



Craft consumption and consumer transformation in a transmodern era



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how craft consumption illuminates consumer self-transformation. Craft consumption refers to activities in which consumers personalize their products by designing and making what they consume themselves (Campbell, 2005). Our work is positioned at the nexus of transmodernity. Transmodern is defined as “a way of thinking that combines intuition and spirituality with rational brainwork” (Luyckx, 1999, p. 971). This study contributes to extant research by highlighting the interplay of rational and spiritual dimensions of craft consumption that leads to consumer transformation. The investigation uses a grounded theory method for conducting qualitative research. This empirical research was conducted through observations and phenomenological interviews with 10 craft consumers belonging to the Pilsen Mexican community in Chicago, USA. The study has implications for contemporary consumer research on consumer co-production.

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1. Introduction

Digital media and multi-channel sales. Everybody is selling and pitching ideas to you and there is so many different means now. Pinterest is a user generated body of examples of everything and gives me pages and pages of color theory and here I am trying to come up with a creative idea but that is somebody else's idea. This is an interesting way that people are being reached through their own desire to create. You are doing an aggregation of these images from other people's aggregation. So I go on Google and log in to my Pinterest account and start collecting images from color theory. When I make my own designs, I do not and should not do this if I want it to represent who I really am. (Participant quotation)

Consumers consume goods as a form of self-expression and self-transformation (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Christensen, Olesen, & Kjær, 2005). The participant quotation above highlights how consumer engagement through self-expression in recent times has become staged, routinized, scripted, or rote, driving a need for consumer self-transformation through craft consumption. Craft consumption refers to activities in which consumers personalize their products by designing and making what they consume themselves (Campbell, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008). As the quotation reveals, craft consumption distills meaning into and invigorates self-expression and eventually leads to consumer self-transformation. Craft consumption therefore presents fresh lessons to be learned about consumer self-expression and transformation.

Despite widespread interest by scholars in consumer self-expression and transformation occasioned by immersion in the innovation processes of firms, there have been limited studies on consumer transformation through craft consumption. The main goal of this study is to investigate how craft consumption illuminates consumer self-expression and consumer self-transformation. This study focuses mainly on traditional craft consumers. Traditional craft consumers are consumers who base their craft on traditional skills and practices and make unique objects that express their creativity (Klamer, 2012).

Our study differs from existing studies on consumer self-expression and self-transformation in two main ways. First, where prior research on consumer self-expression focuses on consumer self-construction together with fulfillment and transformation (e.g., Belk, 1988), the present study proposes a framework that captures all these aspects of consumer engagement as well as transmodern perspectives, which are associated with spirituality. Transmodern is defined as “a way of thinking that combines intuition and spirituality with rational brainwork” (Luyckx, 1999, 971). Second, where prior studies focus on consumer self-expression, and consumer transformation as separate domains, our work examines the interplay of consumer self-expression and self-transformation through craft consumption.

The investigation uses a grounded theory method for conducting qualitative research. This empirical research was conducted through observations and phenomenological interviews with 10 craft consumers belonging to the Pilsen Mexican community in Chicago, USA. The manuscript is organized as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of consumer self-expression and engagement with artworks and an assessment of the research need and introduces the concept of transmodernity as a useful starting point of discussion for the interplay of consumer self-expression and self-transformation. The final section

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concludes with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of our work and of promising future research directions.

2. Theoretical foundations

This study takes research on consumer transformation to the next level with the consideration of craft consumption as avenues for consumer transformation in a transmodern era. The theoretical foundations are based on studies of craft consumption and arts and crafts as self-expression and transformation. Additionally, this discussion provides transmodern perspectives in craft consumption and delineates theoretical gaps in the literature.

2.1. Craft consumption

Crafts represent a traditional (or homely) form of consumer goods, which provides consumers great appeal by reconnecting them with more traditional and rustic forms than designs in a staged and technological world (Scrase, 2005). Harrod (1995) defines craft as “made and designed by the same person,” indicating that the craft consumer exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the product in question. According to Campbell (2005, p. 23, 31), craft consumption entails the application of “skill, knowledge, judgment and passion” and results in the production of something “made and designed by the same person.”

Campbell (2005) singles out cooking, creating outfits and entire wardrobes of clothing, and DIY and restricts the definition of craft consumption to instances in which demand is created by consumers involved in the skillful process of fashioning recognizable assemblages that are more than the sum of their parts. Additionally, craft consumption is quite distinct from craftsmanship, which involves the skilled craftsman working with the hands to create something useful with skills that require training and continuous practice. Activities organized as craft can become art when members of established art worlds take control of their media, techniques, and organizations; through increased subordination of traditional art concerns to demands that arise outside an art world, activities established as art can become craft (Becker, 1978).

A movement of arts and crafts began in the nineteenth century in Britain inspired by the romantic critique of industrial society or anti-modernism. The central notion was that creativity can be a part of the lives of ordinary people. Three main ideas enlivened this arts and crafts movement (Crawford, 1997). The first of these ideas was “the Unity of Art,” which opposed the hierarchy in which the arts were arranged with painting, fine arts and sculpture at the top, architecture in the middle, and the decorative arts at the bottom. The second idea was “Joy in labor,” where the ordinary experience of work was considered to have the potential to become a source of pleasure through the play of imagination. The third idea was “design reform,” a movement to develop the design of objects consumed by the public. Crawford (1997) further reveals that during this époque craft had three qualities. The first was that design of the object reflects its nature and purpose and does not embellish it excessively or make it appear as something else; these crafts designers positioned their work in terms *honesty*, *simplicity*, and the *nature of materials*. The second quality highlighted the simple and splendid aspects of arts and craft. The third quality was the association of craft with nature and the past making it both stylized and realistic. This arts and craft movement was a move away from modernity.

Other theories highlighting anti-modernism in craft are those of postmodernism (e.g., Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995). Postmodern considerations highlight consumers' disillusionment with the inability of the modern project to deliver its promises and the increasing willingness to experience differences (e.g., Firat et al., 1995). Firat et al. (1995) expose that in postmodernity, there is the emergence of the “customizing” consumer who takes elements of market offerings and

crafts a customized consumption experience out of these. Beyond post-modernism, transmodernity focuses on spiritual as well as cultural and moral enrichment and cooperation as a source of efficiency (Cojocaru & Sandu, 2011). Such perspectives highlight craft as transformation as exposed in our study. This research exposes this aspect of spirituality inherent in transmodern considerations that are especially found in recent culturally adaptive communities such as Latino communities; such communities embrace transmodern perspectives from a cultural standpoint as a form of liberation (Dussel, 2012).

2.2. Arts and crafts as transformation and self-expression

The arts and craft movement arising in recent times perceives arts and craft as transformation. Art as transformation focuses on a multi-dimensional process of engagement by the consumer, applying cognition, emotion, and body as well as the spiritual (London, 1992). Art as transformation has been said to occur when artworks serve as a source of insight, belief, reason, and even spiritual inspiration, so that consumers gain insight into those aspects of their own and others' lives (Anderson, 2003). Gilmore and Pine (2009) indicate that consumers' transformation revolves around meaning and that in creating a transformational experience based on meaning consumers will not just be satisfied by a staged experience but require the experience itself to be (or feel) authentic by conforming to self-image. Art as transformation also places the consumer in a state, which enhances the quality of their lives.

Art as transformation focuses on a multi-dimensional process of engagement by the consumer, applying cognition, emotion, and body as well as the spiritual (London, 1992). Art as transformation results when artworks serve as a source of insight, belief, reason, and even spiritual inspiration so that consumers gain insight into those aspects of their own and others' lives (Anderson, 2003). Schneiders (1986, p. 684) defines spirituality as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” London (1989) reiterates that art not only portrays beauty but also has the power to transform and enhance the quality of consumers' lives. London, 1989, p. 159, indicates, “The object, which is back of every true work of art, is the attainment of a state of being, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence.” Art as transformation thus synchronizes with the notion of “flow” as exposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1991) and Merleau-Ponty (1993). This concept of flow is distinguished from everyday creativity and experienced by artists during their productive work. During the experience of flow, awareness is merged and distractions are excluded from consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Merleau-Ponty (1993, p.51) refers to this moment in which time stops as “transversal ecstasis.”

Extant literature reveals that the journey to self-transformation through craft consumption begins with consumer self-expression. Art as self-expression represents a dynamic pattern of consumer feeling and thinking that best finds its expression in an embodied manner as consumers engage with artworks (Joy & Sherry, 2003). Featherstone (1991) further reveals that such a consumer is a self-conscious manipulator of the symbolic meanings that are attached to products. Demand for experiences requires that the consumer customize the product (Etgar, 2008). Consumers may decide to involve themselves in production activities to satisfy their need for self-expression and uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001), for exercising and applying their personal inherent capabilities not applied in their daily routines, and to realize hidden fantasies (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Such consumer co-production may provide consumers with opportunities to search for values such as excellence, where such an experience is appreciated for its capacity to enable consumers to perform well (Holbrook, 2006). Additionally, such co-production provides the consumer with autonomy defined as “a situation that fosters choices and a sense of freedom” (Knee & Zuckerman, 1998).

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