Consumer Creativity During Unconstrained Consumption Tasks

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Interest in consumer creativity reflects an emerging trend in consumer research to understand how consumers themselves construct meaning, create value, and participate actively in every part of the consumption process. Building on creativity theory, consumer researchers have focused on antecedents and consequences of consumer creativity in constrained consumption situations. The present research adds to the literature on consumer creativity by demonstrating high variability in creative processing and creative production during a more realistic, unconstrained consumption task. The results suggest that creative abilities influence creative processing which in turn influences behavioral intentions towards the solutions.

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extensively, drawing on two traditions concerning what metaphor represents and how it may be used within a culture (Hirschman 2007). The first tradition is grounded in literary theory and linguistics, while the second draws from symbolic anthropology and is grounded in cultural images (Hirschman 2007). Although anthropological construal of metaphor is grounded in human experience, it is usually meant to reflect phenomena experienced in the natural or social world. The question then becomes, “What about phenomena that fall outside the realm of the natural or social domain, such as the spiritual?” The current study builds on this question and explores metaphorical associations related to consumer spirituality.

To examine consumer use of transmodern metaphors, an initial study was conducted using visuals from advertisements featuring African kente cloth and targeted at African American consumers from the period of 1980 to 2000. The varied properties embedded in a textile (e.g., social, personal, spiritual, cultural, political, historical, etc.) make it a potent symbol, enabling it to say things that words often cannot (Schneider and Weiner 1986). Further, the African kente cloth, in addition to being the most well known and commercially successful African fabric (Rabine 2002), often features woven patterns and symbols associated with spirituality (Ross 1998). Advertisements were compiled from a variety of businesses ranging from the food and beverage, fashion, insurance and communication industries. The intent was to incorporate a broad set of kente product and industry usage, thus yielding a diverse set of consumer interpretations.

Initial research indicates consumer interpretations of kente involve metaphorical spiritual associations, which we refer to as meta-connections. The term ‘meta’ captures those experiences that reflect the metaphysical; that is, those features of reality that exist beyond the physical world and our immediate senses, but nonetheless are part of the consumer’s everyday life. In this study, meta-connections are captured in consumer interpretations and spiritual sensing of the vivid colors, geometric symbols and proverbial messages embedded in the advertisement. An example is a Disneyworld advert featuring Mickey Mouse and Miss Collegiate African American 1993, wearing kente textiles with patterns that are interpreted with metaphorical associations of spiritual purity.

The introduction of ‘meta-connections’ offers a number of advancements. First, it extends the current literature to include metaphorical associations of spirituality that are interpreted and acted on by consumers in their everyday lives. It therefore throws light on transmodern approaches open to consumer spirituality and related belief systems. Second, spiritual aspects of traditional societies continue to be prevalent in many of contemporary ethnic communities. The inclusion of meta-connections as a type of consumer metaphorical association captures the ontological perspectives embedded within many ethnic cultures and acknowledges the importance of these perspectives in understanding consumer behavior.

References


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Abstract

Interest in consumer creativity reflects an emerging trend in consumer research to understand how consumers themselves construct meaning, create value, and participate actively in every part of the consumption process. Building on creativity theory, consumer researchers have focused on antecedents and consequences of consumer creativity in constrained consumption situations. The present research adds to the literature on consumer creativity by demonstrating high variability in creative processing and creative production.
during a more realistic, *unconstrained* consumption task. The results suggest that creative abilities influence creative processing which in turn influences behavioral intentions towards the solutions.

**Background**

In marketing and consumer research consumers have traditionally been viewed as destroyers rather than creators of value. Recent research on consumer creativity (Moreau and Dahl 2005, Burroughs and Mick 2004), and on consumers’ role as co-creators of value (Xie, Bagozzi and Troye 2008), challenges this view. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that consumers do not always follow the least effortful avenue in their pursuit of goal attainment, but often enjoy exploring alternatives and thinking creatively during consumption tasks (Chernev 2006; Billings and Scherer 1988). The present research adds to the insight of how consumers act creatively in *constrained* consumption tasks (Moreau and Dahl 2005, Burroughs and Mick 2004) by exploring how consumers act creatively in *unconstrained* situations. We will also investigate antecedents and consequences of such creativity.

Creativity research conceptualizes the creative process as a mental process where different categories of knowledge are combined to constructively address an issue (Smith 1995). The process is typically described in terms of phases where the person searches for knowledge to understand and address a given problem (Ward, Smith and Finke 1999). Bottom up thinking, divergent thinking and convergent thinking are indicators of creative processing. Creative production refers to the solution itself. A solution is thought to be creative if it is a novel, appropriate and aesthetic solution to the problem (Burroughs, Moreau, and Mick 2008). Creative abilities are factors that enable the person to think more creatively and produce more creative solutions. Knowledge and motivation are considered critical for creativity (Amabile, 1996). Self efficacy and innovativeness are factors likely to influence creativity in a consumption setting. Consumer creativity has also been found to enhance consumers’ positive affect (Burroughs and Mick, 2004); it is therefore likely that satisfaction and purchase intentions will be influenced by consumer creativity.

**The Study**

273 people participated in the study. A scenario was presented where participants were asked to imagine that they would cook dinner for friends at a dinner party, and write down what they would serve on such an occasion. Since no potential solutions or resources were limited in the scenario, no explicit constraints were imposed on the participants. This was important because the research is concerned with how consumers use creative processing in realistic decision situations. Four judges scored the usefulness of the solutions on a 6 item scale derived from Besemer and O’Quinn’s (1986) CPSS scale. Novelty and aesthetics was assessed by measuring uniqueness and richness of the solutions. After creating solutions to the consumption scenarios, subjects were asked to explain in detail how they had been thinking during construction of each of the solutions, what came into mind first, what did they consider during the decision making task, and so on. Those reports were coded by independent judges with regards to three different measures of creative thinking: bottom up thinking, convergent thinking, and divergent thinking. Established scales were used to measure knowledge, motivation, self efficacy, and innovativeness. Three items measured purchase intentions.

**Results**

A total of 245 usable questionnaires (52% male) were returned. Analysis of creative process suggests that even when little constraints operate, consumers do vary to a great extent in their use of creative processing. Creativity in solutions varied from very low to high. There were significant correlations between creative process and purchase intentions (r=.286, p<.01), creative abilities and creative process (r=.211, p<.001), and creative abilities and creative product (r=.197, p=.01). To test the structural relationships between the constructs in this study, a model where creative abilities influenced creative processing and creative products, creative processing influenced creative production, and both creativity constructs influenced purchase intentions was estimated in LISREL 8.7. The composite reliability of the creative product scale was low (.51). As a result, creative production was removed, and a new model with creative abilities predicting creative processing which in turn predicted purchase intentions was estimated. Fit measures indicated acceptable representation of the data (Kj square=72.52 with 33 df; RMSEA=.070, and AGFI .91). All the paths in the model were significant, and the composite reliability for all constructs was acceptable (0.66-0.83).

**Discussion**

The results presented in this paper suggest high variability in both creative processing and creative production during an unconstrained consumption task. This supports the assumption that creative and noncreative thinking can be conceptualized on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy (Moreau and Dahl 2005; Ward et al 1999). The research contributes with evidence of the existence of creative processes during unconstrained consumption tasks. Creative production correlated with creative abilities, but not with creative processing. This is puzzling, since creativity research typically assumes a strong link between process and production in many domains (Amabile, 1996). The paper discusses how measurement issues regarding creative production may be the reason for this finding, and how this must be addressed to fully understand the relationships tested in this study. Further, although no explicit constraints were imposed on the participants, they may have experienced implicit constraints by imagining a scenario where they would be impression managing (hosting dinner guests). This may have influenced their choices of final solutions more than their creative processing. Despite this weakness, the research reports interesting results regarding creative processing during a consumption task; creative abilities influence creative processing which in turn influence purchase intentions. The practical relevance of focusing on consumer creativity is underscored by the fact that creativity led to higher purchase intentions.

The hope is that this research will contribute to the consumer creativity literature by broadening its scope. By demonstrating that consumers do engage in creative processing and creative production when faced with less constrained consumption problems, new questions rise. What are the factors influencing such creativity? What are the consequences for brand loyalty? Will creative processing influence satisfaction with the product as well as satisfaction with the process and the decision? Some of these questions have been touched upon in this research, but more questions remain unanswered and represent opportunities for future work in this area.
References


