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CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY AND LIFESTYLE SEGMENTATION

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Abstract

This manuscript compares traditional (AKA quantitative), and Consumer Culture Theory (AKA qualitative), approaches to lifestyle segmentation. We find five key differences: (1) While traditional segmentation aims for brevity, CCT adds more detail; (2) Traditional approaches focus on common brand meanings, whereas CCT examines how meanings differ for different consumers; (3) Traditional favors quantitative methods, while CCT favors qualitative research; (4) While traditional group labels tend to remain obscure, like PRISM's "belongers", CCT favors familiar lifestyle groups; (5) Traditional lifestyle segmentation favors the descriptive, whereas CCT emphasizes theory development. Managerial implications are discussed.

Introduction

Lifestyle is the most holistic segmentation approach in that it tries to take into account virtually anything, and every thing, that might help marketers identify and reach desirable target markets (Gonzalez and Bello, 2002). Typically, a traditional lifestyle analysis segments markets using variables from the social sciences (e.g., psychology, social psychology) in combination with (or instead of) the more commonly used demographic descriptors (e.g., age, race, sex). The underlying premise is that people who are similar in terms of such things as attitudes, opinions, motivation, orientation, access to resources, values, and interests are also similar as consumers. As such, lifestyle segments oftentimes are defined in terms of how consumers choose to spend their time and money. Some of the better known commercial lifestyle products available to consumer marketers are VALS2, and the Activities, Interests, and Opinions (AIO) inventory. PRIZM NE and MOSIAC are the most widely discussed of the commercial products that also incorporates geodemographics (e.g., the zip code, international location) to facilitate marketer efforts to reach particular lifestyle segments.

Since the 1980's, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research, also known as qualitative, interpretivist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), has suggested the need for an alternative approach to lifestyle segmentation. Unfortunately, the debate between the traditional and CCT camps oftentimes has been framed in highly abstract terms, leaving some readers a bit perplexed by CCT, particularly with regard to its practical implications. As such, the purpose of this paper is to present a succinct summary of the two approaches and offer some specific suggestions as to when CCT might be more useful in marketing practice. To that end, we identify and discuss five dimensions that capture the fundamental differences in the two viewpoints: (1) parsimony versus detail in analysis, (2) single versus multiple meanings associated with products and brands, (3) quantitative versus qualitative research methods, (4) implicit versus explicit group membership, and (5) a descriptive versus theory-based focus.

We assume that the reader is relatively familiar with traditional lifestyle segmentation and less familiar with CCT approaches. Because our objective is to present a "manager's eye view" of this debate, we focus here on the application of these approaches rather than a discussion of philosophy of science (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Sherry, 1991). We acknowledge from the outset that we spotlight differences rather than similarities in traditional and CCT lifestyle analyses, deal with general tendencies within each approach which will not hold in every

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instance, and necessarily simplify the debate surrounding these issues. Finally, our discussion is specifically limited to CCT and traditional approaches to lifestyle segmentation, and does not apply to experimental psychology or other methods which address other issues.

Key Distinguishing Aspects

Parsimony versus Detail

We begin with a discussion of parsimony versus detail because it is the underlying theme that distinguishes traditional methods from CCT. For our purposes, we define this dimension as the level of detail in the lifestyle analysis.

All segmentation theories/typologies attempt to identify (relatively) homogeneous groups by reducing numerous causes of consumer behavior to those viewed as most significant. In so doing, there is a tradeoff between parsimony (simplicity) and the level of detail. In general, CCT favors greater detail. As Holt wrote from a CCT perspective, he believes that a CCT approach allows for a “more nuanced description of lifestyles” (p. 326); and although traditional “lifestyle analysis captures some underlying commonalities across respondents, the extreme data reduction required to identify commonalities at the level of personality and values requires abstracting away many details of the informants’ tastes that are essential” for understanding lifestyle (p. 332). In contrast, traditional methods opt for parsimony, placing a greater value on ease of use. So, the debate often-times comes down to how best to balance the competing values of nuance and efficiency.

Bourdieu’s (1984) work has been particularly influential on CCT lifestyle research in marketing (e.g. Allen, 2002; Featherstone, 1991; Holt, 1998). VALS is (by far) the traditional lifestyles system most commonly discussed in consumer behavior textbooks. It is not surprising then, that Holt (1997) compared his own CCT theory of lifestyle (derived in part from Bourdieu’s work) to VALS. We follow Holt’s precedent, but employ the updated VALS2, in a direct comparison with Bourdieu’s thinking. Our comparison below shows the much greater emphasis on detail in the CCT approach.

Static versus Dynamic Groups

VALS2 offers a system of eight lifestyle clusters. These clusters are defined by their levels of resources/innovation (high/low) and primary motivation (ideals, achievement, and self-expression). This system is augmented by more detailed descriptions of each cluster based on extensive research, but the underlying structure remains simple and clear. In contrast, Bourdieu feels that such a definitive list of lifestyles simply is not possible because of the dynamic nature of groups, i.e., they tend to rise and fall, spilt off from, and/or merge with other factions over time.

Differences in Values

In describing each market segment, VALS2 often makes reference to the values that are most important to people in that lifestyle group, e.g., “Believers” are said to value traditionalism. VALS2 is consistent with cross cultural psychological theories like Schwartz and Sagiv (1995, v. Schwartz and Bilsky, 1990), that posit 10 types of universal values: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. In this type of values typology, the emphasis is placed on how important a certain value is to an individual or group. For example, some lifestyle segments might primarily value hedonism and stimulation, while placing a low priority on tradition and conformity, and other lifestyle segments would have other priorities. In this way, the differences between lifestyle groups are primarily seen in quantitative terms – how much of a particular value does each person or group hold?

CCT research argues that this is only part of the issue. CCT emphasizes that differences in people are also caused by the fact that they understand values very differently. For example, Holt (1997) criticizes VALS treatment of traditionalism as an oversimplification and suggests that consumers who value traditionalism actually can be broken down into three distinct lifestyle segments – Canonical Aesthetics, Nurturing Mother and Jeffersonian America. These three groups are differentiated

from each other “not by whether they are traditional but by how they conceive of ‘traditional’” (Holt, 1997, p. 332). All three groups might appreciate an early American folk song, and value it as traditional, but their experience would be radically different from each other. Canonical Aesthetics see themselves as traditional because they aspire to the highest levels of intellectual and artistic sophistication in Western culture. The early American folk song might be valued for its historical significance and its place in the development of American music. The Nurturing Mother lifestyle sees itself as traditional because they value the traditional woman’s role as a mother, and they interpret most things in their life in terms of how they effect the children. These women might also value the traditional folk song, but mainly as something that was good and wholesome for their children. Jeffersonian America sees itself as traditional because it idealizes early pastoral America. Members of this lifestyle might see the folksong as a link to a better time, and have a much stronger emotional connection to the folk song than would the Canonical Aesthetics. In this way, CCT’s focus shifts from quantitative differences in values (i.e., how traditional someone is) to more qualitative differences in values (i.e., what “traditional” means to different people).

Definition of Resources

VALS2 subsumes both education and income in its resources dimension. On the other hand, Bourdieu views income and education as different types of resources, labeled economic capital and cultural capital, respectively. He also notes that formal education is only one of several sources of cultural capital and discusses at length the difference between people who grew up in culturally sophisticated homes versus, what he calls ‘autodidacts’, people who taught themselves cultural knowledge. Bourdieu also points out that like cultural capital, economic capital can either be inherited or acquired. Bourdieu’s position is that such distinctions regarding resources are important in lifestyle research because they suggest differential effects on group behavior; however, with these further distinctions, the resulting lifestyle system becomes more complex.

Treatment of Group Histories

While VALS2 is a more recent update of VALS (e.g., the group that used to be called “Actualizers” has been renamed “Innovators”), the specific histories of the lifestyle clusters are not addressed in the system. In contrast, Bourdieu considers the particular history of a lifestyle group as essential to lifestyle segmentation. Bourdieu argues that lifestyle groups that are growing in numbers, wealth and prominence, tend to have more optimistic worldviews and champion new product trends. Whereas, older lifestyle segments whose cultural viewpoints are declining in popularity in the wider culture, tend to cling products and styles that were popular during their cultural ascendancy.

Inter-group Interaction

VALS2 provides a social model in which inter-group interaction, when it occurs at all, is largely about to the emulation of higher status groups by lower status groups. Bourdieu acknowledges this mimicking behavior, but adds that there also exists a complex competition among the groups that involves attempts to get the larger culture to recognize the superiority of particular lifestyles.

In summary, the CCT position is that traditional approaches, such as VALS2, offer only skeletal descriptors of market segments. The process of fleshing out lifestyle segments leads to more complex descriptions of the social systems that give rise to these segments. As such, CCT research tends toward much more detail in the level of analysis. In response, traditionalists may argue that CCT approaches are too complex and often target segments that are too small.

Single versus Polysemic Meanings of Products/Brands

Both traditional and CCT lifestyle analyses are concerned primarily with consumers’ use of products/brands in self-expression and as evidence of group membership. The principal point of disagreement lays in how each faction views this symbolic process as working.

Traditional lifestyle analysis tends to make the simplifying assumption that products/brands have a specific meaning that is close to the same for everyone, e.g., French champagne is a symbol of wealth and sophistication. Thus, consumption of particular products/brands conveys fairly universal meanings across people.

In contrast, CCT approaches recognize that many products/brands have multiple and distinct meanings to consumers (Pateman, 1983; Ahuvia, 1998). To elaborate, CCT views products/brands as texts, in the same way that books, movies, poems, speeches, etc. are texts. Indeed, a good deal of theory underlying CCT comes from the fields of semiotics and literary theory, which originally focused on novels and poetry (Larsen, Mick and Alsted, 1991; Mick, 1986; Umiker-Sebeok, 1992; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992, 1993; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Scott, 1991, 1992, 1994; Sherry, 1987; Stern, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1996). People who read the same book can come away with very different ideas about its meaning. This is called the polysemic nature of texts (“poly” is many and “semic” is meaning); every text has several different possible interpretations. If one thinks of products/brands as a form of texts, then they are polysemic as well, i.e., they mean different things to different people. We employ “French champagne” below to illustrate some different types of meanings consumers may hold for a particular product/brand.

Inter-Group Meanings

CCT recognizes that product meanings tend to be shared within lifestyles, but not necessarily between such groups. For example, some food lovers see food and wine as art, and if are particularly dedicated, they may take a low paying job in the gourmet food industry, sacrificing potential income to pursue enhancing their artistic skills. For these “foodies” or “cork dorks” (Berk, 2005), a good bottle of French champagne means something beyond its mainstream association with material affluence. To this subculture (perhaps more than any other), French champagne symbolizes a dedication to culinary pursuits and an appreciation for the complementary art of winemaking.

Context-Specific Meanings

CCT also acknowledges that product symbolism depends upon the consumption situation and, thus, meanings vary even within a particular lifestyle (Allen, 2002; Thompson, 1996; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Thompson and Troester, 2002; Hirschman, 1990; Holt, 1997, 1998; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Continuing with our French champagne example, the lead up to the Iraq war caused significant tensions between the US and France, with the result that some Americans boycotted French goods. During this time, an American who served French champagne at a political meeting might have done so to symbolize her protest against a war with Iraq (and this meaning would not have been lost on her guests). This political association with French champagne was particularly ephemeral, existing primarily for certain segments of society (the politically active) and only for a particular historical “moment”. This particular association was also more likely in the situation in which the champagne was used (a political meeting). The CCT perspective holds that product symbolism is often very context specific, and the meanings associated with the consumption of particular products/brands can change rapidly.

Presentation and Communication Meanings

CCT notes too that consumer meanings are fashioned by the way a product/brand is displayed and discussed (Holt, 1997). Regarding French champagne, a consumer may intend to convey his wealth and sophistication by serving it at dinner; however, any gauche comments about how expensive it was, will, in fact, reveal him to be *déclassé*.

Marketer-Consumer Negotiated Meanings

CCT looks beyond marketing efforts to how consumers themselves affect the meanings associated with commercial products/brands (Featherstone, 1991; Fiske, 1989). In this regard, CCT often emphasizes that consumers are not simply passive recipients of marketer-created meaning, but rather, active participants in the construction of what the product or brand will mean within their lifestyle group.

Consider a husband with limited income who buys a bottle of French champagne (for its marketed and mainstream meaning) to share with his wife in celebration of their wedding anniversary. While this expenditure itself, symbolizes the husband's great affection for his wife, its use as a symbolic expression is also greatly enhanced by the wife's knowledge of his limited funds. Thus, this couple has fashioned its own meanings for French champagne that go beyond the simpler and more obvious meanings suggested by marketing efforts.

In a related example, rap superstar Snoop Dogg has expressed a particular preference for Chandon champagne. He even works his preference into the lyrics of his hit song, "Drop It Like It's Hot" (i.e., "I got the roly on my arm, and I'm pouring Chandon, and I roll the best weed cause I got it going on"). Snoop Dogg's reference to Chandon stems in part from its marketed image as a status symbol; thus, his preference suggests he's "got it going on". In addition, because of the enormous airplay this song received and the high profile of its singer, Chandon has taken on a meaning in some circles as "Snoop Dogg's champagne". To consumers who share this meaning, drinking Chandon can identify the user as a Snoop Dogg fan or aspirant to his lifestyle – a stark contrast to the more genteel images usually promoted in association with champagne.

The flexibility of a product/brand in terms of its symbolic meaning would, no doubt, be acknowledged by most traditional lifestyle researchers. However, such examples as discussed above are thought to be odd exceptions to the rule of what French champagne means to most people most of the time and, as such, are not important enough to address in lifestyle segmentation systems. In contrast, CCT researchers see them as the fundamental stuff from which product symbolism arises, and argue that they cannot be ignored.

Quantitative versus Qualitative Research Methods

The traditional lifestyle study is characterized by quantitative analysis and data reductionism. The responses to fixed-alternative questionnaire items typically are collapsed into factors to show the structure of the data and to eliminate redundancy in the items. The resultant factors then are fed into a cluster analysis to identify groups that have similar response patterns. After this, verbal descriptions of the ensuing clusters (i.e., lifestyle groups) are developed. For example, in AIO inventories, many dozens of intuitively-selected activity, interest, and opinion questions are first factor analyzed and then cluster analyzed; the results are then employed to induce and label specific lifestyle categories. The key strength of this approach to data gathering and analysis is its ability to consider a lot of complex information and then reduce it to a simpler, more manageable form.

CCT's position is that the quantitative methods employed by traditional lifestyle analysis may actually mask rather than enlighten. For example, Thompson and Troaster (2002, p. 551) argue that reductionism "is a slippery slope that can impede rather than facilitate scholarly efforts to better understand the workings of complex sociocultural processes and structures". Also, Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) point out that "people do not conform always or neatly to the ascribed analytic categories currently proffered by academia, such as VALS group".

Given the foregoing, CCT lifestyles researchers tend to gather detailed qualitative data for interpretive analysis. Specific research methods include depth interviews (McCracken, 1988; Spiggle, 1994; e.g. Ahuvia, 2005; Thompson, 1996), and ethnography, where researchers spend extended periods of time with the people they are studying, observing their behavior and often participating in relevant activities (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; e.g., Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Muniz and O'guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Kates, 2002). The key strength of such qualitative methods is their ability to enhance understanding of the people under study.

The choice between quantitative and qualitative research methods reflects the general orientation of the two sides. Traditional lifestyle researchers tend to prefer a quantitative approach for the parsimony it affords. CCT lifestyle researchers tend to prefer a qualitative approach for the rich insights it can provide.

Implicit versus Explicit Group Membership

Lifestyle groups also can be thought to vary along a continuum of explicitness. Explicit groups have clear boundaries, and members of the group are consciously aware of their status. Explicit lifestyle groups include those formed by consumers' sex, religion, club affiliation, etc. At the other extreme, implicit lifestyle groups are defined by a researcher or marketer, such as PRISM NE's Second City Elite, and Kids & Cul-de-sacs. Consumers in such implicit segments probably have never heard of the term, and probably never even thought about their lifestyle along these lines. Of course, many lifestyles fall somewhere between these two extremes. In these "semi-explicit" groups, members have a clear sense of "their type of people", but the group may have no agreed upon name and no clear membership boundaries. The "Natural Health Microculture" (Thompson and Troester, 2002) is a good example of a semi-explicit group. Consumers who share this lifestyle often are aware of the fact that they belong to a distinct subculture that values products such as organic foods, non-traditional religions, yoga, and alternative medicines, but the group has no widely agreed upon name and no clear boundaries determining membership.

While both traditional and CCT approaches allow for the possibility of implicit membership in a lifestyle group, traditional methods tend to place much more emphasis on implicit groups (e.g., the VALS2 and PRISM NE systems consist entirely of implicit lifestyles). This is due, in part, to differences in the theoretical rationale underlying each method and, in part to the research methods used.

Traditional theories tend to see lifestyle as a set of common psychographic traits rather as a common group identity. For example, Brunso, Scholderer and Grunert (2003, p. 665) argue that lifestyle "is a system of individual differences in the habitual use of declarative and procedural knowledge structures that intervene between abstract goal states (personal values) and situation-specific product perceptions and behaviors". Thus, when two people share enough of this declarative and procedural knowledge, they are deemed to be in the same lifestyle, even if they themselves have no shared sense of identity. Quantitative methods that group people based on shared characteristics, rather than based on what groups people themselves believe they belong to, are consistent with such thinking. As such, there is a close fit between the methods used by traditional researchers and their underlying theory about what a lifestyle is.

CCT approaches, on the other hand, tend to rely on theories developed using interpretive methods. These methods, in turn, are most easily applied to explicit or semi-explicit groups whose social boundaries are visible "to the naked eye." CCT researchers often call explicit or semi-explicit lifestyle groups "subcultures" (Thorton, 1997), such as the gay (Kates, 2002) or cosmopolitan (Thompson, Tambyan, 1999) subcultures. Members of these subcultures share common core values, jargon, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Membership in these subcultural groups often, but not always, has a self-selecting character. This is in keeping with a basic theoretical belief among CCT researchers that the creation of a lifestyle has become an increasingly conscious and self-aware activity. As Bensman and Vidich (1995) argue, people frequently are very mindful their own ability to define and achieve the life they want. Thus, more explicit choices about group memberships are key components contributing to who consumers are or hope to be. And, in order to make a fairly explicit choice about membership in a lifestyle group, a consumer needs to be at least somewhat aware that the group exists.

CCT researchers have shown a particularly strong interest in lifestyle groups formed around a shared interest in a brand, product class, or consumption activity; e.g., new bikers (Schouten, McAlexander, 1995), skydivers (Celsi, Rose, Leigh, 1993), Star Trek fans (Kozinets, 2001). Such lifestyle groups are ubiquitous, extending beyond the "exotic" (e.g., biking, skydiving) to the realm of the more ordinary (e.g., gardening, woodworking, fly-fishing). These subcultures of consumption differ markedly from other subcultural groups in that they are made up of people from many different social classes and cultural backgrounds, brought together primarily by a shared avocation and its attendant consumption experiences (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This basic idea of a group of people, brought together by shared consumption practices, has generated a plethora

of terms to describe it (e.g., fan communities, O'Guinn, 2000; brand communities, Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; consumption worlds, Holt, 1995; consumption tribes, Maffesoli, 1996, Ross, 1994; localized interpretive communities, Thompson and Haytko, 1997; cultures of consumption, Kozinets, 2001; consumer microcultures, Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen, 1996), but there appears to be no sharp theoretical distinction underlying these different terms (Thompson and Troaster, 2002).

Finally, traditional lifestyle analysis tends to view lifestyle segments as made of up a collection of individuals who share traits/consumer behavior. Little, if any, attention is given to the interaction of group members or the group as an entity in and of itself. As such, traditional methods also can be thought of as the "psychology" of lifestyle analysis (i.e., the study of individuals that make up a lifestyle). An analogy can be made to 100 identical hourglasses that have all been turned over at the same time. The behavior of each hourglass is just like the one next to it because they are all structured in the same way. You could take away 99 of the hourglasses, and the one remaining hourglass would proceed unchanged.

In contrast, CCT focuses on the group proper and is concerned with things such as the effects of inter-group dynamics and the larger structures of society on the group's consumption behavior. As such, CCT can be thought of as the "sociology" of lifestyles analysis (i.e., the study of the group that is the lifestyle). As a parallel analogy, CCT tends to see consumer lifestyles as part of a large social machine; if you remove any one part, many other parts, as well as the whole of the machine itself, are likely to be affected.

Descriptive versus Theory-Driven Objectives

Traditional approaches to lifestyle segmentation generally have relatively simple theoretical underpinnings (e.g., individuals who share similar values exhibit similar consumer behavior). Of these, VALS2 seems to have most solid rationale, with its specification of eight segments that differ from one another based on their primary motivation and their resources. Yet, even VALS2 seems more appropriately considered a "typology", i.e., a classification scheme, rather than a true "theory", i.e., thinking that offers cause-and-effect explanations for lifestyle differences (e.g., Brunso, Scholderer and Grunert, 2003).

In contrast, CCT places heavy emphasis understanding what drives differences in lifestyles through asking the "why" and "how" questions, e.g., why groups share commonalities, or how groups came into existence. CCT research typically investigates particular lifestyles with the objective of building grounded-theory (Spiggle, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). To paraphrase, CCT often starts with a detailed investigation of a lifestyle group and builds theory inductively, adjusting any existing theory in light of the specific empirical findings of the study. This theory-building approach also has forced CCT to acknowledge the delimiting factors associated with its explanations (e.g., the context in which they hold).

Managerial Implications of CCT

Generally speaking, CCT offers much potential to practitioners in terms of enhancing their understanding of consumer behavior. Such knowledge can contribute to marketer efforts to identify attractive consumer segments to serve. Moreover, such insights can facilitate the most appropriate manipulations of the marketing mix to satisfy those segments. As a result, CCT may lay the foundation for successful product/brand differentiation in a competitive marketplace.

We offer the following specific suggestions for marketing managers weighing the decision to employ CCT approaches in addition to/instead of traditional lifestyles analysis. These also might be thought of as rules of thumb for "good use" of CCT lifestyle analysis.

First, CCT can greatly facilitate discovery and understanding of desirable product/brand meanings for different lifestyle segments. Such insights seem particularly relevant for effective management of the promotion mix (e.g., advertising, sales promotion, public relations), suggesting apt content and tone for marketing communications to specific lifestyle targets.

Second, with its focus on symbolic consumption, insights from CCT should be especially germane for marketers of products/brands generally viewed as representative of a particular lifestyle. As such, CCT should have significant value to marketers of products/brands: (a) consumed in public (e.g., housing, transportation, fashion), (b) that have direct contact with the body (e.g., food, drink, health and beauty items), and/or (c) considered to be luxuries.

Third, CCT provides the detailed and nuanced understanding needed to position new products/brands in a highly competitive marketplace. In this regard, CCT would appear to be very useful for identifying lifestyles deserving of marketer attention, especially when they are somewhat outside the social mainstream.

Finally, for global marketers, CCT lifestyle analysis seems chiefly appropriate for use with more individualistic and/or affluent cultures. As a society modernizes, it tends to become more focused on the aspirations/pursuits of the person (as compared fundamental groups such as ethnicity, family, class). With this comes an increased role of voluntary lifestyle groups in determining consumer behavior (Ahuvia, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, in more prosperous nations, there is a general tendency for competition among brands to focus more on symbolic differentiation. The CCT approach to lifestyle segmentation analysis is well suited to this cultural and competitive environment.

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