The Emperor’S New Clothes: Are We Seeing Our Subjects Clearly?

Simone Pettigrew, University of Western Australia, Australia

Referencing consumption-related themes in popular music, this paper playfully and provocatively suggests that transformative consumer research could boldly refuse to adopt the underlying assumptions of much previous consumer research and instead consider an alternative interpretation of the consumer.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/16057/volumes/v38/NA-38

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Emperor’s New Clothes: Are We Seeing our Subjects Clearly?
Simone Pettigrew, University of Western Australia, Australia

ABSTRACT

Referencing consumption-related themes in popular music, this paper playfully and provocatively suggests that transformative consumer research could boldly refuse to adopt the underlying assumptions of much previous consumer research and instead consider an alternative interpretation of the consumer.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that we could forget our roles as scientists commissioned with identifying and measuring constructs relating to consumer behavior. Imagine that we could forget our duties as educators where we teach students to view consumption through the lens of theoretical concepts and profit maximization. If we could look at consumption through uninitiated eyes, what would we see? Would everything we behold support our learned interpretations, or is it possible that the metaphorical emperor, our consumer as king, would no longer be swathed in layers of fine clothes but instead appear naked to us? In other words, would the consumer whom we primarily depict as an agentic decision-making unit turn out to be a bewildered and put-upon individual who has a vague awareness of his or her subordination in the marketplace but lacks the knowledge and skills to redress the situation?

It is difficult to adopt a tabula rasa perspective retrospectively, but perhaps if we accessed views on consumption that are offered up in contexts outside of laboratories and formal interviews we could tap into different interpretations that provide alternative views on how consumption ‘works’ in consumers’ everyday lives. Increasingly, consumer researchers are turning to the Internet and social media for insights, but there is an older medium that has been long communicating attitudes about consumption and its role in society. For decades, popular music has been an avenue for consumers to make statements about their relationships with specific consumer goods and the marketplace in general. With the occasional use of lyrics from some of these songs as a loose framework, this paper playfully and provocatively suggests that transformative consumer research could boldly refuse to adopt the underlying assumptions of much previous consumer research and instead consider the implications of an alternative interpretation of the consumer. Given that the task of TCR is to engage in “investigations that are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strive to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands, potentialities, and effects of consumption” (Mick 2006, p2), the perspective adopted in relation to the role of the consumer will be critical in ensuring that research results achieve their potential to improve consumer welfare.

I AM A WEAPON OF MASSIVE CONSUMPTION AND IT’S NOT MY FAULT, IT’S HOW I’M PROGRAMMED TO FUNCTION
LILY ALLEN, “THE FEAR”, 2009

In most consumer behavior research, consumers are viewed as active (as opposed to passive) in their consumption decisions (e.g., Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, and Vohs, 2008; McCracken 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Wright 2002). According to this perspective, consumers are able to make complex consumption decisions with a view to meeting their functional and symbolic needs (Baumgartner 2002; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Holt 1995). Consumers are described as thinking, feeling subjects who imbue the consumption process with many different levels of meaning (Tetreault and Kleine 1990). They are seen to be self-directed in their consumption projects (McCracken 1987), choosing alternatives that will maximize their happiness and wellbeing (Thompson and Troester 2002). Throughout this process, they actively employ products in the fashioning of their self-determined self-images (Holt 1995; McCracken 1990). Consumption is viewed as an enjoyable activity that can be appreciated in its own right as well as being a means to an end (Belk 1996).

Based on assumptions of agency and rationality, this prevailing view considers consumers to be largely in control of their own identity projects (Elliott 1997; Schau, Gilly, and Wolflinberger 2009). The use of objects to assist in the construction and maintenance of the self-concept is seen as a conscious, controllable process in which consumers engage to maximize their satisfaction (McCracken 1989; Walker and Olson 1997). This enables them to shop for a self-identity much as they would for a consumer good (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). In this scenario, consumers deliberately consider symbolism in their consumption decisions and make informed choices about which self out of numerous optional selves they wish to communicate at a particular point in time (Hirschman and Thompson 1997; McCracken 1990).

But what if Lily Allen is on to something? What if today’s consumers are effectively programmed to consume at high levels and in ways that are largely beyond their individual control? Could growing up in a materialistic environment (Giddens, Schermer, and Vernon 2009) and exposure to more than 3,000 advertisements per day (Kalkbrenner 2004) result in consumers being effectively programmed to abide by the requirements of the marketplace, whether they want to or not?

While less frequently explicitly articulated in the consumer behavior literature, Lily’s idea of programmed consumption can be found in numerous accounts of consumer behavior that attribute decisions and activities to elements other than consumers’ conscious decision-making processes. Repetition of messages, unintended exposure to advertising, and associative learning are recognized as producing lasting effects that circumvent consumers’ conscious barriers to persuasion (Ajzen 2001; Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998; Fitzsimons, Chartrand and Fitzsimons 2008; Shapiro 1999; Shimp, Staat, and Engle 1991; Tybout and Artz 1994). In addition, over the years researchers have identified age, gender, social class, stage of the family life cycle, personality traits, mood, aspects of the physical environment, methods of information presentation, time pressures, marketing communications, situational factors, other social actors, and broad cultural forces as having significant impacts on consumer behavior (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001; Bettman et al. 1998; Klein and Lansing 1955; Lury 1996; Mick 2008; O’Guinn and Faber 1989; Raghunathan, Pham, and Corfman 2006; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). These factors are largely beyond consumers’ direct control and therefore can be expected to exert influence over consumption decisions and activities in ways that reduce consumers’ agency. Other factors, such as existing product knowledge, are only partially under the consumer’s direct control but are also influential (Celsi and Olsen 1988). This begs the question: To what extent can behavior be considered volitional in the wake of so many influencing variables? How much ‘space’ is left for truly individual, conscious, and deliberate consumption decisions?
YOU KNOW THAT WE ARE LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD AND I AM A MATERIAL GIRL
MADONNA, “MATERIAL GIRL”, 1984

Madonna sensitizes us to the tendency for individuals to adapt their behaviors in accordance with the requirements of the external environment in order to survive and thrive. While advertisements might be promoting different products, it is possible that in aggregate they are advocating a culture of acquisitiveness (Tybout and Artz 1994), which in turn prevents the visualization or contemplation of alternative lifestyles (Waide 1987). In this situation, the healthy doses of skepticism towards advertising often attributed to consumers (e.g., Kivetz 2005; Scott 1990) are of less relevance because the consumer culture produces an overall orientation to consumption that is unconsciously assimilated.

Murray (2002) has outlined in detail how symbolic meanings resident in consumer goods are pre-determined by the capitalist system. Consumption codes are assimilated from childhood onwards, resulting in an internalized set of consumption priorities that typically prevents consumers from recognizing the pre-programmed nature of their desires. Any resistance only occurs within the system and is merely cosmetic. The result, according to Murray, is consumers who are merely participating in the construction of a reality that has been pre-determined and thus are unwittingly reinforcing the prevailing market system (see also Baudrillard 1988; Firat and Dholakia 1998).

In recent years there has been an increasing focus in consumer research on consumer creativity (Burroughs and Mick 2004; DeBerry-Spence 2008; Moreau and Dahl 2005). In this research stream, the ways in which consumers manipulate meanings and craft individual assortments of objects are seen to be confirmation of their ability to control their consumption behaviors in deliberate ways that are meaningful and satisfying. However, the strategies that have been interpreted by consumer researchers as masterly and creative could be considered reactive and compromised if they are viewed as consumer responses to market-produced tensions (Murray 2002). This is particularly the case where the role of such strategies is to reduce negative emotions rather than to maximize positive outcomes (Luce et al. 2001).

OH LORD, WON’T YOU BUY ME A MERCEDES BENZ? MY FRIENDS ALL DRIVE PORCHES, I MUST MAKE AMENDS
JANIS JOPLIN, “MERCEDES BENZ”, 1971

As appreciated by Janis, conformity pressures place substantial limits on consumer agency. The instinctive need to create and maintain meaningful relationships with others ensures humans are tuned to the expectations of other consumers (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). To effectively achieve their desire for social fit, consumers are compelled to continually monitor the consumption behaviors of others and of themselves (Firat 1994). They observe others’ consumption behaviors and reactions to their own consumption choices, and through these monitoring processes they attempt to conform to socially-prescribed forms of consumption (Hornuth 1990; Lury 1996). Advertising can encourage this behavior by alerting people to the ridicule or rejection they may experience if they consume inappropriately (Waide 1987).

Similarities in consumption patterns at the societal level demonstrate that sociocultural forces are very effective in prescribing behavior (Firat and Dholakia 1982). Consumers continually attempt to utilize the most appropriate behavioral models for their social grouping(s) (Firat 1991), with any differences in behaviors the likely result of differences in “cultural expertise” (Roth and Moorman 1988, p403). Bourdieu (1984) notes that the taste structures taught to members of subcultures form cultural capital that provides an unconscious guide to decision making. The result is that apparent extensive choice in consumer markets conceals the reality that alternatives are constrained at the macro level to a relative few that are socially and culturally acceptable (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Droge, Calantone, Agrawal, and Mackoy 1993). Individual differences in behaviors between consumers are considered to be negligible at the macro level of analysis (Firat and Dholakia 1982; Levy 1981).

SQUARE-CUT OR PEAR-SHAPED THESE ROCKS DON’T LOSE THEIR SHAPE DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL’S BEST FRIEND
Marilyn, “DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL’S BEST FRIEND”, 1953

Marilyn’s emphasis on diamonds over relationships reflects the view that objects can be more constant and reliable than people. The withering of the social structures and growing anonymity of most modern marketplaces have been described as resulting in an empty self that is insatiable for consumer goods that fail to satisfy because they cannot replicate the fulfillment that comes with satisfying human relationships (Cushman 1990). In contexts where relationships are superficial, consumers can be highly dependent on consumption for communication, to the point that they have no choice but to employ products in their social interactions (Firat and Dholakia 1998; Hornuth 1990). Consumers have an underlying awareness that they judge others and in return are judged according to their consumption behaviors (Firat 1995). This results in a heightened need to possess certain types of products to facilitate image management (Baudrillard 1988; Pettigrew 2001).

Another consequence of the relative anonymity of modern societies is the need to present oneself differently in different contexts (Firat 1995; Lury 1996). Although most consumers are more comfortable with a stable sense of self, this is difficult to achieve in a social environment that requires them to perform multiple and sometimes competing roles. Attempts to synthesize competing aspects of self can be unsustainable and result in ongoing effortful identity work for the individual (Ahuvia 2005).

Other complications can also occur in the process of integrating objects into the extended self. The individual wishes to feel unique in consumption, thus supposedly selecting objects that are somehow special or unique (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). Paradoxically, the objects selected are often mass-produced and common to many other consumers (Hornuth 1990). Consumers are encouraged to believe that their consumption assortments are distinctive and constitute genuine expressions of individuality (Baudrillard 1988; Firat 1991). For some analysts, this belief is legitimate as small differences in product combinations are considered to be adequate to claim uniqueness (Murphy and Miller 1997). However, others consider it a form of self-delusion as small differences only camouflage the over-riding similarity between the consumption patterns of individuals (Droge et al. 1993).
I’VE LOOKED AT LIFE FROM BOTH SIDES NOW 
FROM UP AND DOWN, AND STILL SOMEHOW 
IT’S LIFE’S ILLUSIONS I RECALL, I REALLY 
DON’T KNOW LIFE AT ALL 
JONI MITCHELL, “BOTH SIDES NOW”, 1969

Joni’s description of extensive experience failing to provide definitive answers about the nature of life resonates with the TCR task of attempting to address intractable problems that have resisted resolution despite much effort to understand and address them. We need to acknowledge that existing knowledge structures, and especially the dominant assumptions of consumer agency, will constrain our activities in this area of research (Murray and Ozanne 1991). As Joni alludes to above, if we’re not careful our attention will be drawn to the illusions on show (our emperor’s clothes) rather than the underlying substance.

Consumer researchers are often located in marketing or management schools, and as such these researchers typically approach consumption from the perspective that market-based consumption is a liberating, enjoyable, and largely optional pastime in which individuals engage at their discretion. This interpretation justifies the activities of marketers and the academics who assist them in their quest to generate profit from the marketplace. However, adopting a TCR perspective calls for a different approach to consumer research and its intended uses. In particular, it highlights the defensive position of consumers in modern markets and the need to empower them to improve their position relative to other actors in the marketplace (Atherton and Wells 1998). The relatively small amount of attention given to consumer empowerment in the consumer behavior literature has focused on the potential for consumer education to assist individuals in achieving their goals and protecting their interests in the marketplace (Bazerman 2001; Luce et al. 2001; Wathieu et al. 2002; Wright 2002). It is suggested that consumer education should commence early in life and constitute a formalized component of the school curriculum (Benn 2002; Ringold 2002). The underlying belief is that education will assist consumers to act more rationally and thereby enhance their welfare (Atherton and Wells 1998; Bazerman 2001).

Some researchers have pointed to the failure of consumer education initiatives in the past to illustrate that education alone cannot be the answer (Loewenstein 2001). In the case of alcohol consumption, for example, past studies have shown that supply-side factors such as limiting access through minimum age stipulation, restricting store opening hours, and enforcing price increases have been more effective at modifying demand than attempts to educate consumers about the dangers of excessive consumption (Bentzen, Eriksson, and Smith 1999; Wagenaar et al. 2000). At a different level, Seitz (1972) argued that consumer education is inherently futile in dynamic marketplaces where the number of products available is large and growing and where organizations have infinitely more resources at their disposal to obtain and analyze market information. According to this view, consumers will always be in catch-up mode and as a result the power distribution will remain permanently unequal, leaving consumers vulnerable to the actions of those with dominant market power.

Given the inadequacies of education as an all-encompassing path to consumer empowerment, other realms of influence must also be considered if consumers are to be empowered beyond their current position in the marketplace. The important role of social and cultural forces points to the need to address these factors, but they are extremely difficult to change. Influencing the sociocultural environment via upstream initiatives is thus one of the greatest challenges facing transformative consumer researchers. Choices must be made about which aspects of the sociocultural environment to target and how they will be modified. A first step may be to focus on assisting public policy makers to empower consumers through the development and implementation of consumer-focused regulations and legislation (Hollander, Keep, and Dickinson 1999). Some consumer researchers are already active in this area (e.g., Friedman 1998; Karpatkin 1999; Sommer 1994). Such an approach would acknowledge the limited abilities of individual consumers to change the environments in which they live and recognize the necessity of political intervention to achieve large-scale changes (Benn 2002; Seitz 1972). This approach would respond to Murray and Ozanne’s (1991) call for consumer researchers to actively attempt to change social structures to improve consumers’ lives. However, upstream initiatives are still likely to face difficulties in achieving consumer empowerment due to the ability of commercial lobby groups to effectively protest government initiatives that have the capacity to diminish their market power (Pal and Byrom 2005).

Another alternative would be to tame the consumer culture of some of its materialistic ways. The enormity of this task is overwhelming, but just as government-induced cultural change has been effective in the past (such as is currently occurring in the area of attitudes to the environment in many countries), there is potential to alter consumers’ attitudes regarding their ideal lifestyles. For example, it is theoretically possible for public service announcements (PSAs) to be increased in number to equal or even eclipse commercial advertising. PSAs could actively encourage consumers to create meaning in their lives without an over-reliance on goods and services, such as by cultivating those personal virtues that are ultimately more fulfilling and being less concerned with accumulation (Waide 1987). Of course, such an approach would require decisions relating to which values and virtues should be prioritized, an inherently difficult and contentious task.

A further option is to use our skills and expertise to assist consumer associations and activist groups in achieving their goals. These groups attempt to address the imbalance of market power between consumers and organizations by representing consumers in general and disadvantaged consumers in particular (Karpatkin 1999). Alliance with such groups would allow consumer researchers access to those who have some ability to communicate with and resolve issues for individual consumers and groups of consumers. Such an alliance could also empower consumer groups to interact with governments and industry lobby groups on a more equal footing.

To conclude, researchers seeking to transform consumers’ lives in positive and enduring ways may need to step back from current conceptualizations of the consumer that emphasize agency and rational decision-making. Instead, it may be productive to take a more critical view that explicitly recognizes the many and varied forces impacting both researchers’ and consumers’ interpretations of the consumption process. Stripping back the layers of previously learned and implicitly accepted understandings may hold the key to generating new answers to age-old questions.

REFERENCES


______ (1990), Culture and Consumption, USA: Indiana University Press.