Free five relevant theories of consumption essay sample

ASSIGN BUSTER

I, Consumer

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One of the things that has interested me most throughout this course is the idea of consumption as a form of personal identity expression. While I was aware that my own preferences in music or clothing or other categories of goods communicated something about me, I didn't realize the depth of importance that had to me—and, to be honest, my ego—until I read the various theories of consumption that were included in our course material, as well as the additional research I did in preparing to write this paper. Gradually, I have come to understand that I sometimes choose a particular brand or style of item not because I truly believe it is the item that best meets my practical needs, but because I believe it will signal to others something important about me.

The signals I hope to send are generally of two types: The first signals my level of hipness. I make purchases based on an item's ability to signal that I am one of the cool people—someone who is in the know about the most current products, particularly electronic and digital devices, and who can identify quality goods from cheaper imitations. The second type signals my personal values. I like to present myself as someone who cares about the environment and who is a responsible, conscious consumer. Not all purchases are intended to send these signals and each individual purchase may signal only one of the two types, but often a purchase sends both.

The commitment to environmental sustainability is genuine; what interests me is that I also seem to have a need to communicate this to others through my consumption behavior, as if to let them know that I am a good person. In

addition, I believe that I choose to purchase, or not to purchase, a particular product or service as a form of personal empowerment, as described by Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson (2006). The idea that consumption functions as a sort of economic vote is compelling, as is the thought that I may be behaving this way without even being conscious of it.

These realizations are unsettling, because my consumption patterns seem somewhat needy and that is not how I view myself. I always thought of myself as an independent thinker who makes choices based on rational criteria. Now it seems that is not always the case, and this motivates me to explore more deeply those feelings and factors that are influencing my consumption habits. The exploration begins with an understanding of some key consumption theories. Following that, I will analyze my level of involvement and my motivations for making two different purchases: pre-packaged coffee pods for under £10 and a laptop computer for more than £100.

Enduring and Situational Involvement

Houston and Rothschild (1977) proposed two types of consumer involvement with a purchase, enduring involvement and situational involvement. "Enduring involvement stems from the individual and reflects a general and permanent concern with product class" (Week 3 ppt, slide 8). Examples of enduring involvement include such things as golf clubs for a lifelong player of the game and dog food for a breeder of corgis. Situational involvement reflects the level of concern with a specific buying situation. An example is purchasing an engagement ring, which would be a high-involvement

situation, versus buying an everyday commodity, such as a dozen eggs or a liter of milk, which is a low-involvement situation (Week 3 ppt, slides 8-9). There is less at stake in the latter transaction, so the consumer is risking very little in deciding to buy brand A versus brand B.

Involvement and Self-Concept

Bloch and Richins (1983) said that involvement is reflected in how closely the product is linked to a person's self-concept. Where there is a close connection between the product and the buyer's self-concept, the product functions as a mechanism of self-expression and a way to enhance the buyer's self-image (Week 3 ppt, slide 13). Belk (1988) took this idea a step further by introducing the concept of extended self. In this theory, a person not only expresses herself through the products she buys, but uses purchased items to help learn and define who she is (Week 3 ppt, slides 13-15). One might summarize Belk's idea with the statement, " I am what I own."

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) is an extension of the theory of reasoned action developed a decade earlier by Fishbein & Ajzen (1980). This earlier theory focused on a person's intention to behave in a certain way, such as when one researches and plans to purchase a particular model of automobile. However, the theory of reasoned action failed to account for the amount of control that the person has over the buying situation. Ajzen's later theory considered the buyer's level of control when determining the predictive accuracy of the buyer's intention.

Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior;

they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort

hey are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior. As a general rule, the

stronger the intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely should be its performance (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181).

Thus, the theory of planned behavior is useful in that it may predict a consumer's ultimate action based on that consumer's level of control and planned intention.

Theories of Sustainable Consumption

The work of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) helps form the foundation for interdisciplinary theories of sustainable consumption, most of which were developed early in this century. The idea of consumer control figures prominently in the notion of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), which holds that " consumers are more likely to act when they feel that their decisions will make a difference" (Antonetti & Maklan, 2013, p. 117). This sense of having an impact is a prime motivator in a buyer's action to, for instance, purchase an energy saving appliance over a non-conserving alternative. Beyond that, scholars such as Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson (2006) found that people will reduce their personal consumption—make fewer purchases—if they believe that their sacrifice will have a desired effect.

Consumer Neuroscience Theories

Another recent set of theories examines consumption through the lens of human neuroscience. Today's technology and medical breakthroughs allow scholars to measure and interpret the biological processes of the brain and body to understand far more directly what people are thinking when they make consumption choices. This has given rise to a new discipline called consumer neuroscience, the application of which has been called neuromarketing by author Martin Lindstrom (2008). Fortunately, a related discipline has also come to the fore: neuroethics, which looks at the ethical implications of this field and develops various types of consumer protections.

Advocates of consumer neuroscience point out that it has value in providing objective information—in the form of brain wave patterns, PET scans, and similar biometrics—about a consumer's motivations and planned intentions. This is as opposed to the subjective reporting of the consumers themselves, who may misrepresent, intentionally or not, their thinking during the buying experience (Kenning & Linzmajer, 2010).

Another claim is that, " these new insights may help [develop] a better understanding of customer needs and better solutions formore effective product labeling" (Kenning & Linzmajer, 2010, p. 112). It is entirely plausible that less consumer friendly motives are the primary drivers of this research, but in any case the point of including these ideas here is that they are less theoretical than actual, if biometrics are to be believed. If that is the case, then imagine the fascination for a consumer who believes he practices sustainable consumption because of a commitment to the planet, only to

learn from brain images that the real reason is to simply to justify a belief in his own moral superiority. This, too, seems entirely plausible.

The Story of Two Purchases

Coffee Pods

The Keurig single-cup brewer delivers a flavorful cup of coffee in a neat and timely manner. It's easy to clean and allows the user to avoid making an entire pot of coffee when just one cup is needed. It's also great when there are several people, each of whom wants a different flavor or type of beverage; each person can choose from a variety of single-cup beverage preparations. This combination of convenience and taste made the Keurig brewer my number one choice in coffee machines for over three years. There was just one problem, and the irony is that it's the flip side of Keurig's big advantage: the single-serve coffee pods are made of non-recycled plastic. These pods can be purchased pre-filled with a variety of different coffee brands. Once the pod is used to brew a cup of coffee, it goes into the trash. The majority of pods are small, solid cups made of plastic, but a few brands are made of mesh, similar to that of a tea bag, which is suspended from a thin, plastic frame. Alternately, a consumer can purchase a reusable pod from Keurig, also made of plastic, which is hand filled with one's coffee of choice, washed and then reused.

Because I try to make purchases that are environmentally conscious, I first used only the reusable pod in my Keurig. The trouble was, filling it was messy and time-consuming and cleaning it after use was a hassle. After a while I started buying the pre-filled, plastic cups. However, I then had a

different problem: my conscience bothered me every time I added one of those single-use, plastic pods to the waste stream. Also, the pre-filled pods were expensive—almost £8 for a package of 12.

The price was not the issue, however. It was that using plastic pods felt inconsistent with who I was—with the kind of person I felt myself to be. It was just irresponsible and lazy to use those cups when I had a more sustainable alternative. Yet I kept on buying them.

I tried switching to plastic/mesh pods, reasoning that they were less egregious, but I just didn't like the coffee they contained. I went online and researched alternatives, finding some non-Keurig, reusable pods that looked like they would be easier to clean. They were, but they also didn't fit the machine properly and often leaked, creating a different type of mess. The pursuit of an acceptable pod was taking far more time than seemed appropriate for a small purchase, but my emotional involvement was high at this point, not just because I wanted to consume sustainably, but because of the escalating commitment that was endemic to this particular situation (Houston & Rothschild 1977). I made up my mind that these coffee pods would not be my Waterloo.

In the process of trying all of these options, I read up on Keurig and learned that the company had deliberately designed its machines to accept only Keurig-made reusable pods or pre-filled plastic pods made by its subsidiary coffee company, Green Mountain. That was why the non-Keurig reusable pods I bought often leaked. I was infuriated and immediately gave up my search for a sustainable Keurig pod.

Consistent with Bearden & Etzel's (1982) reference group observations, I

used other consumers' product reviews on amazon to gather information on other brands of single-cup coffee makers. I then bought a nice, reasonably priced machine made by Quest Benross, along with a bunch of mesh, fully recyclable pre-filled pods that fit my new machine perfectly, even though they were made by some off-brand company. And these conscience-soothing pods cost far less than any of the plastic pod brands— £7. 95 for 36 of them. Granted, I had to spend an extra £22 for a new coffee maker, but it was worth it to be done with the search for sustainable pods, plus I had the pleasure of boycotting Keurig in retaliation for being unfriendly to consumers and to the planet. I was an empowered consumer, and it felt great (Shaw, et. al., 2006).

New Laptop

I had to buy a new laptop and I didn't have a lot of money, so I decided to be very methodical in identifying the best laptop to buy. I have an enduring involvement (Houston & Rothschild 1977) with laptop computers and their accessories, as I've had my own laptop since I was in grade school. I love being connected to the world through the internet and become truly uneasy when I'm without an internet connection for more than a few hours. I love texting friends and family, checking out pop culture events and people, playing games, doing research, and following news stories that are important to me. I needed to replace my dead MacBook quickly because school was starting soon and, as noted, I didn't want to be disconnected any longer than necessary.

I made a list of my criteria for a suitable laptop. At a minimum, it had to be

fast so I could stream media, lightweight so I could carry it around in a backpack, have very good display quality for watching videos, wireless capability, decent battery life, and a good suite of apps. Ideally, I wanted a MacBook Air, but a new one was about £750 and that was way out of my price range.

I did a lot of research online and saw a few laptops that looked promising. But, honestly, after having a MacBook, I was reluctant to start using a different operating system, especially Windows, which most of my friends, and me too, laughed about. We felt it was a run-of-the-mill operating system at best, made for use by average people who didn't know any better. It's full of glitches and highly vulnerable to malware. I really didn't want to be seen toting around a Windows laptop. I told myself I was being a snob; also that I would be foolish to pay money I didn't have for a laptop just because it had the Apple logo on top. But still, there is a coolness factor to Mac that you just don't get with another brand.

One option that seemed like it might be OK was a Chromebook. There were a lot of models made by quite a few different companies. These machines use Google's Chrome browser and Google Apps to access web-based applications. They don't have an internal optical drive to weigh them down, which is a plus, but it's also a minus because you can't upload any content that is stored on a disk. They do have a USB port, however, so I knew I could use a memory stick for uploading external content. It's a trade off for getting a laptop that's very light and thin, for a really good price. Some of them cost as little as £289. Many Chromebooks run Celeron processors and that bothered me because I worried one wouldn't be fast enough, but I found an

HP model that got good reviews from other buyers. One person who was credible said it was faster than any laptop he'd ever had.

My behavioral intention (BI) was to cooly assess the various models against my list of criteria and then buy the laptop that met most of my requirements (Ajzen, 1991). When it came time to push the " one click" button on amazon, however, I froze. The whole time I had been researching the various models, there was a low-level unease growing in my chest, almost a panic. Perhaps that seems like an overstatement, yet I am certain that I could feel the resistance to the purchase in my physical body (Kenning & Linzmajer, 2010). I didn't become aware of it until my conscious mind told me to go ahead and buy an HP. The problem originated, I now understand, in my " salient normative belief" that Mac is better—the best. I have an emotional attachment to the brand (Lindstrom, 2008).

Using a Mac says something about who I am. It has a creative, arty connotation that a workaday Windows laptop can't even approach. The cool kids use Macs, and I think of myself as a cool kid (Grossman, 2003). Or at least I did. But having hesitated at buying a laptop that was likely to deliver the most utility for my money, I also felt silly. It wasn't rational to buy an expensive laptop that really was more computer than I needed.

I think I was also reacting to some negative comments from other consumers in the reviews of Dell, Acer and some of the other laptop brands. You can tell by reading the reviews who the informed people are, and most of them reinforced my gut belief that Mac is better. They were functioning as my reference group (Shukla, 2009; Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015).

In the end, I did buy a laptop that I could afford, and it's a Chromebook, so I

don't have to think of myself as a Windows user. I like it just fine. Before I
bought it, though, I spent quite a bit of time trying to track down a good,
refurbished MacBook online. Even when I found some, they were still out of
my price range. The search for an acceptable laptop was exhaustive, yet I
know I got a good deal, and that makes me feel satisfied with my purchase.
But I'd still rather have a Mac.

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