
Janet Borgerson, University of Exeter

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9116/volumes/v32/NA-32

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Materiality, Agency, and the Constitution of Consuming Subjects:
Insights for Consumer Research
Janet Borgerson, University of Exeter

ABSTRACT
What do consumer researchers mean when they claim that consumer selves are “transformed”, “created”, “expressed”, or “emancipated” in relation to objects and contexts in consumer culture? What are the relations between subjects and objects that are being proposed, called upon, or assumed in such consumer research? More specifically, what versions of materiality are consumer researchers using? Such questions highlight a concern with the ontological assumptions about subject identity, or self, and its relations to others—and moreover, to consumption objects. Using anthropologist Daniel Miller’s theory of materiality as an illustrative example, this article demonstrates the importance of explicitly conceptualizing the consumer self’s formation, both generally and in relation to influential articulations in primarily interpretive consumer research. Miller’s theory of materiality, based as it is in theoretical reflections upon material practices drawn from extensive anthropological research (Miller 1987; 1994; 1998), presents compelling material for the study of consumer processes and practices. Miller’s prolific work in material culture and consumption studies includes an explicit theory of materiality that consumer research should no longer ignore.

INTRODUCTION
Who or what the consumer is matters. How consumer researchers conceptualize consumers, the consumer self, and consumer identity crucially impacts upon appropriate research assumptions, contextual understandings, and potential insights and outcomes in consumer research. The most obvious danger of leaving unarticulated one’s theory of materiality—or assumptions about the way relations work between subjects and objects—lies in contradictions that may arise between notions of consumer subject agency and implicit, yet unexplored, materiality assumptions. Whereas this article does not suggest unilaterally adopting anthropologist Daniel Miller’s theory of materiality, consumer researchers might use as an illustrative example Miller’s way of recognizing and articulating a theory of materiality undergirding theories of consumption. Such a move inspires interrogation of potential incompatibilities that do creep into consumer research—between ascribed consumer agency and materiality assumptions—and, thus, contributes to theory building.

Such considerations may prompt a puzzled, perhaps ho hum response, signaling the apparent familiarity with, if not banality of, focus on consumer ontologies in a discipline that in recent decades has emphasized self-concept, symbolic consumption, and an increasing market segmentation (e.g., Elliott 1999; Solomon, Bamossy, and Askegaard 2002); and, moreover, consumer “relationships” with products and brands (Fournier 1998). Consumer choice, consumer experiences, consumer products—and material objects generally—are said to express and create (Schau and Muniz 2002), emancipate (Kozinets 2002), and transform (Otnes and Ruth 2003) the consumer self—albeit under varying conditions—and, moreover, communicate self-concept and status to others (Arnold and Price 2001; Belk 1988; Borgerson and Schroeder 2005; Richins 1994). In addition, brands themselves may provide “raw materials” for construction of self and identities (e.g., Holt 2002). What are the relations between subjects and objects that are being proposed, called upon, or assumed when consumers are seen as seeking out certain brands “to contribute directly to their identity projects” (e.g., Holt 2002), or brands are said to function “as resources for the symbolic construction of the self” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998)?

IDENTITY AND MATERIALITY IN CONSUMER RESEARCH
Work in consumer culture has become increasingly focused on the contribution of objects to identity construction—and to questions of agency, generally (Schroeder and Borgerson 2004; Miller 2002). Research with related concerns has tended to discuss materialism—that is, “the role of material objects in affecting terminal goals such as life satisfaction, happiness, and social progress” (Claxton and Murray 1994, p. 422)—rather than materiality, or the relation and co-creation of subjects and objects. Theories of materiality—articulating various understandings of subject and object formation and interrelation—form the foundations for assumptions about consumer processes, relationships, and identity. Nevertheless, insights around consumer subject identity, or self, construction—and, furthermore, agency—remain contested: How much agency should be attributed to objects and subjects in becoming who and what they are?

Often, work on the constitution of consuming subjects and objects of consumption proceeds as though reflective consciousness levels, versions of subject/object co-creation, and related aspects of materiality, enter unproblematically into theorizing. That is, effects of materiality-related assumptions often remain under theorized, or simply absent, leading to conceptual confusion, inaccurate description, and simplifications rather than complexity even in sophisticated attempts to understand relationships between humans and life contexts. Which versions of materiality offer interesting and provocative insights for consumer studies and consumer research? Moreover, how do notions of consumer subject agency function in relation to theories of materiality?

Work focused upon theories that underlie basic assumptions about the world or worlds that consumers inhabit, and in addition, that may be explicitly adopted in execution of observation, description, and explanation of consumers and their contexts (see Thompson 1997), may be more likely to explicate notions of subjects, objects, and their relations. For example, attempts to apply post-structural or existential-phenomenological understandings in consumer research specifically discuss the conceptual movement from a unified and autonomously existing subject, or self, to a self constructed or formed through lived practices in embodied lives with others; in addition, the self may be seen as intersubjective and fragmented (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989). Applying newly mobilized variables around notions of the emergent self and intersubjectivity in multiple contexts provides previously inaccessible insights into who and what the consumer might be, and furthermore, how such an entity engages with and is engaged by context and community. Nevertheless, Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) turn their discussion of three metaphors that ‘describe assumptions’ of existential phenomenology to researcher methodologies and how such assumptions lend themselves to data gathering and interviewing strategies. They might instead have asked what such assumptions mean about the constitution of the consuming subject, and their response would have intersected nicely with Miller’s theory of materiality.

Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) invoke narrative identity theory, dialectical cultural meaning transfer and negotiations, and mediated experience, coming closer than most to articulating a
theory of materiality in their work on “brands as symbolic resources for construction of identity.” They write, “Thus we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves in time and space. This task can be greatly aided by symbolic resources” (p. 133). Advertising images and brands are turned to as powerful sources of symbolic meanings. Consumers actively “draw upon,” “interlace,” and “express” in their efforts to “construct and maintain identities” in the face of postmodern meaningless. Consumption itself “plays a central role in supplying meanings and values for the creation and maintenance of the consumer’s personal and social world” (132) through apparently narrative efforts. Though not explicitly explored, attributions of agency made here appear to be compatible with narrative identity theory and the role ascribed to symbolic resources.

Consumer research has emphasized the importance of understanding the relation between who we are and what we have. Russell Belk (1988) explored the “extended self”—as one conceptual element in complex layers of self—in an attempt to articulate the implied relation between consumers and their possessions. Belk argued that measurement could be made of “the degree to which various things are perceived to be a part of a person’s self” (Belk 1989, p. 130). That is, some objects appear to be more crucial—in terms of possession, “attachment,” and, of course, lack—to a person’s identity than other objects do; and Belk sees insight emerging from consumers’ possession-based responses to the question, “Who are you?” and, by implication, concerns around who one is not (129). In his understanding, “agency” presumes acting upon objects, and through agency “objects can become part of the extended self” (p. 130). Whereas this definition of consumer agency implies a control over things, Belk insists, moreover, that a kind of agency on the part of objects, a kind of “control by things also results in feelings of merged identity with objects” (p. 130).

Cohen (1989) criticized Belk’s notion of the extended self for its lack of meaning, lack of empirical identification, and lack of explanatory power. Extensive as these criticisms—to which Belk replied (1989)—may seem, ultimately neither of the researchers call into question the very notions of self they apply. We see in this debate attention to notions embedded in theories of materiality, yet the researchers merely imply that some process of materiality must be at work. A more extensive engagement with the assumptions found in Belk and Cohen would undoubtedly yield insights into their specific oversights, but such a task must be differed for now.

In this almost magical realm of self-construction and identity transformation something quite fundamental is lacking—that is, any number of possible reflections and acknowledgements of how the consumer self, or the consuming subject, is in fact theoretically conceptualized. This is certainly not to claim that only one version of subject constitution should be finally settled upon. Many theoretical conceptions exist; moreover, these are often implicitly drawn upon in interpretative research, especially that which is informed by social sciences and humanities disciplines that apparently move beyond positivist assumptions (see e. g., Arnould and Price 2001; Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000; Firtat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 1998; Schroeder 2002; Scott 1994; Wilk 2002). Yet, it cannot be denied that this most basic concern—how material objects interact with and transform consuming subjects—rarely receives direct attention in consumer research. How is the self in consumer research conceptualized; and who, or what, is this subject conceptualized as?

MATERIALITY AND AGENCY

The above considerations raise our initial question once again: What, then, do consumer researchers mean when they claim that consumer selves are “transformed”, “created”, “expressed”, or “emancipated” in relation to objects and contexts in consumer culture? By altering assumptions around the existence and formation of the self, new insights emerge. Notions of intersubjective self or subject, formed in relation to experiences of others and material objects, mobilize manifestations of consumer selves in relation to consumer objects, products, experiences, and brands. That is, the consumer self emerges in a context consisting in consumption practices and consumer culture.

Miller’s theory of consumption has attracted considerable attention, however few studies in consumer research have explicitly adopted his theory of materiality. Consumption, according to Miller, is a process through which human beings materialize or objectify values and meanings, and resolve conflicts and paradoxes (Miller 1987). Yet, Miller has argued that a theory of consumption needs a theory of materiality, that is, an understanding of the assumptions about subjects and objects, and the relations between them—including, for example, claims about the inability to distinguish their borders—that undergird various claims in consumer studies. Miller’s position calls for a reflexivity among researchers, a concrete sense of theoretical foundations that may support or undermine hypothesis and model building, particularly regarding consumer self-construction and identity constitution.

A theory of materiality helps map agency and effects in relations between consumers, objects/relations of consumption, and identity constitution. Given the centrality of contradiction in consumption practice—between theoretical generality and specificity, individual and group identity—clear notions of materiality aid in navigating appropriately dialectical analysis. A theory of materiality parallels “a dialectical perspective that understands the link between emerging differentiation or specificity and new forms of totalisation and generality” (Miller 1995, p. 54). Such a focus requires study of “the manner by which both individuals and groups objectify themselves and their values though material culture and consumption acts” (p. 54). In articulating his approach to material culture’s role in culture’s continual process of change, Miller engages a “Hegelian notion of the dialectic.” Such an approach is warranted “in as much as values and social relations are not prior to the cultural form they take, and therefore not reflected by them, but are created in the act by which cultural forms come into being” (Miller 1995, p. 277). Here, then, we have a connection between a theory of materiality and the understanding of various forms of subject and object ‘agency’ and the relations between them.

MILLER’S MATERIALITY

If objects have, not precisely agency, but what could be described as a non-intentional capacity to facilitate alteration, how does Miller’s view of subject/object relation and co-creation intersect with understandings of consumer subject identity formation in interpretative research? Whereas far from all recent research accepts post-structural notions of (the lack of) the subject and related issues of agency, these have had significant influence. Postmodern perspectives acknowledge that “consumer objects and images are increasingly taking over from people as objectification of human values,” yet, Miller goes further: “people are using these objects to formulate ideals and argue through problems” (Miller 1994, p. 315-316). According to Miller, “mass consumption has shifted embodiment of values from their objectification in persons to objectification in objects” (p. 316). Moreover, material culture in a culture of mass consumption engenders pluralism, diversity in identity, and, importantly, expression and resolution of contradictions.

In Material Culture and Mass Consumption (1987), Miller has argued for a theory of materiality emerging from Hegel’s dialectic and the co-production of subjects and objects. Although the work of Hegel is not unknown in broader business studies (see e.g.,
Hancock and Tyler 2001; Reed 1997), such a position offers new challenges to thinking in consumer research. For example, organizational theorists Hancock and Tyler recognize the theory’s potential and their “understanding of Hegel’s ontology of the subject; that is, the phenomenological process through which subjectivity evolves” in the process of examining “managerial interventions into the process of subjectivization” (Hancock and Tyler 2001, p. 570). By focusing upon the creation of institutionalized embodied subjectivities within the organization environment, they are able to point out the absence of non-colonized bodies capable of intersubjective exchange and growth.

Miller’s theory of materiality, through its reliance on material culture and an ethnographically based understanding of subject/object hybridity, avoids the necessity of essentialist transcendent ontologies, yet surpasses in depth the purely epistemological. Theorist Peter Pels argues that Miller attributes “at least a minimum capacity for transcendence to material objects, although, since they are artifacts, this transcendence is achieved by human intentionality and artifice, and matter remains an empty signifier, a tabula rasa on which humanity inscribes meaning differentially” (Pels 1998, p. 99). Though arguably inaccurate in his accusation of a Durkheim-related blindness in Miller’s work, Pels accurately marks Miller as arguing for “recognition of materiality in social process, by systematically treating materiality as a quality of relationship rather than of things” (p. 99). Miller’s Hegelian model reinforces the crucial and constitutive role “objects” have in human life; or, to put it another way, material culture participates in the larger process of development of any possible subject/subjectivity.

While giving up a purer philosophical version of the problem to capture a “representation of objectification that lays closer to the social self-perception that anthropologists deal with” (Miller 2002, p. 4), Miller stands by a “dialectical conception of the intrinsic hybridity of the world” (p. 9). Such a conception recognizes subjects and objects as “necessary but always secondary ‘avatars’ of the foundational being of the world which is the process of objectification” (p. 9). Thus, when Miller discusses the agency of an object, he turns, for example, to a haunted house. A haunted house, writes Miller, “actively constrains” inhabitants’ agency to alter said house. Human transience in the face of the house’s history is constructed as a “ghost.” The ghost’s status and function can be understood through anthropologist Alfred Gell’s notion of aduction—the imagined social agency or intentionality imputed to objects and people. “So the house here has agency in Latour’s sense that it actively constrains our agency, which we then construct as a ghost” (Miller 2002, p. 8-9). Accuracy of ‘haunting’ claims becomes mostly irrelevant, as the experience of agency constraint provokes the situation’s interpretation. The important point here emerges from Miller’s insistence on the overall material environment’s role in creating us as subjects who, moreover, are often compelled to give an account of our experience (Borgerson and Rehn 2003).

In distinguishing his own work on materiality from anthropologist Marilyn Strathern’s, Miller writes that whereas his main concern was for the materiality of artifacts—from which a rethinking of the subject followed—Strathern was interested in “people’s conceptualization of each other” which includes the materiality of artifacts, but not as the primary concern (Miller 2002, p. 5). Strathern and Miller both transcend the simple dualism of persons and objects: acknowledging the subject allows us “to infer the existence of those objects whose effects are seen in the subject” (p. 4). Here, persons can constitute the ‘objects’ that have effects. One of Strathern’s most interesting aspects, writes Miller, is her development of Mauss’ insights into the ‘thing-like’ properties of persons (Miller 1995, referring to Mauss 1966, pp. 6-8).

From another influential perspective, Bruno Latour focuses on the material nature of social worlds, countering Durkheim’s disregard for non-humans and the effects of their agency. On the question of materiality, Latour proposes a “theory of constraints and effects”—with objects as actors that possess agency as “effects” in the social world “that cannot be separated from social and material aspects” (see e.g. Latour 1999). In this way, Latour, like many others doing theory especially over the past three decades, attempts to overcome dualism. For example, Latour proposes that a person in possession of a gun is not subject with object, but a new hybrid, “a person/gun entity”. The “actus” here is the hybrid consisting of a number of forces, together forming the cause of any possible effect that could be attributed to the person/gun combination. In his corrective stance, Latour, according to Miller, ignores the study of material culture, and particularly a “social perception of approach” (Miller 2002, 6). Miller, on the other hand, uses objectification to create a theory of material culture, including the role of objects, often in the form of the subject-like nature of things. Miller (2002) seeks to reconsider the concept of “objectification” in light of Strathern, Gell and Latour’s approaches to materiality and the related role of agency.

How can an understanding of the interdependence of subject and object be transformed into maps of consumer society? Miller’s approach to the question of materiality requires “the vulgarity of ethnographically based work” (2002, p. 3) that refutes the dualistic semantics of persons and things, while at the same time recognizes the employability and usefulness of dualistic semantics. Miller writes, “For example, unlike Latour I think we should allow room for the social anthropology of materiality where that is primarily concerned with how people conceive of objects and agency” (p. 8). So, does the consumer subject, conceived of as agent, consciously and purposefully guide consumption activities, and narratives perhaps, to suit his or her preferred identity? How might consumption objects and meanings constrain consumer agency, for example, in constructing narratives of identity or the consumer self?

WHAT IS AGENCY? : PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Miller’s theory of materiality calls the agency of subjects and objects into question, as agency appears to emerge in relation, not as a quality of either subjects or objects. The most stringent philosophical requirements for agent status, and agency, will be put aside here to engage with the concerns presented by consumer research and Miller’s theory. However, a deeper understanding of philosophical agency will help register a broader theoretical frame for further recognizing what is at stake in models of materiality underlying assumptions in consumer research. Although these considerations may appear unnecessarily abstract, assumptions of both Miller, who acknowledges and is theoretically driven by this, and Belk—representing typical moves in consumer research—depend upon the outcomes.

Agency is often understood simply as the ability to act. An agent is someone, often understood as a subject, who can undertake action. These actions become expressive of a particular agent, ultimately insofar as the agent uses uncoerced decision-making powers to choose between alternatives based upon an understanding of circumstances and options available. The context of the circumstances and options; the variable nature of what is meant by ‘understanding’; and, furthermore, the range of abilities to distinguish crucial and relevant pieces of information all figure into notions of agency and criteria for agent status, especially as this relates to ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’ agency. For example, Immanuel Kant required display of a particular form of “rationality” in the playing
out of human action and decision-making in order for an agent to be considered not amoral, but truly part of the universe of moral action.

On a more general level, the term agent designates sites of cause and effect. This article engages with such definitions used in Latour’s actor-network theory and Miller’s anthropological work on material culture and materiality. However, from a philosophical perspective such a use appears loose and inadequate. Consider for a moment the idea that an agent is simply a site of effects. That is, the agent initiates effects or causes things to happen in the world, often in interaction with other things and agents. A philosophical analysis might question the basic notion that we can designate a cause of an effect, hence, calling into question the effect-causing identified ‘agent.’ Miller, as well, has called into question actor-network theory’s use of apparent subject-based agency as a metaphor where it serves as an interpretative model for so-called object agency (Miller 2002).

Philosopher Harry Frankfort (1998) has characterized different approaches to questions of action and agency. Frankfort’s fundamental concern focuses on the possibility of distinguishing happenings and events in themselves, rather than requiring reference to the causal sequence that has produced an action. Frankfort suggests that a theory of action must allow the agent to account for what is happening in the present. In contrast, a mainstream “causal approach” account refers to the causal chain that occurred prior to the happening: Here, Frankfort writes, “the problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, or between bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without his making them” (Frankfort 1998, p. 69).

Understanding an action, thus, requires access to specifications in time other than the present one, and furthermore, a sense of how these fit together into the puzzle of the present. This places the agent in the unenviable position of possessing an understanding—not of the current happening as an event in itself, but—of “how what is happening was caused to happen by certain earlier conditions” (p. 70). Though a happening may be recognized as an action, “it does not follow even that it has a cause or causes at all” (p. 69); Frankfort argues that assumptions regarding causal antecedents are unsatisfactory.

Intentionality, often the root of any notion of agency, becomes for Frankfort a matter of more or less effective agent intervention. A certain capability underlies human action—articulated as something more significant in human life and understanding than simple effects of intersubjectivity and other causes. Here we differentiate between what an agent does and what happens to him or her. That is, agency is set against, or works in conjunction with, “effects of forces which would otherwise interfere with the course of the behavior” (Frankfort 1998, p. 74). Behavior is “purposive,” writes Frankfort, “when its course is subject to adjustments which compensate for” the effects of forces and “when the occurrence of these adjustments is not explainable by what explains the state of affairs that elicits them” (p. 74). Adjustments, as Frankfort calls them, are an independent causal mechanism that are not guided by us, but rather, when we are performing the action the mechanism is “our guidance of our behavior” (p. 75). This is not something we do: “It is a characteristic of the operation at that time of the systems we are” (p. 74).

Thus, agency becomes a kind of participatory intervention in an attempt to accomplish purposes that might otherwise be dissipated in other intervening forces’ wake. Human agents, or subjects, are conceived of as having this intervening ability, or power, in interaction with other beings, objects, and forces that both have and do not have the same. Interactions become sites of agency, as well as identity constitution—especially in the sense of accomplishing certain purposes, undertaking certain activities, and relating to certain objects/others; or not.

Action and, by implication, the agent become problems. Discussions of this problem are ubiquitous within the realm of poststructural influence. Titles, such as, “Agency without Agents” and the related “Subjectivity without Subjects” push action and subject to their conceptual limits invoking notions of “decentering” and “fragmentation” to aid with new models and theory building, even in anti-theory guise. Other conversations around intersubjectivity, rationality, and various versions of subject/object co-creation that displace and replace concentrations of human agency and intention with materiality and object effects draw attention to the basic status of related questions.

**CONSTITUTION OF CONSUMING SUBJECTS**

Recently, the United States Park Service reevaluated a category of objects that had come into their possession. Collected along the base of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington, D.C., objects left by visitors—in memory of relationships severed by death in war—were transported to “lost and found.” Viewed, or at least categorized, as things forgotten, as if by mistake, that might later be sought after and claimed by their owners, this myriad miscellany has now formed a centerpiece collection to reside in a museum dedicated to meaningful memorial objects that relate permanently in the minds of those left behind to those lost in the Vietnam war. In reflecting upon his own work, Miller writes, “I want to suggest that a theory of objectification continues to have the advantage of precisely problematizing the agency we ascribe to people to the degree to which it ascribes agency to things. But contains an additional advantage because it is open to forms of objectification which do not depend upon the ascription of agency to either people or things, but rather in the Hegelian sense to institutions and ultimately to history” (p.9). In the above example, human subjects—both present and absent, living and dead—and objects together in a complex dance of interaction form and change each other over time. Miller’s approach grounded in material culture with a concern for social perception has a breadth that motivates understandings, for example, in accounting for change in meaning of the objects left at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, where otherwise there might be unrecognized, but meaningful silences.

This article has argued that whereas work in consumer research has become increasingly focused on the contribution of objects to consumer identity construction, theories of materiality that form the foundations for assumptions about consumer processes, relationships, and identity remain under theorized, or simply absent from the discourse. Regarding the constitution of consuming subjects, if one uses a Hegelian model, as Miller does, objects are always already conceived of as active in subject formation. Such a vision of relation and interaction at the base of all human existence invokes certain notions of human agency. In Miller’s view, material culture participates in the larger process of development of any possible subject/subjectivity; that is, he insists upon the overall material environment’s role in creating us as subjects. Miller’s theory of materiality provides a foundation for subject/object co-production claims: whether this vision can lend support to consumer research on conscious and reflective versions of consumer identity, or self, construction remains mostly unexplored. Members of a consumer culture, in which processes of consumption facilitate and constitute contexts basic to human life, engage in and are engaged by particular consumption activities, objects, and meanings that have the potential to create, transform, intensify, or call into question consumer subject identity; but without attending to related materiality issues, consumer research leaves fundamental questions unasked, venturing unreflective assumptions and inaccurate conclusions.
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