The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective

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Most empirical work on product symbolism has paid relatively little attention to how products are used by consumers in everyday social life. This paper argues that the subjective experience imparted by the consumption of many products substantially contributes to the consumer's structuring of social reality, self-concept, and behavior. Moreover, the consumer often relies upon the social meanings inherent in products as a guide to the performance of social roles, especially when role demands are novel. While marketing theory traditionally views products as post hoc responses to underlying needs, the focus here is on conditions under which products serve as a priori stimuli to behavior. By integrating concepts adapted from symbolic interactionism, this approach stresses the importance of product symbolism as a mediator of self-definition and role performance.

The notion that many products possess symbolic features and that consumption of goods may depend more on their social meaning than their functional utility is a significant one for consumer research (Levy 1959, 1964, 1980; Zaltman and Wallendorf 1979). Research streams involving self-image and product-image congruence (Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Gardner and Levy 1955; Grubb and Hupp 1968; Landon 1974), store image (Dornoff and Tatham 1972; Mason and Mayer 1970), the role of products in impression formation and communication (Belk 1978; Holman 1981a, 1981b; Rosenfeld and Plax 1977), and symbolic consumption (Bagozzi 1975; Hirschman 1981; Hirschman and Holbrook 1981; Levy, Czepiel, and Rook 1980) share the basic premise that the symbolic qualities of products are often determinants of product evaluation and adoption.

Although the field has long acknowledged the importance of intangible attributes (e.g., Gardner and Levy 1955), some barriers have impeded the development of theory to assess relationships between product symbolism and consumer behavior. As some researchers have noted, research on symbolic consumption phenomena is often flawed by the inconsistent nature of relevant concepts and by the descriptive nature of results (cf. Hirschman 1981; Holman 1980).

One barrier concerns the basic emphasis in consumer research on the dynamics of the purchase decision. The dominant information-processing model (Bettman 1979), while valuable in explaining and predicting many such decisions, tends to deter researchers from consideration of what consumers do with products once they have bought them. Consumption does not occur in a vacuum; products are integral threads in the fabric of social life.

Although some early theorists distinguished between the processes of buying and consuming (Alderson 1957; Boyd and Levy 1963), the proposition that consumer behavior should not be equated with buyer behavior has only recently begun to receive attention in the literature. One emerging research stream, termed the “experiential view,” emphasizes that many consumption experiences lie beyond the realm of purchase decisions: “fantasies, feelings, and fun” are also vital consumption phenomena (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Thus the “experiences” imparted by products also deserve the attention of consumer researchers. These authors, then, stress the view of mankind as homo ludens, and consider the hedonic role of products for people at play.

The departure point for the present paper involves a different (though by no means mutually exclusive) view of mankind—namely, that of homo faber, man as the maker and user of objects. This perspective focuses on consumers’ relationships with the objects they produce and purchase, and suggests that a significant portion of consumption behavior is actually social behavior—and vice versa. Much of the subjective experience imparted by the consumption of symbolic products can best be understood by placing this process within the larger context of social reality. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton recently observed (1981, p. 1):

Social scientists tend to look for the understanding of human life in the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people; rarely do they consider the role of material objects.

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This paper proposes that additional theory is needed to explain how consumers use intangible product attributes in the course of everyday life.

One asset of this perspective is that it focuses attention on how products are actually used by individuals; with a few exceptions (e.g., Levy 1981; Rook and Levy 1983; Wallendorf 1979), research has not really considered how products are incorporated into interpersonal relationships or into the individual’s social ecology (Hirschman 1980). While the emerging “experiential view” provides a much-needed focus on the hedonic consumption of such symbolic products as entertainment and art (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy and Czepiel 1975), the present emphasis is on the importance of products in “setting the stage” for the multitude of social roles people must play (lover, gourmand, executive, athlete, and so on). It is argued that consumers employ product symbolism to define social reality and to ensure that behaviors appropriate to that reality will ensue. Thus it is proposed that product symbolism is often consumed by the social actor for the purpose of defining and clarifying behavior patterns associated with social roles. The consumer often relies upon the social information inherent in products to shape self-image and to maximize the quality of role performance.

Relationships between material cues and social behavior are approached by melding symbolic interactionism theory from sociology with the empirical work of consumer researchers. It is believed that such an approach will allow assets of each perspective to compensate for deficits in the other. Symbolic interactionism has evolved primarily at an abstract level, with relatively little emphasis on empirical validation of its propositions (cf. Merton 1957; Quarantelli and Cooper 1966). In contrast, much work in product use and communication has emphasized data collection at the expense of theory. In regarding the symbolic meaning embodied in products as one type of social stimulus, the current paper fuses the domain studied by consumer researchers with that studied by psychologists and sociologists.

THE SELF AS SOCIAL OBJECT: AN OVERVIEW OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The body of thought now known as symbolic interactionism originated in the early writings of American social psychologists and sociologists. Chief among these were William James, James Mark Baldwin, Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, Robert E. Park, and George Herbert Mead. Similar approaches were developed independently in Germany by George Simmel and by Max Weber, the latter’s version being known as “action theory.” Some versions of symbolic interactionism are known as “role theory,” while others simply refer to this work as the “Chicaco tradition,” reflecting the dominance of the University of Chicago faculty in the theory’s dissemination (e.g., Mead 1934).

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world. It assumes that people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them. The elicited response is a function of the meaning attached to such actions (Blumer 1962), which is, in turn, mediated largely by symbols. Thus a person’s relation to physical (objective) reality is mediated by the symbolic environment. A symbol may be regarded as a stimulus with a learned meaning and value; the person’s response to the stimulus is in terms of this meaning and is generally not isomorphic with its effect upon the person’s physical sense organs (Rose 1962). 3

Overall, symbolic interactionism asserts at least three fundamental postulates (Kinch 1967):

1. A consumer’s self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others.
2. A consumer’s self-concept functions to direct behavior.
3. A consumer’s perception of the responses of others to some degree reflects those responses.

The first two postulates have been empirically supported, while the evidence for the third is mixed (Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979).

The Social Self

Although there are some variations in perspective, the consensus of modern symbolic interactionism centers on the social nature of the self and its importance for the individual’s interaction patterns (Blumer 1969, p. 12). 4

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1The usefulness of this approach has been recognized by a small number of marketing researchers, who have incorporated some components of the theory in their work (cf. Holman 1980; Munson and Spivey 1980; Schenk and Holman 1980; Turner 1980). While this work has focused on relatively static components of the theory (e.g., situational self-image), the present emphasis is on the dynamic process of the consumer–product symbol interaction; how the consumer uses the product to orient his/her behavior. For example, Holman (1981a) discusses research on the interactional perspective, which concerns the reactions the consumer anticipates from others who might observe him/her using the product (Haire 1950; Woodside, Bearden, and Ronkainen 1977; Holbrook and Hughes 1978).

2For a more complete discussion of the development of interactionist thought, see Laver and Handel (1979), Kinch (1967), McCall and Simmons (1978), Mead (1934), Sarbin and Allen (1968), and especially Rose (1962).

3This definition is consistent with consumer researchers’ understanding of products that serve as symbols and hence are assigned meaning which extends beyond their tangible presence (Bagozzi 1975, 1979; Hirschman 1980; Koehler 1972). One possible discrepancy may be found in the relative weight assigned to tangible and intangible attributes of “things;” there are many instances in consumer behavior where tangible attributes are in fact prepotent. To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

In all instances he is an object to himself; and he acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself.

William James. Architects of symbolic interactionism have always emphasized the social nature of the self. William James (1890), for example, partitioned the self into at least four constituents when he offered separate analyses of the Material Self, the Social Self, the Spiritual Self, and Pure Ego. James believed that each of us has as many selves as we do social roles.

George Herbert Mead. Mead’s (1934) analysis took the construct of self a step further. He proposed that the individual defines (assigns meaning to) the self in the same way that meaning is assigned to other objects or people. According to Mead, the individual’s definition of the self as a role player in a specific relationship is termed a “me.” Thus we have a separate “me” for each of our roles. It seems plausible to assume that all “me’s” are not equally articulated, learned, or complex, and that some are more salient than others for self-definition. The individual’s set of “me’s” combines to form a total self-conception, which Mead termed “I.”

Charles Horton Cooley. Another concept central to the current analysis is the metaphor of “the looking glass self.” For Cooley, the self is the result of the individual’s imaginative processes during interaction with others. The self is a reflected self composed of three elements—namely, “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley 1902, p. 152).

The Role-Playing Self

The consensus of meaning. Symbols acquire their meaning through the socialization process that begins in childhood. For this reason, individuals with a common history of enculturation should exhibit considerable overlap in their interpretation of symbolic meanings. In other words, the ascribed meanings of many symbols possess a high degree of consensual validation. Cultural symbols are vital to the interpretation of social reality; they allow the role player to assign meaning to the world. The shared meaning inherent in a common symbol system allows an individual to assume that his or her interpretation of reality is reasonably consistent with the interpretations of others.

Cultural symbols, which are learned through interaction and then come to mediate it, do not exist in isolation, but are often related to other symbols; sets of symbols are grouped together as guides to behavior. A role is a set of related meanings that directs the individual’s behavior in a social setting (Rose 1962). Since a person can play many disparate roles as a function of the cues inherent in a given setting (e.g., professor, father, pedestrian), behavior is made up largely of role playing. It is proposed that role behavior is facilitated or inhibited by the presence or absence of the material symbols (product cues) that have been culturally associated with a particular role.

Taking the role of the other. Given the overlap of shared meaning, individuals who learn a culture should be able to predict the behavior of others in that culture. Perhaps more importantly, they should structure their own behavior in accordance with others’ predicted behavior. According to symbolic interactionism, this predictive process is accomplished by a property unique to humans—the capacity of role-taking, or empathy. By “taking the role of the other,” the individual is able to estimate the effect of symbol configurations upon the recipient of the communication. Besides taking the role of a specific other, one can take the role of a “generalized other” by imagining the responses to one’s behavior of some social aggregate, such as an aspirational reference group or one’s family. The outcome of this projective process substantially contributes to the consumer’s self-evaluation.

Seeing yourself as others see you. The major emphasis of symbolic interaction theory is thus on the social nature of self-definition. The self is defined largely through interaction—one’s attitude toward oneself is basically determined by the same processes that impel one to assign meaning to other social objects. A corollary to this supposition is that one’s self-image is in part determined—via role-taking—by estimates of how others are evaluating oneself. The degree to which one is committed to a social identity determines the power of that identity to influence behavior. Identities that are central to the self have a greater probability of being invoked as guides to appropriate behavior (Stryker 1968). The integration of the estimated appraisals of oneself by others is termed reflexive evaluation and is central to the present analysis.

PRODUCTS AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Figure A summarizes the divergence between the traditional perspective of products as responses and the proposition that products can serve as stimuli or causes of behavior as well.

Products as Responses

Marketing theory is predicated on the central role of products in the exchange process (Kotler 1976). However,
marketing theorists often seem to overlook the importance of products to human behavior, in that they tend to view products as responses to rather than as causes of behavior. Issues tend to center more upon the processes that affect the ultimate purchase decision and less upon the processes by which the consumer actually uses what he or she has bought. A product is viewed as the material satisfaction of a need (McCarthy 1981). As such, it is really a manifestation of an “inner” search process. The focus is on the effect of economic, psychological, and sociological variables on product choice, rather than on the effects of products on the consumer’s experience. A better understanding of the latter would yield several benefits, ranging from the theoretical to the pragmatic:

1. Transactions comprise a large portion of human activity, and social scientists should incorporate such activities if they wish to paint a complete picture of social life.

2. A view of products as causes of behavior may be helpful in studying the societal and interpersonal changes wrought by innovations in object usage (e.g., television, the automobile).

3. It may be possible to predict symbolic effects and to elicit desirable behavioral outcomes through product/environment intervention (e.g., psychotherapies or management strategies that endorse a restructuring of the environment to induce behavioral changes).

4. Promotional strategies that emphasize the value of products in optimizing the performance of social roles could be developed and refined (e.g., the “dress for success” phenomenon).

Product–social behavior relationships receive even less attention in the “basic” social sciences. With the possible exception of anthropology, these fields emphasize abstract constructs as determinants of behavior (e.g., attitude, class structure). The material products of civilization and/or their intangible attributes tend to be mentioned only in passing, as measurable reflections of underlying variables. For example, despite widespread acknowledgement of the potency of appearance for person perception (cf. Berscheid and Walster 1969), virtually all work has focused upon facial or postural characteristics and has ignored the myriad products that are vital mediators of perceived attractiveness (Solomon and Schopler 1982). The lack of attention to products—save for their occasional convenient use as dependent measures—is typical of much of mainstream psychology and sociology.

In short, most research involving products assumes that they are employed by consumers in a strategic, deliberate sense, either for the purpose of need satisfaction (as in marketing), or for impression management (as in social psychology). In both cases, consumption is a response to a need or to a strategic goal. There is no doubt that products play an important role in the satisfaction of needs and in communication to others in an a posteriori sense, but this is not the whole story. Products also can play an a priori role as stimuli that are antecedent to behavior.

**Products as Stimuli**

The assertion that the products which an individual uses can be a potent information source from which to draw inferences about that individual has been well documented (e.g., Belk 1978, 1980; Holman 1981a, 1981b; Rosenfeld and Plax 1977). In particular, product cues provide information about an individual’s occupation of social roles (vocational, political, religious, and so on); these roles are frequently signified by the unique and discriminable nexus of products that accompanies them.

The centrality of symbolism to the interpretation of social reality and the nature of symbol systems, as shared by members of a common culture, lead to a proposition that extends the symbolic interaction process into the product realm:

**P1:** Cultural symbols acquire meaning only when placed in the context of contemporary culture. The material goods produced by a culture have symbolic properties with meanings that are shared within that culture.

If in fact the possession and display of such products as clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, automobiles, and furniture are taken to be indicators of the underlying characteristics of others and are used to infer or predict their behavior, it seems reasonable to consider the role of these same products for self-attribution. This possibility parallels the fundamental logic of self-perception theory (Bem 1972), which holds that actors rely upon the same cues in making attributions for their own behavior as they do for explaining the behavior of others.

The notion that products can serve as causes as well as consequences of behavior can be restated as follows:

**P2:** Under some conditions, the learned cues inherent

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7These products are consumed largely for the symbolism they contain. Although symbolic interactionists and consumer researchers tend loosely to regard a symbol as something that stands for something else, linguists and semioticians are more specific in their definitions (cf. Peirce 1931–1935). In these literatures, a sign is any bit of information that has a conscious referent; something with enough internal coherence to evoke a consistent image. A symbol is but one kind of sign. Its relation to an object is not based upon some physical or qualitative resemblance, but rather on conventional understanding.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note that, relative to other signs (e.g., emotions or ideas), objects tend to evoke consistent responses over time and hence are more permanent. Also, they observe that products have an especially strong relation to human consciousness, in that they are doubly dependent upon the investment of meaning—at both the encoding/creation and decoding/consumption stages—for their existence. Yet not all products are symbols; some possess personalized sign properties that do not rely upon consensus for meaning (e.g., a “lucky bottle cap” or the tune to a memory-laden song). The present discussion is concerned primarily with those objects that are truly symbols. Although this restriction does force the exclusion of some products, a substantial portion of products do have socially significant meanings. This is especially true when one considers that products are connected to social roles: by definition, products that provide information regarding one’s place in the social system (status, wealth) rely upon consensus to communicate this value.
FIGURE A
PROPOSED BI-DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCTS AND CONSUMERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products as responses:</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>self-image</td>
<td>need arousal</td>
<td>need satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>product purchase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>impression management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products as stimuli:</th>
<th>role definition</th>
<th>self-attribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>product symbolism</td>
<td>situational self-image</td>
<td>role performance</td>
</tr>
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</table>

in product symbolism drive behavior, either by facilitating or by inhibiting role performance.

This proposition is a departure from the usual assumption that the individual’s mood, self-presentational demands, or behavior determine product choice—i.e., that the consumer chooses a constellation of material symbols that are consistent with extant attitudes, moods, or behavior. Usually, the product is viewed as the post hoc satisfaction of a need (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). According to the present perspective, however, the direction of the causal link between the consumer and the product is sometimes reversed. While consumers often display products for impression management, products may also be used for self-definition.

Appearance and Discourse

A fuller consideration of the role of products as socially significant symbols and guides to behavior may help to compensate for a bias in symbolic interactionism, which is heavily weighted toward analysis of the semantic content of interactions at the expense of nonverbal activity. One theorist, Stone (1962), has maintained that every social transaction must be broken down into at least two components—appearance and discourse (i.e., the “text” of the interaction). Appearance is as important for the establishment and maintenance of self as is discourse; it contributes to meaning via identification and validation of the participants. In a sense, then, appearance is more basic to an interaction: it sets the stage for and delimits the possibilities of discourse by defining the parameters of meaningful discussion.

Stone points out that the dimensions of self emphasized by Mead, Cooley, and others are present in such material objects as clothing. The wearer is cast as a social object and arouses others’ anticipation of behavior: “as the self is dressed, it is simultaneously addressed” (Stone 1962, p. 102). Clothing and other appearance-related products may even be viewed as establishing a more potent link between “me” and role-appropriate attitudes or actions than does verbal interaction, which can be more easily modulated. As Thorstein Veblen wrote, “We may escape our discursive obligations, but not our clothed appearances” (1899, p. 167).

PRODUCT SYMBOLISM
AND REFLEXIVE EVALUATION

The individual’s self-concept is largely a result of others’ appraisals, both imagined and actual. It is essentially a projection of how one appears to others—seeing oneself as others do. Evaluations of the person’s roles are dependent upon the appropriateness and quality of the symbols which accompany that role, and many of these symbols are man-made—i.e., products that have acquired learned symbolic value.

P3: The actor’s reflexive evaluation of the meaning assigned by others is influenced by the products with which the self is surrounded. This (real or imagined) appraisal by significant others is, in turn, incorporated into self-definition.

To borrow Cooley’s (1902) terminology, the “looking glass self” requires the proper constellation of products to deliver a satisfactory reflection. The actor’s self-confidence and interactions with others are based on the character of this reflection. Reflexive feedback that one “looks the part” elicits the set of learned behaviors corresponding to the appropriate “me,” thus generating a self-fulfilling prophecy as others pattern their behavior vis-à-vis the enacted role. The subsequent reinforcement from others validates one’s claim to occupy that role. As the learning process progresses, the actor becomes less reliant upon external role validation to perform adequately.

8Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), in their discussion contrasting the “experiential view” with traditional information-processing models, note that studies examining communication content generally involve consumer responses to semantic elements. Consistent with the present discussion, they advocate a greater focus on the effects of syntactic (structure and style) aspects of message content.

9In fact, products themselves can serve as significant others, in the sense that their use or display communicates societal expectations. Mead’s (1934) concept of the “role model” has been applied primarily to actual persons, but he originally included inanimate objects in this category as well (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).
Products with ascribed social meaning, then, may be used in a broad sense to facilitate role performance, in that they increase the probability of portraying the behavior patterns appropriate to that role:

P4: The probability of a successful role performance is increased to the degree that the constellation of material symbols surrounding the role player parallels the symbolism associated with that role.

**PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF PRODUCT SYMBOLISM**

Since product symbolism is here regarded as a form of communication regarding role expectations, it is important to consider briefly both where these symbolic meanings originate and the conditions that encourage their consumption.

Aside from a few isolated macro approaches (e.g., Nicosia and Mayer 1976), consumer research to date has been skewed toward the psychological dynamics of symbolism. For example, “motivation research” (Dichter 1964) was based largely upon Freudian notions of symbolic need gratification, which require examination of the unique history of the individual.

More recent approaches have espoused a sociological perspective. Hirschman (1981) points out that to be operative, a symbol requires at least two parties—sender and receiver. Thus she maintains that a minimum of a dyad is required to study symbolic consumption and that in general, a group is the appropriate level of analysis. Hirschman’s perspective on this issue is in agreement with the present discussion. Certainly, symbols are generated and learned at a relatively macro level. Indeed, one of the precepts of symbolic interactionism is that society and its culture precede any individual actor.

This answer, however, may not be complete. On the one hand, it seems clear that most material symbolism is produced at the societal and/or subcultural level. Cultural symbols are generated and disseminated by “specialists” (e.g., designers, copywriters, musicians); as products, they comprise a culture production system (Clignet 1979; Crane 1976), and such systems compete in the marketplace for adoption by consumers (Hirschman and Solomon 1982). On the other hand, it is not equally clear that consumption necessarily occurs at the societal or subcultural levels:

P5: Product symbolism is generated at the societal level but may be consumed at the level of individual experience. Products are consumed both for their social meaning (as symbols) and for their private meaning (as signs).

Although symbolic interaction theory stresses the importance of a specific or generalized other, it is important to note that reflexive evaluations are often the result of imagined or projected appraisal. Thus, the members of the “dyad” who send and receive symbolic communication may in fact be the same person. While some purchase or store patronage decisions are made as a result of direct and overt group pressure, much of the symbolic consumption process may take place within the private experience of the actor. One need only observe someone preening in front of a mirror or hear a child alone in animated conversation with a menagerie of dolls to understand the often solitary nature of symbolic consumption. Indeed, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) note that the hedonic consumption process can be driven by internal as well as by external cues; consumers generate multisensory images within themselves which are equally valid forms of experience (cf. Berlyne 1981; Singer and Antrobus 1972).

The physical presence of significant others is thus sufficient but not necessary for reflexive evaluation. The feedback that gives symbols their meaning may be intrapersonal at some times (examining the appearance of a new suit in a mirror) and interpersonal at others (compliments on the style or fit of the new suit). In either case, symbolic consumption is likely to be a major component of reflexive evaluation, which in turn affects the consumer’s future adoption and use of products.

**PRODUCT–BEHAVIOR RELATIONSHIPS: ROLE PERFORMANCE VERSUS IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT**

The current analysis holds that the causal linkage between products and behavior is potentially bidirectional. On the one hand, a substantial literature attests to the pervasiveness of products as strategic or communication tools (products as responses). On the other hand, products may “set the stage” for role performances; behavior is matched to the particular role by a set of products (products as stimuli). These alternatives are summarized in Figure B. A final issue to be addressed concerns the specification of environmental demands that may trigger one or the other process.

Compensatory Symbolism

It is proposed that products are likely to act as stimuli when a discrepancy exists between the ideal set of behaviors associated with a given role and the individual’s ability to enact those behaviors. This ability is termed role knowledge; its effect can be stated as follows:

P6: The probability that product symbolism will exert an a priori influence on behavior (by being weighted heavily during reflexive evaluation) is inversely proportional to the individual’s degree of extant role knowledge.

Thus, the determinant of a priori reliance upon product cues is conceived of as a compensatory mechanism. If role knowledge is high (i.e., if one has mastered the repertoire of behaviors associated with successful role performance), the need to determine one’s place in the social system is not aroused because the assignment of meaning already exists. Under such conditions, the individual may well use
products to communicate—rather than to establish—his or her social placement.

On the other hand, many situations arise where the appropriate behavioral set is either unknown or known only in an idealized sense—that is, role socialization is complete only at a stereotypic level, rather than through actual experience (rehearsal) of role behaviors. Here the individual is at the stage of anticipatory role acquisition (Zaltman and Wallendorf 1979). When internal cues to behavior are lacking (perhaps one has never played this part) one must rely on situational cues to determine appropriate actions and “get into” the role. Such situational cues are the same ones that observers use to determine the role an individual is playing. The role player who depends on external cues will undergo reflexive evaluation; his/her self-image will be determined largely by a projection of how others see him/her. Since people base many of their impressions on the possessions of the person being evaluated (i.e., products are used to infer social class, occupation, life style, and so on), the result of such reflexive evaluation should be significantly affected by an evaluation of the symbolic significance of one’s own possessions. A simple but pervasive example is adolescent boys’ use of such “macho” products as cars, clothing, and cologne to bolster developing and fragile masculine self-concepts. Another example is the tendency of members of the “lower upper class” (Warner and Lunt 1941)—i.e., the nouveau riche—to demonstrate their status through the overt display of homes, luxury cars, and clothes. In contrast, the “upper upper class,” which consists primarily of “old money,” avoids ostentatious purchases (Assael 1981).

The notion that lack of experience or ability in satisfying role expectations leads to heightened reliance on relevant material symbols is similar to the logic of symbolic self-completion theory. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) propose that the failure to possess one symbolic indicator of an aspired-to self-definition leads to the compensatory display of other indicators.\(^\text{10}\) For example, in a study of self-definition in the business world, Wicklund et al. (1981)...

\(^{10}\)In other respects, the two approaches diverge. Symbolic self-completion is based upon the tension system construct in Lewinian field theory.
hypothesized that male MBA students with a lower chance of career success (as assessed by an index that included factors such as gradepoint average, number of job interviews, and number of job offers) would be more likely to display symbols of belonging to the business community. The researchers indeed found a strong tendency in the predicted direction; the more "incomplete" students were more likely to wear luxury watches and accessories and appropriate shoes, and were less likely to have long hair or facial hair. In general, then, confidence in one's ability to meet role demands may determine the degree to which one must rely upon material symbols to convince others and oneself of this ability.

Scripts

One area of research that may help to clarify the dual functions of products as stimuli and responses is work on "scripts," which Abelson (1976, p. 33) defines as "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or an observer." Disparate research programs in this area possess a common thread — namely, the idea that much social interaction is governed by learned assumptions regarding the course the interaction should take.

Much of this work is in cognitive and social psychology and focuses on the existence of learned scripts; a central task is to isolate the ways in which such scripts are internally represented in memory by "knowledge structures." In fact, some event sequences are so well internalized that overt information processing may not be necessary to guide behavior; these sequences may be viewed as habitual response chains. One researcher has gone so far as to label this type of responding "mindless behavior" (Langer 1978). Like actors in a long-running play, people in familiar situations often interact by rote, with little conscious attention at the time and even less recall of behavior later. A "jolt back to reality" may be caused by close scrutiny, by embarrassment, or perhaps by an encounter with a novel situation.

The behavioral ramifications of scripts that are under-learned have not been so thoroughly considered. Here, the individual possesses a hazy conception of the sequence of events expected during a role performance. A theatrical actor who is unfamiliar with a new part certainly relies heavily upon the prompter; a shopper in an unfamiliar supermarket consults aisle labels more carefully than does a regular customer. By analogy, a person who has yet to internalize a script may rely heavily upon situational cues (and hence on product symbolism) to orient behavior:

P7: Role demands characterized by script uncertainty are accompanied by an increased reliance upon (and hence consumption of) symbolic products as a guide to behavior.

Thus, the a priori effects of product symbolism upon behavior may be robust in situations where the individual has yet to satisfactorily internalize script requirements. A reliance on environmental cues may be amplified by the state of evaluation apprehension that often accompanies the need to enact appropriate behaviors in novel situations. Moreover, the possibility of failure to match behavior to situational requirements may have aversive consequences for the actor (e.g., incompetence, frustration, or embarrassment). While such situations could be identified in a piecemeal fashion, it is more fruitful to specify classes of situations that are likely to be high in uncertainty and evaluation apprehension.

Role Transition

One broad class of situations characterized by under-learned "scripts" may be termed role transition. More specifically, a person moves through stages in life that have different role requirements and so demand new behavioral responses (Hopson and Adams 1976). The function of the socialization process is to educate the actor to behave appropriately in each new situation. Modern society is in a constant state of flux, and its members frequently find themselves in novel role situations where a process of self-definition must be reinitiated (a first date, a job interview, becoming a new parent, or even reentering the dating game in middle age). Not surprisingly, periods of role transition are often accompanied by the need to employ a variety of products; the correct use of these products is a determinant of success in completing the transition: 1

P8: Periods of role transition, which are often accompanied by uncertainty and evaluation apprehension, render the novice role player especially reliant upon the use of relevant product cues to guide role-appropriate behavior.

CONCLUSION

A theory of symbolic consumption must account for the mechanism(s) by which the consumption of products is related to the rest of social behavior. This need echoes that voiced by others for a focus on social stimuli in consumer research (e.g., Schenk and Holman 1980). Given the central role of consumption in everyday social life, the behavioral sciences also need to address the lack of a theory of materialism—i.e., a theory that elucidates the relationship(s) between people and objects (Belk 1982; Csikszentmihalyi 1982).

The thrust of the present argument is that:

1. The symbolism embedded in many products is the primary reason for their purchase and use.
2. Individuals are evaluated and placed in a social nexus to a significant degree by the products which surround them.

1 This transition process is, incidentally, the lifeblood of many manufacturers, retailers, and marketers who supply the products required to play social roles. For example, the formal wear industry dispenses some of the props that facilitate the major role transformations symbolized by proms, weddings, and funerals.
3. The reflexive evaluation construct implies that the product symbolism which is instrumental in assigning meaning to others is also used by individuals to assign social identity to themselves.

4. The outcome of this self-definition process guides behavior via the script that is evoked.

5. Symbolic consumption can exert an a priori effect on role definition and interaction, especially in situations where internalized behavioral responses are lacking.

Non-Human Variables Affect Human Behavior

Products function as social entities which, much like other (human) role models, act as guides to behavior. The process of consumption is thus integrally related to the process of role-playing. This new emphasis seems warranted, especially given the robust impact of a variety of ecological variables on human interaction patterns. Various situational cues have been shown to affect consumer behavior (Belk 1974); the very layout of an office affects the tone of interactions that occur within it (Amira and Abramowitz 1979). If interpersonal relations are affected by factors such as heat (Bell and Baron 1976), crowding (Griffitt and Veitch 1971), and air pollution (Rotton et al. 1978), it seems likely that material goods, which are so central to self-expression and communication, have at least as much—if not more—impact. As one example, debates in such fields as law enforcement (Tenzel, Storms, and Sweetwood 1976) and health care (Brown and Goldstein 1968) over the effects that uniforms versus civilian clothing have on service delivery attest to the potential impact of clothing as a social entity. The feedback that the individual receives from the reflection of others’ estimated appraisals results in a decision as to whom he or she “is” at that point. It is then that the individual can make conscious, minor adjustments to optimize the image quality communicated to others—that is, products can be used to communicate role information after they have been used by their owner to decide what role should be communicated.

Consumers Are People Too

If the focus of symbolic consumption is broadened to consider the a priori impact of material symbolism on behavior, the role of products in general theories of social behavior may be upgraded. In addition, marketers should be made more aware of the significance of products as determinants of behavior. An abundance of products and services—from clothing, automobiles, cosmetics, and furniture to restaurants, office environments, and airlines—are rich in symbolic content. The nature of consumers’ interactions with these symbol systems may determine their attitudes toward them and toward themselves. A further integration of products with social science constructs is a challenge for both social psychologists and consumer behavior researchers. It is hoped that the theoretical input of the former can be blended with the empirical contributions of the latter to balance and extend our knowledge of symbolic consumption. The result may be a blurring of the sometimes artificial distinction between consumer behavior and human behavior.

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