

Consumption and identity: a study of low-income consumers

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Abstract

The relationship between consumption and identity is an important domain of study in consumer research. Existing literature highlights the symbolic role of consumption in reflecting and creating identity. With a few exceptions, research on the consumption-identity relationship has been mainly conducted in highly identity-expressive consumption contexts, focusing on consumers who have adequate economic resources that allow them to express and construct their identities through consumption. Through this dissertation we examine the consumption identity-relationship in the context of low-income consumers and explore how identity-related meanings are derived from consumption when financial resources are constrained and consumption is mainly utilitarian. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, we examine the consumption experience of low-income working women in India and explore its relationship with identity. The experiential perspective provided by the dissertation offers a nuanced understanding of consumption practice in the face of resource restrictions. Our findings suggest that the domain of resource-constrained consumption is associated with immense activity; consumption decisions on tight budgets involve a great amount of cognitive effort, trade-offs and balancing. Our research reveals how consumers' contexts, identities, values and consuming activities are aligned. Our findings offer insights into how identity-related meanings are derived from consumption that mainly addresses basic needs. We find that the context of resource restrictions that frames the lives of this low-income consumer group, is internalized, creating an idea of the self that is resource-constrained. The 'resource-constrained self' colours almost all aspects of our participants' lives and influences other forms of identity - it shapes their self-view, has a bearing on their social roles and influences their social identification. We find that for this group of low-income women consumers, their roles as carers and providers, particularly the salience of their identities as mothers, result in an idea of the self that is relationally embedded, rooted in the duty of care towards their loved ones. Their resource-constrained context, their responsibilities towards their families and the primacy of relational considerations in their lives guide their consumption, often at the cost of their own needs. We suggest that self-transcending values form the basis of these women's identities which are expressed in the form of selfless love for those in their close circle of relationships. Our findings reveal that when resources are limited, the self-expressive aspects of consumption do not manifest in obvious ways - the resource constrained self reveals itself not in acquiring and possessing but in self-denial and consumption abnegation in order to nurture loved ones. Finally, we discuss the implications of our research for theory, practice and policy.