

The Self and Symbolic Consumption

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores theoretical concepts regarding the relationship between the self and consumption. In consumer culture, consumption is central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. That is, we make our consumption choices not only from the products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings. Basically, we employ consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society. Nevertheless, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through symbolic consumption may also enslave us in the illusive world of consumption.

INTRODUCTION

[In the postmodern world] Our Identity is moulded as consumers.

Sarup 1996, p.120

Consumption moved from a means towards an end – living – to being an end in its own right. Living life to the full became increasingly synonymous with consumption.

Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 7

Endeavouring to create the self in contemporary society is presumably inseparable from consumption (Elliott 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Gergen 1991; White and Hellerich 1998). Indeed, contemporary society is first and foremost a consumer culture – where our social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Giddens 1991; Slater 1997). That is, our “social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets” Slater (1997, p.8). Consumption is thus central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. Basically, we employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society (Elliott 1994b, 1997; Kleine and et al 1995). Products (e.g., low-calorie corn flake, natural-based cosmetic, leather jacket or Victorian house) that we buy, activities (e.g., Oxfam's Big Fast, fly-fishing or travelling) that we do and philosophies or beliefs (e.g., astrology, religion or political ideology) that we pursue tell stories about who we are and with whom we identify. Certainly, we do not consume products, activities or beliefs only to satisfy our needs but also to carry out our self-creation project. In order to feel ‘alive’ in this saturated world (Gergen 1991), we crave for a sense of meaningfulness in our pursuit of ‘being’ (i.e., the self-creation project). And it seems that we can symbolically acquire it from our everyday consumption. Slater (1997, p. 131) asserts, “Consumption is a meaningful activity.” Indeed, all voluntary consumption seems to carry, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings. By this, I mean if we have a choice, we will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings. These meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. For example, using recycled envelopes may symbolise ‘I care for the environment’, going to classical concerts may represent ‘I am cultured’, supporting gay rights may signify ‘I am open-minded’, or even buying unbranded detergent may mean ‘I am a clever consumer.’ Much literature suggests that we are what we have, since our material possessions are viewed as major parts of our extended selves (Belk 1988a; Dittmar 1992; James 1892; Sartre 1998). Material objects embody a system of meanings, through which we express ourselves and communicate with others (Dittmar 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Gabriel and Lang 1995; McCracken 1988a). Since all consumption holds some kind of expressive meaning, we endeavour to incorporate into our self-creation project those meanings we aspire to, while struggling to resist those we find undesirable. Observably, we sometimes avoid particular consumption in order to create, maintain and advance the self (Gould *et al* 1997; Hogg and Michell 1996). Nevertheless, from a critical point of view, striving to create the self through symbolic consumption may also enslave us in the illusive world of consumption.

IN PURSUIT OF MEANINGFULNESS IN THE WORLD OF GOODS

There is no self outside a system of meaning.

Gergen 1991, p.157

As the self is perceived as encountering “the looming threat of personal meaninglessness” (Giddens 1991) or the possibility of dissolving into the ‘no self’ (when fully saturated) (Gergen 1991), it struggles to resume a sense