Playful Consumption: a Physical Perspective

Olivier Sibai, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

Consumers increasingly engage in playful physical activities. Existing theorizations of playful consumption are disembodied and therefore cannot capture the phenomenon adequately. I investigate the practice of juggling using ethnography to develop an embodied theory of playful consumption. This research contributes to theories of playful consumption and consumer expertise.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021979/volumes/v44/NA-44

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Playfulness is ubiquitous in consumption, pervading every stage of the consumption process (Grayson 1999; Jantzen et al. 2012). While physically playful consumption has become a widespread phenomenon, existing conceptualizations of play in consumer research are disembodied. In this paper I conceptualize (1) why consumers engage in physically playful consumption and (2) how they do it. This research contributes to the literature on playful consumption and consumer expertise.

Previous research has conceptualized playful consumption as a non-productive, intrinsically motivated, voluntary consumption experience involving an optimal level of arousal and feelings of fun, and anchored at the border between the real and the imaginary (Holt 1995; Holbrook 1999; Kozinets et al. 2004). Two trends have developed in playful consumption. One the one hand, consumers increasingly engage in mental play. For example, consumers revel in the actualization of impossible fantasies in video games (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010) and engage in “screen play” (Kozinets et al. 2004 p. 668). On the other hand, consumers also engage in physical play. Descriptive accounts show that consumers playfully explore their bodies through a wide range of consumption activities, from sports (Coakley and Dunning 2000), to yoga (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015), DIY (Wolf and McQuitty 2011) and the latest generation of video games (Benford, Magerkuth and Ljungstrand 2005).

However, these descriptive accounts have not conceptualized the processes and purposes of physically playful consumption.

The study was conducted in the juggling community. The community members practice as consumers rather than professionals the circus crafts involving the manipulation of objects, a set of highly physical and playful activities (Palacios 1991). The study follows an ethnographic research design based on participant-observation in two London juggling clubs. Over 2015, 11 jugglers were interviewed (200 transcript pages), members’ online discussions were continuously scrutinized (over 100 conversations downloaded) and field notes were taken at 25 juggling gatherings (40 transcript pages).

Physical play emerges as a mode of consumption whereby consumers appropriate material reality. I distinguish four types of physically playful consumption practices allowing consumers to appropriate different aspects of material reality. Each practice is characterized by specific doings, uses of objects and physical meanings. In skill playing, consumers train to develop new physical abilities, using the toy as a tool, and derive feelings of self-improvement from it. Skill playing allows consumers to appropriate their body. In artistic playing, consumers improvise long sequences of movements, viewing the toy as an extension of their body, allowing them to express themselves. Through artistic playing, consumers unite with surrounding objects. In collaborative playing, consumers play physical games with others, using the toy as a communication medium, to gain feelings of mutual incorporation, perceptions of being in physical harmony with others. Consumers thus integrate the bodies of fellow consumers in their inner worlds. In performance playing, consumers present their physical abilities to an audience in a choreography, using the toy as a theatrical property. By defying the rules of gravity, the player produces feelings of magic in the audience. In performance playing, consumers enchant the world, reshaping material reality as they wish. The range of physical play practices consumers can engage in expands overtime as their expertise develops. Beginners start with skill playing as all other forms of play require mastering a number of basic movements. Then, they can engage in artistic and collaborative playing. In the last step consumers can become performance players.

While in previous research consumers were viewed as playing to escape material reality (Deighton and Greyson 1995), this research indicates that consumers play to connect with material reality and characterizes four ways in which it does. This study also contributes to the literature on consumer expertise. It offers an embodied account of consumer expertise contrasting with existing cognitive ones (von Wallpach and Kreuzer 2013). While cognitive expertise allows consumers to select the experiences which enhance their expertise the most, leading expert consumers to engage in less varied experiences than novices (Clarkson, Janiszewski and Cinelli 2013), physical expertise unlocks new experience opportunities, leading expert consumers to engage in more diverse experiences than novices.

REFERENCES


