

Disruptive consumption: How consumers challenge mainstream markets through makeshifting

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study aims to unpack makeshifting, an understudied, yet widespread, consumption practice whereby consumers use materials, parts and objects at hand to adjust, improve, or invent solutions to their needs and desires for goods or services that are sometimes not available or existing in their markets. Around the world, culture-specific terms analogous to makeshifting are found: bodge (UK), tapullo (Italy), urawaza (Japan), jua kali (Kenya), jugaad (India), and gambiarra (Brazil). Although prior research has investigated do-it-yourself (DIY) and craft behaviors (Wolf and McQuitty, 2013; Moisiso, Arnould and Gentry, 2013), it has overlooked the specific ways in which consumers apply their creativity to bypass market-mediated offers to design and produce their own solutions.

Often associated with improvised solutions that address people's immediate needs (Bouffleur, 2006), makeshifting is a sustainable practice because it reduces waste disposal. Sustainable consumption initiatives are grounded on three key actions: reduce, reuse and recycle (3Rs). Considerable research has been devoted to understanding reducing (e.g. boycott, frugality) and recycling as environmentally friendly consumer behaviours (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014), but less attention has been paid to reuse practices (Lee, Roux, Cherrier and Cova, 2011). Makeshifting fits in the reuse category, because consumers creatively reprocess their waste and idle objects to produce alternative products. More importantly, many makeshifts have universal utility, are easily replicable and can fully replace commercial products. Hence this practice can improve quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources.

A limited view of makeshifting as “quick fix” solutions neglects the creativity and resourcefulness employed by individuals in reusing materials, parts and objects at hand to challenge mainstream marketing by adjusting, improving, and inventing solutions that fit consumers' unique material, social, and cultural motivations. As makeshifting blurs the boundary between production and consumption, it empowers consumers to challenge mainstream markets, rejecting their commercial offerings, while addressing consumption needs. To further examine this phenomenon, we ask: *What is the nature of the makeshifting practice? How does it help consumers disrupt conventional consumption practices? What are its consequences for the market and for sustainable consumption?*

To address these questions, we conducted a netnography (Kozinets, 2015) of the Brazilian makeshifting practice, popularly known as gambiarra. We immersed ourselves in multiple online platforms where Gambiarra was shared and discussed by consumers, collecting and qualitatively analyzing visual and textual data.

Prior research has noted that understanding the dynamics of social practices (i.e. how they emerge, are sustained, and become naturalized) might shed light on contemporary social problems such as environmental issues, or persistent patterns of inequality (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). As such, practice theories provide an adequate theoretical lens through which to analyse makeshifting, and a useful framework to reflect on this phenomenon, its relation to sustainable consumption, and its implications for public policies (Welch and Warde, 2015).

Findings

Consumers may re-signify market resources, second-hand resources, or even waste in creating makeshift solutions. Material inputs can be repurposed in combination (e.g. used coffee pods [repurposed] and new electrical supplies [repurposed] are combined to produce Christmas tree lighting), or in isolation (e.g., a hair dryer [repurposed] is used to efficiently glue eyelash extensions). Gambiarra, then, endows objects, components and procedures with new meanings.

Gambiarra is driven by several non-mutually exclusive factors, such as resource limitations, lack of access to markets, sustainability values, an anti-consumption ideology, a desire for social recognition, personalization (crafting), and artistic expression (junk art). Gambiarra, then, is a practice that is sustained by a complex nexus of teleoaffective structures. Furthermore, individuals with multiple levels of competence and planning can engage in gambiarra and have successful results. Gambiarra might emerge as a completely improvised practice at a moment of need; or as an extremely planned solution. Parallel to this improvised-planned continuum, gambiarra may be performed by both practitioners who have high technical competence, or those who have none. Finally, consumers may determine whether a given practice or solution is gambiarra or not, according to their own values. Often, the same practice or solution is considered differently by different consumers. For example, using a power cable to connect several light bulbs may be explained as gambiarra by an electrician, or introduced as an artistic and affordable DIY decoration solution by an amateur party planner. This signals the ambiguous and conflicting meanings of gambiarra, as either negative transgression, or positive ingenuity. Often, this distinction indicates an aesthetic polarization between the ugly, unskillful transgression and the beautiful artistic solution.

All in all, our findings indicate that gambiarra is a practice without routine. That means, gambiarra is neither an integrative nor a dispersive but instead a disruptive practice that finds in object transformation its crucial drive. If rules represent one of the links of the practice nexus (Schatzki, 1996), in makeshifting it is precisely the absence of rules that characterizes the practice. In addition to the absence of rules, gambiarra can be considered a disruptive practice because disruption may occur in the process, but also in the object's materiality and functionality.

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