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Contested Consumption in Everyday Life

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This article introduces the concept of “contested consumption,” a set of mundane antagonistic social practices not yet explored by consumer culture theorists. Contested consumption refers to a multitude of discursive behaviors that consumers apply for challenging the legitimacy of each other’s consumption choices, behaviors, and ideologies. Using the Hummer brand of vehicles as empirical context, ethno- and netnographic methods for data collection, and hermeneutic reading for data analysis, we reveal the cultural tensions and empirical practices of contested consumption and discuss their theoretical implications.

[to cite]:

Marius K. Luedicke and Markus Giesler (2008) , "Contested Consumption in Everyday Life", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 35, eds. Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 812-813.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13622/volumes/v35/NA-35>

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The study of ideological conflict over meanings and methods in market economies constitutes a central research program in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Since the beginning of the 1970s, consumer researchers have accumulated an insightful body of knowledge on the motivations, ideological agendas, and empirical behaviors that consumers evolve for resisting reportedly scrupulous market forces (Peñaloza and Price 1993). For a better understanding of the various motives, expressions, and implications of market-based conflict, the emerging literature advanced theoretical notions such as consumer boycott (Friedman 1985; Garrett 1987), consumer emancipation (Kozinets 2002), consumer resistance (Holt 2002; Peñaloza and Price 1993), consumer movements {Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Coksuner-Balli 2007}, cultural jamming (Handelman 1999; Lasn 2000), and marketplace drama (Giesler forthcoming).

Building on the initial work of Dameron (1938; 1941) and Sorensen (1941) on consumerism, this line of studies theorizes on antagonistic social behaviors as individual or collective conducts of consumers that feel reluctantly domineered by hegemonic business forces, including corporations (Thompson and Arsel 2004), brands (Klein 1999; Thompson et al. 2006), ideologies (Rumbo 2002), or the capitalist market system per se (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Emancipation from and resistance against such dominant powers was first expected to find its fruition outside of the “totalizing logic of the market” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). However, in line with contemporary sociologists de Certeau ([1974] 1984), Fiske (1989), and Willis (1991), consumer culture theorists came to agree that resistance is not only a market-inherent mechanism but also an important function for rejuvenating (Holt 2002) and transforming the market (Giesler forthcoming).

Our point of departure is that due to its focus on the dramatic David-versus-Goliath types of consumer struggles against unwanted forces—such as anti-Starbucks, anti-Nike, or anti-Branding activism—current theory has largely overlooked the consumer cultural influence of the mundane everyday negotiations of consumption meanings among equally influential, individual consumers.

To best reveal the cultural grounds and social practices of consumer-consumer conflicts, we offer the concept of “contested consumption.” Contested consumption comprises a set of influential interactive practices by which consumers explicitly challenge and critique each other’s consumption choices, behaviors, and ideologies. Central to understanding these processes is the existence, perception, and enforcement of power in social relationships. We use the Foucaultian idea of power as “multiple and mobile field[s] of force relations” (1980, p. 102) in order to reveal the motivations for contestation and discuss the structuring influences of the phenomenon within a larger consumer cultural context.

This research reveals two vital discourses—authenticity and sociality—in the ideological realm of which consumers negotiate the legitimacy of Hummer ownership. These discourses also draw from and contribute to a multitude of dialectical tensions, including individualism vs. collectivism (Triandis 1985), open vs. closed (Pitt et al. 2006), sharing vs. owning (Giesler 2008), or modesty vs. conspicuous (Veblen [1899] 1927), that provide further ideological grounds for the Hummer conflict in the American culture. The practice of contested consumption comprises five expressive forms of contestation that Hummer owners and adversaries evolve for

achieving ideological predominance in their respective cause: vigilant justice, insult, discredit, ridicule and instruction. These forms differ by their directness of contestation and explicitness of formulation.

In summary, the analysis reveals classic, but previously unexplored practices of consumer antagonism that offer valuable insights into the creation and proliferation of ideology, culture, and brand meaning from a consumer perspective. Previous research has located antagonistic consumer behaviors exclusively within consumer-versus-producer domains (Klein 1999; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Our study illuminates that consumerist action also resides within the mundane everyday contestations among people that are endowed with similar social and economic capital but pursue different ideological agendas.

The Hummer case illuminates that consumers defend and reinforce their ideas of a desirable market culture not only by throwing stones at Nike store windows or symbolically burning wooden men at distant desert festivals, but also and even more by passionately contesting the behaviors of individuals that transgress their perceived boundaries of legitimacy in everyday life. In addition, what has previously been theorized as a domain of leftist and somewhat more enlightened elitist consumer activists (cf. Thompson 2004), appears as a more profane practice in the light of the Hummer case. Consumerism can no longer be viewed as the exclusive domain of committed individuals such as Naomi Klein (1999) or Noreena Hertz (2001) who dedicate their lives to consumerism and possess particular expert knowledge, but as a continuum of cultural influences beginning with the practices of ordinary people expressing their beliefs by insulting Hummer owners or discrediting Toyota Prius owners in turn.

Our empirical account of contested consumption is a preliminary one. We hope that the present study will inspire fellow researchers to inquire deeper into the dynamics of the phenomenon in various social and cultural contexts in order to refine the concept and test the integrity of the findings.

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