A Friend And/Or a Foe?: Exploring Activeness of Objects in Consumption

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The issue of consumer-object relation has received considerable attention in consumer research. This paper explores peoples’ perception of an object as an active entity in consumption; specifically, the focus here is on how objects’ activeness is realized in everyday consumption practices. Twenty three interviews were conducted with consumers regarding their experiences with active objects in their lives. Two emergent themes–objects as companions and objects as consumers–are discussed to illuminate different dimensions of objects’ activeness in consumption. We hope to contribute to an understanding of object-relations that arise from objects’ functionality, and broadly from the work aspect of consumption (Latour 1992).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The issue of consumer-object relation has received considerable attention in consumer research. Taking Belk’s (1988) notion of the extended self as the conceptual foundation, a significant body of work has examined the role of things in self-actualization, constructing social identities and coping with identity change in transition periods (e.g., Price et al 2000; Schouten 1991), as well as feelings of possessiveness, and moral effects of possessions on personality and person’s well-being (e.g., Hill 1991; Richins 1994). Another active stream of consumer research explores how consumption objects mediate social relations and the ways consumers use goods to make and maintain social distinctions (e.g., Kates 2002). While this research has generated valuable, rich insights into various facets of person-object relations in consumption contexts, as a generalization, much of this research focuses on symbolic aspect of goods and consumer-object relations; hence objects are often conceived as passive relation-partners, albeit endowed by people with meanings. However, our exploratory study reveals that some people see and interact with various objects as active entities that could enhance or interfere with their everyday life. It is this activeness of objects, how it transpires in and impacts consumption that we seek to explore.

In this research, we draw extensively on the existent research into consumers’ relation to things and to animal companions (ibid.; Hirschman 1994; Holbrook et al 2001). In addition, we engage a selection of concepts, debates and ideas on the activeness of things from the world of art, literature and popular science. Thus, we consider the 1920s soviet constructivists’ concept of a socialist thing—an active partner and co-worker, whose activeness arises primarily from its functionality. The core of the notion is the belief that “thing has an agency that is potentially beneficial to the human subject, which is itself rendered more active and “evolved” through interaction with this thing” (Kiaer 2004, 263). We also draw on works of fiction from the same period in the Soviet history, where such agency of things was celebrated as well as questioned (e.g., Olesha 1923). That literature anticipated the emergence in the 1950s of a controversial idea of resistentialism, which rests on the belief that inanimate objects have a natural hostility toward humans; thus, it is things rather than people who increasingly control daily living (Jennings 1948). Finally, our research is informed by more recent academic works that consider activeness of objects, premised on objects’ utility among other things. Particularly, emphasizing the importance of the materiality of things and their sensual qualities, Miller (1998) contends that objects are active insofar as they are constituents of social relations. Latour (1992; 1994), to oversimplify greatly, argues against the artificially made distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, and advocates thinking of things as non-human actors, that carry huge amount of social work.

The notion of things’ activeness emerged in the course of in-depth interviews conducted as part of an exploratory study into car ownership practices. As the significance of this notion became apparent, we broadened the scope of the inquiry to include objects other than cars to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. Such research conduct is consistent with the methodological logic of grounded-theory approach (Goulding 2002). We interviewed 23 consumers about their experiences with active objects in their lives. We followed the guidelines of McCracken’s (1988) “long inter-view,” allowing our interviewees to lead the way raising the issues of interest to them as regards the suggested topic. The analysis was iterative; we focused on discerning broader patterns and common themes across the interviews, moving back and forth between the themes and the literature to develop an understanding of the themes (Goulding 2002).

Two thematic constellations of relating to active object emerged in the study, each comprising of a number of practices. The first, objects as companions, refers to seeing and treating a particular object as a partner, which helps a person to cope with the daily challenges. The theme is realized through humanizing tendency, which in turn is enacted in practices naming objects, assigning gender, celebrating their birthdays and constructing their life-histories. Informants report a range of positive experiences resulting from object companionship from emotional support (‘makes me smile’) to improving the quality of person’s life (both through objects’ functioning and its aesthetics). The second theme –object as a consumer– relates to the idea that objects place demands on people in terms of skills, knowledge, manner of use but it also relates to people’s perception that some objects have needs and desires, feelings and interests. Such view is evident in the practices of buying ‘presents’ for a pet-object and servicing an object as a way of pleasing it. The positive experiences with the objects companionship depends on the functional performance of the object, and adequacy of the demands it puts on people relative to its performance and centrality of the object in people’s everyday life. Overall, the two tentative thematic constellations are deeply intertwined, they become evident and acquire their significance in specific contexts, and importantly they speak of the activeness of things, which appears to emerge in relations, in people’s mundane practices and daily experiences with objects.

Conceiving the paper as polemic, we conclude by pointing out three issues that arise from considering the activeness of things. The first has to do with how, if at all, the perceived activeness of an object reflects on consumption patterns. The second concerns the general question of the use of consumption objects and consumption as work, against the background of consumer researchers’ focus on acquisition and prevalent interest in symbolic aspects of consumption. The third is the question about the nature of relationships between people and objects, activeness of which arises and depends on both their utility and their aesthetic value. Theoretically, we hope to contribute to an understanding of object-relations that arise from objects’ functionality. Practically, by focusing on practices, including both people’s doings with things and social work of things, we hope to contribute to the research on sustainable consumption, for, given that sustainability is not just a matter of technical fixes but of social and cultural practices (Shove 2003), a more nuanced understanding of curating practices, for example, could help in devising effective strategies to increase the longevity of objects in use, thereby promote sustainable consumption.

References


