Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

Applicant Name: Stephanie Finnel, Doctoral Candidate, Marketing Department

Project Title: Feeling Torn – Coping with Ambivalence and Conflicting Identities in Consumption

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Project Description and Contribution

Sometimes consumers make choices that pit one aspect of who they are against another. For example, consider a working mother who feels torn between purchasing two desktop computers: the first computer will help her excel at work but is difficult for her children to use, whereas the second computer lacks some of the capabilities she would like to have for work but is easy and fun for her children to use. She does not know what to do. No matter what she does, she will feel that she has been faithful to one aspect of who she is (e.g., her profession) but that she has neglected another (e.g., her role as a mother).

In situations like the working mother example, consumers may feel ambivalent: they feel positively about being faithful to one aspect of who they are but negatively about neglecting another aspect of who they are. This ambivalence is uncomfortable for consumers (Newby-Clark, McGregor, and Zanna 2002; Williams and Aaker 2002), and so they may seek to cope with it (reduce it or at the very least accept it) in a variety of ways.

Often consumers cope on their own. For instance, the working mother in our earlier example may buy a computer that benefits her professionally but may later remind herself how much she values her role as a mother or may purchase new toys for her children (Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). In this way, she is faithful to both aspects of who she is over time (Dhar and Simonson 1999; Fishbach and Dhar 2005).

However, people in consumers' surroundings may also provide feedback to facilitate coping. For instance, the working mother's boss may say something about the computer choice and may thereby reduce the working mother's ambivalence. This social facilitation of coping is understudied in the ambivalence and consumer behavior literatures. I seek to fill this gap in the present project, which is my dissertation.

Importantly, I argue that social feedback does not always have a positive effect on consumer coping. Such feedback may help consumers cope in some cases, decreasing their ambivalence or at least making them more accepting of their ambivalence. In other cases, it may actually impede consumer coping. The literature generally suggests that social support has positive effects on consumers' ability to cope with stress (e.g., Brisette, Scheier, and Carver 2002; Dukley, Zuroff, and Blankstein 2003), whereas I suggest that it may vary in its effects depending on what people say when they provide support. Therefore, my dissertation makes a unique contribution in that it identifies when social support helps and when it backfires in a decision making context.

Understanding how others contribute to the coping process is important from both a conceptual and a practical standpoint. Conceptually, we know close others are inextricably linked to consumers' sense of who they are (Andersen, Chen, and Miranda 2002). Indeed, consumers judge how well they are doing in different social identities in part by thinking about how others evaluate them (Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002). For instance, the working mom may gage how well she is doing in her career by considering what her boss thinks of her, or she may gage how good of a mom she is by considering what her children think of her. In addition, consumers frequently turn to others for support in stressful consumption situations (Duhachek 2004). Thus, including feedback from others will provide a more realistic picture of how consumers manage ambivalence.

Practically, consumers often make choices with others, so understanding the role of others in reducing ambivalence may enable marketers to maximize consumers' satisfaction with products that elicit ambivalence. Such satisfaction may result in higher repeat purchase later.

I will test a variety of hypotheses concerning the effects of social feedback on consumers' ability to cope with ambivalence, with the goal of determining when such feedback helps and when it hurts. These hypotheses will be tested through both lab experiments and field experiments. I am requesting funding to help defray the cost of recruiting and paying participants. I would appreciate any assistance the Ackoff Fellowship can provide.

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