

THE ENCHANTED CONSUMER

POSTMODERN CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE

The Esoteric and the Experiential

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.

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.

appropriation

Source: MYCBook.
www.MYCBook.com



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 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”

authenticity

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 believed to have actually existed in a specific time period and to have been used in a specific circumstance. Thus, an “original” Marilyn Monroe dress is indeed the one that was actually worn by Ms. Monroe. In contrast, in a replica, authenticity is judged by how similar the object is to the original real object—e.g., the dress on display is not the one actually worn by Ms. Monroe, but the dress she actually wore looked exactly like this one.⁵

Consumer enjoyment and satisfaction gained from the experience of authenticity also comes in two forms: exploration and connection.⁶ For consumers who are not enduringly involved in the domain of the authentic experience, viewing an authentic object or witnessing a replica of an authentic historical event is simply an **exploration**, an act of getting to learn and know about that object or event. These consumers feel the joy of simply seeing the object or the place from times past; it satisfies their curiosity and gives them the satisfaction of knowing a slice of the past more directly, more intimately. The second group of consumers—those who are enduringly involved in the specific domain—feel the experience as a much more personal event. Viewing an authentic object or being in an authentic place gives them the sense of **being connected** with the past, somehow being part of that era. It is for them a fantasy world come true.

Exploration-oriented consumers are quite satisfied with the replica form of authenticity. **Connection-seeking consumers** seek out, in contrast, authenticity in its original form; they are unlikely to experience the same joy by viewing or experiencing a replica—they want the

“real thing.” Moreover, connection-seeking consumers will not stop at simply viewing the authentic exhibit; rather they will want to bring back with them a substantial part of the authentic exhibit (in replica form, of course)—tangible objects with which they can then surround themselves in everyday life.

The foregoing description refers to historical objects and events. But there is, these days, a significant trend of authenticity in everyday commercial products. This sort of authenticity resides in “the genuineness and uniqueness of an object in its first origin.” The product was created uniquely from materials and by craftsmanship sourced from places and persons/artisans not already found in other mass produced goods. These products incorporate some unique combination of local ingredients, resources, culture, and the skills of individual artisans, and are thus distinguished from mass produced goods. Starbucks and Anthropologie are good examples. Authentic brands, when they expand in scale, retain their claims to authenticity by maintaining their original “formula” of making and selling goods.

3. CONSUMPTION OF BODY ADORNMENTS

“My Body is a Scrapbook.”

Source: MYCBBBook.
www.MYCBBBook.com

