Compensatory Consumption When Saying Goodbye

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In our fast-paced world context, consumers are increasingly exposed to temporary or lasting departures from familiar contexts: from landscapes, surroundings, and/or significant others. Our empirical research supports the finding that consumption experiences act as compensators from losses of the familiar. We elicited from the data two mechanisms for this compensation to occur: The Teddy Bear Effect – symbolically activating the missing past in a current personal situation - and The Rebound Effect - anticipating novelty in life. Ten case studies enlighten this agenda; their interpretation results from an iterative process leveraged on both participants and the philosophical concept of Narrative Identity.

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“Guérir-on jamais des êtres qui nous quittent? [1]”

When choosing the words that best describe developed contemporary societies, specialists seem to agree on a kind of “disruptive” vocabulary. They refer to: liquid, fluid, movement, fragmentation and acceleration (e.g. Lyotard 1978; Marquard 1991; Bauman 2000; Lipovetsky and Charles 2004). These descriptors of an accelerated world capture the continual departure from familiar contexts in which post-modern citizens are embedded.

Continual departures challenge traditional reference points, such as the classic family model, life-long working community or citizenship. The ambiguity and instability of traditional reference points motivate alternative ways of organizing life, contributing to the acceleration of such phenomena as divorce, migration and switching or losing jobs.

In this fast-paced world, our research, studies compensatory consumption in the framework of consumers exposed to the loss of familiar contexts: landscapes, surroundings, and/or significant others. This study is a response to our conviction that investigating human capacity to compensate for the disappearance of familiarity in life through consumption has become an important aspect of consumer research (see for instance, Bonsu and Belk 2003; Curasi et al. 2004 or Schau et al. 2009).

The research method used for this inquiry has been inspired heavily by the bottom-up approach of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990)—starting with the data and building the theory from this foundation. This agenda is highlighted by ten case studies of people who have encountered important losses in life. After being shortly debriefed about the idea of lost under investigation, participants shared their stories about their personal loss on four occasions:

1. A biographical written exercise: participants were required to identify important losses that had deeply impacted on them.
2. A lost telling exercise: participants were recorded during an interview, in which they were asked to describe the details of the loss.
   Each of these personal telling exercises lasted between one and two hours, during which we interfered as little as possible with the free flow of narrative.
3. A dialogical experience: the two first phases enabled us to identify a number of topics common to all participants. We engaged in a dialogical experience (Thompson et al. 1989) during a second round of interviews, with the specific objective of focusing on these particular topics.
4. Feedback exercise: participants were invited to provide an individual feedback on the preliminary conclusions that we drew when they modified some of our interpretations and enriched the information we had.

The major results elicited from the data so far can be divided into two groups of strategies in which consumers leverage on consumption, when facing the loss of familiar contexts: The Teddy Bear Effect and The Rebound Effect.

The Teddy Bear Effect: can be defined as the coercive force that aims at preserving a past that may otherwise be forgotten, in order to ensure the development of a coherent personal narrative. Participants often bring that past closer to themselves as a reassuring strategy, when times become uncertain and challenging (Marquard 1991, p. 81).

This effect can be illustrated with the case of Bruna (32 years old), an Italian citizen who immigrated to Belgium seven years ago. She identifies living overseas as a risk of losing her Italian identity. For instance, she notices that her Italian is becoming less fluent, that she has totally lost track of Italian shops, that she does not know the “new” words used by young Italians, as she no longer watches local television.

Her personal Teddy Bear consists of purchasing traditional Italian food at supermarkets, which she feels is consistent with her Italian cooking background. She also travels back to Italy each time she needs to celebrate a professional success. A couple of years ago, after having bought an apartment in Belgium, the risk of losing her identity as Italian increased, she described the purchasing situation as “strange”, as she would always have thought of having her own home first in Italy.

Purchasing a house can be seen at first sight as an activity we do in order to live there later on. However, as Martin Heidegger suggests (1958), we already project ourselves dwelling in these places at the time we decide to build or buy them. Residential housing purchase decisions are material signs of our desire to stay in place. In this case, Bruna’s decision makes her realize that she was intending to remain in Belgium. Consequently, her reaction was to reinforce her personal Teddy Bear by buying most of her furniture in Italy and bringing it by car to Belgium.

The Rebound Effect results from the capacity of the human brain to make up and integrate concepts, and multiple alternative action plans in order to achieve future goals (Ingvar 1985). It consists of consumption-related actions performed to anticipate novelty in life and compensate for past losses. One of our participants, Caroline (28 years old), experienced a Rebound Effect after losing a brother in a motorcycle accident.

Her Rebound focuses on living a healthier and “carpe-diem” life. After her brother passed away, she became determined to overcome her anorexia, a sickness which had plagued her since she was a teenager. She describes this change in her life as a personal strategy, which obliged her to protect her own life, thus preventing her parents from losing yet another child. She now goes out for meals with friends, without having to search for an excuse for not to eat.

8Free translation: Do we ever heal from those who leave us?
Her “carpe-diem” Rebound acknowledges a new perspective on enjoying life that she and her entire family have adopted. She often consciously reinforces her hedonic consumption, for instance by going on enjoyable outings, allowing herself impulsive purchases of expensive clothes. She visits relatively expensive bars or restaurants from time to time and also bought a new car that satisfies aesthetic criteria more than utilitarian needs.

As the world continues its accelerated innovative path, consumers are exposed more and more to losses of known paths. The speed of change cannot immediately be comprehended by consumers who generally live at a slower speed. This requires “mundane” consumption experiences to compensate for the profound loss of familiarity.

References

High Hopes and Letdowns: The Influence of Self-Esteem on Expectations and Product Failure
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Self-esteem, defined as how worthwhile one perceives him or herself to be, plays an important role in one’s self-concept (Swann et al. 2007). Marketing researchers have explored self-esteem in the context of consumer behavior, showing that it can affect overconsumption (Mandel and Smeesters 2008), perceptions of models (Smeesters and Mandel 2006), brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003), and materialism (Chaplin and Roedder-John 2007).

In our research, we explore how product expectations differ by self-esteem. Specifically, we explore the impact of self-esteem on a consumer’s expectations of product performance, particularly given other consumers’ and professionals’ ratings of the product. Our central proposition is that high and low self-esteem consumers will react differently to recommendation information because they differ in their ability to adjust their expectations. Because people with high self-esteem (HSE) are more effective at adjusting their expectations, when they have information (e.g., ratings by other consumers and/or by product experts) indicating lower quality, they adjust their expectations accordingly. However, low self-esteem (LSE) consumers are not as good at making such adjustments. As such, these consumers end up with high hopes for a low quality product. Hence we predict: