Consumer Culture Theories of the Consumer and Developing New Conceptualizations
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This article surveys how consumer culture theorists have variously conceptualized the consumer (e.g., consumer as relationship partner, community member, structured agent, etc.) and explains how and why junior scholars could and should develop new conceptualizations of the consumer to answer recurring calls for ‘new perspectives’ in marketing theory and practice.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1010346/volumes/v39/NA-39

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plastic surgery). In other cases, the outcome is tension between simplifying regulation efforts that reduce the risk-taking propensity of the population to a normative uniform/risk-averse function (e.g., do not gamble online).

Third, we demonstrate how various groups construct notions of risk and safety and how they define the boundaries of individualism and free choice. Risk and safety are legitimated and promoted in accord with the economic and political interests of the involved agents—consumers, marketers and the state. The recent discussion on the legalization of marijuana is a case in place documenting the multifaceted process of ‘normalization’.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This article has three objectives. First, it surveys how consumer culture theorists have variously conceptualized the consumer in consumer culture theory. Examples include the consumer as meaning maker (e.g., Levy 1959), feeling being (e.g., Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), self concept (e.g., Belk 1988), metaphorical processor (e.g., Zaltman 1995), relationship partner (e.g., Fournier 1988), community member (e.g., Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), structured agent (e.g., Crockett and Wallendorf 2004), network actor (Epp and Price 199, and multiphrenic self (e.g., Bahl and Milne 2010)).

Second, the article identifies the unique implications of each conceptualization for collecting qualitative data, building grounded theory, and constructing marketing strategy. For example, the conceptualization of the consumer as a multiphrenic self suggests motivating consumption in one of two ways. Marketers can promote a product as a self-serving solution to a particular kind of self shared by many consumers (i.e., an archetypal self). Alternatively, marketers can promote a product to the meta-self as a solution to common goal conflicts among selves. The conception also hints that new markets may be created by inventing new archetypes (e.g., GQ men and Harley bikers). To demotivate consumption, advocates could help consumers identify their multiple selves and heal their dysfunctional selves. Thereafter, consumers must learn strategies for resolving conflicts among selves (e.g., coalition), such that a few versatile consumables can serve the interests of multiple selves.

Third, and most importantly, the article discusses how theorists, especially junior scholars, can develop new conceptualizations of the consumer to answer recurring calls for ‘new perspectives’ in consumer and marketing research. The value of articles that explicitly or implicitly offer new conceptualizations of consumption (Belk 1988; Fournier 1998; Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn 2001) is evidenced in their relatively high citation counts, disproportionate numbers of awards, and frequent appearance in doctoral course syllabi. Owing to the importance of new conceptualizations, this article addresses the question: how do theorists develop new conceptions?

New conceptions develop in three main acts: ideation, construction, and publication. In the first act of ideation, the initial inspiration for new conceptions may arise from intellectual ‘kindling’ as diverse as cognitive dissonance, eclectic reading, empirical research, new technologies, other fields of research, lay theories, personal experience, projective exercises, theory-data tensions, or thought experiments (Langley 1999; Weick 1989; Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1982). An idea is often expressed in tropes such as analogies and metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Morgan 1980, 1986; Weick 1989). For example, Muniz Jr. and O’Guinn (2001) began a vigorous stream of marketing literature with the simple notion that groups of people who consume the same brand and derive benefits from shared experiences are analogous to communities.

Second, no matter how their initial idea is kindled, theorists ‘discipline’ their imagination (cf. Weick 1989) with theoretical materials from other disciplines to support their conceptions. Thus far, conceptual innovators in consumer research have drawn heavily on the social sciences such as anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology and a bit less extensively on the natural sciences such as neuroscience and humanities such as literary criticism. Theorists can also discipline their imagination using empirical materials, but theory is always necessary. The theoretical approach is exemplified by Belk (1988). The author draws on multiple streams of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology to evidence the idea that consumption is often like an extension of one’s self concept. The mixed theory-data approach is exemplified by Fournier (1998). The author tacks back and forth between relationship psychology and informants’ longitudinal engagements with brands to explicate the idea that consumption is like an interpersonal relationship. (For a longer discussion of theory construction as disciplined imagination via problem statements, thought trials, and selection criteria, see Weick (1989).)

Third, following ideation and construction, conceptions face the arduous task of warranting publication. ‘A’ journals such as JCR require that authors demonstrate how their conception makes a distinct contribution to the field. Authors can choose to highlight how their new conceptualization reveals (i) new aspects of the consumer, (ii) new consumption activities, or (iii) new motivating forces. For example, Bahl and Milne (2010) inject new insight into the role of the self in consumer behavior (cf. Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982) on all three dimensions. (i) Consumers do not have one self concept, but multiple selves and a meta-self. (ii) Consumer choice is not as simple as negotiating whether a product matches one’s identity, but having a conversation among multiple selves—a conversation that may end in various outcomes ranging from domination to coalition. (iii) Consuming is motivated by not only the need to sustain one’s selves but also by the need to achieve harmony among them.

REFERENCES


