Living in Another World: the Role of Narrative Imagination in the Production of Fantasy Enclaves

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While there are multiple manifestations of consumers’ imagination in the marketing literature, very little is known about its nature and the role that it plays in consumption experiences. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the concept of imagination, especially as it relates to the construction of alternative consumption realities or what Belk and Costa (1998) call “fantastic consumption enclaves.” In this regard, we address two pertinent issues that are of interest to consumer researchers. First, we explore the nature of consumer imagination in consumption experiences and second, we provide insight into the role that imagination plays as a source of pleasure and as an indication of consumers’ playful, voluntary participation in experiential consumption.

Two major existing streams of literature are identified. First, mental imagery research (Atwood 1989; Childers and Houston 1983, 1984; Gutman 1988; Mitchell 1986) treats consumer imagination as an information-processing mode that, compared to non-imagery processing, can be a strong mnemonic device and enhance incidental learning (MacInnis and Price 1987). In general, the more vivid the image of a stimulus, the stronger the effect on memorability and cognitive structure will be (Kisielius and Sternthal 1984). Since imagery processing assists elaboration and product visualizations, it can render product use more likely, consumption events more probable, and consequently, it is argued that it can have a positive effect on decision strategies, purchasing intentions, and satisfaction (MacInnis and Price 1987, 1990). This research tradition conceives mental images as “static pictures” that more or less vividly reflect the external reality. Also, it is restricted in the images of certain objects, sounds or smells, de-contextualized from their larger environment. The more encompassing mental activity of elaboration that is subsumed under the same literature does not evade these limitations, since new images are treated as pieces of information that are added to the existing imagery structure in order to provide a better “static picture” of the stimulus object and enable consumers to make more informed decisions. While the information processing view of consumption has greatly enriched marketing thought, it is mostly focused on consumer decision making and thus, it falls short in addressing experiential modes of consumption like tourism, leisure, and various playful activities.

On the other hand, the phenomenological tradition treats imagination as an entity separate from the external sensation, constituting an experience by itself (Giorgi 1987). In this respect, it addresses some of the problems encountered by the mental imagery perspective. This perspective is in accordance with the experiential view of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), where imagination is seen as a form of human experience. However, there is no work that examines how imagination as an experience plays out in consumption contexts. Both of the above perspectives seem incomplete in addressing the phenomenon of imagination during consumption experiences and its role in constructing fantasy worlds.

Ethnographic research was conducted at Gettysburg, one of the most significant Civil War sites in the United States. Not only does Gettysburg attract the largest number of visitors from all other war sites in the United States, but it also provides an ideal context to study consumers’ interaction with a world that is 140 years in the past, during the most fierce civil war battle ever waged in the western hemisphere, and with a major role to play in the future conception and structure of the nation. Data collection methods included 75 personal interviews with 121 visitors, business owners, managers, and licensed guides, participant and non-participant observation, and photo-elicitation.

The findings show that consumers’ imagination is an essential element of the visitors’ experience and it operates in assisting consumers’ to visualize scenes of the past, to vicariously participate in the battle, and to experience what it feels like to live in the past. In addition, this imagination extends beyond a visual picture into all the forms of sensory experiences: acoustic, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory. Consumers are able to hear noises, smell odors, and feel the mid-summer heat penetrating their skin. Under this property, their imaginings include the environmental conditions and they offer a holistic view of life in the past, rather than an isolated “image.” In this sense, consumers’ imaginings imitate life. Imagination includes actors (people lived in the past) who perform acts (fight, charge, being killed) at specific scenes (authentic locations). Actors, acts, and scenes are intertwined in consumers’ imagination in a dynamic whole. Thus, their imagination is not restricted to a static, visual picture. Rather, it is an encompassing, moving scene that develops like a narrative: from a beginning, through a middle, to an end (Ewick and Silbey 1995). In addition, this dynamic nature of imagination is life-like: it imparts sensory elements in the form of “believed-in imaginings” (Sarbin 1998). It is this dynamic character of consumer imagination that differentiates it from previously discussed notions of a mental image and makes it dramatic. It is this dramatic perspective of what visitors visualize that renders their imagination a narrative imagination.

Our data illustrate that one impact that narrative imagination has on the consumption experience is in providing consumers a better understanding and a deeper insight into the life of the past. Furthermore, narrative imagination assists consumers to connect with the past. We define connection with the past as a deeper cognitive and emotional understanding of life in the past according to which someone vicariously experiences what it must have been like to live in the past. What is very characteristic about this experiential state is that during certain moments the past becomes alive. Data collected at Gettysburg show that during these moments “people come up closer to the actual event” and that the whole experience “brings you closer to what has happened.”

Marketers can perceive this connection as a major payoff for the consumption of products related with the past. It is this connection that brings consumers close to events that happened hundreds or thousands of years ago and endows them with value. In a more generalized sense, consumer imagination operates as a time machine (Anderson 1982, 1984) that transfers consumers into alternative worlds and makes them “really, really real” (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000).

References

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