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Negotiating Agency in the Elderly Consumption Ensemble

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Over 18% of Americans over the age of 75 require assistance with daily consumption activities. Assistance is often provided by family, friends, and paid care providers in changing configurations over time. We refer to these people together with the elderly consumer as the elderly consumption ensemble. Through depth interviews with ensemble members, this research investigates how consumer agency operates within the ensemble, including how it is constrained, enhanced, contested, and shared by elderly consumers, family members, and market providers. Contributions include adding to our understanding of the nature of consumer agency and to the socially embedded nature of consumption.

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SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

Freedom and Constraint: The Interplay of Consumer Agency, Social Relations, and the Market

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SESSION OVERVIEW

This session on consumer agency—that is, one’s ability to fully engage in all of the various aspects of consumption—is positioned as a follow up to last year’s ACR epistemic panel on consumer freedom. In that session Tom O’Guinn, Rob Kozinets, and Lisa Peñaloza joined organizer David Mick in addressing the nature, extent, up/downsides, and changes in consumer freedom over time. This topic tapped a major artery running through consumer culture theory (CCT) in conveying the powerful and creative force of this social construction. As historical artifact, freedom has inspired revolutions, wars, and civil rights struggles. As modern idealization, freedom traverses a complex web of meanings interwoven in everyday and spectacular consumption practices at home and in the marketplace, with implications to larger social and government institutions. As such, the concept of freedom merits much further work.

In the spirit of such further work, this session on consumer agency is organized to contribute understanding to the micro dynamics through which consumer agency is exerted and constrained. Western ideas of agency are rooted in the tradition of philosophers such as Descartes and Hume who emphasized an autonomous, rational subject capable of individual thought. The ability to think independently and understand one’s subjectivity and self interests is necessary for agency, which has been understood in terms of action and the potential for action, as in one’s capacity to act in his/her own interests. When cast in the consumption domain, consumer agency is exercised in consumption practices.

In this session, we problematize consumption practices and discourses of consumer agency. In doing so, it is important to anchor our studies in relation to representations of the consumer and the social expectations held for consuming agents by significant others—family, friends, and market agents. Questions raised include: What does agency entail in the consumption domain? How do market institutions convey agency to their consumers? How does ownership of consumption artifacts enable and constrain agency? And, how is consumer agency differentially configured in the three contexts on which we focus: a family making use of their dining room table, as we get old, and when we move? These contexts allow us to bring forth various contours of personal independence and autonomy in social relations and in the market as consumers employ products and services in relation to their family and friends and with firms.

Writers such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo have positioned the market as a source of freedom from oppressive social and religious traditions, casting consumer agency as a means of liberating ourselves from social constraints. Yet previous research has shown that the market places its own constraints on individual freedom (e.g. Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005; Peñaloza 1994; Peñaloza 2001), with some consumers finding the market so oppressive that they attempt to escape to an idealized, liberating social space (Kozinets 2002). In this session we examine the tension between freedom and constraint that exists in both the market and the social realms, and consider how engaging in one realm can influence the freedom/constraint balance in the other. Furthermore, this session illuminates the ways in which consumer agency is affected by significant others, the market, and one’s own body.

A common thread running through each of the three papers is an emphasis on the interplay between social relations and consumer agency. In its investigation of identity construction and the use of a family’s dining room table, the first paper challenges us to reconceptualize agency as something that is articulated in the practices of individual, relational and collective identity bundles rather than being manifest only by individuals. This work also uniquely contributes to this session in its emphasis on how an object, the table, may exert a constraining force over human agency. The analysis and write-up of this paper are complete. The second paper considers how consumer agency can be shared by family, paid providers, and elderly consumers when an older person is no longer able to consume independently. In this context, the focus shifts from an inanimate object to our own bodies as a source of constraint. Additionally, this research considers how the market can perpetuate an idealized concept of freedom and independence in old age. One round of data collection and analysis for this paper is complete, and the authors expect to be in the final stages of analysis by the time of the conference. Finally, in the context of house moving, the third paper analyzes the interplay and tensions between individual consumers and their social networks of family members, friends and acquaintances. Like the other papers of the session, this research questions the individualistic view of agency by focusing on how people negotiate the social expectations and relational obligations of the gift economy. More importantly, it examines how people may sometimes seek to escape the gift economy by turning to the market. As such, this paper looks at how the market helps to reconcile consumers’ desire to belong to a social network and their need for freedom and autonomy. Analysis and write-up are expected to be completed by the time of the conference.

This session is expected to appeal to those interested in consumer agency and freedom, the family, identity construction, elderly consumers, materiality, and the socially embedded nature of consumption. Implications for individuals include how they can use consumption to balance personal life goals with social and market benefits and challenges. Implications for service providers such as movers and elder care services relate to how they might position themselves relative to competitors and in anticipating future market development. Finally, implications for social theory include providing insight into how consumption impacts social groups of family and friends.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Agency, Identity and Materiality: The Storied Life of a Family and their Table”

Amber M. Epp, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Linda L. Price, University of Arizona, USA

Eric J. Arnould, University of Wyoming, USA

“Figured worlds, like activities, are not so much things or objects to be apprehended as processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them,” Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain 2003

Prior research in material culture studies has sought to “transcend a simple dualism in which agency is seen as a possession of

persons or society, and objects merely that which is passively worked upon” promoting instead an approach based on networks of agents that “include both animate and inanimate forms” (Miller 2001, p. 119). Consistent with this evolving perspective, we view consumer agency as improvisations and potentialities that come from the interplay of individual, relational and collective identities, material objects, other cultural resources, and situations in practice (Holland et al 2003). As such, agency is socially instanced in identities produced through collective practices that are spread across the material world and located in specific times and places (Cetina 1997). Within a socio-historical or “figured world” of semiotic meanings, objects are instruments of agency, recipients of the acts of others’ agency and also act as agents to transform and displace individual, relational and collective identities and practices (Miller 2005). Hence, at contrast with views of agency as individualistic, purposeful control; we emphasize how other social units (such as couples, children and families); objects; and spaces exert semiotic agency as they interplay in identity practices (Epp and Price 2008). In particular, our study illustrates “the positive blending of social and material relations” (Miller 2001, 115) that can occur at the intersection of object and personal biographies.

Our paper is based on a two-year ethnographic case study we conducted that describes linkages between the biography of the Erikson family (a pseudonym) and the biography of their kitchen table, a highly singularized object (Kopytoff 1986). Using a life-history approach (Denzin 1978), we interviewed five family members, including a mother, father, two children, and the mother’s mother. We uncover how contextual shifts and constellations of objects and spaces propel and alter the uses of the table, and how the table in turn alters key family identity practices. We produce depth of understanding and triangulation across informants and events by drawing on multiple family members and collecting data at multiple time points (Yin 2003; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Over the two-year period one of the researchers made multiple visits to the family’s home and photographed the table in various roles. Fortunately, this case tracks a family during a transitional period (moving to a new house), making identity issues salient (Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997; Schouten 1991) and allowing us to assess contextual changes that challenge the object’s role in family identity.

Our research reveals that a highly singularized object can be propelled into periods of inactivity by a convergence of forces including 1) other singularized objects with complementary and/or competing biographies; 2) other complementary and/or competing individual, relational or collective identity performances; 3) shifts in contextual elements such as spaces, life events, and so on. In the case of a highly singularized object, periods of inactivity are marked by incorporation attempts and contemplation about possible futures for both object and family biographies. Objects are moved back into activity by 1) possible futures the family envisions, which create new opportunities for object-family interactions; 2) object indexicality that demands that particular identity practices require the use of THIS particular object; 3) the complementary iconicity of objects and spaces (as dining table; contamination of the object by the space and vice versa; sometimes just needs to be a big table); and 4) shifts in contextual elements.

Object movements have unprompted and unintended consequences such as displacement of identity practices, other objects, and spaces. By focusing on the consequences of movements of singularized objects in and out of activity, we are able to account for paradoxical behaviors. For example, we explain why and how individual, relational, and family identity practices are altered or abandoned in order to reincorporate singularized objects into their

performances. We also show how a singularized object, as it exits and re-enters the family’s social space, can precipitate a new vision of family identity. Our research provides examples of objects exerting constraining force over human agency as seen in the dramatic efforts made by two generations of family to accommodate the table, including remodeling three houses and moving the table in and out of the current house in order to provide a key prop to particular identity performances. In addition, we highlight the agency of multiple identity bundles, not just the individual, in the improvisations that unfold in the “figured world” of the Erikson family. In the Erikson family, convergent and overlapping identity practices are more prominent than divergent and competing practices. However, divergence and competition between identity bundles emerge in the family’s move to a new home with new objects and spaces potent with competing identities that ultimately displace the table to the garage. In this move we see how individual, relational and collective identities collide, compete and interplay to exert agency over the next moment of activity.

“Negotiating Agency in the Elderly Consumption Ensemble”

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While improvements in health care have greatly increased life expectancy over the last century, they have not eliminated many of the physical and mental limitations that often accompany old age. Age related changes leave many older consumers unable to consume independently. In 2005, 6.4% of Americans between the ages of 65 and 74, and 18.3% of those over the age of 75 required assistance with at least one of the following consumption activities: using the telephone, traveling outside the home, shopping, preparing meals, doing housework, taking medications, and managing money (Census 2008).

Assistance may include private, informal help from family members or friends as well as paid in-home services, and is likely to be a complex and dynamic process involving multiple people in changing configurations over time (Waldrop 2006). We refer to this group as the *elderly consumption ensemble (ECE)* and define it as an elderly consumer and one or more others who together engage in consumption activities of that elderly person. The ECE is analogous to a jazz ensemble in which members possess different competencies and are more or less engaged in activity at any particular moment.

This research investigates how consumer agency operates within ECEs that include both unpaid family or friends and paid providers. In so doing, it strives to understand how agency is constrained, enhanced, protected, contested, relinquished, and shared in consumer behavior. For example, an older person’s consumer agency may be constrained by physical limitations, enhanced by adaptive devices, protected as they insist on “doing it myself,” contested by family members worried about an elder’s physical safety, relinquished when they ask others to do something for them, and shared when they are able to engage in a consumption activity only with assistance. For our theoretical framework, we draw eclectically from previous work on elderly consumers, family, joint consumption, and commercial friendships. Methodology includes depth interviews with members of six ECEs, each consisting of an elderly consumer, at least one family member or friend, and at least one paid care provider. Questions elicit oral histories beginning with informants’ first recognition that assistance was needed, and including how levels and types of assistance and ensemble members’ relationships changed over time. Additional questions explore informants’ reflections on their experience as an older person,

family member/friend, or caregiver; their own aging; and what it means to be old in American society. Of interest is how older consumers' agency is influenced by their own aging bodies, family members, and market providers.

While cognition has received greater attention in studies of aging consumers (Cole and Balasubramanian 1993; Yoon 1997; John and Cole 1986; Law, Hawkins, and Craik 1998), changes in the body can also make it difficult or impossible for older consumers to exercise agency. For instance, Richard (89) has macular degeneration. He is no longer able to drive and reads only with great difficulty using a special machine that he has at home. While he has experienced no marked decline in his cognitive abilities, his is unable to act independently as a consumer in a marketplace that demands a certain degree of mobility and literacy.

Family members or friends may attempt to enhance or protect the agency of an older consumer by gifting adaptive devices, such as Richard's reading machine or Jane's (82) new walker. Yet these items may also be seen as threatening markers of age that imply a gradual loss of freedom and independence. Alternatively, family/friends may attempt to limit an older person's agency as they try to protect the older person or to advance their own self interests. When family members engage in consumption activity with an older person who previously acted alone, agency must be negotiated in consumption behavior as the elderly consumer moves into and acts from an elderly subject position.

Finally, the market both frees and constrains older consumers. Advertising images of independent, active seniors legitimize old age in ways that are gratifying but can also create unrealistic expectations of perpetual independence and autonomy. Service providers make it possible for older consumers to live independently from their families. However, this social independence is counterbalanced with increasing dependency on the market. Assisted living centers and paid caregivers are examples. At the level of the individual service provider, we conceptualize paid care providers as ECE members engaged in consumption with elderly consumers while supporting an ideal of independence. Like family members, paid care providers negotiate agency and subject position with the elderly consumer through consumption behavior. However, in this case the relationship between an older consumer's agency and the ECE member's interest is more immediately obvious. The paid provider's employment is the direct result of the older consumer's constrained agency. If the older person could act alone, the provider would not be needed. Thus, while the paid provider may out of genuine friendship or love wish to enhance the older person's agency, he/she also has a vested interest in continued or increasing constraints.

This research seeks to contribute to the consumer behavior literature by elucidating how changes in the body and changes in family and market relationships that accompany advanced age impact the nature of consumer agency. Furthermore, by asking how agency is shared by ECE members, we challenge the concept of individual consumer agency and add to previous work on the socially embedded nature of consumption. In increasing our understanding of the ECE, this work has implications for family members, marketers, and policy makers interested in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life of elderly consumers and their families.

"Moving Across the Gift Economy and the Market"

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In consumer research, the gift economy has usually been considered as a sphere of exchange that is distinct from the market. The two are not only analyzed separately, however. They are also

often organized into a hierarchy of values in which the gift is privileged.

Researchers like Cheal (1988), Giesler (2006) and Thompson and Arsel (2004), for instance, have analyzed the gift and the gift economy extensively. These researchers have described gift-giving as a social activity in which a humanizing logic is applied at an interpersonal level. They have also projected this idea up to the level of the gift economy (see for example Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Few of these researchers have questioned, however, the ennobling view of the gift economy. Notwithstanding the work on the darker sides of the gift (see for example Belk 1976, 1979; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel, 1999; Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1993), which has unveiled the emotional and relational constraints of gift-giving behavior, consumer researchers have usually failed to explore the implications of the dark side of the gift in relation to the market. In other words, they have often ignored how people may seek to escape the constraints of the gift economy, and how they may turn to the market as a result.

This presentation examines how people negotiate the social expectations of the gift economy and the relational obligations (like social indebtedness) that such a context of exchange entails. It unveils the micro-dynamics of consumption that leads people to either comply to the norm of the gift economy, subvert it, or escape it through the market. The notion of agency is useful for understanding this process. If freedom is a notion in which the choice is sometimes idealized, agency is understood for its part as a means of expressing volition and intentions within a set of norms. In this case, we can speak about the norms of reciprocity prevailing inside the gift economy. As such, turning to the market becomes a means of asserting agency.

This presentation is grounded in an ethnographic study of house moving in Montreal (Canada). In line with Arnould and Thompson (2005), moving is used here as a privileged context for accessing reciprocity relations and for revealing the tensions that may make the gift economy unattractive, and that may lead people to escape it as a result. In Montreal, using family, friends, acquaintances and social networks for the purpose of moving is the norm. Moving is a social event particularly appropriate for the emergence of reciprocity relations. During a move, members of primary support networks—and also more distantly related persons—give, swap, exchange and trade services and resources in a fringe zone of social activity that lies between the gift economy and the market. Many people who decide to move view calling upon the market as a complement to, a substitute for, or an exit from the gift economy. Thus, the analysis of moving, with this activity seen as a point of passage between the gift economy and the market, can help us to think beyond the literature on reciprocity and gift-giving.

This presentation does not only challenge expectations of specific CCT researchers. It also goes against some of the fundamental tenets of consumer research on the gift. It shows how people may subvert the hierarchy of values that underlies most of our field's research on the gift.

References available upon request.