

Consumption experience, customer value, and subjective personal introspection: An illustrative photographic essay

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Abstract

This study illustrates the applicability of subjective personal introspection via a photographic essay that draws on written memoirs as a path to insights concerning the role of customer value in the consumption experience. Extending earlier work in this direction, the present research explores a set of sixty-year-old Kodachrome slides taken by the author's grandfather to develop interpretations bolstered and corroborated by the narrative accounts in this late gentleman's logbook. Arguably, this approach taps aspects of the Three Fs (fantasies, feelings, and fun) as they contribute to customer value in ways not accessible to methods of modeling the consumer as a rational economic decision maker nor to advanced techniques for studying the consumption experience by means of laboratory experiments, quantitative surveys, and multivariate statistics.

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1. The tradition

Back in October 1964, a group of fearless marketing scholars from a number of notable schools – including Ray Bauer (Harvard), Paul Green (Wharton), Al Kuehn (Carnegie), Sid Levy (Northwestern), Bill Massy (Stanford), Charles Ramond (Columbia), Gary Steiner (Chicago), and Bill Wells (Rutgers) – convened briefly at Stanford University to initiate the development of what would ultimately become the field of consumer research via essays later published as a book edited by Newman (1966) and entitled *On Knowing the Consumer*. In its early days, this fledgling discipline struggled for academic respectability while its key contributors strived to attain the maximum degree of scientific rigor (e.g., Howard and Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1966). Toward this end, a consensus evolved to embrace a view of the consumer as a rational economic decision maker who searched for, attended to, and processed information about brand attributes in an effort to achieve maximally satisfying purchase choices (e.g., Bettman, 1979). Deeply indebted to the work of Nobel laureate Herbert Simon and his colleagues at Carnegie

(e.g., Simon, 1957), this view regarded the consumer as a sort of computer — that is, as a machine for cranking out bounded-rational brand choices aimed at the maximization of utility subject to various imperfections imposed by limitations in cognitive capacity (selective attention, distorted perceptions, restricted memory, and so forth).

2. The consumption experience

This decision-oriented information-processing perspective and the methodological baggage that accompanied it (laboratory experiments, quantitative surveys, multivariate statistics, structural equation models, and all that) held sway well into the 1980s and, to this day, still represent what many or even most students of buyer behavior would regard as the mainstream approach to consumer research. But, during the early 1980s, some of us began to wonder if – beyond their economically rational purchasing decisions – consumers might also exhibit characteristics typical of animals rather than machines in general and of humans rather than computers in particular. Thus was born what Beth Hirschman and I called an experiential approach that focused on the “Three Fs” or *fantasies* (dreams, imagination, unconscious desires); *feelings* (emotions such as love, hate, anger, fear, joy, sorrow); and *fun* (hedonic pleasure derived from

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playful activities or aesthetic enjoyment) as key aspects of the consumption experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

At first, Beth and I incorrectly thought that we had pretty much invented this experiential approach to consumer research—not realizing that a distinguished lineage for the basic concepts involved could be traced back through the work of (say) Sid Levy at Northwestern in the 1960s, Wroe Alderson at Wharton in the 1950s, and the economists Lawrence Abbott in the 1950s or Alfred Marshall in the early 1900s, all the way to Adam Smith in the Eighteenth Century (e.g., Alderson, 1957; Boyd and Levy, 1963; Woods, 1981). Among these precursors, my favorite quote comes from *Quality and Competition* by the economist Abbott (1955), who offered the following trenchant anticipation of our major arguments:

The thesis ... may be stated quite simply. What people really desire are *not products* but *satisfying experiences*. Experiences are attained through activities. In order that activities may be carried out, physical objects or the services of human beings are usually needed. Here lies the connecting link between man's inner world and the outer world of economic activity. People want products because they want the *experience-bringing services* which they hope the products will render (p. 40, italics added).

More recently, the focus on consumption experiences has commanded increasing attention among the consulting-oriented gurus who write self-help manager-targeted how-to guides with titles like *The Experience Economy* (Pine and Gilmore, 1999); *Experiential Marketing* (Schmitt, 1999); *Managing the Customer Experience* (Smith and Wheeler, 2002); *Building Great Customer Experiences* (Shaw and Ivens, 2002); and *Priceless: Turning Ordinary Products Into Extraordinary Experiences* (LaSalle and Britton, 2003). What these works share in common—beyond their insistent emphasis on the importance of the consumption experience—is their infallible tendency (with the partial exception of *Priceless*) to repeat the mistake that Beth and I made by forgetting or neglecting to acknowledge the previous thinkers who have pioneered the relevant concepts.

3. Customer value

My own work on the consumption experience (e.g., Holbrook, 1995) dwells on various aspects of fantasies (an essentially Freudian emphasis on unconscious desires); feelings (the multifaceted array of emotions that accompany consumption experiences or that characterize responses to advertising); and fun (both in the enjoyment of leisure activities and in various aesthetic responses to the arts or entertainment). My most important theme focuses on the nature and types of customer value (e.g., Holbrook, 1994, 1999; Holbrook and Corfman, 1985). Customer value serves as the foundation for all effective marketing activity—both as the key to the formulation of successful marketing strategy and as the crux of our hopes for its ethical justification. However, surprisingly, the problem of defining what we mean by customer value or analyzing its various types receives little attention.

3.1. The nature of customer value

I define *customer value* as an *interactive relativistic preference experience*. By this, I mean that it involves an *interaction* between an object (e.g., a product) and a subject (e.g., a consumer). This object–subject interaction is *relativistic* in at least three senses (comparative, personal, situational)—first, involving a comparison among objects; second, varying from one person to another; and, third, depending on the situation in which the evaluation occurs—so that we can at most claim (say) that George prefers bananas to apples when slicing fruit on his cereal whereas Mary prefers strawberries to oranges as a topping for her ice cream (noticing that these sorts of statement avoid the fallacies of interpersonal utility comparisons and the dangers of generalizing across consumption contexts). Hence, customer value entails subjective hierarchical *preferences* based on an individual's situation-specific comparisons of one object with another. Such interactive relativistic preferences shape the essence of the consumption *experiences* that underlie the creation of all customer value in the sense that products perform services that provide the relevant value-creating experiences. From this perspective, *all products are services* so that the distinction between services marketing and other kinds of marketing disappears.

3.2. The types of customer value

Viewing the *nature* of customer value in the manner just described raises questions concerning the major *types* of customer value that deserve to be distinguished in our consideration of consumer behavior. In response to such questions, I have proposed a typology of customer value that hinges on two or three underlying dimensions or distinctions (depending on the degree of hair-splitting obsessiveness from which I happen to be suffering on any given occasion). For the present purposes (no pedantry allowed), I shall confine myself to two key distinctions—namely, those between (1) *extrinsic value* (where a product or consumption experience serves instrumentally or functionally as a means to some further end) versus *intrinsic value* (where a consumption experience is appreciated for its own sake as a self-justifying end-in-itself) and (2) *self-oriented value* (where I prize some product or consumption experience for my own sake, because of how I respond to it, or by virtue of the effect it has on me) versus *other-oriented value* (where I prize a product or consumption experience for the sake of others, because of how they respond to it, or by virtue of the effect it has on them). Combining these two distinctions produces the following *Typology of Customer Value*:

	<i>Extrinsic</i>	<i>Intrinsic</i>
<i>Self-oriented</i>	Economic Value	Hedonic Value
<i>Other-oriented</i>	Social Value	Altruistic Value

In this typology, *economic value* refers to the case in which a product or consumption experience serves as a means to a

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