It'S Smiling At Me: Satisfying Social Needs Through Consumer Products

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Beginning with imaginary friends and teddy bears in childhood, human beings demonstrate a fundamental need for belonging that continues across the lifespan (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). Although social needs are often fulfilled through contact with other people, it seems plausible that consumer products could fulfill similar needs. Results across two studies indicate that people’s perceptions of their social inclusion and exclusion 1) influence the kinds of products they might buy, and 2) those products influence their social behaviors. We propose that if social needs can be satisfied through products, consumers may not seek fulfillment through other people and, therefore, increase their risk of negatively impacting real social relationships, perpetuating a cycle of consumption at the expense of social interaction.

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nings of border also vary in the process of globalization by the applications of debordering and rebordering processes (Stetter 2008) and by the engendered fragmentation of globalization (Firat 1997).

I draw on the data collected through 37 interviews with consumers who cross the U.S.-Mexico border, some frequently and some infrequently, to understand perceived meanings of that border in the local community. Several intriguing themes emerged from the analysis. Generally speaking, consumers (re)interpret borders differently, and given their familiarity with the fluid and polysemous meanings of that border, their narratives contain paradoxical articulations of the meanings of border.

The first theme taps the paradoxical feelings of security and ambivalence. Seeking order, comfort, security, and pleasant consumption experiences, many people believe that these ideals are intimately linked to the U.S.-Mexico border. Border is thus a vital component of their everyday lives. These people also report of structural influences that the border imposes upon them, leading to discomfort, feelings of self-doubt, and stress when they get closer to the border.

The second theme is resistance against the materialization of the symbolic. Those who see the border as a means of order, security and comfort condemn the wall that the Bush administration intended to build between the U.S. and Mexico. These consumers consider the border to be crucial for maintaining order and security in the region, but allude to the proposed wall as a means of discrimination. They feel that the wall will render the symbolically ‘fair’ order to a visibly ‘discriminatory’ mechanism. Although they feel that no wall can stop them from crossing over, they fear that it will make the border more palpable and definite to local people’s detriment.

The third paradoxical theme introduces the border as a symbolic obstacle and consumption as reward. Local people encounter numerous difficulties while crossing the border. They wait in lengthy lines everyday, sometimes under excruciating conditions. But once they are done crossing the border, they often indulge themselves in consumption experiences available on “the other” side. Therefore, the border is a symbolic obstacle in the way of alluring consumption time, and the act of crossing it generates a mysterious and thrilling experience. It is apparent from the narratives that such sensational swings would not be possible or the same if the border was to be removed.

The fourth theme is “border as fragmentation.” Firat (1995) argues that “fragmentation of the metanarrative allows the liberation and acceptance of indifferences, as well as putting an end to the dominance of any one regime of truth.” Consistent with this argument, interviewees view (a) border as a force that symbolically maintains and intensifies these differences, and (b) globalization as a force engendering fragmentation and availing desired experiences of whatever, whenever. Postconsumers are contemporary people who produce their selves and create their images within and through meaningful experiences they seek in life primarily through consumptions (Firat 1997). Border-crossers are prime examples of postconsumers. More specifically, Mexicans who cross the border, do so in part due to their liking for the ‘American Dream’ and American lifestyles. Symbolically, the border represents such ideal images.

The fifth theme is “border as a privilege.” Mexicans perceive border as a privilege since, for many, being able to cross the border and experience “the other” side (the U.S.) is a privilege. Crossing over to the U.S. makes Mexicans feel special, different, or even part of a superior social class in their native communities.

The last theme is “social construction of border reality and hyperreality.” Many Mexicans believe and articulate that U.S. is ‘better’ than Mexico in almost every aspect even when they do not see any difference between the two countries in terms of the quality and variety of products and services. Advertising and media play eminent roles in the construction of border hyperreality.

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Beginning with imaginary friends and teddy bears in childhood, human beings demonstrate a fundamental need for belonging that continues across the lifespan (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). Although social needs are often fulfilled through contact with other people, it seems plausible that consumer products could fulfill similar needs. For example, consumers might purchase goods and services hoping to attain love, affection, and emotional pleasure. Rather than calling a friend when feeling lonely, a person may choose to indulge in comfort food or shop online. Seeking social need fulfillment through products may, paradoxically, serve as a detriment to interpersonal relationship development and maintenance. The objective of the current research is to explore how the consumption of products, in general, can come at the cost of social relationships when products satisfy the needs customarily fulfilled by other people.

Just how far people supplement human interactions with product interactions is a matter warranting careful study. Research suggests the possibility of consumers developing relationships with nonsocial objects that mirror interpersonal relationships (Aggarwal, 2004). Fournier (1998) identified brands as viable relationship partners where one party in the exchange is a person who receives significant social benefits.
Further evidence indicates that individuals readily perceive objects as gendered (Guthrie, 2007), brands as having personality (Aaker, 1997), and brand-related characters as human (Rook & Levy, 1999). Social exclusion may play a role in these findings, however, such that those who are craving human contact may more readily “see” people in their products. Research by Epley, Waytz, Akalis, and Cacioppo (2008) shows that people who feel more chronically disconnected from others and lonely anthropomorphize more than those who feel more connected. Indeed, individuals who are well integrated in their social networks are less likely to seek additional bonds relative to their more deprived counterparts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In the present research, we examine in two studies the link between social exclusion and consumer products. We propose that when a social need exists, products may satisfy it in a way similar to people, which reduces the likelihood of seeking interpersonal fulfillment. Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose, but never empirically test, that social relationships “...should substitute for each other, to some extent, as would be indicated by effective replacement of lost relationship partners and by a capacity for social relatedness in one sphere to overcome potential ill effects of social deprivation in another sphere.” We seek to demonstrate that consumers who perceive a void in affiliative bonds may be able to derive similar social benefits by forming relationships with and consuming products.

Study 1 utilized a 3(social inclusion/social exclusion/control) × 2(anthropomorphized/non-anthropomorphized product) between-subjects design. Undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of three essay conditions: social inclusion (“write about a time you felt very included by other people”), social exclusion (“a time you felt very excluded by other people”), or a nonsocial negative control (“a time you did worse than expected on an academic assignment”). Participants were then presented information about iRobot’s Roomba. This product was deemed appropriate because previous research indicates owners readily personalize the robot, which creates emotional engagement (Sung, Grinter, & Christensen, 2009). Participants were shown either an anthropomorphized (i.e., rotated 180 degrees from its original orientation so that it appears to be smiling) or nonanthropomorphized (i.e., rotated 90 degrees so it appears on its side) version. Aggarwal and McGill (2007) utilized a similar manipulation where they exposed participants to a picture of the front of a car that had been modified by a computer graphics professional. Specifically, the grille was positioned to be either pointing up in a smile or down in a frown. A series of rating scales followed Roomba presentation to assess product perceptions.

Results revealed a significant interaction between the two independent variables for purchase likelihood, after controlling for Roomba ownership. Means suggest that the anthropomorphized version was generally preferred among both socially included and excluded individuals, but not for those in the control condition. More importantly, socially excluded participants expressed a greater likelihood of buying the anthropomorphized Roomba over its nonanthropomorphized counterpart. A second key variable was willingness to pay for a Roomba, controlling for current ownership. Results yielded a marginally significant interaction between the two independent variables. Assessing the means revealed a similar pattern to purchase likelihood such that the socially included and excluded groups were willing to spend more money on an anthropomorphized Roomba than the control group. Conversely, the control and included groups were willing to spend noticeably more on the nonanthropomorphized Roomba compared to the socially excluded group. Taken as a whole, the socially excluded individuals are willing to pay a premium to obtain a humanlike product over its nonhuman counterpart.

Study 2 replicated Study 1 with a more heterogeneous sample and focused on social behaviors rather than product perceptions. A similar design was used: 1) individuals wrote about a time they felt either socially included or excluded (no control group), 2) viewed either an anthropomorphized or nonanthropomorphized Roomba, and 3) responded to a series of items including whether they wanted to wait alone or with others for subsequent tasks. Results yielded a significant interaction between the two independent variables in desire for social contact. Means indicate that those made to feel excluded were more likely to prefer waiting alone when presented with an anthropomorphized version of the Roomba compared to those also made to feel excluded who were presented with a nonanthropomorphized version. Presumably, the excluded individuals were able to “fill the void” when presented a humanlike product.

In sum, we find initial evidence for the idea that people’s perceptions of their social inclusion and exclusion 1) influence the kinds of products they might buy, and 2) those products influence their social behaviors. Additional studies are already underway to replicate these effects with other products and to elucidate the mechanisms driving these effects. We hope future results will further support our central argument: If social needs can be satisfied through products, consumers may not seek fulfillment through other people and, therefore, increase their risk of negatively impacting real social relationships, perpetuating a cycle of consumption at the expense of social interaction.

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