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Consumer Temporality

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Definition

Consumer temporality refers to how consumption is structured as ongoing events and processes that are perceived as before, during, and after (Robinson et al., 2021). This is known as sequencing. Time is a consumer problem, as sequencing differs across scales (e.g., geological time vs human time), social domains (e.g., shared time vs private time), speeds (e.g., accelerated vs decelerated time), ontologies (e.g., clock time vs phenomenological time), and intervals (e.g., time between birth and death vs time before birth and after death). One key role of consumption is therefore to mediate the tensions between different kinds of time: managing geological time within human time, balancing acceleration, and deceleration, negotiating work-life balance, imbedding human experience within the broad march of history, or existentially coming to terms with a limited lifespan as society continues.

Consumption has a natural affinity with time through “the principle of pleasure-seeking in the normal process of imaginative anticipation of, or speculation about the future” (Campbell, 1987, 83) and “culturally situated patterns of expectations towards the future” (Douglas & Isherwood 1996: 30). The cultural preoccupation with time in the marketplace can be seen in the prevalence of time travel movies, DNA ancestry kits, nostalgic products and services, and popular representations of the future in the news when tackling issues like robots and AI, energy, or political elections.

Rapid social change makes additional demands on sensemaking through sequencing, thereby foregrounding issues of consumer temporality, which can then be monetized. Contexts of particular interest to marketing research on time include crisis, mobility, ritual, new start mindset, planning and decision-making, identity, sustainability, legitimacy, and technology. Time is often addressed tangentially in almost all consumer research, since key theories are fundamentally about time. Bourdieu’s, habitus is a tacit expectation towards the future. Goffman’s status management concerns shaping of future reputation. Time is also a key factor in appraisal theory leading to emotions like hope, despair, resentment, enthusiasm, and remorse. However, the following literature review focuses specifically on consumer temporality research.

Key Findings & Insights

Time is central to consumer research since it pervades every aspect of human behavior and the market (Graham, 1981; Jacoby et al., 1976). Early investigations into consumer temporality focus mainly on time budgeting decisions, or how consumers allocate segments of chronological time for work, leisure, and domestic activities (Feldman, Laurence & Hornik, Jacob, 1981; Holbrook & Lehmann, 1981). Subsequently, scholars have approached time within the framework of cognition, mental schemata, and metaphors (Bergadaà, 1990). Cotte et al., (2004) for example, provide a deeper understanding of consumer timestyles – the customary ways in which people perceive and use time – which they categorize in terms of social, temporal, planning, and polychronic orientation.

Quantitative work on temporality has broadly examined time through consumer choices and decisions in themes such as time inconsistency (Jackson & Yariv, 2015), time pressure (Alm & Olsen, 2017), impatience (Obstfeld, 1990), and the general differences between consumer resources such as time and money (Monga & Zor, 2019). Other studies address temporal distance, i.e. the relative proximity of a future or past event to the present (Loebnitz et al., 2022), and temporal compatibility of various processes (Etkin & Ratner,

2013). Finally, temporal context studies explore day of the week, holiday purchasing, and New Year's sales effects (Richins & Bloch, 1986).

Consumer researchers have also used qualitative epistemologies to explore heterogeneous, multidimensional time through consumer narratives. A narrative is a story that provides a chronology of time by reconstructing personal perspectives on the past and the future in order to establish the "meaning, unity and purpose" of progressing events (Schau et al., 2009b). Russell & Levy (2012), for instance, discuss the role of narrative time in the re-consumption of past products as a way for consumers to establish control over their temporal progression. The authors focus on consumers' strategic management of life by reopening deep personal pasts, such as one's childhood or other events many decades prior. Brunk et al., (2017) take a more macro level approach in the marketization of east German nostalgia for its DDR past when managing future oriented challenges.

The focus on life-long time spans is recurrent in consumer research on narrative time. For example, Price et al. (2000) address older consumers' engagement with intra-familial conflict late in life through life review. Curasi et al. (2004) also explore how cherished possessions become inalienable wealth within the family, passing from generation to generation. Addressing the issue of longevity, Schau et al. (2009a)) examine retirees who weave life narratives across the time orientations of past, present, and future. Finally, studying the long history of objects and people, Ture & Ger (2016) address consumers' material work on heirloom rejuvenation to curate the past for future generations.

A major innovation in consumer research on time concerns perceived temporal speed in the present, addressing fast-paced consumption activities such as motocross, or purposefully dilatory practices such as slow food and slow fashion. Woermann & Rokka, (2015) argue that timeflow experiences are integral to establishing a consumer's sense of true self. The authors account for how timeflow experience is modified through consumer practices. Temporal experiences of drag or rush therefore appear as an effect of misaligned practice elements performed by the individual consumer. Similarly, consumer researchers have explored temporal slowness in activities such as yoga, mindfulness, and pilgrimages. Husemann & Eckhardt (2018) argue that deceleration of time is integral to eliciting a more authentic sense of self. Recognizing that time is individually perceived, they argue that such a perception is determined by the temporal logic that prevails in society. Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) show that the speed of temporal consumer experiences stems from immersion into, or escaping from, broader socio-temporal logics.

Lately, consumer research has explored temporality in the age of fracture (Rodgers, 2010), where social divisions, epidemics, migration, resource depletion, climate change and other compiling wicked problems give rise to a sense of pervasive crisis and uncertainty about time. Robinson, (2015) addresses the problematic multiplication of socially constituted narratives about the future. The meaning of consumer objects and services becomes damaged when its relationship to the future becomes ambiguous and uncertain. For consumers, this shifts awareness from ordinary clock time, Chronos, to opportune time, Kairos. Kairos time allows consumers to renegotiate their relationship to possessions and their implications for the future. Bradford & Sherry (2023) extend this approach by exploring how marketers can exploit Kairos time in ritual behaviour.

In a study of health messaging Robinson & Veresiu, (2021) define crisis as a disruption to expectations about the future. The authors find that the temporal disorientation of crisis gives rise to emotional, cognitive, and existential consumer challenges. Consumers mourn what could have been, rationally renegotiate pathways into new futures, and adapt their identities as innovative practices unfold in the new time. This research highlights ways of reestablishing social consensus after temporal disruption in crisis. Finally, Robinson et al., (2021) propose the concept of consumer timework to capture how social tensions between

up-group, down-group, in-group, and out-group shapes time as a cultural consumption resource in consumer research, highlighting the impact of social time on body perceptions, family dynamics, technological innovation, and minority groups.

Outlook

The individual nature of consumer temporality has been a core assumption in the field from inception. Graham, (1981, 335) for instance stresses that “my time is not your time.” While there have been efforts to position individual experiences of time within social logics about time (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018), authors such as Russell & Levy, (2012, 356) point out that “focus on the individual ... only broaches the overarching social and cultural dynamics about time.” Excluding other perspectives creates important constraints, which occlude managerial innovation. Neighbouring fields such as management and institutional theory have for instance begun to explore heterochrony, or multiple types of time within a human setting (Reinecke et al., 2020).

Decentring to address the time of animals, architecture, supply chains, plants, geology, weather, and the perspectives of other non-human actants may go some way to explore how consumer temporality is an assemblage of many temporalities. Recognizing the ontological diversity of time reorganizes and reveals complexities, fluidity, exchanges, and connections, which highlight interdependency between consumer temporality and the time of the surrounding world (Bear, 2014; Mills, 2000; Munn, 1992).

Marketing has for instance begun to address the critical challenges of climate change, sustainability, and resource depletion. These key issues are inherently temporal as sustainability is defined as consumption that does not compromise the ability of future generations to consume at a similar rate to the present. And yet, individual, phenomenological, subjectivist time seems poorly equipped to engage with these topics, i.e., the time of those who are not born and the time of the natural world which keeps us alive. Key issues for managers are therefore how to make geological and climatic time visible and meaningful to human consumers, but also how to shift consumer behaviour into alignment with the time of natural processes.

Little is known about how the enormous timescales of climate and geology are comprehended and acted upon by consumers. Large timescales beyond human lifespans are typically translated into material manifestations through geological sedimentations in canyons or tree rings which makes time visible, but little is known about how this changes consumer temporality or the managerial potential in marketing and advertising (Irvine 2020).

While market-driven consumer Timeflow can vary in speed, rhythm, and tempi, it is currently defined as “ceaseless” (Woermann and Rokka 2015, 1490) through its “ongoing imposition of mental content” (Husemann and Eckhard 2019, 1159). Future research can explore consumption in seeking non-temporal events like sleeping or other kinds of unconsciousness. Key theoretical insights would involve understanding the episodic nature of timeflow beyond mere acceleration and deceleration. This would bring timeflow into relation with other temporal ontologies such as traditional chronology and could highlight norms and emotions associated with time, which are currently not well understood.

Finally, time is a tacit component of nearly all key theories in consumer research. Explicitly addressing the temporal components of key theorizations, no matter the topic, would go a long way to bringing consumer time research from the periphery into the centre of the field.

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Key Words

Time
Chronology
Sequencing
Temporal Assemblage
Heterochrony

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