Conceptions of Consumption in Consumer Culture Theory: a Dynamic Framework

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Presidential addresses to the Association of Consumer Research, from the first published (Pratt 1974) to the most recent (Janiszewski forthcoming), and editorial statements in the Journal of Consumer Research, from the first (Frank 1974) to the most recent (Deighton 2005), regularly assert that what anchors the field of consumer research is not a theoretical perspective but a substantive domain called consumption. Thus, unsurprisingly, the field houses several conceptions of consumption. Consumption is conceived of as utility maximization in an economic perspective, as information-processing in a cognitive-psychological perspective, as decision-making in a behavioral-economic perspective, as structuration in a sociological perspective, as meaning-making in a cultural-anthropological perspective, and as goal seeking, identity management, need fulfillment, and want negotiation among numerous other conceptions. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these conceptions so long as one does not reify these conceptions. Conceptions are images, models, or ways of perceiving. Conceptions are neither true nor false; rather, conceptions are more or less useful. It is futile to seek a universal best conception; instead, one must determine which conceptions of a phenomenon are valuable across different sets of circumstances, or inversely, which sets of circumstances substantiate the value of different conceptions (Lewis and Grimes 1999; Morgan 1980; Weick 1989).

Scope. In a historical period when the consumer research community is home to over a thousand researchers and over a dozen annual conferences and dedicated journals, the field is simply too vast and varied to fit all of its working conceptions of consumption into a single essay. One functional way to manage the issue of scope is to choose one sub-field of consumer research as a boundary condition. There are three established sub-fields of consumer research, consumer culture theory (CCT), consumer decision making (CDM), and consumer information processing (CIP), and one growing field of transformative consumer research (TCR) (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Johar, Maheswaran, and Peracchio 2006; Loken 2005; MacInnis and Folkes forthcoming; Mick 2008; Simonson et al. 2001). The decision making and information processing conceptions of consumption lie at the foundations of CDM and CIP respectively, though each of those sub-fields also host variations of those conceptions (Newell and Broder 2008). By contrast, conceptions of consumption lie at the frontiers of CCT research. A tacit assumption among CCT researchers is that because there can be no universal conception of consumption across contexts, perspectives, or times, there should be no ruling conception in CCT either. Rather, CCT researchers often try out multiple conceptions during the course of a single study and debate the merits of various conceptions across a stream of literature (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Holt 1995; Spiggle 1994). It is precisely because conceptions of consumption are contested and evolving in CCT that it is theoretically valuable to focus our attention on this sub-field.

Conceptions. This essay could have been framed as analogies, images, interpretations, models, metaphors, or theories of consumption, or even concepts or conceptualizations of consumption. Our preference for conceptions of consumption is based on a few heuristics and on early reviews. Conception is not as superficial as image but not as deep as theory. Though all conceptions discussed in this essay have generated substantial insight for marketing theory or practice, not all conceptions have produced full-fledged theories as of yet. Conception does not carry as much disciplinary baggage as some of the other terms do. For example, while some cultural anthropologists and cognitive scientists have documented the function and power of metaphor in human culture and cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), many theorists and practitioners overlook metaphor as a mere rhetoric matter owing to the term’s association with literature. Unlike concept, the terms conception and conceptualization clearly evoke not only the cognitive product but also the cognitive process that produces it. Furthermore, reviewers of an early draft of this essay misconstrued concepts of consumption to be concepts within consumption theory rather than conceptualizations of the consumption phenomenon, as we intended. Finally, the hexa-syllabic conceptualization proved too cacophonous for many readers. In sum, we prefer conception because it communicates both cognitive process and product, at an appropriate level of theoretical maturity, without associative or aural excess.

Organization. Our ongoing objective is to map conceptions of consumption along informative dimensions of differentiation. Owing to the space constraints in this forum, it is not possible to discuss each of the dimensions and each of the conceptions in the detail that each deserves. However, it is possible to identify and partially illuminate some of the major dimensions and major conceptions in a condensed tabular form. The first section delineates the dimensions of differentiation that are useful in sorting through alternative conceptions of consumption. The second section itemizes major conceptions of consumption and explicates them along relevant dimensions. Thereafter, distinguishing characteristics of our framework are discussed and recommendations for future research and theory building are proffered.