

THE ENCHANTED CONSUMER POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE AND TRENDS

The Esoteric, the Experiential, and the Emergent

Beatlemania! If you happen to be in London, you may join this tour by an enterprising Beatles fan, Gregory S. He will show you Sir Paul McCartney's workspace, the studio where "Hey Jude" was recorded, and the famous Apple studio where Beatles played their last gig on the rooftop. The tour sells out on most days.¹

In New York city, at an East Village monastery, you can dine with Rasanath Dasa (cost \$20 per person). Rasanath Das is an engineer with an MBA from Cornell University. He has been an investment banker for Bank of America and a strategy consultant for Deloitte. But now he is a monk and a spiritual thinker. "Wow! Fantastic experience!" says Brad Svrluga who dined with the monk recently. "The vegetarian lunch was delicious and conversation vibrant. For the hour and half I was at the monastery I forgot I was in fast paced NYC," opines Kristine Michelsen-Correa.²

This is the stuff consumer researchers call *postmodern*. Experiential. Authentic. Global. An increasing number of consumers—certainly only a niche segment by any stretch but substantial and growing nonetheless—are seeking it. They are consuming, not just products, but also the symbols behind them, and their meaning. The "consumption of meaning" comes into full focus when the goods being consumed are intangible—such as art and memories and virtual life. How consumers consume the meaning of these symbolic and experiential goods and what life satisfaction they derive from such consumption is our topic in this note. We also take an inventory of recent and emerging trends in consumer behavior, ranging from the rising power of women to globalism to digital autobiographies.

OBJECTS OF DESIRE DEEP MEANING IN CONSUMPTION

What does your car mean to you? Do your sunglasses have a special meaning for you? Do you have a special attachment to your pair of jeans? Your CB textbook? And, would you feel sad giving away your old high school football outfit? To explore the symbolic meaning of goods, we have selected eight unique and significant consumption entities, here simply called *consumption potpourri*. This is a rich cornucopia of the culture of consumption itself, so let us immerse ourselves and experience it.

1. APPROPRIATION OF PRODUCTS "How I Anoint What I Buy"

The clothes you wear, the car you drive, the mobile phones you use—these products are produced by the ton and bought by millions of other consumers. How is it, then, that you come to consider your car as your own, separate from other identical units of the same brand; you come to view your jeans as something special and unlike

any others; and you come to like your own mobile phone so much that if you were to lose it, replacing it by another exactly identical unit wouldn't be the same thing? When you bought it—the car, the pair of jeans, the cell phone—it was one of the countless many; but after you acquired it, something happened to it; you did something to it, so it somehow became different, unique, and special to you. What you did is called **appropriation**—the process of making something one's own.³ Although consumers never say so, they are always attempting to appropriate their acquisitions—the products they acquire as gifts or as purchases, at least the important ones. When objects are appropriated, they somehow become special, and as such they become sources of extra satisfaction. Let us see how this process of appropriation works.

Basically, appropriation entails investing ourselves in the product and somehow separating and distancing the product from its original existence as a mass produced unit. This process consists of five rituals: selection, acquisition, exchange, possession, and usage.⁴

Selection Ritual This is the process the consumer undertakes to identify and select the desired object. The fact that the consumer selected it from so many other products makes that brand or object more salient to the consumer. The more time the consumer spends in selecting the product, the more he/she sees himself/herself invested in it. Somehow the very process of selection puts the self into the product and distinguishes the specific object from others (notwithstanding similarity in a physical sense).

Thus, products whose selection entails much personal investment of time will become more thoroughly appropriated. In particular, when we choose a specific product after rejecting several others, then by contrast with those products we reject, we feel an affinity toward those we select. Moreover, in the process of selection, if we were to judge products also by how well they reflect our personalities, then we would experience that much more



appropriation

affinity and personal feeling toward the chosen product.

Exchange Ritual An exchange ritual is an event surrounding the acquisition of a product as a gift from someone. A product received as a gift becomes unique because it includes the memory of the gift-giver. Occasionally, we also buy products as self-gifts, and in these instances, the memory of the cause for celebration serves to distinguish the product in our minds as something special.

Acquisition Ritual Many consumers follow certain acquisition rituals; for instance, they take along their best friends when they go to take possession of a new car, they wear special clothing to get a diamond or the like, or they consult an astrologer to decide exactly when to buy an engagement ring. In many ethnic cultures, certain days are considered more auspicious for acquiring a significant new product like a car or a house. Many ethnic groups also perform certain religious rituals, such as worshipping in the name of the newer possession or anointing the object itself.

Possession Ritual Often consumers try to modify a product before they take possession of it—for example, by retrofitting or customizing a new car, or by remodeling a house. When we acquire previously owned objects (e.g., a house, car, clothing, etc.), often we attempt to transform or alter them, in part to exorcise the ghost of the previous owner, so to speak. For example, we change the paint or window treatments on a house, or we get new wheel covers on the car. Through these rituals and transformations, we appropriate all objects we consider significant in our lives.

Usage Ritual Finally, we appropriate some objects simply by using them; somehow, they seem to mold themselves to our individual bodies and idiosyncratic behaviors. As I drive my car, I feel it is getting used to the way I drive so it is now mine and special. Likewise, as I break in my shoes, or wear my jeans, I see them progressively fitting better and better over time (in part because they become softer with washing). I also personalize a product through some modifications in its use—for example by selecting the ring tones for my cell phone, I make a mass produced phone unique, special, and *my* own.

Sometimes, we perform these rituals as second nature and sometimes, with great fanfare (e.g., driving out in a new car to show it off). Regardless, such rituals result in products becoming anointed, and such anointment both begins and nurtures our attachment



to the products we acquire and own. That is why our products become very especial to us.

2. CONSUMING AUTHENTICITY

“Bringing the Glorious Past into Present Life”

Authentic *Random House Dictionary* defines *authentic* as “Conforming to fact and therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief; Having a claimed and verifiable origin or authorship; not counterfeit or copied.” Here, in the context of

consumer products, we will define **authenticity** as the genuineness of an object in its likeness as it existed at a time in history or when it first originated.

Authenticity is an important source of value and life satisfaction for consumers. Although consumers differ in the extent to which they seek authentic experience, most consumers do enjoy authentic experience at least occasionally in their lives. Who among us has not paused at Dick Clark’s American Band Stand or Planet Hollywood to look at a dress originally owned by Marilyn Monroe? (You can pick up some fascinating memorabilia from one of the five Dick Clark’s in the USA: Branson, MO; Molly Pitcher on the New Jersey Turnpike; Chandler, AZ; Phoenix, AZ; and Salt Lake City, UT. And you can find Planet Hollywood in New York City; London, UK; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Olympia Mall, Kuwait; Bali, Indonesia; and Dubai, UAR, among other cities.) Original? Well, almost!

Some consumers seek authenticity as an occasional experience. Others want to incorporate it into their everyday lives. Likewise, some are deeply attached to a particular domain of interest; others are curious but not possessed by it. Thus, the Elvis Presley Museum in Memphis attracts thousands of visitors every week; some come for the first and only time, and they enjoy viewing all the Elvis artifacts. Later in their lives, they will occasionally remember this experience with fond memory, but beyond that they will go about their lives without thinking of Elvis. Others will wrap themselves in the Elvis experience—visiting the Memphis museum frequently, having several Elvis items (replicas) in their homes, listening to Elvis music, reading his biographies, and frequently talking about him with friends and even strangers.

Authenticity in objects comes in two forms: original and in replica. In the original form, the object is

authenticity

FORESIGHTS

TEN TRENDS IN CONSUMER SPACE

What will the future of consumer behavior be like, say, over the next decade? What will change and in what manner? Forecasting the future is always risky business, yet not to form an educated expectation could be even riskier as it would leave us unprepared to face the future. In this section, we survey the broad environment of consumption, describe the social and cultural milieu, and project ten upcoming trends in consumer behavior.

TEN TRENDS IN CONSUMER SPACE

1. THE REVENGE OF THE BOOMERS

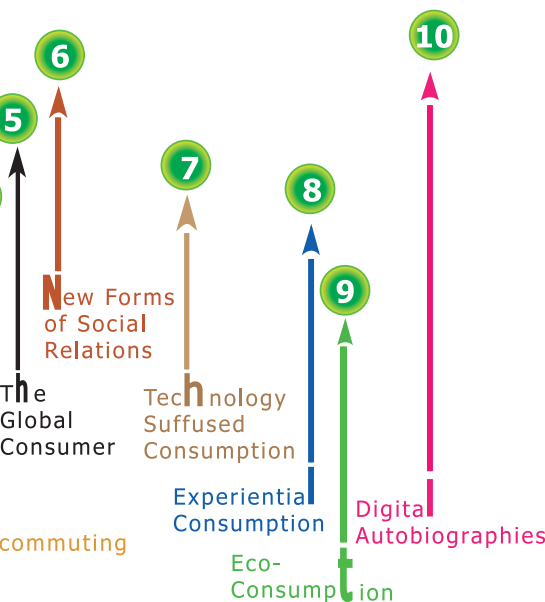
Baby boomers (those born in America between 1946 and 1964) are up in arms. They are 78 million in number, and 38 million of them will be in the age range of 55-75 over the next decade. Call them self-centered, materialistic, dreamers, anything. Just don't call them old. They don't see themselves that way, and they definitely don't want to look their age.

Yes, they are up in arms, fiercely battling their aging looks. Hair coloring, anti-wrinkle creams, Botox, liposuction, they will take them all. Whatever it takes. And they will have the money to afford it all. After all, unlike their predecessor cohorts, they are vibrant and active, and they don't plan to retire anytime soon.

Elsewhere, especially in the cultures of the East, aging and aged looks actually bring more respect, so the pursuit of age-reversal is going to be much more subdued there. But growing ranks of 70, 80, and 90-somethings, especially in Japan, are buoyed by rising longevity and will create unprecedented levels of demand in health and elder care, as well as for innovations in medicine.

2. POWER TO WOMEN

Women are not going to abandon the apron anytime soon (not all of them and not entirely), but the days when a woman's place was, by definition, in the home are long over—at least in much of the Western world. Women now outnumber men among college students (54%),¹⁸ and a recent report shows that academic achievement scores are higher for girls than for boys.¹⁹ In most of the industrialized world,



women aged 25-34 outnumber men in possessing at least a college degree.²⁰

With degrees under their belts and an 8-10 year longevity advantage over men, women's life-time earning capacities will be substantially improved. Already, 30% of working-women in the United States earn more than their husbands.²¹

A significant number of men, especially those who worked in high tech industries, have been laid off, whereas their spouses took up or continued working in their jobs in the growing service industries (health care, retail, etc.). And men are quickly becoming adept at raising the kids and completing domestic chores, thereby earning the appellation "Mr. Mom."

The contemporary woman, in industrialized and third world countries alike, is surely and rapidly moving toward an egalitarian role in corporate, government, and household affairs. Increasingly, then, marketers will have to treat women as having equal importance in decision-making about all major purchases. Conversely, even

to market household consumables, they will also have to include men in their target audiences.

3. GREATER DIVERSITY

As we move toward the middle of the second decade of the new millennium, there will

