

Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated Moral Conflict

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Consumer researchers have tended to equate consumer moralism with normative condemnations of mainstream consumer culture. Consequently, little research has investigated the multifaceted forms of identity work that consumers can undertake through more diverse ideological forms of consumer moralism. To redress this theoretical gap, we analyze the adversarial consumer narratives through which a brand-mediated moral conflict is enacted. We show that consumers' moralistic identity work is culturally framed by the myth of the moral protagonist and further illuminate how consumers use this mythic structure to transform their ideological beliefs into dramatic narratives of identity. Our resulting theoretical framework explicates identity-value-enhancing relationships among mythic structure, ideological meanings, and marketplace resources that have not been recognized by prior studies of consumer identity work.

Moralism about consumption is a social phenomenon that cries out for more study. We need to know more about who makes moral arguments, how these arguments are deployed, what kinds of effects they have on others. (Wilk 2001, 250)

Moralism about consumption is commonly discussed as a cultural viewpoint epitomized by the writings of Galbraith (1958), Schor (2000), Veblen (1899/1927), and numerous books on "affluenza" (de Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2002;

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John Deighton served as editor and Eric Arnould served as associate editor for this article.

Electronically published September 18, 2009

Hamilton and Denniss 2006; James 2007). In this genre of commentaries and analyses, social theorists portray certain forms of consumption as looming threats to the civic and communal integrity of society, personal well-being, and, most recently, the ecosystem (Hilton 2004). While the specific consumption practices being targeted vary across sociohistoric settings, these moral critiques almost invariably invoke charges of wastefulness, personal irresponsibility, and selfish disregard for the collective good, as well as nostalgic laments that traditional bedrock values have been displaced by the superficial or inauthentic pleasures promoted by the commercial marketplace (Cross 2000). Legions of journalists, political and religious leaders, artists, educators, social activists, and public policy makers have also developed and diffused variations on this moral critique of consumption, making it part and parcel of contemporary culture (see Cohen, Comrov, and Hoffner 2005; Holt 2000; Horowitz 1984, 2004; and Schor 2007). Following Cross (2000), we refer to this cultural viewpoint as the jeremiad against consumerism.

Owing to its cultural prominence, the jeremiad against consumerism is now treated as being nearly synonymous with moralism about consumption. For example, Wilk (2001, 254) concludes that moralism about consumption is a means by which people confront basic "problems of distributive justice, balancing the goals and desires of people, the ownership and control of objects and resources, and the problem that consumption can destroy or deplete common resources." In a similar fashion, Hilton (2004, 118) argues that contemporary