Alternative Consumption Experiences Via Imaginative Fantasy Creation

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In an exploratory study employing open-ended questions, we examined the extent to which consumers who believe an item or experience is unattainable, engage in imaginative fantasies to substitute for actual consumption and whether these fantasies result in benefits similar to actual consumption such as excitement and a sense of accomplishment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often wish to have consumption items or experiences, which they also realize may be unattainable for them. Consumption-related research suggests consumers who want an item or an experience engage in various activities to prepare for the anticipated benefits eventual consumption will bring. However, when consumers believe the item or experience is unattainable, can they ever gain some of the benefits of consumption without actually engaging in consumption? That is, might perceptions of unattainability motivate consumers to develop imaginative fantasies of their consumption items to gain consumption-related outcomes without physically experiencing or engaging with the item? In this exploratory research, we examine whether consumers who engage in pre-consumption activities, such as mental imagery (MacInnis and Price 1987, 1990), wish list creation (Fournier and Guiry 1993), consumption visions (Phillips, Olson, and Baumgartner 1995; Phillips 1996), and consumption dreaming (d’Astous and Deschénes 2005), for unattainable consumption items or experiences integrate these pre-consumption processes within an imaginative fantasy creation resulting in a mental experience that, while not a physical consumption experience, provides them with feelings of excitement, satisfaction and satiation akin to a physical consumption experience.

We suggest that consumers, as a result of imaginatively exploring their unattainable consumption items, gain outcomes associated with consumption even if they do not experience consumption. Consumers may be able to develop clear, cogent reasons that pertain to their inability to consume, providing a catalyst to develop an alternative to actually experiencing what they want via engaging in imaginative fantasy creation. Although the fantasy experience is specific to the individual and may not offer a true representation of what the actual experience may be, consumers integrate their prior knowledge and stored mental imagery within the fantasy creation to explore what they wish to actually experience. Although this suggested process is devoid of traditionally understood consumption stages and does not involve the consumer actually interacting with the item or experience, consumers may still be able to develop an enjoyable experience, satiate their wanting for the item without investing or transacting for the actual object, and also alter their feelings towards the brand, potentially affecting their knowledge and impressions of the brand in addition to future consumption interactions. This suggestion draws on the work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) who recognize that consumers do not just participate in consumption to satisfy needs and wants but for the feelings of fantasy and fun that are part of the experience.

To gain an initial understanding of whether consumers who perceive consumption as unattainable are engaging in activities that may contribute to a consumption experience within the mind of the consumer, an exploratory interview-based study was conducted. Findings from our exploratory study suggest consumers are able to identify consumption items they perceive as unattainable yet still engage in imaginative fantasy creations that offer consumers a consumption “experience” within the mind. Consumers who recognize what they want is unattainable appear to develop imaginative mental experiences involving the consumption experience they wish to have. These occurrences incorporate known pre-consumption processes yet are more developed and complex, suggesting that coupled with imaginative fantasy creation, consumers develop a consumption-like experience that does not involve physically interacting with the actual item they want.

While exploratory in nature, preliminary findings suggest the marketing literature’s present understanding of consumption is often limited to the suggestion that consumers engage in these types of behaviors specifically for the purposes of engaging in actual consumption experiences and this understanding should be adjusted to accommodate these types of experiences as part of how we view consumption. These types of fantasy creations offer consumers an alternative consumption experience as well as benefits typically associated with actual consumption experiences, which provides an interesting basis for future exploration of how we view consumption and the ways in which consumers may be able to interact with the things they want without actually experiencing those things. Consumers are likely already benefiting from the creation of these types of experiences, thus understanding more about how consumers engage with what they want through imaginative fantasy creations can only benefit both marketers and consumer researchers, as well as consumers.

REFERENCES


