Experts, Novices, and Non-Consumption Among Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers

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We study consumer expertise among thru-hikers of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Consumption decisions in preparation for this trip are constrained by the ability to physically carry what is purchased, while the confined juxtaposition of novices and experts on this extended hike creates a site in which adaptive, situational learning takes place. Using an ethnographic approach, we collected data through depth interviews and participant-observation methods. Unlike previous conceptualizations of expertise found in the consumer research literature, we suggest a more social one that uses Reflective Choice Adaptation (RCA).

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We study consumer expertise among thru-hikers of the Appalachian Trail (AT). The AT, a 2,175 mi. trail that extends along the Appalachian mountain range from Georgia to Maine, is the site of a four- to six-month trek of 2,000 hikers annually. Consumption decisions in preparation for this trip are constrained by the ability to physically carry what is purchased. Also, the confined juxtaposition of novices and experts on this extended hike creates a site in which adaptive, situational learning takes place. We document this process and suggest a conceptualization of consumer expertise that extends beyond that seen in the consumer research literature.

An extensive literature exists in judgment and decision making that describes how experts and novices differ. For instance, Johnson and Russo (1984) found that consumers familiar with a product category had increased ability to code and organize new information related to that product category and limited their search activities for that category. Sujan (1985) found that experts and novices used different categorizing processes when faced with discrepant information in an advertisement. Experts in Maheswaran and Sternthal’s (1990) study processed attribute information (as opposed to benefit information) more extensively than did novices and also found that detailed processing by experts was more evaluative in nature, while that done by novices tended to be more literal, suggesting that category knowledge influences not only the amount of processing done, but also the qualitative nature of that processing.

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) suggest that consumer knowledge is comprised of both product familiarity, which they define as “the number of product-related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer,” and expertise, defined as “the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully” (p.411). They suggest that the former leads to the latter and that expertise has five different dimensions: cognitive effort, cognitive structure, analysis, elaboration, and memory. Common to these studies is a paradigmatic focus on the psychological inputs into and moderators of the individual decision-making process. In contrast, we focus on the lived experiences of expert and novice hikers as they progress. We define an expert as “someone who has acquired domain-specific knowledge through experience and training” (Spence and Brucks 1997, p 233), and operationalize it as a hiker who has covered at least 2,000 miles on the AT, while a novice hiker has hiked at least 200 miles. Our focus is on the social interactions and the learning processes exhibited by expert and novice hikers, and specifically their gear- and equipment-related decision processes.

We used a focused ethnographic approach consistent with past research in the consumption literature (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994). Data were collected using depth interviews with thru-hikers with variation sought on gender, age, hiking experience level, and degree of involvement in the AT thru-hiking community. Additional sources of data included informal discussions with thru-hikers, participating in the annual Trail Days gathering, and conducting of video-ethnographic interviews with hikers about their equipment. Lastly, we have both backpacked on the AT extensively since childhood. The data were analyzed hermeneutically (Thompson 1997)—initial categories were iteratively challenged and restructured as the study progressed and as themes emerged.

We find a conceptualization of expertise, distinct from that found in the judgment and decision-making literature that is characterized by Reflective Choice Adaptation (RCA). RCA consists, first, of self-reflection sited in both private (individual) and public (social) spheres. Public journaling allows experts to share the benefit of their experiences with both novices and other experts, and allows learning to be scaffolded through the discursive process of public feedback and evaluation. Adjustment to dynamic environmental conditions is the second characteristic of expertise. This ability to make choices within the contextually rich decision context, rather than dogmatically, allows the expert to adjust rapidly to changes in the environment. The final characteristic of expertise we found was that of adaptation. Adaptive expertise involves the marshalling of resources (in both cognition and equipment) in situ to adapt to the demands of a given situation, and includes the modification or creation of personalized technologies. Several experts we met along the trail carried shelters, clothing, or tools that they had made themselves because no product existed, or because the available tools failed to satisfy the hikers’ needs.

We find that RCA more completely characterizes experts than do previous conceptualizations of expertise in the consumer research literature when the context examined is more social in nature, and we suggest that there might be applications to not only other recreational contexts, such as performance musicians and live-aboard sailors, but also other decision contexts such as purchase situations where the act of purchase is more social in nature.

References