The Biographies of Things: Provenance and the Pursuit of Moral Consumption

Todd Weaver, Point University, USA
Pam Ellen, Georgia State University, USA
Carolyn Curasi, Georgia State University, USA

Consumers are increasingly concerned about the biography of products they purchase and want this information to help guide their pursuit of moral consumption. Our findings suggest that product biographies are commonly incomplete and can create tension and dilemmas for consumers who feel they must balance their often-conflicting consumption objectives.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024783/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://wwwcopyright.com/.
The Biographies of Things: Provenance and the Pursuit of Moral Consumption
Todd Weaver, Point University, USA
Pam Ellen, Georgia State University, USA
Carolyn Curasi, Georgia State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Anecdotal evidence suggests that consumers are increasingly concerned with the background of the products they consume. These product biographies relate to the provenance of products: the people, places, resources, and processes involved in creating and distributing products for consumption. In this research, we show that some consumers want to know the biographies of products they buy so they can choose items with backgrounds consistent with their moral values, such as environmental concerns or social justice. Furthermore, we find product biographies can create tensions and dilemmas for consumers as they attempt to balance multiple consumption goals with their moral values.

Kopytoff (1986) introduced the idea of a product biography as a way of conceptualizing meanings relating to a product’s background, proposing that products, like people, have “life histories” that inform and influence the meanings attached to them by consumers. He notes that product biographies would have many facets covering a wide range of culturally-constituted and objective meanings, including where a product is made and by whom, and that biographical meanings can have important moral implications for consumers. Our goal in this research was to explore whether consumers sought biographical information when purchasing and, if so, to understand the types of biographical information that consumers seek. We also sought to understand how these biographies impact consumption decisions as consumers attempt to consume morally.

To explore product biographies and their impact on consumers, we selected the pseudonymous Springs Landing as the site for our research, a neighborhood within a major metropolitan area in the southeastern U.S., where residents agree to live by certain community values, such as “Diversity” and “Sustainability.” Twenty-five residents were interviewed, and follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 of them. The sample included diverse age groups, household types, and professions. Semi-structured (i.e., open-ended and non-directive) interviews were used to allow flexibility to explore novel or unexpected themes. Individual interviews were coded to illuminate themes within each individual discourse. After coding individual transcripts, a thorough analysis of the data set as a whole was conducted. The overall thematic structure emerged via consensus of the research team. As a test of the credibility of the analysis, we performed member checks by meeting with informants after research team consensus was reached (Hirschman, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Informants repeatedly referred to various processes involved in systems of provenance in accounts of their consumption. Process biographies stemmed from all stages of provenance, from the extraction of raw materials to the retailing of finished goods. Respondents frequently used these meanings to distinguish the morality of one product from another. For example, the PlayStation video game system brought to mind negative meanings related to the materials necessary for their construction for Neil. Although it did not prevent him from buying a game system, he clearly feels guilt for consuming something whose provenance might involve human suffering, even though he is not confident in this knowledge.

Informants also demonstrated an awareness of product biographies related to the resources invested in making and marketing products. These resource biographies frequently related to natural resources, particularly the natural resources contained in products or those used or affected by the provenance of products. One example is David’s concern about the natural resources used in building his own housing community. David notes the irony of building or purchasing something new to be more sustainable: the new thing uses up more of the Earth’s scarce resources, which is often contradictory to sustainability.

The third type of provenance biography mentioned by our informants, person biographies, concerns the people involved in provenance. Our informants frequently expressed concern for the workers involved in the production of consumer goods. For example, Dorothy is uncertain about who specifically benefits from Fair Trade certification and how exactly they might benefit, but she still seeks Fair Trade certification with the hope that she might be helping the workers in the supply chain in terms of work conditions and pay.

Meanings associated with the geographical background, place biographies, constituted a fourth type of provenance biography mentioned by our informants. In some instances, informants even discussed distant or abstract places they had never visited. Lacey, a working mother with young children, is uncertain exactly where the apple juice she buys at Publix comes from, but infers that the United States is “a pretty good place” for making apple juice and that Indonesia is less desirable.

Our informants noted that product biographies could pose a number of dilemmas in their decision making. Informants frequently encountered a conflict between moral values, such as environmentalism and altruism, and pragmatic goals to conserve time and money. For example, Lacey feels great moral conflict when she shops at Walmart:

Our location makes it hard because there is a Walmart superstore right around the corner. And with a child, sometimes it’s just easier to go to the Walmart superstore, and that place is just full of evilness. (Lacey, 30s, healthcare professional)

Like most consumers, Lacey values convenience and will sometimes prioritize it over competing objectives. In this case, her beliefs about the biographies of the products available at Walmart make her feel guilty about shopping there because she feels she is not being true to her moral consumption identity.

Another conundrum was presented by prices. Several informants noted that the low prices of some consumer goods did not make sense given their provenance biographies. For example, Bill, a retiree living on a fixed income, reported that he primarily shops at a local organic grocer, in part, because he feels that prices at national grocery chain Publix and other mainstream stores do not fairly represent the value of the natural resources required to create the products. For Bill, shopping for groceries brings to mind the production processes involved, a thought that compels him to shop for groceries that are more expensive, despite his fixed income and their less convenient location.

REFERENCES