

Mundane Everyday Consumption and the Self: A Conceptual Orientation and Prospects for Consumer Research

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ABSTRACT

The self--a sense of who and what we are--is offered as the organizing construct through which people's everyday activities can be seen as significant. The mundane tasks of daily life (and the consumer behaviors necessary to enact them) deserve greater attention than has been accorded them because they are inextricably intertwined with people's sense of well-being. A conceptual orientation to this genre of research suggests the kinds of issues involved as well as the variety of investigative approaches to each that seems congenial. At a minimum, the realm of mundane activities affords researchers the opportunity to select between buyer (acquisition) behavior and consumer (use and disposition) behavior as a focal perspective.

INTRODUCTION

"First, the very idea of consumption itself has to be set back into the social process, not merely looked upon as a result or objective of work. Consumption has to be recognized as an integral part of the social need to relate to other people, and to have mediating materials for relating to them. Mediating materials are food, drink, and hospitality of home to offer, flowers and clothes to signal shared rejoicing, or mourning dress to share sorrow. Goods, work and consumption have been artificially abstracted out of the whole social scheme. The way the excision has been made damages the possibility of understanding these aspects of life" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, p. 4).

Consumer research continues to emphasize pre-acquisition phases of consumption. Consequently, the goods-in-use and disposition phases remain underexplored. Similar to Douglas and Isherwood, we submit that to understand *consumer* (cf. buyer) behavior, it should be studied as it is embedded in daily life--i.e., as part-and-parcel of mundane everyday consumption.

"Mundane and everyday" refers to those activities which constitute the bulk of daily life -- preparing meals, relaxing, or getting to work, for example. *Mundane everyday consumption* occurs while and as an integral part of negotiating these daily life-tasks. Although the study of such ordinary embedded consumption is not new (e.g., Boyd and Levy 1963), it remains an underspecified aspect of consumer behavior.

We believe that the *self* (James 1890) affords a particularly powerful lens through which ordinary consumption behavior can be viewed inasmuch as many of our daily life-tasks constitute self-enterprises--e.g., personal- and social-identity

development. As Belk (1988) has argued, possessions afford a person (and others) a sense of both who and what s/he is. In the context of Sartre's (1943) distinctions, we see the product clusters that people use ("having") as facilitating their daily activity patterns ("doing") and that these two, in combination, reflect people's sense of self ("being"). Thus the ordinary things people do (and consume) every day have profound implications for their sense of well-being. It seems remarkable that such fundamental concerns do not reside at the core of contemporary consumer research.

This paper is intended to: (1) direct researcher attention to mundane everyday consumption as a not-so-mundane and, in fact, rich research topic; (2) provide conceptual direction for its exploration; (3) illustrate that significant research questions are raised by such study; and (4) encourage consumer researchers (of whatever metaphysical persuasion) to study mundane everyday consumption phenomena.

MUNDANE CONSUMPTION: A CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATION

As noted above, mundane consumption is self-relevant; what we consume--in order to perform even ordinary human activities--both contributes to and reflects our sense of identity. Belk (1988) has proposed that possessions not only define who and what we are; they also afford us a link with the past and provide a marker for the future. Given such a self-as-nexus construal, it is not surprising that a variety of *human* concerns (quite apart from the traditional consumer research agenda) has been mirrored through the self--developmental psychologists, clinical practitioners, sociologists and anthropologists, as well as a host of critics (particularly of a post-modern bent) all see it as a reflection of individual and social mental health. However, we construe self broadly and do not implicate a particular self theory. Any number of theoretical orientations on the self--e.g., independent vs. interdependent (Markus and Kitayama 1991), public vs. private (Baumeister 1986), or social identity (Stryker 1980)--might be useful for studying mundane consumption. But following Sarbin and Allen (1968) and Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982), we believe that mundane consumption is linked more closely with *specific aspects* of the self (e.g., cyclist, parent) than with individuals' wholistic self, even though consumer researchers traditionally have studied the relevance of consumption to people's wholistic self-concept (Sirgy 1982). Further, since the self is fundamentally dynamic, a developmental (Kegan 1982) or cultivation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) approach to studying the self/consumption link may prove most beneficial.

Casting mundane consumption as self-relevant raises three characteristics of the phenomenon to which we believe consumer researchers have paid insufficient attention: (1) mundane consumption involves the patterned use of product clusters; (2) it occurs within an activity stream; and (3) it frequently involves social interaction. Each of these characteristics presents opportunities for consumer researchers.

Product Sets

Mundane consumption involves patterned use of sets of products. Although generally studied in isolation, rarely are products consumed that way (Boyd and Levy 1963; McCracken 1988; Michael Solomon 1988). Mundane consumption entails using sets of interdependent and complementary products in a particular way. A cyclist's bicycle, cycling shorts, shirt, shoes, helmet, and gloves exemplify the utilitarian *and* symbolic coherence of such sets. Product clusters cohere around and enable an aspect of the self (Kernan and Sommers 1967). This product-cluster-in-use orientation contrasts with traditional symbolic consumer behavior research which adopts a communication or person-perception perspective. Visible consumption patterns influence our impressions of an unknown person (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982), for example, and the personality traits we attribute to them (Holman 1980). In addition, people can describe product clusters characteristic of certain cultural categories of "person types" (e.g., businessman; Solomon and Assael 1987). Yet such studies leave underspecified the role that personal inventories of product clusters have in individuals' daily lives. Consider the following issues raised by contemplating product clusters in daily life.

- How do individuals select from and combine elements of their existing product clusters? This process is not so simple when we recognize that one's inventory of products relevant to a particular aspect of self often contains more elements than one can use all at once. Consider, for example, the daily challenge of combining a set of things to wear to work. And what might precipitate surprising, unusual, and/or innovative patterning of items within a cluster or items from different clusters?
- Thinking in terms of self-relevant product clusters places a different spin on product acquisition and disposition. Such decisions become cast in a larger framework. Acquisition and disposition are influenced by the self-appropriateness of the product (cf. Kernan and Sommers 1967) *and* the impact that an item's addition or deletion has on the resulting cluster (cf. McCracken's [1988] Diderot principle). We know little about how individuals assess a product's self-relevance or how that changes over time. We understand even less about how consumers evaluate a product cluster's marginal utility

when a new item is added or an existing one is deleted.

Many research opportunities surround such product cluster dynamics. How, for example, does a product cluster change over time through acquisition, use, and disposition? What gave rise to the particular combination of products owned? What constrains its composition? Finally, what is the link between product clusters and self-cultivation? How do self-relevant product clusters help us become certain types of people? Do certain cluster elements serve as entry (exit) barriers for cultivating (or disposing of) a particular aspect of the self? Is it possible to create an aspect of oneself simply by owning a particular product cluster? In short, mundane consumption involves clusters of self-relevant products. This view spurs us to explore product clusters, each one of which coheres around some aspect of the self, how they arise, and their purposes in carrying on everyday activities. This leads us to the second characteristic of mundane consumption.

Activity Streams

Mundane consumption occurs within an activity stream. Ewen (1988, p. 108) observes that "life is caught between the polarities of having and doing." Yet, to suggest that everyday consumption is embedded within an activity stream recognizes that having and doing are complementary, not polar opposites. Activity streams generate, organize, and regulate consumption (Boyd and Levy 1963). Consumption, in turn, enables the activity. Cycling shoes, for example, enable one to ride a bicycle in a particular way. The combination of activity stream and product cluster forms a consumption system (Boyd and Levy 1963). Simply, we consume while doing something; but the *activity*, not the products consumed, is our primary focus.

- Casting product clusters as tools for supporting activity streams emphasizes questions like: How are goods used to perform an activity? How is product use embedded in an activity stream? Are there core vs. peripheral enabling products for an activity? If so, what happens to an activity if consumption of certain core or peripheral products is inhibited? How is self-cultivation influenced when this occurs?

Consumption-generating activity streams direct attention to consumers' procedural knowledge and expertise. Yet much consumer research is directed toward pre-having. These investigations emphasize attributes of specific brands, consequently consumer expertise is generally construed to reflect only consumers' factual knowledge of brand-attributes (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson 1987). It seems implicitly assumed that consumers know how, when, and in what combination products are used and where they can be acquired. An emphasis on consumers' procedural (i.e., how-to) knowledge, however, raises questions like: How do people acquire knowledge vis-a-vis a particular

aspect of the self (e.g., cyclist, gourmet cook, organic gardener) and the products--utilitarian as well as symbolic--that will enable this enactment? How does this learning affect who they *can* become (i.e., self-development)? What are the sources of this learning? What relative influence might friends, media, the marketplace, etc., have in cultivating one's sense of self? Additional issues arise when consumers encounter an unfamiliar (e.g., cross-cultural) realm. What are the implications of *not* knowing the relevant consumption systems--e.g., when one doesn't understand an activity stream and/or what products should/can be used to facilitate it? How does lack of such procedural knowledge inhibit one's ability to function in the context? Similarly, how are unusual or deviant consumption systems acquired and how do they affect self-cultivation? Such processes often involve other people, the third characteristic of mundane consumption.

Social Interaction

Mundane consumption frequently involves social interaction. The autonomous consumer has been consumer research's primary focus. (There is even a budding concern with solitary consumption--Goodwin 1990). Yet many self-tasks are carried out in social settings. Indeed, one purpose of self-relevant consumption is to help us get along with others. Mundane consumption thus facilitates and mediates social interaction (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). This raises questions concerning how consumers *use* consumption patterns in social interaction and, in turn, how social interaction *shapes* those consumption patterns. For example, how do certain products or product sets act as the nonverbal elements that facilitate social communication in family settings like the contemporary dinner table or consumers' exchanges with store clerks?

- The genesis (or culmination) of certain consumption patterns (including those that may be dysfunctional) often depends upon one's entry into (exit from) appropriate interpersonal networks. Parents, for example, worry that their children will become involved with the "wrong groups," which will introduce them to substance abuse. Similarly, one's active participation in a particular social-network--e.g., a sports-car club--can stabilize consumption patterns and this can make stopping or modifying consumption difficult. Participation in the sports-car club might discourage one from exploring more athletic activities. Apart from some nascent efforts (e.g., Reingen and Kernan 1986), we understand little of how acquaintance networks influence self-cultivation and accompanying self-relevant consumption patterns.
- Social-interaction can alter the course of a person's ongoing consumption system. The consumption repertoire one displays during (or in anticipation of) social interaction

emerges from the particulars of the intercourse; social exchange is a principle source of mundane consumption's dynamism. Thus, even though the topical context remains fixed, we bring a different set of behaviors to each new episode in the topical drama. ("What should I wear to work today?" "This is our third date; what does s/he expect?") How people modify their self-relevant consumption in response to interaction-embedded imperatives is scarcely addressed in the agenda of traditional consumer research, however.

- And we sometimes desire to *avoid* social interaction. Consumption patterns also are used to discourage or inhibit interaction, for purposes of privacy or self-boundary regulation (Vinsel et al. 1981). Listening to one's personal stereo, reading a book, and Nautilus workouts are common examples. Yet consumer researchers largely have ignored people's use of consumption patterns to inhibit social-interaction (Goodwin 1990 is an exception).
- Finally, this social-interaction emphasis highlights the under-explored domain of consumption that occurs *only* in groups. Board games, sporting events, college educations, and academic conferences are consumption activities for which social interaction is fundamental. Such group-consumption phenomena perhaps best exemplify our most basic premise: mundane consumption supports, but is not the conscious focus of, individuals' self-cultivation. They also challenge us, as consumer researchers, to enrich our understanding of such complex consumption. (Ward and Reingen 1990 represents an enterprising effort toward this end.)

SOME DARK-SIDE REFLECTIONS

To recognize that both buyer behavior *and* consumer behavior comprise self-relevant activities is to move beyond the ambitions of marketing managers to the sober concerns of society. If our consumption patterns fashion our identities, the consequences of mundane activities are far more profound than traditionally has been considered; both people's sense of well-being (a.k.a. mental health) and our society's values (a.k.a. the commonweal) are in play. And neither--at least according to the skeptics--is immune from jeopardy.

Self-identity has always been a problem, some uneasy confederation of the person, significant others, authority, religion and superstition. Historically, one managed this (while not preoccupied with daily sustenance) by negotiating a path between the tenants of Romanticism (love, emotion, moral values) and the Enlightenment (reason, empiricism). The postmodern era, however, complicated all this

with ever-expanding communication; one now is forced to relate to a multitude of people and institutions in a variety of ways. The result is that each of us is no longer one self, but many; this is the age of the "saturated self" (Gergen 1991). In the postmodern world the emphasis is on relationships--this aspect of "me" (never the generalized SELF), presented in whatever persona seems most appropriate. Gergen calls this the "pastiche personality" (perhaps the equivalent of high self-monitoring), a chameleon-like identity that is, in sum, no identity. Life and truth are so fragmented, relative, and ephemeral that no one has a residual sense of ME. As Ewen (1988) puts it, "... the primacy of style over substance has become the normative consciousness" (p. 2). Jack Solomon (1988) is even less sanguine, contending that we have lost our understanding of an "essential me," that there is no centering self-identity or inherent character that remains. He cites the careers of Madonna and Michael Jackson as semiotic paradigms of our society, challenging skeptics to define who or what these celebrities are.

If we are a society of fledgling neurotics, commercial depictions (advertising, cinema) of mundane activities and the product clusters that enable them surely bear scrutiny, although whether these shape, reinforce, or merely chronicle socially-responsible behavior may be a moot question. Apart from that sticky issue, however, it seems clear that a multidimensional self is the only tenable construal. We may long wistfully for a consummate "character," but a stable (tensile?) assemblage of self-definitions probably is requisite to contemporary life. Such a compartmentalized construal has been central to our conceptualization and is a tenet of Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) provocative theory of symbolic-self completion.

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