

# HOW IS THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE DEFINED IN CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY? DISCUSSING DIFFERENT FRAMES OF ANALYSIS

Eeva-Katri Ahola, Helsinki School of Economics

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the notion of experience in the context of consumer culture theory. The analytical research question is the following: How is the notion of experience defined in consumer culture theory? In this paper I aim to capture the notion of experience by discussing three different frames used to theorize experience in the field of consumer culture theory. I have named these frames as 1) humanistic frame (experience as a subjective and inner phenomenon), 2) extraordinariness frame<sup>1</sup> (experience as a special and particular phenomenon) and 3) marketplace frame (experience as marketplace phenomenon). Key words: experience, extraordinary, marketplace

## INTRODUCTION

The nature of experience society and the aesthetization of everyday life have been described in sociological literature since the beginning of 1990's (Schulze 1992; Featherstone 1991; Uusitalo 1995; Firat & Fenkatesh 1995, Pantzar 1998). The notion of experience has also become the key element in understanding consumer behavior (Addis & Holbrook 2001), most important marketing offer (Schmitt 1999) and a foundation for the economy (Pine & Gilmore 1999). In addition, experience is also important business and leisure activity. For instance, activities around exhibitions and trade shows are an important sub sector in the experience industry. For example, during the year 2002 there were 43 different exhibition events in the Helsinki Fair Centre. The amount of visitors in these events was 983 000.

The word experience has also entered more strongly to our everyday language of consumption. Increasingly often you can hear somebody using the word 'experience' when he or she is telling about e.g. the past weekend, vocation trip or the dinner they have enjoyed. In addition, the word of experience is also more often visible in advertisements. The following e-mail message from a travel agency is an example of how experience is used in the travel business.

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<sup>1</sup> In Finnish: ihmeellinen (ihastusta herättävä), poikkeuksellinen, ainutlaatuinen, ilmiömäinen, tavaton (epätavallinen, kummallinen), 2. hämmästyttävä, yllättävä, ihmeellinen, merkillinen (<http://mot.kielikone.fi/mot/hkkk/netmot.exe>)

Crips and colourful autumn has arrived. Your task in the game [a game in computer] is to lead a group of swans for a journey. Please, choose from the map where you want to take your wedge of swans - just like Suomen Matkatoimisto to the tailored experiences. You can win a splendid trip to Paris! And then the game starts... (Source: An e-mail from a travel agency (Suomen Matkatoimisto) on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, 2004).

The story behind the advertisement is based on the cultural and often rather grievous story of autumn coming in Finland. Then it is time to say farewell to summer at the latest when all migratory birds are flying over on their way to distant places in Africa and the southern Europe. In this advertisement the selling argument is that the true experiences exist elsewhere.

Previously some researchers paid attention to the fact that the concept of experience is rather poorly defined in the context of consumer research and marketing (Carù & Cova 2003).

In this paper I aim at increasing our knowledge of the notion of experience in the consumer culture theory. The research question is the following: What kinds of major analytical frames are used in the consumer culture when defining the notion of experience? What kinds of themes construct the notion of experience in the analytical frames? In this paper I will discuss three different analytical frames used to theorize experience in the consumer culture theory. The frames discussed are 1) humanistic frame (experience as a subjective and inner phenomenon), 2) extraordinariness frame (experience as a special and particular phenomenon) and 3) marketplace frame (experience as marketplace phenomenon).

## **DIFFERENT FRAMES TO THEORIZE EXPERIENCE IN THE CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY**

In the following I will discuss the three different frames of experience theorizations used in consumer culture theory.

### **Humanistic frame- experience as subjective and inner phenomena**

The first frame I have named as humanistic frame. This frame is the oldest approach to theorize experience in the consumer culture theory. The notion of experience entered in the field of consumer culture theory with Holbrook & Hirschman's ground-breaking article of the year 1982. The article contrasted the experiential aspects of consumption with the information processing perspective and led to calls for an experiential paradigm in consumer theory. "This experiential perspective is phenomenal in spirit and regards consumption as a primary subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria" (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982).

I have named this approach as humanistic frame since in this frame experience is understood as a subjective, inner kind of phenomena (Hirschman 1984). Experience is also defined as personally unique event that is associated with significant emotional experiences. The seeking of

emotional arousal has been argued to be the major motivation for consumption of certain product classes such as novels, plays and sporting events (Hirschman 1982).

The approach has also placed interest on the multisensory and imagery elements of consumption. By multisensory elements it is meant the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images (Hirschman 1982). By imaginary elements it is meant for instance, historic imaginary and fantasy. The historic imagery involves recalling an event that actually did occur in the past. For example, the scent of perfume can cause the consumer to evoke a pleasant past episode. In turn, the fantasy imagery occurs when the consumer responds by producing a multisensory image not drawn straight from the prior experience. Instead of recalling a historic sequence the consumer produces an imaginary one.

Carù & Cova (2003) note in their paper that in consumer research, an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance stemming from the consumption of products and services. Later on the humanistic approach has developed towards analyzing the interplay between consumption experiences and lifeprojects (e.g. Mick & Buhl 1992).

### **The frame of extraordinariness-emphasizing newness and the social**

The second frame I have named as the frame of extraordinariness. The notion of extraordinariness<sup>2</sup> originates from the anthropology of experience that deals with how individuals actually experience their culture, that is, how events are received consciousness (Bruner 1986, p. 4). The actual notion of extraordinary experience comes from Abrahams (1986, p. 68) who makes a distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences in the following way. "On the one hand, there is a flow of activity, and on the other, distinctive marked-out acts and events, all going under the name of experience. Moreover, the very flow of the everyday assures the continuity between routine activities and the more extraordinary ones. We have become aware of the continuities between the ordinary and the 'deeper' or 'higher' events through performed mimetic experiences, which openly imitate (and stylize) everyday acts and interactions".

The concept of extraordinary experience has been applied and further developed in consumer culture theory. It has been used in analyzing the role of rituals and sacred in consumer behavior (Belk & Wallendorf & Sherry 1989), delivering of extraordinary experience (Arnould & Price 1993), skydiving subculture (Celsi & Rose & Leigh 1993) and consumption fantasy (Belk & Costa 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford American Dictionary (1986, 306): extraordinary adj. 1) very unusual or remarkable; 2) beyond what is usual or ordinary. Extraordinarily (adv.)

According to Arnould & Price (1993) the term extraordinary experience points out especially to the sense of newness of perception and process. In their analysis of the nature of extraordinary experience Arnould & Price (1993) contrast extraordinary experience with flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and peak experience (Maslow 1964). In the conceptual analysis Arnould & Price (1993) find that the intensity and the relational mode of in each of the experiences differentiate the experience types from one another. Compared with flow experience extraordinary experience is activated by unusual events and is characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and experience. Compared to peak experience extraordinary experience does not involve either superior levels of effort or an independent relational mode. In fact, an important trigger for the extraordinary experience is interpersonal interaction, the feeling of communion with other people, namely *communitas* bond or antistructure (Turner & Turner 1978, p. 249-252; Selänniemi 1999, p. 277). These kinds of *communitas* bonds between people are equal and spontaneous in character and free them from common norms. They also include feelings of linkage, of belonging and group devotion to a shared goal (Arnould & Price 1993).

In the previous studies extraordinary type of experience is at times connected to transitional elements of experience. The idea of transition comes from Turner (1978) and it is often associated with pilgrimage and their way of leaving homes and separating from ordinary everyday lives. After separation pilgrims enter to sacred grounds where they stay and experience the phase of transformation. After the transforming occurrence has been finalized, the pilgrim returns home transformed and is integrated back to his or her community. Turner (1978, p. 195-196) calls these phases preliminal, liminal and postliminal. The word *limen* comes from latin and means threshold. Liminal<sup>3</sup> states are in-between states where everything is possible and allowed (Turner 1978, p. 195-196; Selänniemi 1999, p. 277). These states are culturally produced time-outs that provide liberation, relief and renewal from normative constraints of everyday life (Turner 1978, p. 195-196; Valtonen 2004, p. 47). In sum, the most important characteristics of extraordinary experience are unusual events as triggers, emotional intensity and activity, no superior levels of effort and interpersonal interaction. Especially the importance of interpersonal interaction separates the frame of the phenomenological frame discussed earlier.

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3 Turner & Turner (1978: 249-252) suggest that many experiences originating from leisure activities such as from tourism be thought of as liminoid rather than liminal. Liminoid differs from liminal in the sense that the former is produced and consumed by people whereas the latter is anonym in character and it is believed to be divine in nature.

## **Marketplace frame—experience as an artifact produced in the market**

The third frame I have named as the marketplace frame. The key research question driving the marketplace<sup>4</sup> frame is the following: How are the meanings of experience formed in the marketplace? This approach draws mainly from the tradition of cultural studies (Hall, 1992; du Gay *et.al.* 1997) and the theories of text reception and aesthetics (Iser 1980; Jaus 1982). It also draws from cultural approaches to marketplace phenomena. Examples of the previous studies on marketplaces include investigations of consumer acculturation of Mexican immigrants to U.S. market culture (Peñaloza 1994), marketer acculturation in multicultural market sites (Peñaloza & Gilly 1999), consumer cultural production processes at different types of marketplace sites such as servicescapes (Sherry 1998), trade show and rodeo (Peñaloza 2001) and museums (Joy & Sherry 2003) as well as how cultural production systems such as advertising or the fashion industry existing in the marketplace influence consumers (McCracken 1986). This approach comes rather close to what Arnould & Thompson (forthcoming) call the framework of mass-mediated marketplace and consumers' interpretative strategies.

The marketplace frame focuses its interest in systems of meaning that have a tendency to direct consumers' meaning making. Examples of these are 1) the characteristics of normative messages that media transmit about consumption and 2) consumer meaning making of these media messages (Hirschman & Thompson 1997).

In the marketplace frame consumers and other actors in the market negotiate the cultural meanings in relations to each other (Peñaloza 2001). Moreover these studies often adopt the postmodern refusal to split consumption and production (Firat & Venkatesh 1995). In this research approach consumers are regarded as interpretative agents whose meaning-making activities range from reading according to dominant logic to those readings that depart from the ideological instructions.

Previous research in marketing and consumer culture theory has placed little attention to experience as a social phenomenon. Examples of the questions directing research towards to more social direction are the following. What are the characteristics of the experience market/sector/economy? What kind of submarkets can be identified? Who are the actors that take part in the meaning making processes and what are the main characteristics of these meaning making processes? What kind of role does the experience sector play in employment and general wellbeing of people?

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4 According to Oxford American Dictionary (1980: 544) market is defined as follows. 1) gathering for the sale of goods or livestock. 2) a space or building used for this purpose 3) the conditions or opportunity for buying or selling 4) a place where goods may be sold, a particular class of buyers e.g. foreign markets 5) the stock market. According to Oxford American Dictionary (1980: 544) the word marketplace means an open space where a market is held in a town.

In my PhD study I will investigate the production of meanings in the experience market/sector with the help of the above described marketplace frame. The focus of the study lies in marketing and consumer culture theory. The phenomenon under closer investigation is cultural negotiation of experience in the market. Towards that end I aim to develop a theoretical approach that is able to 1) to identify the circle of culture in the experience market and, 2) to increase our knowledge of the cultural processes that underline the construction of experience in the market, and 3) to increase our understanding of consumers' interpretative strategies related to production, mediation and consumption of the experience in the market. By doing this, I wish to contribute to marketing, especially to experiential marketing as well as consumer culture theory. The major contribution of this study is to conceptualize experience as cultural artefact by elaborating on the cultural processes in which meanings are constructed, contested and changed in the market.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the notion of experience in the context of consumer culture theory. In this paper I captured the notion of experience by discussing three major approaches used to theorize experience in the field of consumer culture theory. I named these frames as 1) humanistic frame (experience as a subjective and inner phenomenon), 2) extraordinariness frame (experience as a special and particular phenomenon) and 3) marketplace frame (experience as marketplace phenomenon). The discussion was exploratory in nature. For further research I suggest more profound theoretical analysis on the notion of experience.

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## **AUTHOR**

Eeva-Katri Ahola (M.Sc. econ), works for Helsinki School of Economics, Department of Marketing and Management, P.O. Box 1210, 00101 Helsinki, Finland.