Potential Contributions From Contemporary Social Science Literature: Expanding Cultural Understanding in Consumer Research

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This paper reviews the social sciences to identify theories and concepts that can contribute to research on cultural consumer behavior. A review of the top ten cited journals from five disciplines revealed 323 relevant articles from the last two years that were content analyzed. These works were classified based on cultural dimensions recently studied by social scientists: language and communication; religion and beliefs; ethnicity, race and nationality; family and gender; government and law; and regionalization and globalization. Our study identifies theories, concepts and underexplored phenomena that can advance the field and our understanding of the role of culture.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research has examined the state of culture based consumer research (Sojka and Tansuhaj 1995), yet to our knowledge there are no published works that study the issue from a cross-disciplinary and non-marketing/consumer perspective. The purpose of this paper is to review and integrate recent cultural research in social science disciplines in order to gain insights into theories and related concepts that will help further our understanding of consumers in diverse cultures.

Two independent judges reviewed 323 articles from the top ten cited journals in five social science disciplines: anthropology, psychology, communication, philosophy and sociology. We aim at exploring and assessing the breadth, not depth, of knowledge in contemporary social science research. Therefore, articles published in the past two years (2006 and 2007) were included in order to identify contemporary research. Our analysis includes studies between cultures and nations as well as investigations within one culture or nation. The articles were coded on additional criteria, including cultural dimension, format (conceptual vs. empirical), and method (qualitative vs. quantitative).

Our findings reveal some prominent cultural themes in each discipline. While contemporary sociology papers tend to focus on transnational migration and role of religion, communication research centers on race and racial bias. Recent anthropology articles tend to emphasize macro issues of imperialism and capitalism. Philosophy papers focus on the meaning of globalization, diversity and sympathy. Psychology research examines acculturation, discrimination, and ingroup/outgroup issues. The main recent theme that seems to cut across all disciplines is globalization and its differential effects on various peoples across the globe.

Identified articles were content analyzed by the judges and classified into six dimensions: 1) language and communication, which includes studies that explore the cultural functions of communication; 2) religion and beliefs, covering studies that have theological and ethical perspective on cultural issues; 3) ethnicity, race and nationality, which comprises research that emphasizes race, ethnicity, acculturation, and nationality; 4) family and gender, examining marriage, sexual identity, and family issues; 5) government and law including works that focus on legal structures as they affect everyday life; and 6) regionalization and globalization, reflecting studies that examine the origins and consequences of integration of economies and political systems and their repercussions on individuals.

Relevant theories and concepts were identified and discussed for each dimension. In the language and communication dimension, we discuss two particular theories: cultural sensitivity/centered approaches and pictorial realism. Moral cosmology theory was chosen as a significant contribution in the religion and values dimension. The ethnicity, race, and nationality dimension provides the largest quantity of relevant theories, including dramaturgical theory, “I-know-you-but-you-don’t-know-me,” cultural frame switching, social unity, and material cultural evolution concepts. Applicable theories in the family and gender dimension include the demand/withdraw pattern of communication and transformative processes. In the government and law dimension, resistance and affect control theory seem to have a high potential for providing a significant contribution to consumer research. Finally, in the regionalization and globalization dimension, the theory of globalization of law and authenticity were identified and discussed as applicable and useful for introducing to the consumer research in marketing.

Our research suggests the presence of a bias toward the United States and its respective cultural groups. Future research should entail more work in South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe. In addition, more research on religion and beliefs could provide significant contributions to the field. While the family has been researched in the social sciences, it has not received much attention in consumer behavior. In addition, more work is needed in sexual identity issues. Finally, consumer research has also not addressed regionalization and globalization in any serious manner. We cannot ignore such a global phenomenon and how it affects consumers at the macro and micro levels (i.e., collective consumer trends such as hypermodernism in China, versus changes in individual consumer attitudes, values and behavior changes).

With this study, we hope to provide consumer researchers with new and exciting research directions that might help us better understand consumer behavior in diverse settings. Despite repeated calls, cross-cultural consumer research continues to use nationality as a proxy for culture. We wish to reemphasize the need to move away from treating culture and nationality as equivalent. Amid globalization, we can also learn from the same weakness shown in social science research, the need to reduce our bias toward focusing mostly on studying America or the American culture. Finally, scholars have stressed the need for consumer research to become more interdisciplinary (Deighton 2005; Mick 2006; Shimp 1994; Wells 1993), yet these calls have gone unheeded. The ultimate goal of this work is for the reported results and suggestions to serve as a starting point for researchers to begin to move the field toward a multidisciplinary emphasis.

REFERENCES

The Impact of Family Micro-Environments on Children’s Consumer Socialization
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the family environment in which children learn to become consumers. It aims to contribute towards filling the significant gaps which exist in our current understanding of the role that the family environment plays in the consumer socialization process. Moschis and Churchill (1997), too, point towards the importance of the family in the consumer socialization process, and Moschis and Churchill (1978) offer their classic conceptualization of consumer socialization.

With the family described as the socialisation unit (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), it is perhaps surprising that relatively little is known about how such a social environment impacts on the consumer socialization environment. Theories such as parental socialisation style (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988) and family communication pattern (Carlson et al., 1994) have been presented which aim to shed greater light on the family socialization environment. However, such theories have failed to adopt an internal focus. Instead, families are often compared to one another, and consumer research has ignored the possible differences which may exist within the same family.

Research in the fields of genetics and behavioural psychology suggest that multiple environments, or family micro-environments (Harris, 1995), exist within the same family. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the family environment in greater detail in relation to the consumer socialization of children. A wide variety of family forms were chosen as the sites of consumption due to marketing’s preoccupation with nuclear family types (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), and the voices of children alongside adults are actively sought.

Six families were recruited to participate; one lesbian headed family with both adopted and biological children; one blended family; a family headed by a cohabiting couple; a family headed by a single mother; and two nuclear families. Each family member was invited to take part in the research process in a move away from the early family studies which recruited only a limited number of respondents. Generally every family member who was living in the family home chose to participate, although there were a few exceptions (most notably with very young children, adolescent children and certain fathers who chose not to be involved).

Consent was sought from both parents and children alike to participate in phenomenological interviews and family observation. The families were seen between three and five times over a period ranging from four to twelve months. The interviews were conducted in the family home, where a parent or guardian was always present, and interviews were conducted with individuals and family groups depending on which family members were available.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed following Spiggle’s (1994) data analysis steps in which marginal notes were made on each transcript. This allowed similar topics to be grouped under broader emergent themes. Each family was analysed initially on an idiographic basis and then across-family analysis occurred which allowed for global themes to emerge. The interpretation of the interview texts used a hermeneutical approach (Thompson, 1991; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990) which involved an iterative process of moving back and forth within and across interview texts and between transcripts and the literature.

Across all six family cases significant differences were found to exist within the families studied. Family members, parents and children alike, treated various family members in different ways, creating very unique familial micro-environments for the family members. Two family cases, in a similar vein to Thompson (2005), are presented; the Baldwin family story to illustrate the differences in the family environment that are created by parents; and the Jones family story to illustrate how children themselves can treat their fellow siblings in different ways.

The familial micro-environments which exist within each family story suggest that one universal family environment does not exist. Empirical support is not found to support the universal parental socialization style and family communication pattern that Carlson and Grossbart (1988) and Carlson et al. (1994) respectively present. Rather, different socialization tendencies exist within the same family, with parents and children acting as important socialization agents within the family for other children.

The unique familial environments fostered by parents (paternal micro-environments) and children (fraternal micro-environments) impact the consumer socialization environment in families, and the antecedent variables and socialization process variables which Moschis and Churchill (1978) identify, and thus the learning outcomes for children within families. A child’s familial micro-environment affects the opportunities which are made available to the child to discuss consumption related issues, and thus the ability to acquire consumer skills.

REFERENCES