The Social Construction of Consumer Needs: a Case Analysis of the “Healing Boom” in Japan

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This paper examines the healing boom, the largest consumer culture in Japan at the turn of the century. Since the late 1990s, many firms in various industries, triggered by media that reported the boom, launched a large number of “healing” products and services. It prompted cognitive institutionalization, which means that people now take consuming them for granted. Content analysis of 5,371 newspaper articles and 8,038 titles of magazine articles from 1982 to 2007 indicates that consumers’ needs for healing are socially constructed by media discourse and the imitative behavior of firms.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development process of the healing boom, the largest consumer culture in Japan at the turn of the century, which developed consumers’ collective sense of consumption environments and oriented their experience and lives (Kozinets 2001). Since the late 1990s, many firms in different industries launched a large number of “healing” products and services; such a category had not existed until this boom. The more the boom developed, the wider the category of healing products and services expanded. Finally, hair dryers that generate negative ions, talking stuffed dolls, tourist resorts, spa, and compilation CDs of easy listening were advertised as “healing” products or services.

Due to the massive launch of “healing” products and services, the meaning of healing was drastically changed. According to K?jien 5th edition (1998), the most authoritative Japanese dictionary, Iyasu (heal) means to cure somebody’s disease or injury, satisfy hunger, or mitigate emotional pain. Gendai Y?go no Kiso Chishiki (Encyclopedia of Contemporary Words) 2003 Edition explains that Iyashi Sij? (healing market) is a market of goods and services that are useful for creating psychological security, and nowadays, various kinds of consumer goods such as books, music, paintings, movies, massage, drink, food, and clothing, which help us relax, fall under this rubric.

This study argues that this linguistic change is evidence of the cognitive institutionalization of healing, which means that healing is accepted as an objective reality among the members of society (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Neo-institutional sociology has been interested in this cognitive process (DiMaggio 1997; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Zucker 1983). Agents such as firms and consumers take some actions not because of rules or obligations forced by their society but because such an action is taken for granted as the way we do these things (Scott 2008).

To analyze the interplay among corporate behavior, media discourse, and consumer needs, this study adopts two concepts from neo-institutional sociology: firms’ mimetic isomorphism and the media’s theorization. Mimetic isomorphism is the mechanism that forces organizations to imitate other organizations’ behavior that they perceive as successful when the relationship between means and ends is uncertain (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Successful products or services are now easily imitated by their competitors because marketers’ ceaseless effort to offer hit products or services always faces uncertainty about the relationship between means (the 4Ps) and ends (sales and/or profit). The imitative process in the healing boom can be considered as a typical instance of mimetic isomorphism. Theorization is the self-conscious development and specification of abstract categories and the formulation of patterned relationships such as chains of cause and effect (Strang and Meyer 1993). Nikkei newspapers, the counterpart of Wall Street Journal, theorized that people bought healing products because they hoped to eliminate their stress. This causal explanation triggered imitative behavior by firms.

This study includes three content analyses. First, in order to understand firms’ mimetic isomorphism, all healing products and services launched were listed by investigating 5,371 articles of Nikkei newspapers published from 1982 to 2007. Second, in order to understand the media’s theorization, a qualitative content analysis on the contents of Nikkei articles was conducted. Third, to understand the views of ordinary people on healing (cognitive institutionalization), the study analyzed the environment of ideas to which ordinary magazine readers were exposed. A content analysis on 8,038 article titles from 466 types of magazines published from 1984 to 2007 was carried out. Content analysis was adopted because it is a useful research tool to understand consumption value through time (Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989).

Three cognitive institutionalization processes are found. First, it is now taken for granted that healthy people have the need to be healed. Second, it is also considered natural that these needs can be satisfied by purchasing and using healing products or services. Third, the new expression Iyashi-kei (healing kind) began to be used frequently for describing certain kinds of laypersons who just help us relax and are not religious persons or healers. Most celebrities considered as Iyashi-kei are young actresses, which endorses the implicit shared views on the gendered division of labor: women heal men. In summary, consumers’ needs for healing are socially constructed by media discourse and the imitative behavior of firms.

REFERENCES


