Toward a Framework For Cct Research on Consumer Emotion

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As multiple scholars have recently noted, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research on consumer emotion is extensive but fragmented, a largely disconnected array of insights across levels of analysis and theoretical perspectives. This conceptual paper synthesizes these insights to develop an integrative framework for CCT research on consumer emotion.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

CCT research on consumer emotion dates back to the 1980s, following passionate pleas by interpretive researchers to highlight the emotional, experiential, and expressive aspects of consumer behavior (Belk 1987; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook 1987). Although CCT has made valuable inquiries into emotion, the field has tended to employ different theoretical perspectives of emotion, to situate concepts of emotion at differing levels of analysis, and often to subordinate emotion under parallel theoretical notions, such as, ideology and community. As a result, CCT research on consumer emotion is rather fragmented (Gopaldas 2014; Illouz 2009; Rafferty 2011), having produced a large unconnected array of piecemeal insights. Consequently, there has been a call for more social-, cultural-, and management-related conceptualizations of emotions in marketing and consumer research (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999; Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010). This article proposes an integrative framework for CCT research on consumer emotion. We develop a framework that captures the distinctions and possible links among the macro-cultural, the meso-market, and the micro-individual level as they relate to emotion. Such integrative framework extends existing theorizations of consumer emotion by establishing important connections among different levels (macro, meso, micro) of analysis.

To develop our framework we collected CCT articles from the Journal of Consumer Research; Journal of Consumer Culture; Consumption, Markets, and Culture; and Marketing Theory; along with relevant texts from other journals, books, and edited volumes on consumer emotion, focusing primarily on socio-cultural perspectives (Belk and Coon 1993; Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Beruchashvili and Moisio 2012; Beruchashvili, Moisio, and Gentry 2015; Bonsu, Darmody, and Parmentier 2010; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Gopaldas 2014; Jantzen et al. 2012; Kuruoglu and Ger 2015; Ottes and Pleck 2003; Sandlin and Callahan 2009; Siebert 2013, 2014; Thompson 2005). Next, we iteratively went back and forth between landmark emotion research in the social sciences (Hochschild 1979; Illouz 1997; Stearns and Stearns 1985; Stets and Turner 2008) and our collection of CCT work on consumer emotion. From this process, we built up and created common themes, assumptions about emotion, and an overall framework integrating and connecting recent CCT research on consumer emotion along a macro-meso-micro spectrum of analysis.

We resort to the notion of “emotionology” (Stearns and Stearns 1985) to distinguish between the cultural and market elements that shape consumer emotion, and individual emotional experience and expression itself. Although the term in its original formulation is largely limited to social rules regarding emotion, we adapt it to capture the macro and meso levels of analysis. We suggest the label “cultural emotionology” for macro-level ideational resources pertaining to emotion, such as, emotion discourses, values, and norms. In addition, we suggest labeling “marketplace emotionology” the material and symbolic resources related to emotion that result from the use and reworking of cultural resources by actors in market and consumption settings (e.g., brand-centered “emotion cultures,” Beruchashvili et al. 2015) and the market-mediated assemblages formed by resources, concrete emotions, and market actors (e.g., “emotional economies,” Kuruoglu and Ger 2015). At each level, emotionological formations may serve as resources and regulating structures for consumers.

Next we describe the main findings emerging from our analysis at the three levels: macro, meso, and individual. The key elements at the macro level of cultural emotionology (e.g., emotion ideals, vocabularies, ideologies) usually exist in plural form in societies and are often contradictory, creating tensions at the cultural level that animate much of the dynamism in human emotional activity. However, these elements can also form “emotional regimes” (Jantzen et al. 2012; Reddy 2001) that enforce particular emotional norms, values, and techniques guiding consumers in desirable emotional directions.

The key elements at the meso level of marketplace emotionology are market offerings and actors, symbolic marketplace resources, and consumer collectives. These elements become variously assembled in the emotion concepts that prior research has created or applied. For instance, the concepts “emotion culture” (Beruchashvili et al. 2015; Gordon 1989) and “structures of feeling” (Thompson 2005; Williams 1997) were used to reveal how emotional consumer behavior is normatively shaped. We further locate at the meso level, emotional or “affective economies” (Kuruoglu and Ger 2015; Ahmed 2004) and “marketplace sentiments” (Gopaldas 2014). These latter concepts although paying little explicit attention to normative content about emotions, they represent more concrete assemblages that encourage collective thoughts, feelings, and actions. Much research at this level tends to perceive emotions as being collectively evoked in and through the interactions of consumers (and other market actors and actants) in shared consumption settings.

The cultural and marketplace levels provide scripts and resources for individuals as socially situated emotion interpreters to make sense of and (make efforts to) deal with their emotional experiences and expressions. Research at the micro-individual level emphasizing emotion as a central element in consumers’ identity projects tends to be based on the premise that emotion and identity are interlinked and broadly governed by similar structures and processes (Beruchashvili and Moisio 2012; Hochschild 1983). Emotions are seen as being orientated or managed toward, motivating, reassuring, or hindering particular identity goals and prescribed consumer positions (and vice versa) within cultural contexts and marketplace structures (Belk et al. 2003; Siebert 2013; Thompson 2005; Thompson and Coskuner-Ball 2007).

Overall the proposed framework helps broadening scholarly debates from specific concepts and dichotomizations between cultural and psychological work to connections among existing concepts at different levels of analysis. By taking such a perspective, researchers will have a more comprehensive view of consumer emotion. The framework further clarifies the different emotionological levels, and the links between the socio-culturally constructed (i.e., emotionology) and the messy realm of the individually experienced.

REFERENCES


