Living in Harmony With Nature: a Post-Human Analysis of Consumers' Relationships With Nature

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We explore consumers’ paradoxical desire to live in harmony with a nature that they dominate and control at the same time through analyzing how consumers negotiate tensions between utilitarian and romantic discourses of nature vis-à-vis their experience of material forces of nature and their use of technological objects.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Living in harmony with nature is a pervasive ideology of how a “sustainable future” and a “fulfilled life” would look like. Both a vision of a desired future and an imagined past, the idea of living in harmony with nature can be found in a diverse set of contexts, including politics, social movements, popular culture, and marketing. For example, a 2009 Toyota commercial announced that the Prius will bring “harmony between man, nature, and machine.” As marketers, consumers, and society as a whole negotiate their relationships with nature, it is important for consumer researchers to explore what it means to live in harmony with nature.

The notion of living in harmony with nature is highly paradoxical, as consumers seek to live in harmony with a nature that they control and dominate at the same time. From a cultural perspective, living in harmony with nature requires consumers to constantly negotiate between romantic discourses of a sacred, living, and benevolent Mother Nature (Arnould and Price 1993; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Thompson 2004) and conflicting utilitarian discourses that conceptualize nature as passive matter that needs to be dominated and controlled (Merchant 1983). More importantly, consumers’ negotiations between these contradicting cultural discourses are complicated by the fact that consumption is situated in material environments of technological objects and natural geographies (Bennett 2010; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Miller 2010). In order to better understand the “harmony paradox,” it is therefore necessary to explore how consumers negotiate tensions between utilitarian and romantic discourses of nature vis-à-vis their experience of material forces of nature and their use of technological objects. In particular, we explore (1) how consumers achieve harmony with nature given their experiences of a sometimes dangerous and threatening nature, and (2) how they are able to combine technology and the domination of nature with their pursuit of harmony with nature.

In alignment with previous research (Canniford and Shankar 2013), we adopt a post-human theory of assemblage (Delanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 2008), particularly drawing on the notion of symmetrically distributed agency (Bennett 2010; Pickering 1995). Multi-day, back-country hiking was selected as the context for a visual-material ethnography (Peñaloza and Cayla 2006) because hikers have to frequently overcome tensions between utilitarian and romantic discourses of nature (Michael 2000; Nash 2001) while engaging with material forces of nature that constantly complicate their negotiations of these two cultural discourses. Over a time frame of nine months, the first author participated in six hiking trips as a participant observer, resulting in 114 pages of field notes and about 2,150 photos. In addition, he interviewed 15 individuals who had previously participated in one or more of the field trips.

Findings are presented through three interrelated themes. The first theme highlights how hikers appropriate romantic discourses by seeking harmony in a nature that is perceived as external to civilization. Noting the contradiction that hikers’ quest for being in harmony with a “romantic nature” oftentimes exposes them to higher physical dangers in material nature, the subsequent themes explore how harmony can arise when hikers have to struggle with physical dangers of nature. Focusing on these physical dangers, theme 2 finds that hikers’ relationship with nature is highly ambivalent: They strive to experience “more nature and less civilization”, but also “more civilization and less nature.” Importantly, informants do not have full control over what discourses of nature are appropriated, as the relationship they form with nature are co-determined by the material agency of nature. The third theme explores how changes in material nature shift the meanings consumers assign to technological objects that are used during hiking. Using the example of hiking poles, we show how technology does not need to distract hikers from achieving harmony with nature, but can rather support them because technology allows hikers to prevail in the struggle with nature. Thus, technology can become a symbol for being in harmony with nature.

This research offers several contributions that advance and broaden our understanding of the human/nature relationship and materialism more generally. In contrast to conceptualizing technology and other markers of civilization as (unacceptable) betrayals that need to be purged and purified away before feelings of harmony with nature can arise (Canniford and Shankar 2013), our research demonstrates that the meanings of technologies are not fixed but are localized in a particular space and engagement with nature. In certain material-natural conditions, hiking poles are symbols of civilization and the domination of nature, while in other conditions they are symbols of a hiker’s pursuit of harmony. Thus, we challenge the notion that harmony with nature can only be found outside civilization, and instead propose that consumers can achieve harmony with nature though civilization. From a more abstract perspective, our research advances our understanding of the dynamics between materialities and cultural discourses by highlighting how the material agency of nature co-determines what cultural discourses consumers can appropriate when making sense of their experience of nature and when assigning meanings to technological objects. Consumers can therefore always only exert partial control over the shaping of the assemblage and what cultural discourses can be appropriated. Finally, we offer managerial implications by discussing how marketers can successfully position their products on the idea of living in harmony with nature.

REFERENCES


