Product Meaning and Consumer Creativity

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Product meanings are negotiated by a variety of social actors in a particular historical context. In this study we use a series of long interviews to explore product meanings actively created by consumers. We find that consumers create meaning through irony, through use innovation, and by adopting abandoned products. Consumers are motivated to create meaning because consumer-created meanings provide flexibility in constructing an identity, economic rewards, and intrinsic enjoyment. Leveraging creativity enables consumers to develop a space free from commoditized identities bartered in the marketplace.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14380/volumes/v36/NA-36

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We propose an overarching view of consumer hope in which it is divided into two basic categories—dispositional consumer hope (DCH) and situational consumer hope (SCH). We have developed two measures of consumer hope that tap into each of these levels of analysis. Dispositional consumer hope is a long-term, stable predisposition in individuals to view consumption experiences as either hopeful or hopeless. Our DCH scale is designed to be specific enough to capture the entire domain of consumer behavior, but more specific than domain-general measures of hope that capture less specificity of consumer outcomes.

Situational consumer hope is a relatively short-term affective reaction to a specific environmental stimulus. As opposed to DCH, which is longer lasting but more diffuse, SCH tends to have a clear cause or object and is more focused and intense. Our SCH scale, therefore, is designed to more precisely measure outcomes related to specific contexts, but less effectively assesses broader consumer outcomes.

Scaled Development Methodology
Taking into consideration the conceptualization of hope by MacInnis and de Mello (2005) and remaining consistent with the authors’ theorizing, we treat the “to have hope” and “to be hopeful” dimensions as necessary elements for hope to exist. However, we focus our scale development on the “to have hope” dimension as this is the dimension we believe is most relevant for consumer research. While we create measures for the “to have hope” and “to be hopeful” dimensions of consumer hope in order to ensure that hope exists, we focus most of our validation efforts on the “to hope” dimension.

We develop items tapping both dispositional and situational aspects of consumer hope. First, we use methodological procedures to generate and purify our initial pool of items. Next, we use data from study 1 to select items based on a battery of psychometric criteria. Then, study 2 data are subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to provide evidence regarding the unidimensionality, scale reliability, and discriminant validity of the dispositional and situational consumer hope measures. Data from both studies 1 and 2 are then analyzed to provide further evidence of discriminant validity and initial assessments of the nomological validity of the scales. Study 3 is currently underway to evaluate the predictive validity of the newly developed consumer hope scales and study 4 is planned for the purpose of providing evidence for construct validation of our two measures in a food choice context.

Major Findings
In study 1, evidence is provided that both dispositional and situational consumer hope discriminate from optimism, a global measure of state-based hope, a global measure of trait-based hope, and a global measure of hopelessness. In study 2, we first provide validation for the unidimensional structure of the consumer hope scales. We then show that the dispositional consumer hope measure predicts subjective knowledge and customer satisfaction better than an existing global hope scale and optimism and that the DCH scale is distinct from both the Herth Hope Scale (Herth 1991) and the Life Orientation Test (Scheier et al. 1994). Moreover, we show that the SCH measure using a healthy food context predicts involvement with food choices, anticipated regret from making bad food choices, and impulsive eating better than an existing global state-based measure and that the SCH scale is distinct from the Herth Hope Index (Herth 1992). The results of two additional studies are forthcoming. In study 3, the DCH and SCH measures will be assessed for predictive validity while in study 4; we aim to demonstrate the predictive ability of both scales in a consumer food choice context.

References

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Abstract
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Introduction
Consumer products are not merely commodities, but symbols consumers use to construct identities, strengthen relationships, and understand their social environment (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Solomon 1983). Consumers interpret a product’s meaning by associating the product with other cultural signs. These signs include its physical appearance, its intended purpose, the meanings established by manufacturers, and the personal identities and autobiographical memories linked to the product (Hirschman 1986; Hodder 2000; Mick 1986). To the extent that consumers can alter the signs associated with a product, they are able to create new product meanings.

Most product meanings are not created by individual consumers (McCracken 1986). More often meaning is shaped through a firm’s branding efforts. For example, Wheaties is “The Breakfast of Champions,” a meaning established through extensive athlete endorsements. Occasionally, however, consumers go beyond established interpretations to instill products with new meanings. For example, by converting Altoids tins into Buddhist shrines, HAM radios, or thumb pianos consumers cause the tins to become more than packaging for curiously strong mints.

There is growing interest in the role of consumer creativity as it relates to design (Moreau and Dahl 2005), product co-creation (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Vargo and Lusch 2004) and innovation (Hirschman 1980). Yet limited research links creativity to the meaning creation process. Our study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the strategies and motivations that underlie consumer-created product meaning.

Method
The authors conducted depth interviews using a purposeful sample of six informants in the greater Denver area. Interviews followed methodological procedures outlined by McCracken (1988). Informants were asked a series of grand tour questions concerning their identity, sense of style, and methods of self-expression followed by more specific prompts.

We interpreted the interviews first by looking for emic meanings embedded in the text. We next searched for broader themes and categories emerging in the interviews, interpreting these in light of our pre-understanding shaped by the literature and our own experiences (Arnold and Fisher 1994).

Findings
Strategies
Our interviews revealed three partially overlapping strategies informants used to create product meaning: irony, use innovation, and adopting abandoned products.

Irony was achieved by using products with a dominant meaning in clever and unexpected ways. One informant described a bookcase built from bear traps welded to form supports for glass shelves. This one-of-a-kind piece contrasts sharp metal teeth with smooth glass playfully requiring the user to reach across powerful steel jaws to access books. Another informant described an outfit pairing a men’s A-shirt, which she referred to as a “wife-beater,” with a sequined shirt passed down from her grandmother. This combination created ironic tension by pairing the “wife-beater,” a symbol of female submission in society generally associated with rural, working class men, with sparkle and flair, symbols more frequently tied to garishness and conspicuous fashion consumption.

Our informants relied on juxtaposed associations to create new meanings that abstract away from dominant interpretations. While the specific ironic meaning did not exist prior to the informants’ creations, the formula of using tension to create meaning remains constant.

Informants also generated meaning by using products in ways not initially intended, a practice known as use innovation (Hirschman 1986). Given that a product’s purpose largely determines its meaning, consumers create new meanings through new uses. Examples include a swim buoy used as a living room decoration and a lemon used as a cosmetic. A swim buoy means something very different when placed on a wall for aesthetic value than when placed on a ship deck for safety. Similarly, the interpretation of a lemon depends on its use.

A final way our informants created meaning was by adopting abandoned or cast-aside products. By adopting vintage clothing or obsolete electronics, and associating them with new people and new contexts, our informants created new meanings for these products.

Motivations
Informants reaped both intrinsic pleasure and economic benefits by creating product meanings. Informants described acts of meaning creation, such as turning a “scarf into a new window treatment,” as an enjoyable way to spend free time. Informants who created meaning themselves avoided paying brand or fashion premiums and, in some cases, profited from reselling the fruit of their creation. One informant saved money by purchasing abandoned clothing at second-hand stores. Another profited directly by selling products infused with new meanings. Dan re-sold a generic $70 table purchased at Target for several hundred dollars after converting it to a custom made “Michael Jordan table” incorporating images from “his entire career.”

Informants also created product meanings as a vehicle for controlling their identity. As product meanings are often leveraged in a quest to construct a self-image (Belk 1988), meaning creation affords consumers greater autonomy in shaping their identity. Creating novel product meanings enables consumers to construct a unique identity uncontaminated by meanings associated with undesirable, mainstream trends or commercialization. One informant sidestepped undesirable, dominant cultural meanings by purchasing obscure or second hand goods and by altering or combining products in ironic ways.

Discussion
This study hopes to illuminate an overlooked source of product meaning: consumer creativity. Through irony, use innovation, or by adopting abandoned products consumers can alter the signs, associations, and contexts of a product to establish new meanings. Given that identity is heavily shaped by possessions, meaning creation may be an essential step in developing a space free from the commoditized identities bartered in the marketplace (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Kozinets 2002).