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Generative Literacy and Consumer Empowerment

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Consumer literacy has the potential to be empowering to individuals and transformative for societies. We develop a model of generative literacy and propose productive inquiry and dynamic affordances as linking mechanisms between educational and functional literacies that are suggested to be distinct. We discuss implications for consumer and societal empowerment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Responding to the inherent complexities of today's knowledge-intensive economy and the resulting knowledge-intensive consumption, consumer researchers have begun to address consumer literacy (e.g., Wallendorf 2001; Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin 2005; Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005). So far, researchers' conceptualization of consumer literacy entwines educational and functional literacy. Equating educational literacy with consumer literacy seems, at the very least, rather limiting given the inherent diversity in products available for consumption in the marketplace and the resulting diversity in complexities related to consumption.

Specifically, while the foundation of educational literacy can be important for consumer literacy research, consumer literacy goes beyond educational literacy. For example, in complex consumption categories involving finance and health related offerings in the marketplace, literacy is highly context specific and knowledge intensive. Consequently, there has been burgeoning interest in functionally rooted financial literacy (e.g., Emund 2010; Huston 2010) and health literacy (e.g., Adkins and Corus 2009; Bone, France, and Aiken 2010) in consumer research. However, despite the seeming importance of the issue of consumer literacy, there is much confusion in the consumer literature regarding the definition/conceptualization and treatment of literacy.

Therefore, we first review the current research on consumer literacy with reference to the conceptualization/ definition and major findings. Second, building on our review, we elaborate on functional versus educational literacy, develop a model of generative literacy, and introduce the notion of a generative cycle of educational and functional literacies for consumer empowerment.

This paper makes several contributions to the consumer literacy research domain. First, our comprehensive and systematic review with reference to the conceptualization/ definition, products focused on, nature of research, and major findings reveals interesting insights into the links between consumer literacy and empowerment, conceptual inconsistencies, public policy issues, and normative strategies for firms. Here, we critically analyze the literature and consciously look for integrative elements and conceptual lacunae in consumer literacy research. Second, building on our review and critical analysis, we (i) propose a 2X2 matrix that helps categorize the differences between low and high levels of educational and functional literacy, reflecting four possibilities that are distinct and present different challenges to researchers and practitioners alike, (ii) summarize the differences between educational and functional literacies, and (iii) develop a figure that illustrates the relationships and moderating factors derived out of the extant literature. Third, we develop and introduce the notion of the generative cycle of educational and functional literacies for consumer empowerment. Herein, we depict dynamic affordances and productive inquiry as linking mechanisms between educational and functional literacies. Overall, our research has several implications for future research as shown in the brief research agenda that follows.

In discussing a research agenda for consumer literacy, we first focus on the context of discovery and, then, the context of justification. As the scope of this research is conceptual, there are several avenues of future research in the context of discovery. First, our integrative and critical review can be subjected to conceptual scrutiny.

Second, the conceptual model of generative literacy that emerged from analysis can be evaluated with reference to parsimony (errors of commission) and comprehensiveness (errors of omission). Furthermore, our conceptualization of generative literacy and the generative cycle of educational and functional literacies for empowerment can also be investigated for conceptual adequacy, consistency, and validity. Third, drawing on the seminal work of Cook and Brown (1999), we introduce the concepts of productive inquiry and dynamic affordances in the context of the generative cycle of educational and functional literacies for empowerment. These two concepts need further development and clarification.

As to the context of justification, our research brings forth concepts such as generative literacy, cognitive predilections, identity management, productive inquiry, dynamic affordances and two new frameworks in the conceptual model of literacy and the generative cycle of educational and functional literacies for empowerment that can be subjected to empirical scrutiny, that in turn, provides several new avenues for future research.

In order to equip the vast majority of people who live on the other side of the social divide with capabilities that they value, transformative consumer research has to take into consideration the generative nature of literacy and strive to balance both educational and functional perspectives for true self and societal empowerment.

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