

TOWARD AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION SYMBOLISM: SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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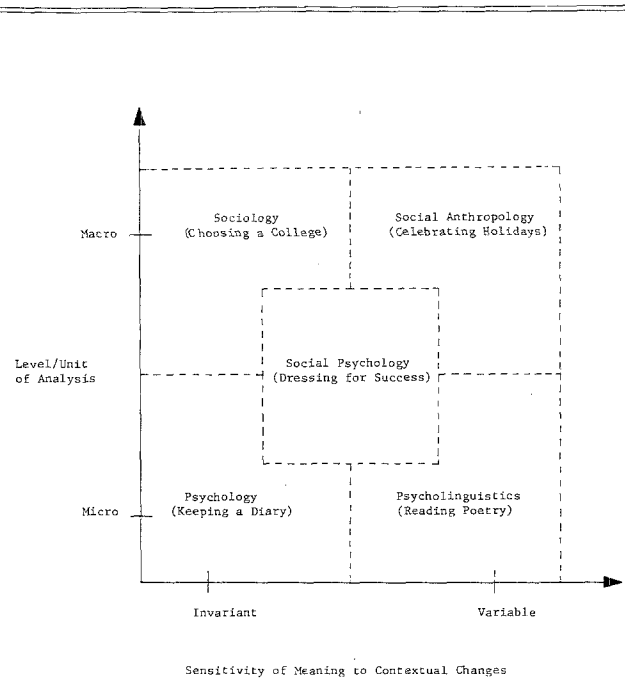
Introduction

The emergence of the experiential perspective in consumer research (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) suggests the importance of developing a working epistemology of symbolism. At its core, the experiential perspective depends on the subjective meaning of consumption, which is to say on its symbolic content. This paper offers an initial, yet multidisciplinary consideration of such fundamental questions as "what is a symbol?" and "how does a symbol come to mean what it does?" It initiates the analysis of consumption symbolism as a process, an endeavor that has occupied other disciplines for some time.

Organization

Following the convention of Morris (1938), the study of symbolism/meaning has been approached in terms of semantics (that subdivision of semiotics concerning the relationship of signs/symbols to objects), syntactics (signs to signs), and pragmatics (signs to their interpreters). Cognate disciplines' emphasis in such research can be mapped as illustrated in the accompanying Figure.

FIGURE  
 TRADITIONS IN SYMBOLISM/MEANING RESEARCH  
 (WITH ASSOCIATED CONSUMER BEHAVIORS)



<sup>1</sup> A more extensive version of this paper is available from the authors.

The Psychological/Psycholinguistic Tradition

Psychological research on symbolism or meaning is characterized by individual-level analysis and comparative insensitivity to context. Typical of this tradition is the work of Charles Osgood, whose mediational theory of meaning has been popularized by the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957). This paradigm construes meaning as the location of a sign (a stimulus that evokes reactions relevant to a target object) in semantic space--its mediational direction and polarization--operationalized by the dimensions of activity, potency and evaluation.

The Anthropological/Sociological Tradition

Anthropological research in symbolism employs a macro level of analysis and meaning is very sensitive to context. To anthropologists, meaning is something collective and shared that "resides" in a culture's symbols (expressive acts or objects). Mary Douglas (1982), with her emphasis on group properties (e.g. "grid" and "group") that influence how people select symbols (and which ones) to comport themselves appropriately, exemplifies this research tradition.

The Social Psychological Tradition

Although a variety of paradigms fit this tradition, the work of Ogden and Richards (1953) is illustrative. They propose the assignment of meaning in the form of a triangular analog, anchored by symbol (signs used to think and/or communicate), reference (thought), and referent (what the symbol stands for). Causal relations are postulated between symbol and reference and between reference and referent. Symbol and referent are related by inference. Thus, what a symbol stands for (that to which its user and/or interpreter believes it refers) must be inferred from thought.

Conclusion

An epistemology of consumption symbolism must account for its semiotics. While each of the research traditions noted has something to contribute, much remains to be formulated. Consumer researchers need especially to focus on the process by which symbols acquire meaning.

References

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