

**Anticipated Consumption:  
Leading the customer experience**

*John Turnbull*

*Macquarie Graduate School of Management*

*Macquarie University*

*John.turnbull@mgsu.edu.au*

**Abstract**

Whilst customer experience is recognised in recent decades as an important extension of the long-standing information processing view of consumers, there is relatively little empirical research to support the theories and models that have been developed. Anticipated consumption, or pre-purchase experience, is the important first stage in a number of multi-stage theoretical models of experience. This paper aims to provide an empirically-founded understanding of the key elements that comprise anticipated consumption. Qualitative methods are used, in particular ethnographic content analysis, to study first-person narratives of a range of customer experiences across eight different consumer sectors. The research concludes that hegemonic information processing models are inadequate to explain the totality of consumer behaviour. More holistic, experiential models provide a more complete explanation that warrants further attention.

Keywords: customer experience, anticipated consumption, hedonic consumption, consumer behaviour.

# **Anticipated Consumption: Leading the customer experience**

## **Introduction**

In Holbrook and Hirschman's seminal paper (1982) the hegemonic information processing view of consumers is challenged to include experiential, hedonic elements such as fantasies, feelings and fun. Whilst other authors have continued to develop the experiential view of consumers (Frow & Payne, 2007; M. B. Holbrook, Lehmann, & O'Shaughnessy, 1986; Verhoef et al., 2009), the concept of customer experience is ill-defined and varies considerably between academic and managerial perspectives (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

In recent years, various efforts have been made to define and understand the nature of customer experience (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; M. Holbrook, 2006/7). A number of models have emerged that represent customer experience as a process over time, comprising a number of stages (Carù & Cova, 2003; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). A consistent theme in these multi-stage models is a "pre-purchase" or "anticipated consumption" stage (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2004), yet the composition of this stage varies between models.

As far back as 100 years ago the American pragmatist John Dewey proposed a multi-stage model of decision-making that survives today in a number of marketing texts (Kotler & Keller, 2006). The components of the Dewey model that align with anticipated consumption include problem recognition and information search. More recent experiential models add planning, daydreaming and fantasising (Arnould et al., 2004), expectation setting and pre-purchase interaction with the provider (Shaw & Ivens, 2002).

Whilst these and other contributions have furthered debate and understanding, there is little empirical evidence regarding the general nature of customer experience (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Anticipated consumption deserves particular attention as this stage in the experience contains many elements that fall outside existing decision-making models of consumer behaviour (Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979).

This paper presents a general, empirically-supported view of anticipated consumption that spans a range of sectors and contexts. In order to best represent the perspective of the customer, first-hand accounts of customer experiences are studied using qualitative, interpretive methods.

## **Method**

Customers create their own experiences using the artefacts and contexts around them (Cova & Caru, 2007); in this respect customers are the ultimate judge of experienced value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Despite the challenges presented by the idiosyncratic, context-specific nature of customer experience, common themes can be derived and studied using interpretive methods under the existential-phenomenological paradigm (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). These methods focus on the lived experience of subjects recorded in the first-person through personal journals, diaries or phenomenological interviews.

This research studies 48 cases written by individual consumers either on web forums (11 cases) or personal journals (37 cases). Cases were selected for the study using snowball and, in the latter stages, theoretical sampling. In order to encompass a wide range of contexts the stories were collected across eight consumer market sectors: automotive, consumer durables, consumer packaged goods, fashion / apparel, leisure / entertainment, personal services, possession services and property.

NVivo 8 was used to code each case, identifying key expressions used by consumers prior to the purchase episode. Emergent themes were identified and interpreted using ethnographic content analysis or ECA (Altheide, 1987). ECA aims to discover emergent patterns,

emphases and themes using a reflexive movement between sampling, data collection, coding, analysis, interpretation and concept development. Ethnographic methods are generally applicable to the study of customer experience (Healy, Beverland, Oppenwal, & Sands, 2007) and ECA is particular suitable for the study of narrative data.

## Findings

Of the 48 cases, 38 (80%) contain significant narrative relating to anticipated consumption. Analysis of these cases yields eight key elements of anticipated consumption:

Information processing elements of anticipated consumption (56 occurrences in total):

- Problem recognition (19 occurrences)
- Information gathering (14 occurrences)
- Form assessment criteria (6 occurrences)
- Search (17 occurrences)

Experiential elements of anticipated consumption (38 occurrences in total):

- Exploration (8 occurrences)
- Reminiscing (8 occurrences)
- Self-justification (11 occurrences)
- Seeking affirmation (11 occurrences)

Whilst information processing elements comprise a significant proportion of the experience, they are not the focus of this paper. Experiential elements, comprising 40% of occurrences, are also significant and therefore warrant further analysis.

## Exploration

Whilst problem recognition is evident in a number of cases, consumers do not always start with or recognise a problem. Consumption may be triggered by a suggestion from another person, noticing something in passing or sensational attraction such as described here by KH:

KH: *“The bright lights, the beautiful branding, the minimalist displays, the white marble floors, the well dressed staff, and even the special security guard who ushered you in...”*

Consumers may not be searching at all; they may stumble fortuitously on an idea to consume through internal reflection or sensory stimuli outside the shopping context:

RC: *“Visiting a friend several months ago, I noticed her apartment had a beautiful fragrance. The source was a large bottle of Jaye Niemi perfumed oil”*

The information processing view highlights the importance of external stimuli, particularly those generated by marketers including product attributes, advertising or service clues (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Consumers may be attracted to stores where external stimuli are in a state of flux, where there is a sense of discovery or adventure:

SW: *“I quite enjoy going to Aldi to see what they’ve got that’s interesting... you never know what you’re going to find in there; there’s the element of surprise”*

Curiosity, exploration and sensation seeking are important hedonic elements that form the experiential counterparts to problem solving, information acquisition and explicit search in the information processing view. Consumers often recognise an opportunity to enjoy or purchase something, rather than being driven by the need to solve a problem.

Theoretical support for this element of anticipated consumption is evident in the desire for exploration (Howard & Sheth, 1969), variety seeking (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982) and browsing behaviour (Hirschman, 1980).

## Reminiscing

Some experiences are triggered by reminiscing or daydreaming. Personal thoughts from childhood or youth emerge as a strong theme in the early stages of several experiences:

FB: *"I'd ridden motorbikes when I was a young man, illegally, and had really enjoyed it. Family and responsibility, plus the English weather made me give it away"*

These form part of the values or criteria that guide consumption decisions. Whilst the information processing model focuses on utilitarian / economic criteria, a significant number of cases indicated aesthetic / nostalgic criteria:

KH: *"Having grown up with pets, I have always been fond of animals. I love dogs, especially large dogs"*

Sometimes nostalgic recollection is sufficient to drive the entire decision process:

RC: *"I had an immediate preference for carton milk, driven by childhood memories of excitement about carton milk"*

Recollections of past pleasures can also lead to strong feelings of anticipation and looking forward to the experience:

LS: *"We had anticipated it for weeks. It was to be a short break, with a small group of girlfriends... without a doubt, on the way with these friends there would be the inevitable magnetic pull of boutique shopping"*

The importance of memories and the association of these with possessions is well recognised (Belk, 1988) and has received more recent treatment in work on emotional memories, nostalgic bonding and the consumption experience (M. B. Holbrook & Schindler, 2003).

## Self-justification

Another element of anticipated consumption is self-justification. Whilst there are utilitarian elements in self-justification, there are also hedonic elements such as needing to cheer up:

RC: *"I felt very solitary at work and in need of a break, so I decided to book the post-exam reward holiday to cheer myself up and give myself something to look forward to"*

Consumers seek to justify, often to themselves, the need or desire for a purchase. This is not always a rational, information-centric process; self-justification appears to primarily serve the consumer's need to feel good about the purchase:

LS: *"So well deserved for the 6 of us, great accommodation, beautiful food"*

Justification rarely follows a logical path; for example having done without a product for several years does not necessarily justify the decision to buy one now. Logically nothing has changed; the consumer could continue to do without.

RC: *"I actually needed a new coat about four years ago, but have never purchased one"*

Consumers may seek to create a sense of economic justification, even beyond the rational realisation that buying a discretionary item consumes money rather than saves money:

KH: *"but if you are lucky enough to get a sale seat, you could save hundreds of dollars"*

Theoretical parallels for self-justification are evident in consumer rationalization (Markin, 1979) and reduction of dissonance (Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976).

## Seeking affirmation

During anticipated consumption, justification is sometimes sought through others. This takes the form of seeking affirmation from other consumers or friends:

DC: *"I share the Chesalong news. He then shares his family's experiences at Chesalong with his parents having been cared for at Chesalong. He recommended Chesalong highly"*

Affirmation may be explicitly sought in a rational way prior to purchase as part of collaborative decision-making:

RC: “*My husband endorsed my view and agreed we should try to get some for ourselves*”

Whilst the information processing model sees other parties and reference groups as important sources of information, a number of cases indicated that the consumer was seeking reinforcement or even social approval rather than information:

AK: “*Another customer confirmed that it was indeed a beautiful ring*”

Affirmation may be sought after purchase, in order to allay fears, reduce dissonance or project an image of a canny shopper:

SW: “*So I jest with people. I make fun of the fact I shop at Aldi and I allow them to make fun of me for shopping at Aldi.*”

Established consumer theory relating to normative influence (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975) and related work on feedback-seeking in organisational behaviour (Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007) provide theoretical support for this element.

### Discussion

Content analysis of the cases, particularly the sequence in which the eight elements occur, yields some interesting insight. Of the eight occurrences of reminiscing, for example, all but one are at the start of the experience; that is, have no preceding element. Similarly, search typically occurs at the end of the anticipated consumption stage. Continuing this analysis yields a potential model for the flow of anticipated consumption:

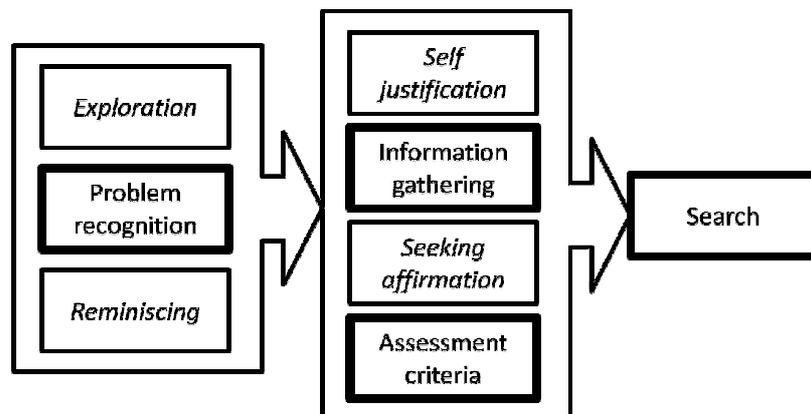


Figure 1 - Potential model for anticipated consumption

Experiential elements (italics) generally occur earlier in the stage than information processing elements. Problem recognition and search remain strong but not absolute; anticipated consumption can start with exploration or reminiscing. In the middle of the experience we find self-justification, seeking affirmation, information gathering and forming assessment criteria which appear to support and guide the search process.

Dewey’s decision-making model, comprising problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, choice and outcomes (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988) is partly supported by the cases studied but is not sufficient to fully understand anticipated consumption.

Holbrook and Hirschman’s extension of the information processing model (1982) touches on several elements found in our research, particularly hedonic response verses problem-solving, exploratory behaviour, fantasies and daydreams, however the extended model does not explicitly address self-justification or seeking affirmation. Models such as this, using the stimulus-organism-response framework (Fiore & Kim, 2007; M. Holbrook, 1986), treat the

consumer as an entity that receives stimuli and produces responses rather than a multi-faceted individual with possible irrational thoughts, feelings, doubts, desires and contradictions.

Our research indicates the relatively unstructured nature of consumer experience in which consumers browse, reflect on and repeat elements over the course of the experience, as opposed to the strong process orientation of information-based and stimulus-organism-response models. Reminiscing, seeking affirmation and self-justification can occur at any stage of the experience, for example, not just in anticipated consumption. Relationships between elements are general at best and change depending on the characteristics of the consumer and context. For this reason less structured models which loosely categorise elements of the experience yet allow for a more holistic gestalt perspective as advocated by Schmitt (1999) are favoured by our findings.

Two such models, proposed by Shaw and Ivens (2002) and Arnould et al. (2004) are particularly relevant (Turnbull, 2009). Arnould's first category of experience, anticipated consumption, aligns well with our research although one element of the model, budgeting, is not significant in the cases studied. Shaw and Ivens' five-stage model starts with two stages, expectation setting and pre-purchase interactions. Whilst expectations are mentioned in 10 of the 48 cases, they are largely already in place prior to the experience. Shaw and Ivens' specific focus on "interactions" is also not well supported in the cases studied as much of the experience takes place in the consumer's mind, through reflections, thoughts, fears and desires, rather than through interactions with the external world.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Anticipated consumption forms the first stage of consumer experience. It contains both information processing elements and experiential elements such as exploration, reminiscing, self-justification and seeking affirmation. These elements satisfy the desire to feel good, excited, guilt-free or accepted rather than being a pragmatic step in a rational decision process. The experiential elements of anticipated consumption are not always rational; however this does not appear to reduce their role in influencing the purchase decision.

The qualitative, experiential nature of this research inherently limits the direct applicability of findings to the particular contexts studied; nonetheless the findings and conclusions of our research may be taken as background knowledge to further develop understanding of anticipated consumption. In particular, further research is warranted in specific contexts such as online, impulse and symbolic products, as well as applying the methods used in this research to the middle and latter stages of the customer experience.

The hegemonic information processing model of consumer behaviour falls short of explaining how consumers experience products and services. More holistic models such as that proposed by Arnould et al. (2004) provide a more complete explanation and therefore warrant further attention in empirical research and consumer behaviour texts.

This research has important managerial implications. It highlights the need to move beyond a rational, economic view of the consumer and supports investment in understanding the experiential, hedonic elements of consumer experience. Organisations can make use of these findings to develop new ways to segment consumers, design consumer environments and experiences and engage with consumers more effectively prior to the purchase episode.

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