Fighting With Feathers and Bubbles: Consumer Resistance and the Urban Playground Movement

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Current perspectives on consumer movements define them as ideologically laden, organization-centered and well structured actions focused on fighting particular market and industry practices. However, as markets become increasingly politicized and public spaces increasingly commercialized, less structured forms of consumer resistance emerge. By looking at a series of diverse, fluid and sporadic actions undertaken by consumers in metropolitan cities, we attempt to enrich our understanding of political consumerism. Through an ethnographic investigation of the urban playground movement, we examine how consumers engage in playful interventions while subverting the norms and rules that structure public and market spaces.

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Current perspectives on consumer movements define them as ideologically laden, organization-centered and well-structured actions focused on fighting particular market and industry practices. However, as markets become increasingly politicized and public spaces increasingly commercialized, less structured forms of consumer resistance emerge. By looking at a series of diverse, fluid and sporadic actions undertaken by consumers in metropolitan cities, we attempt to enrich our understanding of political consumerism. Through an ethnographic investigation of the urban playground movement, we examine how consumers engage in playful interventions while subverting the norms and rules that structure public and market spaces.

A Brand in Hand: Symbolic Props in Self-Presentation
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Considerable evidence exists that people tactically manage verbal communication and bodily expressions to convey a desired impression of the self—and sometimes deceive others in the process (e.g. Argo, White and Dahl 2006; Feldman, Forrest and Happ 2002; Jones and Pittman 1982). Research building on symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981) finds that individuals who feel situationally under-endowed on a desirable personality trait will be more likely than well-endowed individuals to socially display (obscure) a brand that is congruent (incongruent) with positive identity on that trait. This prediction is consistent with recent findings that a “shaken self” motivates choice preference for products that possess self-enhancing trait symbolism (Gao, Wheeler and Shiv 2009). Interaction of trait features with the situation may play a role in moderating the actual use of such products in self-presentation. For example, when one’s real abilities are perceived to be difficult to defend in verbal presentation, people may prefer to “tell the truth” or be protective in signaling traits with a brand possession rather than risk being caught in an act of acquisitive or self-enhancing impression management (Arkin 1981; DePaulo 1992; Swann, Pelham and Krull 1989).

Study 1
The first study entailed a 2 (Brand: high vs. low symbolic meaning on a specific personality trait) x 2 (Self: high vs. low self-evaluation on the same trait) design. Pretests identified brand pairs for which differences existed in selected personality traits for individuals possessing the brands and for the brands themselves. Two magazine brands were selected that measured high vs. low in the trait of “amiability” (In Touch Weekly and The Economist, respectively), similar in selected other traits, and not different on measures supporting posited alternatives (e.g. awareness, likeability, purchase intent).

A cover story delivered a branded object into participants’ possession in a manner meeting Schlenker and Weigold’s (1992) criteria for actor, audience and situational factors in self-presentation. Participants were individually told that they would be entering a room to be judged in an interview. Through a ruse regarding “additional studies” to take home with them, participants found themselves in...