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The theory of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1984, 1992) suggests that in order to make time human and socially shared, we require a narrative identity for ourselves; that is, we make sense of ourselves and our lives by stories we can (or cannot) tell. This paper explores compensatory consumption through the experiences of two adult women and the stories they construct which help them situate themselves in time and place. The function of these stories is examined in relation to the materialisation and maintenance of identity within the context of the women's lived experience of shopping and compensatory consumption behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Compensatory consumption is a complex area of consumer behaviour spanning a vast range of types of compensation and behaviour manifestations (Woodruffe, 1997). According to Gronmo (1988), the theories underlying the concept have been described as early as 1933 (Jahoda et al.) and the work of Caplovitz (1963) explored links between compensatory behaviour and consumption. However, the concept of compensatory consumption has attracted little attention from marketing academics and consumer researchers and yet exploration of the extant literature suggests possible relationships with other areas of consumer research which have been (and continue to be) the focus of much contemporary study; for example addictive consumption (e.g. Elliott, 1994), compulsive buying (e.g. O'Guinn and Faber, 1989) self-gift giving (e.g. Mick and DeMoss, 1990, Luomala, 1988), compensatory eating behaviour, (Grunert, 1998), mood repair (Rook and Gardner, 1993), and conspicuous consumption (e.g. Mason, 1981 and Page, 1992).

Narrative Identity Theory (Ricoeur, 1984) suggests we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can (or cannot tell). Narrative provides an opportunity for construction of self in consumption and narrative research generates knowledge about the social or individual construction of reality through story telling (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001). In this paper, consumers' construction of fluent 'consumption stories' is examined in the light of narrative identity theory and the consumption experiences of two female consumers are explored through their utilisation of narrative forms to develop coherent meaning.

COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION

Although compensatory consumption was identified by Dichter in the early 1960's (Dichter 1960, 1964), no further investigation of the concept appears until Gronmo's 1988 paper which sought to theorise and conceptualise compensatory behaviour specifically from a consumer and consumption perspective, within the critical sociology of consumption.

Gronmo presented his synthesis of a number of significant pieces of research carried out over a period stretching back over half a century (Jahoda et al, 1933, Lynd and Lynd, 1937, Chinoy, 1952, Bell, 1960, Mills, 1951, Caplovitz, 1963) which, he proposed "*have been or might be interpreted as indications or evidence of compensatory consumer behaviour*" (p.76). However, it is worth noting that the studies Gronmo examined focused on population groups who were suffering economic hardship and privation of various forms and he envisaged compensatory consumption as a response to underprivilege or repression.

Gronmo's (1988) understanding of compensatory consumption behaviour derived from the notion that while many consumer behaviour models are based on an underlying correspondence between action and needs an opposite approach could be equally valid in that parts of the consumer's behaviour are characterised by a systematic *lack* of correspondence between action and needs. Rather than satisfying specific needs, certain aspects of consumption may be reactions to a more general lack of need satisfaction—that is, to compensate for failure or weaknesses of some sort, for example:

"compensatory consumer behaviour means that consumption is heavily emphasised as a reaction to, and as an attempt to make up for, a general lack of esteem or self-actualisation" (Gronmo, 1988, p.68)

Grunert (1993) explored eating behaviour as compensatory consumption. Her development of the subject is significant in furthering understanding of the topic because although the focus is eating, she identified the possible use of various resources to satisfy a lack (of *x*) which were not always based on food or eating, such as a visit to the cinema to see a humorous film or an evening out with friends. She also reported that compensatory buying behaviour was reported in a study she conducted with others in West Germany (Scherhorn et al, 1988), although it was not the main focus of the study. Grunert defines compensatory consumption as follows:

*"In general terms, the phenomenon is that a lack of *x* could be cured by a supply of *x*, but may also be cured by a supply of *y*. If *y* is used, this process is called compensation."* (p.76)

Gould (1997) links the concept of compensation with consumption and mood management in his paper "An interpretive study of purposeful, mood regulating consumption: the consumption and mood framework".

Woodruffe (1997) examined compensatory consumption and, although the main focus was shopping behaviour, she also showed that the range of compensatory activities engaged in by consumers also included eating (at home or out), socialising and other forms of consumption, concurring with Grunert's analysis. In contrast to Gronmo (1988) who focused on groups who were suffering various forms of socio-economic privation or exclusion, Woodruffe's (1997) research suggested that compensatory consumption—whether in the form of buying objects, self-gift giving, shopping or the consumption of food, for example, or any kind of goods and services—could be seen in fact to be a 'regular' consumer activity and not restricted to groups who might be considered to be repressed, suppressed or underprivileged in some way. This view is supported by ideas put forward by Elliot (1994) in summarising aspects of 'normal' consumption with the view that an important function of consumption is to maintain consumers in a positive mood and also to work which indicates that it is widely used by people to 'repair' negative emotional states, (e.g., Cohen and Areni, 1990).

What emerges from a study of the existing literature on compensatory consumption and other related aspects of consumer behaviour (e.g., compulsive buying—O'Guinn and Faber, 1989, self

gift giving-Mick and DeMoss, 1990, addictive consumption-Elliott, 1994, conspicuous consumption-Mason, 1981) is a broader conceptualisation of compensatory consumption. The literature supports the notion that many facets of consumption behaviour are compensatory in nature. In the authors' view, compulsive buying, for example, is a chronic form of compensatory consumption behaviour in an extreme form. Other facets of the phenomenon mentioned by O'Guinn and Faber (1989) also add weight to this proposition. For example, they highlight the fact that for many people, compulsive buying seems to be strongly tied to their need for affection and support from others. In other words, the authors contend this can be interpreted as meaning that they are responding to a perceived 'lack', (suggested by the author in italics). Informants in their study spoke of their need to lead more exciting lives (*a lack of excitement?*), "feel alive" (*a lack of life? As in "get a life!"*), to coin a highly illustrative phrase, and be stimulated by their surroundings (*a lack of stimulation; boredom?*).

Motivational explanations for addictive consumption cited by Elliott (1994) include coping with anxiety states and stress (*a lack of calm, inner peace, well-being?*), links with self esteem (*a lack of self esteem?*), and construction of a 'self' (*lack of self?*).

Self gift-giving has been the focus of various studies (e.g. McKeage, 1992, Mick and DeMoss, 1990, Luomala, 1988) and a therapeutic role has been recognised (Mick and deMoss, 1990) which links clearly with compensatory consumption behaviour. As a respondent in their study stated: "I was feeling extremely frustrated (*a lack of opportunity?*) and hapless (*a lack of happiness?*) at work. I needed to have lunch with a friend and drink masala tea at the Indian restaurant." Another says: "Eating ice cream makes me feel calm and happy. It's smooth and cool. I felt more rational, more in control, ready to work my problem out." These two suggestions which reflect self gift-giving taking place in the form of compensatory eating behaviours illustrate links pointed out earlier in relation to Grunert's work and compensatory consumer behaviour.

This broader conceptualisation—as discussed above—is the basis upon which compensatory consumption is defined for the purposes of this study, defined as follows:

"Compensatory consumption is engaged in whenever an individual feels a need, lack or desire which they cannot satisfy with a primary fulfilment so they seek and use an alternative means of fulfilment in its place".

NARRATIVE IDENTITY THEORY

The theory of Narrative Identity (Ricoeur, 1984; 1992) suggests that in order to make time human and socially shared, we require a narrative identity for our self, that is, we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can (or cannot) tell. Thus we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves in time and place. The self is conceptualised in postmodernity not as a given product of a social system nor as a fixed entity which the individual can simply adopt, but as something the person actively creates, partially through consumption (Giddens, 1991). The consumer exercises free will to form images of who and what s/he wants to be, although, paradoxically, 'free will' is directed by values which are probably also a social product. Thompson (1995) describes the self as a *symbolic project*, which the individual must actively construct out of the available symbolic materials, materials which "*the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity.*" The individual visualises her/his self according to the imagined possibilities of the self and Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that "*an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the*

individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences."

This task can be greatly aided by symbolic resources, the main one articulated by Ricoeur (1977) is literature which gives structure and meaning to the complexity and confusion of life by providing a causal model for the individual by linking disparate life events into a coherent sequence. Engagement with consumption, for example through advertising and the shopping experience, can also be used as symbolic resources to construct a narrative identity which helps the individual locate themselves and their behaviour in a logical sequence of meaningful action (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Narrative psychology (Sarbin, 1986) posits that stories are used by individuals to make sense of their (phenomenological) world, whilst Shotter and Gergen (1989) point to the conflict between the individual experience of identity and the social processes involved in its construction. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) develop a performative theory of identity where self-narratives actively construct the individual rather than reflecting behavioural events. Kotre (1984) suggests that some narratives have a generative potential which enables individuals to overcome life crises such as old age.

CHRONOTOPES AND NARRATIVE

Bakhtin (1941/1981) proposes *chronotopes* as an analytical tool for identifying a synthesis of time and space, where history is melded with narrative to form an interpretive schema. Bakhtin's analysis gives particular significance to the narrative logic of place and we can understand the meaning construction of identity by studying locations and actions and how individuals cope with key Bakhtinian themes of *chance, consciousness* and *reversibility* (Murray, 1995). In a consumption context we may expect consumers to weave a coherent meaning for their consumption behaviour (compensatory and functional) through the utilisation of narrative forms. These 'consumption stories' may function to locate the individual's behaviour in a predictable world and to reduce the uncertainties of lived experience.

As part of a much larger study into compensatory consumption, this paper explores the consumption experiences of two adult women and attempts to identify chronotopic narrative forms and their function in relation to the materialisation and maintenance of identity.

METHODOLOGY

The research took the form of phenomenological interviews, adopting the format and context outlined by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989). Phenomenological descriptions were interpreted in line with the criteria noted by Thompson et al.; additionally, while the notion of multiple interpretation is acknowledged, it should be emphasised that the interpretations presented here reflect a "*fusion of horizons between the text and the researcher*" (Gadamer, 1975)—in other words, provide insight into the phenomenon of compensatory consumption. Existential-phenomenological understanding is attained by describing lived experiences and the meanings that emerge from them (Thompson et al., 1989) and this is the means by which it is hoped that an understanding of narrative identity in relation to compensatory consumption may be developed.

The sampling method is purposive, which is a characteristic of interpretive research and respondents were selected for interview on the basis of screening questions designed to identify individuals who are aware that they do use shopping and other forms of consumption as compensatory behaviour to some degree. Ques-

tions asked are along the lines of “do you like to go shopping when you’re fed up?” or “how do you like to cheer yourself up when you’re feeling down?” These questions are designed to be quite ‘light’ in nature and unlikely to cause embarrassment, prompting spontaneous responses. The criteria for selection of interviewees has been based on their participation in this behaviour although respondents interviewed (27 in all) were of varying ages and represent a wide range of backgrounds, including students, people in full employment and retirement. The interviews were held on an individual basis in strict confidence and were, on average, of between one and two hours’ duration. Interviews were tape recorded and the respondents offered the opportunity to view the transcripts.

INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE EXCERPTS AND DISCUSSION

Janet

As the concept of ‘self’ is so central to our discussion, aspects of ‘self’ revealed in these excerpts are explored in relation to the literature on ‘self’ when appropriate. In Janet’s case, she talks about her own ‘self-image’ in disparaging terms which is redolent of the self-hatred identified by Horney (1950) when individuals make a comparison between the actual self they see, in Janet’s case:

“I get it in my head, because some times I go through really bad phases where I’m just thinking, oh God look at the state of me. It may be a situation where I’m just going to the shop and I’ve got all dressed up I’m going out to have a nice time and then 3 people make arsey comments to me before I’ve even got out the building like ‘look at you you’re really weird, you’re really tall’ and then it makes me feel down like I’m really weird but I’m not it’s a horrible feeling when you feel like everybody’s staring at you like you’re a freak or something”

and the idealised self of their vision, described this way by Janet:

“Yeah I think it’s still going to be me but a me a really cool me, how you imagine yourself if you imagine that you could transport yourself in any way. Sort of shorter, thinner.”

Janet is very tall—around 6’3” in bare feet. Her height (as well as her weight) contributes to her negative view of “self” and her lack of positive self regard (Rogers’ theory, 1959) stems a great deal from the attitudes of others, as shown in the passage above, but also from her own ‘self’ where the self becomes almost a significant other (Rogers, 1961). This may be leading her to distort her true self in order to gain the approval and positive regard of other people necessary for positive self regard, in line with Rogers’ theory as the following passage illustrates:

“I’ll start buying things that aren’t going to suit me but they’re going to suit a me that’s going to blend in, like things are going to hide you”

Janet distinguishes here between “me” which could be true ‘self’ and “a (different) me” which reflects a different, distorted ‘self’, to the extent where her own narrative shows how she engages in activities like denial, which is a defense mechanism arising from Freudian psychoanalysis (Liebert and Speigler, 1974):

“If I’m feeling really down about myself and I’m trying to convince myself that I can fit into clothes that are designed for

people of average height quite often I will come away with the crazy idea that I can let the sleeves down, or I can do something to them that will make them longer or shoes that I can get them stretched at the shoe shop and then they’re going to fit and so I’ve got loads of stuff like that. Trousers that I thought I could take the hem down a bit they only add half an inch and they’re four inches too short. A lot of stuff where I meant to adapt in some way. There are things that are too tight as well.”

However, Janet recognises that she can get dressed up to express her individuality and to create a variety of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) especially when going shopping which she says has an escapist element:

“Yeah, especially if I’m dressed up, ’cos I like to think that I’m not just a student with no money, but just wandering around, I could be anybody—an advertising exec—you could be anybody though couldn’t you, ’cos nobody knows you”

Sometimes it seems that the best way to start to understand what is really taking place in the ‘shopping-as-compensatory-consumption’ episode is to look at an individual account of the whole shopping trip, as this excerpt from Janet’s interview shows. What emerges is a sort of picture like a jigsaw, where the pieces fit together to make the experience particularly exciting, relaxing or fulfilling. Janet recalls a particular shopping trip which was triggered by boredom from her job as well as feeling unhappy about a personal situation involving her friends:

“yeah, at Christmas after the January sales I hadn’t been able to go out anyway because I had been working and I’d been working really hard and sort of got some money together and I was down about work anyway ’cos I had to work in the centre of Leeds, which meant I had to get up at 6 o’clock in the morning just to beat the traffic and it was doing my head in, it was a very boring job, but I was getting money for it, and then, but being at home things were a bit stressful at home....and everything sort of being sort of, really kind of looking forward to this chance to go to the shops, and I’d been the first time and I hadn’t found anything, so I was really pissed off, and em, so I remember I went and then I took the day off work, and which is quite bad, and then I went in and I went to Harvey Nicks, which is em, em, and then I blew the lot. On a dress but it was all half price so it was just fine, and then, and then I remember ’cos I was really like, unhappy ’cos some of my friends were really having a hard time, and I was really worried about them, and then we were going out em, we were all going to go out and have a really nice night and I was really looking forward to it, so I wanted to be really special and so I wanted to buy this, then I bought this dress and I remember seeing this dress and it was a bit expensive for me but I thought well I’d try it on, and I tried it on and I thought it fitted really well and I felt really good in it. So when I bought it I felt as if we were going to have a really good night because I’ve got this dress, and we did but I don’t know if it was just because I was really sort of um, happy ’cos I’d got this outfit, and, er, I don’t know it was nice cos we all got on really well and everything and a lot of the things that seemed sort of bad they weren’t as bad.

Here the outcomes were that she bought a dress which was a bargain which made her feel really good and that made everything seem less of a problem.

Emily

Financial stress is frequently a trigger for compensatory consumption activity in Emily's life as this example shows:

"A few weeks ago, I don't remember what triggered it but I assume it must either have been a huge bill of some sort probably a huge Access bill-usually the reason. If I get a bill or something like that, I don't want to cook I want to go out to dinner instead, we usually go to a popular restaurant, which is never a good idea when you are in a bad mood to go out with a 3 year old to dinner but this is quite standard at home, is that financial bad news then going out to dinner. I think that is the most recent example I can think of."

However, on reading the following passage, many minor frustrations and irritations about her husband, their home life and their financial position come to the fore in exquisite detail. Financial stress appears secondary to the role her husband plays in creating some of their financial problems and his attitude and general lack of concern which extends to mundane shared responsibility of household tasks as well. Emily agrees that spending money when they are faced with financial problems is *"rather conflictual"* but elaborates on why eating out has become an important ritual for her. At the end of this passage it can be seen that the real meaning Emily associates with eating out is not having to cook family supper in an untidy kitchen strewn with yesterday's washing up which her husband will have left undone. She links this graphic description of the state of her kitchen with the state of her husband's finances and it seems that the left-over washing up becomes a metaphor for her frustrations with her husband's lack of organisation and unstructured approach to working:

"But yes it is rather conflictual but I just don't feel like stomping about. My husband's job is washing up, mine cooking and he doesn't have such a tight idea of.... like I wouldn't dream of cooking supper the next day after it was due where he doesn't seem to have a problem washing up the day after. Thinking I'm going to have to go back to a filthy kitchen and crash about through all the dirty pans from yesterday tends to put me off. And I associate the fact that we have got a bill, usually with my husband anyway because he is a great spender and not a great earner, but he is a very interesting person in how he keeps a project on the go and he is involved in all sorts of cultural and artistic activities, he's busy, busy, busy all the time, but very few of his projects actually bring any money, in any sort of regular wage. His photography he sells but not in a regular way. We will get a great lump of money from his agent but then not get any for months, then get another great lump because they've sold some of his picture. So usually I know that if I go home and cook I know that I am going to be crashing around in amongst the dirty pans and wanting to kill him. Whereas if we go out then that's OK."

Emily's description of the house they live in shows some idea of the meaning consumers themselves invest in products. They like the house they live in because it looks grand and they could not see themselves in *"little ordinary houses"*.

"We are renting (a house), we like a nice looking house and we like big space and we are very lucky to have fallen on our feet because we live at a place called The Grange which is a big 19th Century house which is cut up into flats and cottages and so very little money because the place the falling down and the agents don't do anything to it. We've got this very very flash

looking house with huge stone gothic porch and oak panelling and a big fire place and whatever. It's kind of damp and grotty but it looks flash. We can't cope with little ordinary houses, we've lived in them for a while, I think both of us get severely depressed, and we are lucky that The Grange is cheap because we probably otherwise would have ended up spending a lot on rent. My London friends have a fit when they come up because we pay a month what they pay for half a week....it is very cheap. Its good, because it is a bit run down everyone there is either eccentric or poor or both so you don't have the pressure from the neighbours. There are no Mondeos at The Grange.....mostly clapped out old Land Rovers. It's good to get out of that pressure thing because there is nobody that you can compete with".

One of the most fascinating things in that passage is Emily's reference to Mondeos. She mentions the model name of a popular brand of car but the meaning she invests in that name can be interpreted as heavily loaded because it can be linked to a certain image or lifestyle which she is saying does not match hers. In a similar vein, her description of the house they live in also says something about lifestyle; it does not matter that it is falling apart, it looks very flash. This illustrates the point made by Firat and Venkatesh (1993) when they say that:

"...the postmodern consumer appreciates that value is not a property of the product, the thing, but a property of the image; that the image does not represent the product but the product represents the image" (original emphasis) (p.244)

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

These women appear to be fluent at constructing 'consumption stories' which help them to situate themselves in time and place and to be using aspects of their consumption activities and experiences to weave together a coherent narrative by the use of chronotopic forms. These narratives help construct a seamless web that draws upon personal history to legitimate current behaviour and which seems able to give the individual some control over chance and fate. They help the women to form their own identity where "identity provides an escape from uncertainty" (Baumann, 1996). Their utilisation of chronotopic narrative forms when the issue of identity arises occurs when they are coping with uncertainty and the stories they weave may change with time and space in line with conditions of postmodernity.

These women engage in compensatory consumption not only to deal with a specific 'lack' or difficulty, but also as part of a chronotopic rendering of life experiences which draws on many other resources. This paper has identified chronotopic narrative forms and their function in relation to the materialisation and maintenance of identity within the context of their lived experience of shopping and consumption behaviour.

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