Defining and Differentiating Marketplace Tranquility

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How do consumers understand general tranquility (GT), and compare it to the outcomes that “tranquil” market offerings promise? We define and dissect “marketplace tranquility” (MT), its sources, and consumers’ motivations for pursuing it. We find consumers regard GT as abstract and unattainable, but MT as resonant, accessible, practical, and goal-oriented.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recently, demand has increased for products, services, and experiences that facilitate consumers’ ability to withdraw from a technology-driven, multitasked, fast-paced, and typically urban world. For example, over 20,000 spas in the U.S. generate $15.5 billion in revenue (International Spa Association, 2014). More recently, coloring books for adults, which enable them to achieve respite from stress-filled, overstimulated lives, dominate lists of bestselling books (Harrison, 2016). Increasingly, people who seek respite from an “age of incessancy” (Prochnik, 2011, 12) are turning to the marketplace for solutions.

But despite the increase in demand for such offerings, there is little understanding of how and why consumers acquire them. Rather, the long-dominant paradigm of the “experience economy” (Pine II and Gilmore 1999) advocates offering consumers sensory-laden, stimulating marketplace experiences. Likewise, most research on retail atmospheres centers on how to keep customers excited, thrilled, and stimulated (Fulberg 2003; Lesser and Kamal 1991; Wakefield and Baker 1998), implying these outcomes yield optimal outcomes for firms and consumers. Yet the increased demand for offerings such as Bose noise-reducing headphones, Amtrak Quiet Cars (Gallagher 2014), and even monastic retreats may indicate that the experience economy paradigm is overlooking consumers’ needs to leverage the marketplace to achieve peace, quiet, and associated consumer-welfare benefits.

We address this theoretical and empirical gap by exploring an emergent construct that we label “marketplace tranquility” (MT). In so doing, we explore these questions: 1) How do consumers understand tranquility in general (GT), and how do they perceive it differs from MT? 2) What marketplace resources and practices do they identify as potential sources of tranquility? 3) What motivates consumers to seek out these sources? Our main contributions of this admittedly exploratory study are to demonstrate the salience of MT to consumers, and to show how they perceive MT as meaningfully different from GT. In short, while consumers perceive GT as abstract and often unattainable in a hyper-urbanized, hectic world, they conceptualize MT as a “practical” form of tranquility – one both accessible and useful in their pursuit of life goals. Furthermore, consumers now seem to take it for granted that the commercial sphere will, and should, provide opportunities for them to try and achieve tranquility-related outcomes.

Below, we discuss current academic understandings of tranquility, and differentiate it from distinct but related constructs. We then explicate our methods, analyze our research questions, discuss the paradoxes inherent in MT, and offer ideas for future research.

BACKGROUND

Tranquility

The OED (“Tranquility,” 2016) defines tranquility as “free from disturbance [and] calm.” Research supports this delineation, explaining tranquility as a state symbolized by emotional ease and lack of anxiety (Ellison, Burdette, and Hill 2009; Yager 1982). Along similar lines, Herzog and Bosley (1992) refer to tranquility as calmness, serenity, and peace. Other research highlights the importance of the external environment in achieving these outcomes. Eliovson (1971) interprets tranquility as a desirable state of mind, promoted by certain components of a natural environment (Herzog and Bosley 1992). Likewise, Hunter et al. (2010) detail tranquility as a mental state likely occurring in the presence of sensory inputs from the natural environment. Thus it appears tranquility stems from two components, feelings of calmness and peace (or low-arousal positive affect; Russell 1980) and the external environment that supports it. Consolidating the above characterizations, we offer a cohesive definition of general tranquility (GT) as a state of mind resulting from the experience of low-arousal positive emotions, emerging from immersion in an external environment typified by lack of disturbance.

Related But Dissimilar Constructs

Some studies (e.g., Puccinelli et al. 2009) argue it is critical to understand the role of atmospherics in consumers’ marketplace experiences. However, no extant research explores how consumers seek or leverage marketspaces or resources to achieve tranquility. Nevertheless, GT can be compared to similar constructs studied within consumer behavior. For example, consumption simplicity pertains to consumers’ voluntary simplification or reduction of consumption levels through downshifting (Schor 1998), and may involve consumers foregoing maximum consumption and income-earning opportunities (Shaw and Newholm 2002). Such simplicity may remove consumers’ burdens, enabling them to enjoy “non-materialistic satisfaction…from slowing down to enjoying nature…to reading challenging books to watching…classic[s] on television” (Etzioni 1998, 637). Although tranquility and consumer simplicity may appear similar, we believe simplicity is more accurately understood as an antecedent to tranquility. Furthermore, solitude (or aloneness) may seem related to tranquility—but the two may not be the same. Previous research argues that togetherness, as manifest through healthy human relationships, may actually contribute to tranquil outcomes (Stoilova et al. 2014; Williams, Page, and Petrosky 2010). On similar lines, although silence shares common features with tranquility, we argue it is also distinct. Indeed, some types of sounds (especially those emanating from nature; e.g., wind and water) may contribute to tranquil experience (Herzog 1985).

METHOD

Given our goal to explicate a new construct (MacInnis and De Mello 2005), we chose in-depth interviews as our primary research technique. These enable consumers to articulate their own experiences, understandings, and meanings pertaining to GT and MT. We began with an initial, broad question, “What comes to mind when you hear the word tranquility?” We then asked them to describe how they sought tranquility in their lives, and to discuss any marketplace entities they thought could (or could not) contribute to their tranquility. We also allowed informants to discuss other aspects of MT they believed to be important.

We interviewed six informants (three males, three females) from September-October 2015. All were acquaintances. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype. All but one informant is Korean, and all are graduate students in their 20s. Each read and signed consent forms prior to the interviews, permitting us to transcribe the text and use excerpts when disseminating research, while protecting their anonymity. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and...
were audiotaped and transcribed, yielding almost 100 pages of typed transcripts. We supplemented these interviews with two one-hour observations of marketplace offerings designed to foster tranquility—a yoga class and a class held at a Japanese teahouse in the Midwest, contributing twelve pages of field notes to the data set. The research team read the data set individually, seeking codes and patterns across the text, and discussed and negotiated emergent themes pertaining to general and marketplace tranquility. Our discussion led us to devise the following definition of MT, as distinct from general tranquility (GT): “Marketplace tranquility is an outcome consumers acquire when leveraging products, services, and experiences that enable them to enjoy peace, quiet, and related benefits.”

**FINDINGS**

Our first research question is: How do consumers understand tranquility in general (GT), and how do they perceive that it differs from MT? Similar to the elements emanating from previous research, informants associate GT with the experience of low- arousal, positive emotions such as peace, serenity, and calmness. In addition, they emphasize that immersion in a natural environment is necessary for tranquility to emerge. In fact, many “define” GT by offering vivid, nature-laden descriptions: [GT is] “feeling like flowers, like a plateau, and lying on it”. Yet they express skepticism as to whether GT is attainable, or in any sense permanent. Summer notes, “I know…[GT] is…good for my mind, but in reality [it] feels…distant from me.” Likewise, Paul notes GT can last “that day, that few hours…you can’t be tranquil for 50 years (laughs)…likely there are chunks of time [in which to feel] complete and utter peace.”

Also consistent with the literature, informants note GT requires escape from crowded, fast-paced environments such as city living, which David equates with a “chicken cage.” Especially salient is their desire to escape from crowds of people in general, and from stress-inducing social groups in particular: “you don’t have people over your shoulder saying, ‘you should do it a certain way’” (Paul). Yet while escaping oppressive others was prevalent in the text, some of our informants’ descriptions of GT do feature small groups of intimate others, typically enjoying themselves in natural settings.

**General Tranquility vs. Marketplace Tranquility**

As we consider whether the marketplace can offer tranquility, our informants concur, offering many examples of this phenomenon. But contrary to their more abstract, elusive conceptualizations of GT, we assert they perceive MT as practical and goal-oriented. We root this assertion in the emergence of three key aspects of MT: its ability to help informants feel nostalgic, informants’ beliefs that the marketplace should socialize them in where and how to attain tranquil offerings, and the ability of MT to help informants achieve goals related to coping with their stressful daily lives.

First, although scholars recognize nostalgia as driving many forms of consumption (Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler 2003), we are unaware of any studies linking nostalgia and tranquility. However, Paul clearly links the two constructs, noting about bookstores that “they could be peaceful ‘cause it’s quiet usually. And very soft music. When I was a child my [parents] would take me to a bookstore a lot…I remember I was sad when it closed. I think that the tranquility thing is something that takes you to your childhood.” Likewise, other informants equate the simplicity of certain retail atmospheres, or marketplace offerings (e.g., adult coloring books) with simpler times in their lives.

Furthermore, informants rely upon the marketplace to educate and train them on offerings that can help them achieve tranquility. As the table reveals, they identify a plethora of offerings contributing to this outcome. Joy avers: “we absolutely need these kinds of books [about] peacefulness and enjoying the present…. you don’t know how to do it by yourself. I think it’s good to purchase the methods…. ” However, many offerings entail mastering rituals and behaviors that informants realize they should incorporate into their daily lives for maximum effect (e.g., meditation, yoga). For example, at a calligraphy class at the Japanese teahouse, students first engage in a purification ceremony, then pay their respects to sacred scrolls prior to entering the class. Furthermore, prolonged instances such as Buddhist “Temple Stays” in Korea feature monks schooling their visitors in specific “ritual utterances” (e.g., “blessings,” Ottnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni, 2012) to promote tranquility during and after the visit.

Finally, informants often seek out commercial offerings to help them cope with the stress of their everyday lives, using words like “heal” and “refresh” to reflect their motivations. Summer notes “[if marketers can] make…really good places where people in this modern society can rest or find peace, it will be good for [us], and profitable too.” Nicole notes marketplace offerings enable people to “purify…so that you can do your work hard.” The yoga class we observed reflects consumers’ desires for such outcomes. Offered as part of a program promoting wellness in general (and held outside), its instructor encouraged participants to incorporate yoga practice into their lives to help them deal with daily stress.

**Marketplace Aspects and Resources**

Our second research question explores the elements consumers identify as contributing to MT. As the table reveals, they mention brands, products, retailers, services, and experiences they believe do so. Three important characteristics of these entities emerge: 1) muted features/atmospheres; 2) quietude; and 3) privacy. First, consumers perceive marketplace offerings as tranquil when they are less intrusive upon the senses. Paul mentions Banana Republic as a tranquil retail space due to its “smooth” and “beach tone and black” colors. Likewise, the simplicity associated with a lack of patterns or labels contributes to consumers’ perceptions of brands as tranquil. Furthermore, quietude is also a critical element contributing to MT—although quietude does not equal silence. Many informants note soft, instrumental music can play an important role in fostering a calm, peaceful mindset. Together with muteness and quietude, privacy also contributes to MT. Securing a private commercial place or space helps consumers feel secure, safe, and comfortable. In fact, many informants use the word “safe” when describing retail outlets that protect them somewhat from the outside world, offering nooks or spaces where they can feel secluded in a (relatively) noise-free, comfortable environment.

**Motivations for Seeking MT**

Not surprisingly, informants’ goals for seeking MT correspond to the issues discussed above: namely, coping and managing the pressures of their stress-filled, hectic lives. Specifically, our analysis reveals three specific goals they pursue when seeking commercial offerings to gain peace and quiet. We discuss these briefly below.

**Escape**

We mention above that informants often use the word “safe” to describe marketspaces and resources that enable them to experience MT. Indeed, we were intrigued that almost all of our informants used the word “safe” as an outcome for experiencing MT. However, they do not use the term to denote concerns over their personal safety. Instead, safety appears to refer to their ability to enjoy personal freedom and exercise agency in an otherwise-demanding world. Nicole notes she feels safe at a particular area of a coffee shop “‘cause it’s
small, blocked a little bit, so ... it feels like I have my own space? It’s still public, but I feel like I have some private space in there so ... I can do my own thing.” Ironically, some retail spaces such as Starbucks that were originally designed to offer consumers a “caffeine-induced oasis” (Kim and Mauborgne, 1999, 90) in their lives may have become so popular, they can no longer offer MT as a viable benefit.

Engagement

It may seem paradoxical that consumers use tranquility to foster engagement. However, the type of engagement is not typically social, but mental. Our informants note their jam-packed lives do not afford them opportunities to pursue creative activities, or to engage with their authentic selves. In pursuing MT, consumers are very specific about leveraging products and services that help them delve into passions in a creative manner. Paul observes of his photography hobby that it is “a more active way I seek tranquility... I am creating a new shot. I am... exploring the city while I am doing it. And I say, “Oh wow, I captured that moment... it’s kind of the same buzz people get when they learn something.” Thus, our informants demonstrate that the “flow” they seek when engaged in creative pursuits (Csikszentmihalyi 1996) both requires tranquility, and can prolong it as well.

(Marketplace) Emancipation

As we note above, our informants often discuss how they wish to free themselves from the confines of their stressful and typically urbanized existence. Ironically, however, one context they specify describe as wanting to escape – and where they believe the MT can offer a solution – are overstuffed, overstimulating retail outlets themselves. Many of our informants describe the information overload they experience when engaged in retail stores (Eroglu, Machleit, and Chebat, 2004). However, Paul extends his discussion of the oppressive nature of the marketplace by remarking on the drain on self-esteem he believes women must endure, given the strict norms governing beauty in American culture that retail outlets often reflect: “I think clothing [purchasing] is more tranquil to guys... because body image is very obvious in clothing... and girls are constantly comparing themselves with the models in a very unfair standard... that’s not fair. Not a very safe environment. You feel very insecure.” In short, informants contrast tranquil marketplaces with the overabundant and normative retail spaces that characterize contemporary consumer culture. Furthermore, they imply there may be a moral imperative to offer alternatives to these marketplaces to enhance consumer welfare – an issue that may interest marketers and practitioners whose agendas intersect with that of transformative consumer culture. Furthermore, they imply there may be a moral imperative to offer alternatives to these marketplaces to enhance consumer welfare – an issue that may interest marketers and practitioners whose agendas intersect with that of transformative consumer research (e.g., Mick et al., 2012).

DISCUSSION

The present work advances current understanding of tranquility, and how consumers may perceive it as integral to marketplace offerings. Specifically, we explore three main research questions that pertain to consumers’ understanding of GT and its distinction from MT. We find that consumers perceive MT as meaningfully different from GT and actively seek products, services and experiences that enable tranquility. Further, three main motivations emerge as driving the need for tranquility from marketplace offerings. It appears consumers want to escape from sensory-laden external environments (including retail environments), and find environments typified by relative peace and quiet where they can engage with their authentic selves.

Interestingly, our findings illuminate intriguing paradoxes that not only enhance the current understanding of MT, but offer significant implications and open research avenues for academics and practitioners. The first paradox is that consumers use the marketplace to try and escape the overabundance and cacophony of the marketplace. Second, it appears consumers seek to leverage MT to clear their minds so they can then engage their minds. Third, consumers detail that they rely on MT because they may find GT increasingly unattainable; in fact, MT be their only available resource in a world where nature is increasingly detached from everyday experience, and where time pressures mean they must seek tranquility from sources available to them in urban settings—such as the marketplace.

This research thus highlights implications for both consumers and marketers. It appears tranquil retail spaces may yield implications for consumer well-being and mental health. Currently, retail environments focus on providing stimulating rather than calm and peaceful environments. In addition, our research offers new insights for practitioners, with respect to customer needs and expectations from marketplace offerings. Marketers can adopt new strategies to satisfy this emerging customer need. Furthermore, implications for pricing strategies may be salient; e.g., are consumers willing to pay more for tranquil marketplace experiences?

Other future research implications emerge from these findings. For example, it would be valuable to understand the effect of product types on tranquility experiences. For example, many luxury products or hedonic consumption offerings promise calmness and hint at tranquil experiences; it is possible then that hedonic and compared to utilitarian consumption may lead to higher tranquil experiences? Another interesting future research question may entail understanding how consumers reconcile undelivered promises by service providers with respect to tranquility. For example, how would loud conversations and other distracting sensory input at a “tranquil” service provider (e.g., a spa) impact customer expectations, service evaluations and brand loyalty? These and many other interesting questions arising from this research may merit further attention.

REFERENCES


