The Consumer Role: Core Characteristics and Personal Boundaries

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We present theoretical propositions describing core features of the consumer role and the results of a qualitative, image-based study. We conclude there is a shared social characterization of the consumer role (the consumer role is materialistic, self-focused, empowered, and hopeful); however, an individual's embodiment of the consumer role is highly influenced by the idiosyncratic nature of consumer role boundaries. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/100955/volumes/v39/NA-39

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sumer behavior is distinguished from other fields [of human behavior] by its focus on a consumer role" (899). Also in 2010, the JCR editorial team invited consumer researchers to produce ‘integrative summaries’ and ‘new perspectives’ because “both types of papers are important means by which a field moves forward.” Accordingly, the discussants are invited to evaluate one session-wide question and four paper-specific questions. Do the papers in this session begin to realize the increasingly unanimous vision for truly consumer-specific research? In other words, do the papers in this session re-shape the boundaries of consumer research in a visionary or dangerous direction?

1. Does exploring the phenomenological (de)activation of the consumer role within and beyond consumption contexts sharpen or blur the boundaries of consumer research?

2. Consumer psychology and consumer culture theory have thrived for decades on laboratory experiments and consumer ethnographies. Should we care how managers think of and relate to consumers?

3. Most consumer researchers don’t read history, let alone futures studies. Should we continue assuming consumer behavior is a hard (trans-historical) science or start observing how ‘consumer’ is a fragile concept evolving with society?

4. Will positioning conceptualizations of the consumer – numerous, contested, and ever-changing as they are – at the heart of consumer research provide the discipline an enduring and anchoring theoretical puzzle or foster a Tower of Babel?

Building Connections. Consumer research has a responsibility to the broader social science community: it must lead the academic conversation on the meanings and functions of the consumer concept. This special session takes this scholarly duty to advance theories of the consumer rather seriously. However, the authors of these papers also collectively aim to make important connections across disciplinary, methodological, and social boundaries. First, although the papers are mostly crafted in the tradition of consumer culture theory, they extensively converge with other disciplines: consumer psychology (paper 1, 4), marketing strategy (paper 2, 4), and the sociology of consumption (paper 3, 4). Second, the session also connects methodological solutions to conceptual problems in a novel or at least non-routine way. By strategically employing image-based projective techniques (paper 1), extended ethnographic engagements (paper 2), multi-sited netnographic research (paper 3), and meta-theoretical analysis (paper 4), the session celebrates the diversity of methods in the qualitative marketing research toolkit (Belk 2006). Finally, this special session also hopes to build social connections in a quite literal way: the authors and discussants collectively represent 3 countries, 7 universities, and scholars at multiple stages of their career – from PhD candidates to JCR editors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the centrality of the consumer role in today’s society, a rich description of the role is surprisingly underdeveloped. Describing the consumer role is extremely important, because as Folkes (2002) points out, “when situational cues lead people to perceive themselves as customers, they then interpret the world differently than when they do not perceive themselves as customers, and that influences their behavior” (1). In other words, a clear definition of the consumer role will provide us with the foundation needed to further investigate the consequences of being a consumer—both within and beyond the consumer context. Using role theory and boundary theory, we first provide a detailed conceptualization of the consumer role and second, use image-based qualitative interviews to explore how individuals embody the consumer role in their daily lives.

Core Characteristics of the Consumer Role. Like actors playing specific roles, people behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on the context and the role they occupy. Broadly speaking, roles are defined as a “certain persona—replete with specific goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles, and time horizons” (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000, 475). To simplify, we define the consumer role as the core set of characteristics that guide behavior during the pursuit and acquisition of marketplace goods and services.

To identify the core characteristics of the consumer role, we rely on a thorough literature review of the history of consumerism and research on compulsive buyers. From this, we identify four core characteristics of the consumer role: materialism, self-focus, empowerment, and hopefulness. First (and not surprisingly), the consumer role is linked to materialism. Materialism is the value an individual places on the acquisition and possession of material goods, especially for their symbolic purposes (Richins and Dawson 1992). Not only does the Veblenesque account of the rise of consumerism highlight the symbolic importance of consumer goods (Veblen 1899/1953), but compulsive buyers also tend to be highly materialistic (O’Guinn and Faber 1989). In addition, if the consumer role is materialistic, it must also be self-focused as materialism is a self-focused value (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). Empowerment is another core characteristic. Stearns (2001) proposes that the consumer revolution occurred because women were desperate to regain control over their lives, a feeling that is often echoed by compulsive buyers (Faber 2000; Krueger 1988; O’Guinn and Faber 1989). Lastly, Campbell’s (1987) account of the consumer role as being driven by hope, daydreaming, and disillusionment is supported by the consistent finding that compulsive shoppers have a high propensity to fantasize and are quickly disenchanted with their purchases (Faber 2000; Krueger 1988; O’Guinn and Faber 1989). Thus, we propose that the consumer role is materialistic, self-focused, hopeful, and empowering.

It is important to note that traditional role theory regards roles as shared, social conceptions that are “clearly defined and agreed upon by society” (Solomon et al. 1985, 101). Recently, however, research explores how an individual’s own understanding of a social role results in a role that, to some degree, is unique to the individual (Neale and Griffin 2006). To explore how the consumer role varies across individuals, we turn to boundary theory and image-based qualitative interviews.

Consumer Role Boundaries. Individuals create boundaries to maintain or modify social roles (Nippert-Eng 1996). Depending on the strength of their boundaries, roles may be classified along an integration-segmentation continuum: integrated roles have weak and flexible boundaries and segmented roles have strong and inflexible boundaries (Ashforth et al. 2000; Clark 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996). To better understand individual variations in consumer role boundaries and their subsequent impact on the enactment of the consumer role, we conducted nine depth interviews using visual images selected by our participants (Zaltman 1997; Zaltman and Coulter 1995). Our analysis revealed five variations of the consumer role, which
we characterize along the integration-segmentation continuum as the blended consumer, the romantic consumer, the unidimensional consumer, the self-aware consumer, and the defensive consumer.

For the blended consumer, consumer role boundaries are largely non-existent. The consumer role is highly integrated and almost inseparable from other life domains. The consumer role is not the dominant role but is subsumed under another more salient role. The romantic consumer is also highly integrated but still somewhat separable. This consumer embraces the consumer role precisely because of the characteristics identified above, with little or no concern for the potentially negative consequences of being a consumer (e.g., overspending). Boundaries are virtually nonexistent, and transitioning into the consumer role occurs frequently and often unintentionally. The unidimensional consumer also embraces the consumer role, but to a lesser degree. Though this individual is materialistic, self-focused, hopeful and empowered when in the consumer role, at least one of these characteristics is clearly dominant. The self-aware consumer is mindful of both the pros and cons of being a consumer and erects some boundaries to maintain control of when and why the consumer role is entered. Lastly, the defensive consumer erects strong boundaries and is extremely weary of being under the influence of the consumer role.

In exploring the consumer role along the integration-segmentation continuum, several interesting insights emerge. First, the more segmented the consumer role, the less likely the individual is to experience both advantages and disadvantages of the consumer role. Further, maintaining extreme segmentation seems exhausting given how pervasive the consumer role is in today’s society. Lastly, the more segmented the consumer role, the more mindful transitioning into the consumer role is likely to be.

Implications. Our research provides a rich conceptual description of the consumer role, while also demonstrating that this role is highly influenced by the idiosyncratic nature of consumer role boundaries. Counter to boundary theory’s penchant to examine role integration/segmentation in the context of two roles (e.g., work and family), we also show that roles and their boundaries can be studied independently of other roles. Finally, our research provides the conceptual foundation necessary to explore further why people seek out the consumer role, how individuals can manage their consumer role transitions, and how the consumer role can impact behavior and relationships in non-consumer contexts.

A Less-Than-Immaculate Conception: Investigating the Relationship Between Product Developers and Their Imagined Consumer

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers have examined consumers’ relationships with brands, products and organizations (e.g. Fournier 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) but remain largely indifferent to the perspective of the managers who produce the objects and symbols with which consumers interact (for exceptions see Cayla and Eckhardt 2006; Desroches and Marcoux 2007). This is fundamentally problematic because, “for a relationship to truly exist...the partners must collectively affect, define and redefine the relationship” (Fournier 1998:344).

Accordingly, this paper examines managers’ relationships with their imagined consumers (Cayla and Eckhardt 2006) in the context of product development. Product development is a rich context for examining the relationships producers construe with consumers, because it is during this process that managers actively explore and address the fundamental nature of consumers’ motivations, desires and behaviors. The study was initiated by examining the myriad of tools, artifacts and processes that are employed to construct or otherwise reify consumers in the course of product development. This foundation in turns, informs the study’s focal question: What is the nature of the relationship between members of product development teams and the consumers they develop for?

Method. The author conducted a multisited ethnographic study of five Fortune 500 firms’ strategic business units over 18 months. Data from focal firms was collected via semi-structured interviews with key informants; participant-observation of product development activities and collection of archival information from the firms as well as media reports. Additional interviews with informants in nine other consumer goods and consulting firms were conducted to enhance the validity of findings. Sampled firms represent multiple industries and product categories including: consumer packaged goods; consumer durables; high-tech equipment and medical services.

Findings. Relationships between members of product development teams and their consumers vary along two primary continua: a role orientation ranging from personal (e.g. consumer as friend) to professional (e.g. consumer as client) and an interaction dimension ranging from the intimate (e.g. empathy or shared experience) to the clinical (e.g. data dominates). Importantly, the nature of each manager’s relationship with a given target reveals a mental model reflecting both personality traits and life experiences. Thus, managerial relationships with consumers can vary considerably, even among members of the same product development team. Conversely, managers may be motivated to revise initial schemas about consumers in the course of collective sensemaking (cf. Weick et al. 2005).

To illustrate, managers with a strong professional role orientation as well as a sense of empathy for their consumer subjects might construe the targeted consumer as a potential victim, deserving of protection or advocacy. This is the case with Katherine, who works in research and development for ‘Better Living’, maker of personal care products. She explains, “I kind of see myself as a soldier for the consumer. There are definitely marketers and other people inside the company for whom it’s more about chasing the money than the longer term solution...I’m more worried about the long-term consumer behavior than quarter-to-quarter” (personal interview, August 2009).

Producer-consumer relationships are subject to the vicissitudes of insight gleaned from consumer intelligence and as such are an integral factor linking consumer research and product development. For example, at ‘Crunchies’, a packaged food company, retail transaction data indicated that mothers of teenage boys were key buyers of the company’s bestselling snack. Given stereotypes of mothers as the nuclear family’s primary provider of nourishment and caretaker of health, producers assumed that the mothers would be concerned with these issues when making purchase decisions and product development efforts focused on increasing the snacks’ nutritional profile. However, subsequent ethnographic research revealed that many mothers were more interested in increasing their son’s social capital than salubrity. These mothers aspired to create a context in which their teen was seen by peers to have the “right stuff” (including snack foods), and for their home to become the preferred place for her son’s friends to gather. The discovery of this insight instantly converted the development team’s interpretation of the buyer segment from hard-to-please “Shopper Moms” to impressively cool “Kick Ass Moms.” This reframing of the consumer not only shifted

1 Informants have been given pseudonyms to provide anonymity.
2 Organizational identities have also been masked to preserve confidentiality and comply with non-disclosure agreements.
3 Verbatim segment names provided by informants.