This paper reports results from a new research direction called Postconsumption Motivation which tries to study motivational effects after basic social needs have been satisfied through consumption. Based on the theory of optimal distinctiveness we demonstrate that consumers who consume a brand that allows them to satisfy their need for distinctiveness, have an increased desire for being connected to other people. We believe that research in Postconsumption Motivation can help to better understand consumption as a continuing process that does not stop after a need has been satisfied. Our results are based on two strong experimental tests and also provide an explanation for the underlying theoretical framework of this process.

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This paper reports results from a new research direction called Postconsumption Motivation which tries to study motivational effects after basic social needs have been satisfied through consumption. Consumers purchase products or brands in order to satisfy certain needs, however, what are the motivational forces that drive consumers to act in a certain way after the brand is consumed? Is it even possible to predict any kind of behavior after consumption? Based on the theory of optimal distinctiveness we demonstrate that consumers who consume a brand that allows them to satisfy their need for distinctiveness, have an increased desire for being connected to other people. This example is counterintuitive since (as existing theories in consumer behavior would predict) one would expect that when a consumer gets the feeling of being unique or distinctive by using a certain brand (e.g. wearing sunglasses from Gucci one feels distinctive from lower class people) this person should also continue to feel or act as a distinctive individual. However, as our studies showed, the opposite happens. Our theoretical concept is based on Brewer’s theory of optimal distinctiveness (ODT, 1991) which asserts that individuals desire to attain an optimal balance of belongingness and distinctiveness within and between social groups and situations. These two motives are in constant opposition with each other; when there is too much of one motive, the other must increase in order to counterbalance it and vice versa. We tested this concept in 2x2x2 full-factoral between-subject experimental setting. In a first step consumers had to watch a 3 minutes slide presentation (that contained pictures from unique individuals combined with sentences and words that were associated with distinctiveness) that activated their need for distinctiveness. Then the experimental group (distinctiveness group) received a brief advertising message about a tea-bag brand which is associated with uniqueness (i.e. it helps the consumer to feel distinctive). In the control condition the participants received a message about the same tea-bag brand, but with a neutral content. Both groups had to rate the attractiveness of the advertising message (and returned the ratings to the experimenter) and then received one real tea-bag as a gift. That is, participants in both groups had an increased need for distinctiveness (through the slide presentation), then people in the experimental group learned that this brand is associated with distinctiveness and would therefore serve as a means to satisfy this particular need which finally happened after they received the tea-bag. After having rated how much this tea-bag would enable them to feel distinctive, participants were asked whether they would now prefer to work in a group or alone for the next task. We assumed that after their need for distinctiveness was satisfied through the tea-bag they would rather prefer to work in a group than alone since now—according to ODT—their need for belongingness would be activated. However, for the control group, this effect should be significantly weaker, since these participants never associated distinctiveness with the brand and would therefore not have successfully satisfied their need through the received tea-bag. The results confirmed our hypotheses. Participants in the experimental condition felt that the tea-bag would let them feel significantly more distinctive than participants in the control condition and also had a significantly higher preference towards working in a group (i.e. higher need for belongingness) than the control group. The experimental group also showed higher overall preference towards the tea-brand. In a second experiment we followed the same procedure than in study 1, however this time participants received a false tea-bag brand, that is, when the experimenter distributed the tea-bags he told the participants that his research assistant accidentally bought the wrong tea-bags, so he could only give them a different brand than the one in the advertising. The idea behind this procedure was that, in this experiment, both groups (1. group with distinctiveness message and 2. group with neutral message) were unable to satisfy their need for distinctiveness, as they haven’t received the brand that was associated with distinctiveness. We therefore expected that both groups (compared to the experimental group from study 1) would also have a decreased feeling of distinctiveness for the tea-bag brand (since this was not associated with distinctiveness inside the ad) and consequently a decreased preference towards working in the group, since their need for belongingness wasn’t activated accordingly due to the fact that distinctiveness wasn’t sufficiently satisfied in the first task. Again our results were consistent with the hypotheses. In addition to that both studies also contained a memory recognition task where in the final part of the study participants were asked to recall adjectives which they read in the first rating of the advertising message. These results also confirmed the hypotheses. Participants who received the distinctiveness message and the correct tea-bag brand could remember significantly more adjectives than participants from the other three groups.

We believe that these results show important findings of a very new direction in consumer research where consumers motivational reactions are studied after a certain need has been satisfied. We assume that research in postconsumption motivation can help to better understand consumption as a continuing process that does not stop after a need has been satisfied. Our results are based on two strong experimental tests and also provide an explanation for the underlying theoretical framework of this process. In a further step we conduct studies that test the effect when consumers’ need for belongingness is activated at the beginning and we will present these results together with those discussed above at the conference.

Reference