

Consumer Agency and Obligatory Consumption

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Abstract:

Consumer agency in extant literature is portrayed in terms of unlimited freedom to act. However, consumers find themselves in situations where their capacity for action is constrained by legal, moral, social or other factors. In this paper the concept of obligatory consumption is introduced and a novel type of consumer agency which arises in such an obligatory consumption setting is described. In the particular context of child car seats, risky agency emerges as a practice in response to macro-level legislative forces. Implications for marketing professionals and policy makers to increase safety in obligatory consumption are discussed.

Keywords: consumer agency, obligatory consumption, practice theory

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Consumer agency is oftentimes presented in terms of an almost unlimited freedom to choose and act. Consumption is thus seen as a voluntary or optional practice. However, there are situations when consumption becomes obligatory. In this paper, I present the case for obligatory consumption and examine it from a macro and micro level. At the macro level, I look at UN regulations 44 and 129 which lay out the responsibility of drivers to transport children in child restraint systems (CRS) more commonly referred to as car seats. Additionally, legislative documents are analysed to examine the practices of drafting governmental regulation. At the micro level, consumer agency is examined in this underexplored type of consumption which with its constraining qualities results in a, at least theoretically, constrained consumer agency.

The paper opens with a description of the theoretical approach, the particulars of the context which is then followed by a discussion of the findings. Implications for policy-makers and marketing professionals are discussed in the concluding section.

2. Theoretical approach

I view consumer agency as an everyday practice (Ortner, 2006; Valtonen, 2013). It describes what consumers do, how they act and what changes (if any) result from these actions. However, this practice is embedded in another practice, namely that of obligatory consumption (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). But because in this study obligatory consumption is examined through the lens of macro-level forces, and in particular governmental regulation of consumption, governing is also understood as a practice or as the “art of government” (Foucault, 1979/2008). As such, practices form bundles and complexes which are interlinked (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

In this section, I review agency in consumer research and present the case of obligatory consumption before introducing the child car seat context as a particular example of obligatory consumption.

1.2 Consumer agency

Agency is a well-documented concept in consumer research (Kozinets et al., 2004; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Valtonen, 2013) and attracts ongoing academic attention as it continues to represent both a threat (Holt, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke, Thompson &

Giesler, 2010) and an opportunity (Ger & Belk, 1996; Sandicki & Ger, 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) to marketing professionals. The specific forms and aims of consumer agency will vary depending on the level of analysis and its corresponding theoretical approach. For example, institutional theory (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and new social movement theory (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) are applied to study agency aimed at driving macro-level changes. On the other hand, practice theory (Sandicki & Ger, 2010) or co-optation theory (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) have been used to describe agency taking place at the micro-level. In this paper, I examine how consumer agency is shaped by macro-level forces, in particular governmental regulations. To this end, I take the view that consumer agency generally refers to the capacity of consumers to act within a given socio-cultural structure (Ahearn, 2001) and follow the practice theory approach.

Thus far, research in this domain has largely taken place in non-obligatory consumption contexts. In non-obligatory consumption consumers are free to opt-out of consumption. Put differently, consumers' capacity to act is not constrained by factors which oblige consumers to consume. Participation in consumption is voluntary or optional. For example, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) describe how consumers change the market. In their account consumer agency in a non-obligatory consumption context is not limited by legal, moral or social considerations, although it can be shaped by it. However, consumption doesn't always take a non-obligatory form.

1.2 Obligatory consumption

Obligatory consumption is nothing new. For example, homeowners are legally required to purchase home insurance, parents have a moral obligation to provide for their children and employees are expected to maintain a bank account. This type of consumption takes place when legal, moral or social factors require consumers to consume. Other factors such as religion (Sandicki and Ger, 2010) or health (Clarke, 2007) may also make consumption obligatory. In short, in this type of consumption consumers have no choice other than to consume.

It appears that obligatory consumption as a concept has been largely overlooked in consumer research. Nevertheless, there are many examples of this type of consumption in consumer literature. For example, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) note that participation in a community-supported agriculture community can be driven by moral considerations of providing a benefit to younger generations (p.145). Similarly, REF Thus, there may be hints of

moral convictions and beliefs which shape feelings of obligations to consume in particular ways, thus driving agency in alternative consumer markets. However, moral obligations which force consumers to consume and their effect on consumer agency is largely missing from current consumer literature.

Obligatory consumption can also be driven by law. At first glance, this may seem surprising but there are plentiful examples of regulatory documents making consumption a requirement. For example, in Eastern Europe fire extinguishers must be purchased to be kept in every car. Home and life insurance must be purchased by UK homeowners. And child car seats are a legal requirement across the EU and other developed parts of the world.

Why is it that obligatory consumption seems to be lacking a conceptual description? On closer inspection, the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideologies, which emphasise individual responsibility (Crouch, 2011; Price et al., 2018; Veresiu and Giesler, 2018), may have a role to play. Perhaps the absence of obligatory consumption as a concept from consumer literature stems from it hiding in plain sight: with neoliberalism gradually demanding consumers to take responsibility for their actions (e.g. Price et al., 2018), it also normalised obligations to consume. For instance, this is evidenced in recent (2005) legislation on child car seats where obligations to protect children in cars lie with consumers rather than car manufacturers.

In sum, there is a gap in understanding whether obligation to purchase, consume or participate is present in any of the contexts applied in consumer agency research thus far and what effect it has on consumers' capacity to act.

3. Child car seats

Directive 2003/20/EC was the first document in the EU to ensure that children are seated in child restraint systems, commonly known as car seats, when travelling by car. Currently, across Europe the ECE r129 and ECE r44 regulations require all children who are less than 12 years old or smaller than 135 cm in height (whichever comes first) to travel in car seats. These regulations are based on strong evidence that child restraint systems prevent injury and death in the event of a car crash (WHO, 2009).

With a legal requirement of transporting children in child restraint systems, demand for car seats has sharply risen and the European car seat market has been booming ever since (Technavio, 2019). Specialist manufacturers of car seats have spent decades innovating (e.g. BeSafe, Britax-Roemer, Maxi-Cosi or Klippan) and companies specialising in baby products

have extended their expertise to car seats (e.g. Baby Jogger, Babyzen, Trunki, Stokke and many more) as well as new players have entered the market (e.g. Kiddy or Multimac). Increased competition coupled with greater demand has led to innovation and increased safety of child restraint systems.

There are over 300 car seat models available on the UK market alone. Nowadays, car seats are predominantly categorised by weight into distinctive groups as illustrated below, with new EU regulations focusing on height instead of weight.

GROUP	CHILD MASS [KG]
0	up to 10 kg
0+	up to 13 kg
1	9 – 18 kg
2	15 – 25 kg
3	22 – 36 kg

Table 1: Child car seat groupings based on UNECE r44 (p.5)

However, from a consumer perspective this classification is overly simplistic because many car seat models stretch across the different groups. For example, group 0+/1 car seats are quite common as are group 2/3 car seats, although group 0+ and group 1/2/3 car seats are also available. Additionally, car seats can be rear or forward facing as well as extended rear-facing. Some come with ISOFIX/ISOFIT anchors while others simply use the vehicle’s 3-point seat belt. Furthermore, top tethers, support legs, ISOFIX or belted bases as well as integrated 3 or 5-point harnesses add to the complexity of the product. What is more, installation of a single car seat can be done in different ways, such as the Axkid Duofix Isofix which has 4 different installation types depending on the direction of travel and weight of the child. Another challenge regarding car seats is the correct use of a seat, that is a proper installation and harnessing of the child which is difficult to achieve as studies of car seat misuse show that about 65% of car seat usage in Europe is incorrect. Car seats also come with different price tags ranging from £10 to well over £600 for a single car seat, adding to the already long list of considerations.

As is evident from the above market overview, parents and carers of children who use cars as a mode of transport find themselves in a situation where product purchase is required but product selection and usage are complex.

In short, consumer agency in this context is constrained by regulation, there is no option to “reject” all market propositions (Kozinets et al., 2004), “alternative markets” (Ozanne and Ozanne, 2016) are prohibited and consumers are forced to buy and/or use the product. Consequently, the child car seat context represents a suitable setting for studying obligatory consumption. It is also a context that contains less reflexive consumption practices (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). As such, it represents an important area for regulators and car seat manufacturers and has direct implications for these professional groups.

4. Methodology

Askegaard and Linnet (2011) call for a “contextually (socially, culturally, politically and institutionally) oriented” research (p.384) which connects the ‘macro-social’ with the ‘micro-social’. This research answers this call by analysing consumer agency, as experienced by individuals in an obligatory consumption context, through the lens of macro-social and structural forces.

I ask what does the practice of obligatory consumption look like and in particular the practice of consumer agency within it? How is the practice of the “art of government” (Foucault, 1979/2008) interlinked with the practice of obligatory consumption?

So far, in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) were conducted with 15 participants in Scotland. Participants comprised mothers and fathers with different socio-economic backgrounds. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. For analysis, 1st order concepts were grouped into 2nd order themes and 3rd order dimensions (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012).

Secondary data was collected and comprised of governmental regulations r44 and r129 as well as the EU’s Working Party on Passive Safety informal Child Restraint System group documents. This secondary data collection resulted in 670 individual documents.

5. Findings

The practice of governmental action and the practice of consumer agency are linked (Shove et al., 2012) in the practice of obligatory consumption. Consumer agency is practiced in a risky way by reworking and breaking rules and constraints of obligatory consumption which in turn is shaped by the practices of the government. The practice of governmental action is strongly

shaped by an industry lobby. In other words, governmental practices create and shape obligatory consumption. Or put differently, the practice of consumption is made, at least in parts, to be obligatory by what regulators do and how they practice drafting and passing regulations. In this section I focus on the practice of consumer agency.

5.1 Risky agency

On the surface, a strong sense of moral obligations to protect one's child and a need to be a "good parent" (Prothero, 2004) is evident. Consumers spend considerable amounts of time researching, buying and learning how to install and use the right car seats. However, in this process risky behaviours take place. This risky agency involve 'risky experts' and 'risky fun'.

5.1.1 Risky experts

A large choice, obligation to buy and a lack of standards within the industry lead to consumer confusion. To address this, consumers seek 'experts' who seem trustworthy and with whom they can have meaningful interactions. However, digital experts vary, and some consumers choose experts who are rejected by other consumers.

This is reflected in the following quote:

"I knew that places like Which? were good places to get reviews but my opinion of that has changed during my process. 'Cause I realised when I was reading about all my extended rear-facing that quite a lot of the Which? reviews were quite bad for rear-facing car seats and I felt that was because they were getting marked down because they were difficult to install. And that doesn't mean they are not safe, they are just so that they are difficult to install. So Which? was giving them bad reviews. (...) Because a lot of people like me would go to that and take that advice as like gospel... if Which? say this car seat is safe or that car seat is not safe. But then when you... And you've got to be careful what you read on the Internet. And what your sources are." – Emma

5.1.2 Risky fun

There is a sense of a loss of "fun" in the car as compared to times past. Thus, consumers mitigate this by engaging in risky agency as exemplified by the quote below:

"when I pick him up from his nursery, sometimes he sits in the front seat beside me and on more than one occasion I've forgotten to transfer him to his car seat when we get to the main

road. And so we just put it... it's.. it's just on the other side of (...) the park. So we've just driven home which he loves. Ehm.... But I forgot to put him in... to put him in the back and when I realised it became a calculated risk and we were fine" – Zoe

5.2 Constrained agency

Obligatory consumption can be voluntary or involuntary. While many participants agree and even encourage regulation, some question the need for child restraint systems up to the age of 12. Thus, the use of a car seat can turn into involuntary consumption at a certain point.

Obligatory consumption also means that products can be consumed incorrectly which in the case of a child car seat can have serious consequences. Many parents have described their difficulties in installing and using the products correctly by themselves and their children. This should come as no surprise with over 16 different ways of installing a child car seat and without an easy and trusted way of learning correct car seat installation.

In summary, agency is indeed limited in this context as the option to opt-out of a complex consumption practice is not possible.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Obligatory consumption is a concept which can offer a useful lens through which to examine consumer behaviour. It certainly holds distinguishing features at least in the context of child car seats. These features have a knock-on effect on consumer agency which although limited is manifested in different ways as compared to non-obligatory consumption.

On a theoretical level, two implications emerge. Firstly, consumer agency in an obligatory consumption setting is shown to involve risky behaviours. Secondly, the conceptualisation of obligatory consumption sheds light on an under-researched area which offers potent ground for the exploration of consumer behaviour from a new perspective. This has important practical implications.

In the case of the research presented here, policy-makers should consider the consumer viewpoint in their legislative processes. At the moment, the consumer voice is largely missing from policy decision making. With a consumer perspective some of the responsibility of child safety may need to be shifted towards car manufacturers. Additionally, introduction of standards in the child restraint system vertical would improve consumption experiences and safety.

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