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Reconceptualizing Consumer Power: A View from Market Segment Theory in Retailing

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to suggest how the degree of power consumers possess in the marketplace develops in part from the nature of the relationships between retailers and their targeted markets. Propositions are developed to facilitate empirical research by consumer researchers. By furthering awareness of the nature of consumer power, consumer educators and activists may gain a clearer understanding of the relationships between consumers and retailers, and retailers may be in a better position to determine the optimal investment of limited resources.

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Introduction

Given the pervasive role that shopping activities and consumption play in the lives of individuals, an examination of the power possessed by consumers in the marketplace appears warranted (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schoeder 2006). The relative power held by consumers can be expected to have a direct bearing on the nature of their relationships with businesses, namely retailers (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006). Relatively powerless consumers, for instance, can be expected to experience a greater incidence of retail encounters where they may be at a disadvantage whereas relatively more powerful consumers can be expected to experience a lesser incidence of retail encounters where they may be at a disadvantage.

Although a number of approaches to studying consumer power exist (e.g., the effects of integrative marketing communication strategies on consumer power; consumerism and consumer power; individual consumer characteristics and consumer power), the focus of this paper is more fundamental. The objective is to explore the nature of consumer power emanating from the relationship between retailers and their targeted markets and to develop propositions to guide further inquiry. First, the paper reviews the literature on consumer power within the context of the relationship between retailers and their targeted markets. Second, the various ways market segments can be conceived and the implications for consumer power are examined and propositions developed. Third, the structure of the relationships between retailers and their targeted markets and the effects of that structure on consumer power are explored and additional

propositions developed. Lastly, conclusions are drawn concerning the importance of continuing to study consumer power.

Consumer Power

The relative power of consumers in the marketplace has been gaining increasing attention, particularly as it relates to consumer culture (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006). However, surprisingly few attempts have been made to systematically study this subject (for an exception see Merlo, Whitwell, and Lucas (2004)). One reason for this lack of attention is the lack of agreement on the domain of consumer power. Although there is no definitive agreement on how to describe or examine consumer power (Desmond 2003; Starkey 2003), most definitions refer to the ability of consumers to affect the behavior of businesses, specifically the ability of consumers to entice retailers to provide offerings which are consistent with their needs and desires (Grønmo and Ölander 1991; Harrison, Waite, and Hunter 2006). Lack of agreement, however, exists concerning what constitutes individuals' needs and desires (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006). Consequently, disagreement exists over the degree of power consumers actually possess in the marketplace (Grønmo and Ölander 1991). Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) attempt to eliminate some of the confusion by identifying three different models through which consumer power has been viewed: consumer sovereignty, consumer culture, and discursive power. (The first two models are similar to the consumerist and liberational models proposed by Croft and Beresford (1995)). Each is briefly discussed below.

Consumer Sovereignty Model

Consumer sovereignty is defined as the ability of consumers "to determine, from the offerings of producers of goods and services, what goods and services will be produced" (Shaw et al. 2006, p. 1052). Within this model, the extent to which consumers possess power in the marketplace is regarded to be based on two issues: consumer rationality and freedom of choice (Kohn 1986). Consumer rationality assumes that individuals act in a manner that will allow them to communicate their needs and desires to retailers in such a way that retailers will have the ability to recognize and to fulfill these needs and desires (Shaw et al. 2006). Furthermore, for consumers to possess freedom of choice, they must have access to products of differing quality and price, and have the ability and motivation to seek, process, and act upon information about quality and price (Sirgy and Su 2000).

Using this approach to consumer power, many believe that consumers today possess unprecedented power in the marketplace (e.g., Barrutia and Charterina 2006; Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier 2010; Hughes 2007; Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007; Rezaabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader 2006). They base their conclusions on the fact that consumers possess easy access to an overwhelming amount of information. Through the Internet, for instance, consumers often find that they have access to a heretofore unimaginable quantity of product information, extensive information on retailers' inventories and business practices, and access to retailers from around the globe (Pires, Stanton, and Rita 2006). Indeed, "if knowledge is power, then consumer knowledge is about to overturn the world of retailing as we know it" (Loewe and Bonchek 1991, p. 38). Furthermore, Barrutia and Charterina state:

The changes that accompany this new technology are significant: consumers now have access to accurate, recent, unbiased information; they are readily able to talk to many other consumers; it becomes easy for them to band together with numerous other consumers; there is a heightening consumer awareness of the shortcomings of different companies; customers are discovering simpler and cheaper legal recourse and access; customers now

have access to technical expertise for evaluating complex products and services; and customers are talking to firms in the public domain (2006, pp. 355-356).

Greater access to information along with the ability and motivation to use it are assumed to better allow consumers to communicate their needs and desires to retailers and, as a result, provide retailers with the information needed to provide the broad assortments of products varying in quality and price needed to meet the diverse needs and desires of their customers (Kucuk 2008). Indeed, Harrison et al. (2006) observe that consumers equate empowerment with access to information. In response to this apparent growth in consumer power, Jenner (1994) believes that the increased power experienced by consumers necessitates changes in the organizational structure of the businesses that serve them. Loewe and Bonchek (1991) also suggest that retailers who do not change their business model to reflect the empowered consumer will eventually fail. Indeed, Kevin Roberts, chief executive of Saatchi and Saatchi states “for the first time the consumer is boss, which is fascinatingly frightening, scary, and terrifying, because everything we used to do, everything we used to know, will no longer work” (“Crowned at Last” 2005, p. 3).

Taking a different perspective on the effect of the Internet on consumer power, Kucuk (2008) explores Hirschman’s (1970) exit and voice theory. Kucuk suggests that the Internet has led to increased consumer power through an increased ease of exit – because of the Internet, consumers can much more easily abandon a product or retailer and choose another. Kucuk also suggests that consumers can much more easily raise their voices to complain if they choose not to abandon a product or retailer. Furthermore, the Internet permits consumers to more easily join with other consumers to jointly express their demands. Zureik and Monshowitz (2005), for instance, point to the role of the Internet in implementing successful boycotts. Consequently, they state “the Internet is perhaps the most powerful instrument yet devised for the actualization of consumer power” (2005, p. 50).

Not all agree that consumer power has significantly increased. Sirgy and Su (2000), for instance, believe that any idea about the supposed growth in the power possessed by consumers in the marketplace is nothing more than myth. Instead of a marketplace where consumer power is on the sharp upswing, they suggest that consumer power is actually declining. First, they suggest that freedom of choice in the marketplace has become limited. A competitive environment characterized by numerous small and medium-sized businesses actively competing for customers by producing myriads of differentiated products often no longer exists. Instead, many industries today are dominated by a small number of very large establishments producing fairly homogeneous products. Furthermore, in past years it was often fairly easy for consumers to compare the quality and relative value of competing products. Today, many products can be characterized as “high-tech” – products which are highly dependent on numerous miniature transistors and circuit boards for their operation. Most consumers, however, are not adequately technologically sophisticated to be able to understand, let alone be able to assess, the workings of these products regardless of the amount of information which may be available. Retailers, therefore, often do not provide products of varying quality and price, and individuals are often not able to gather the information they need to make knowledgeable choices in the marketplace.

Moreover, some suggest that increased information may actually be detrimental, leading to more choice alternatives which may paralyze a consumer from making a choice or increase the possibility of a consumer making a suboptimal choice, leading to regret (Iyenger and Lepper 2000). The availability of information does little if consumers do not actively seek and use the information (Newholm, Laing, and Hogg 2006). Finally, the “McDonaldization” of society, where consumers are increasingly responsible for activities traditionally undertaken by retailers (Ritzer 2000), has been cited as evidence of a loss of power by consumers.

As the balance continues to shift between what it is normal for service managers to do, and what it is expected consumers should be able to do for themselves, the organization achieves a greater degree of flexibility. Thus the organization rather than the consumer is empowered (Gilliatt, Fenwick, and Alford 2000, p. 347).

Grønmo and Ölander (1991) suggest that some of the confusion over the degree of power possessed by consumers in the marketplace may arise from the fact that this power is not necessarily a fixed entity. Instead, the degree of power held by consumers may differ over time, across product categories, and between different cases and situations. They hold that the marketplace is a dynamic place where reference to universal trends will necessarily be misleading.

Consumer Culture Model

The consumer culture model focuses attention on the influence of culture on the lives of individual consumers. Proponents of this model reject the premise that individuals have underlying physical wants and desires which they seek to satisfy through the acquisition of various products (Kirkpatrick 1994). They further reject the contention that products have the explicit abilities to fulfill these wants and desires based on their physical performance attributes (Ozanne and Murray 1996). Alternatively, in a consumer culture, many goods and services are not marketed as merely being capable of satisfying a consumer's physical needs (Shaw, et al. 2006). Instead, they are marketed as providing the means by which consumers' non-market needs can be similarly fulfilled (Burns 2001; Crawford 1985). A discussion of the role of non-market needs appears warranted.

Non-market needs differ in kind from basic physical needs (Sirgy et al. 1995). They are, by definition, needs which usually cannot be satisfied through ordinary market means – such needs would include the desire for love, companionship, or self-esteem (Waide 1987). Non-market needs, however, are associated with products through semiotic communication. Even though products by definition are not generally able to satisfy individuals' non-market needs, through a system of signs and symbols, consumers come to associate certain non-market needs with certain products, such as companionship, fun, and sex with certain brands of beer, or romance and mystery with certain brands of perfume (Burns 2001). Indeed, many theories of consumer behavior suggest that consumers evaluate products based on their subjective perceptions of the products (perceptions based on signs and symbols) rather than on objective physical reality (Friedmann and Lessig 1987). Levy suggested that "people buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (1959, p. 118). Baudrillard expanded on this as follows:

Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is a systematic act of the manipulation of signs...In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, a-signed arbitrarily and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs (1988, p. 22).

It therefore appears that many products are acquired based on their perceived capacity to satisfy nonmarket needs through the meanings or symbolic qualities ascribed to them instead of just the physical qualities of the products (Dittmar 1992; Hoshino 1987; Shaw et al. 2006). Indeed, "when we consume objects, we are consuming sign, and in the process are defining ourselves" (Ritzer 1997, p. 80).

Within a consumer culture, many purchases by individuals are for self-development or self-enhancement purposes where individuals view their physical possessions as the primary building blocks in the construction of their selves or identities (Cooper, McLoughlin, and Keating 2005; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2007). The idea that possessions are an integral defining

element of one's self is not new (e.g., James 1890) – in a consumer culture, however, they become the primary defining element. Belk states 'knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as ourselves. ... That we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior' (1988, p. 139).

Since the self-construction process is carried out primarily through consumption in consumer culture, consumption becomes necessary to develop and maintain one's self (Ferguson 1992). Consequently, acquiring products, or, more importantly, acquiring the images that are associated with products by marketers and by consumers becomes a, if not the, primary driving force behind much of individuals' purchasing activity (Neuner, Raab, and Reisch 2005). Individuals' shopping activity becomes tied to the images associated with available products (Burns 2001). In other words, 'The image is the substance. Through a planned interplay of signs, the image becomes the essence a customer seeks in a product or service... Technology (in the hands of marketers) exists merely to create images' (Cova 1996, pp. 496-497). On the other hand, freedom lies in the ability to choose one's self and, consequently, the type of images and symbols to be acquired. The purchase of products with self-consistent images becomes a primary orientation of one's life – a materialistic lifestyle must be pursued if one is going to possess a viable, coherent self in a consumer culture (Davies and Elliott 2006; Miller 2004). Hence, within consumer culture, some view life as being imprisoned to the self-construction process (Burns 2006). "While some may view these economic decisions (consumer purchases) as free choices, others ... view consumers as manipulated victims who are not free with the current market system" (Shaw et al. 2006, p. 1054).

Consequently, within a consumer culture, consumers are often viewed as possessing relatively little power – they are viewed as passive subjects who are forced to accept the images ascribed by marketers to particular products (Burns and Warren 2009). Several, however, question whether marketers operating in a consumer culture are able to exert such an effect. There is no guarantee that signs, a necessary component of the meaning development process, for instance, will be passively and consistently accepted by targeted consumers in a way dictated by marketers and/or retailers – individuals can be expected to exhibit considerable variation in their interpretation of signs. This quality is referred to as the polysemic quality of signs (Derrida 1976; du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus 1997) – signs are, by their very nature, often open to multiple interpretations by their audience (Bakhtin 1981). Indeed, consumers may be the ultimate determiner of how the signs associated with a product are interpreted (Firat and Dholakia 2006). The polysemic quality of signs in the retail environment, therefore, appears to affect the amount of power that consumers truly possess within this model of consumer power.

Discursive Model

Based on Foucault, the discursive model rejects the idea of the sovereign consumer as depicted in the consumer sovereignty model and the cultural dominance by marketers suggested by the cultural model (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006). Instead, consumer power is viewed to be product of the interaction between consumers and retailers. Kozinets, Sherry, Storm, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit, and Deberry-Spence illustrates this approach by stating that the "wills of consumers and producers turn out to be far more overlapping, mutual and interdependent than commonly recognized" (2004, p. 671). Within this paradigm, power is viewed as omnipresent, hence there is no possessing, acquiring, or losing it (Shanker, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Power is not viewed as existing independently of the society in which it is manifest. As such, instead of power being possessed by retailers or consumers, power is what creates both providers and consumers within discourses of knowledge (Shanker et al. 2006).

The discursive model suggests that behavior is not moderated by internal standards but by an

internalization of an external discourse of normalcy and conduct. Internalization of norms and codes of conduct takes place via iterative and co-evolving processes of “objectivisation” where truths are established to effect normalizing behavior, and “subjectivism” where appropriate practices of the self result in the constitution of a subject as a known, free and empowered agent. Hence, individuals are simultaneously objectivised by institutional discourses and disciplinary power and subjectivised by the practices of the self (Denegri-Knott 2006, p. 961).

The three models through which consumer power can be viewed are not mutually exclusive, but each provides insight into the relationships between consumers and retailers. For the purpose of this paper, contributions from each of the models are included to provide a holistic view of consumer power. Specifically, consumer power is viewed as the ability of consumers to effect changes in the offerings provided by retailers, while recognizing the role played by the culture in determining the “needs” of consumers and the interrelated nature of consumers and retailers.

Markets and Market Segments

Although each of the various models of consumer power provides unique perspectives on the subject, implicit in each is that the extent to which consumers possess power is dependent at least in part on the nature of the market. To better understand the issue of consumer power, therefore, it is necessary to examine the nature of markets and market segments.

A market is comprised of “people with sufficient purchasing power, authority, and willingness to buy” (Kurtz 2011, p. 274). A market, therefore, includes all who buy products – a conception commonly referred to as the mass market. The definition of a market can also be limited to individuals who have desires for products in a specific product category, such as a market for mid-size SUVs or for cartons of ice cream. Both of these conceptions of a market, however, are similar in that both are constructions (Blumler 1996) – a market is merely a group of unique heterogeneous individuals, unified only in the want, desire, or need to consume.

The above market description is equally applicable to market segments. The existence of desires for relatively similar products across a group of individuals such as a market segment, however, does not imply that these desires arise from similar underlying wants and needs. Indeed, it is often more likely that the desire for a certain set of product benefits arises from a multitude of differing individual wants and needs, all of which almost coincidentally lead to the desire for similar product benefits. Like a market, then, a market segment targeted by a specific retailer, or the retailer’s target market, is a construction. A market segment as a relatively homogeneous grouping often exists only in the mind of the business attempting to reach it.

Market segments, however, are essential tools for retailers in their quest for continued existence and financial success (Wedel and Kanakura 2000). Although market segmentation by retailers is generally regarded as a relatively simple, straight-forward undertaking, in practice it becomes a much more complex phenomenon, particularly when the effect that the interactions between retailers and their targeted market segments have on consumers’ shopping activities are analyzed.

McQuail (1987) and Blumler (1996), in their discussions of media audiences, suggest market segmentation is actually often a complex activity, by suggesting that media audiences can be conceptualized in several different fashions – fashions which ultimately affect the relative power of the individuals who comprise the groupings. McQuail (1987) and Blumler (1996) suggest that media audiences can be construed in economic terms, as publics, as vessels, or from a cultural perspective. Arguably, this conceptualization is also applicable to market segments and,

consequently, can logically be expected to provide insights into the degree of power possessed by consumers. Each of these ways of construing segments is described below.

Market Segments as Economic Entities

Market segments are most commonly characterized in economic terms. Here, attention is not on the individuals who comprise the market segment (consumers). Instead, individuals are viewed only as spectators passively receiving and reacting to the offerings presented to them by retailers. From such a perspective, a market segment is viewed as a commodity. The focus of attention is on the commercial transaction – the sale. More specifically, a market segment is viewed merely as a means or a tool by which a retailer can increase the number and size of sales transactions with the objective of maximizing profits. Consequently, the exclusive measure of the success of a retailer's activities is the level of profit.

Under this construction, retailers develop offerings determined to (or are thought to) appeal to their selected market segments. When exposed to these offerings, individual consumers who comprise a targeted segment are expected to respond appropriately by purchasing the offerings. Within this context, market segments are considered only because of an existing similarity in the set of product benefits being sought by its members – a similarity which increases the likelihood that offerings can be made available which will produce the highest resulting level of profits. The power possessed by individual consumers within this perspective, therefore, is negligible. The needs of individual consumers matter only to the extent to which they correspond to those of a larger group of individuals (a market segment). An individual in this context generally finds an inability to entice retailers to provide offerings corresponding with their specific desires unless their desires correspond with those of a larger market segment – to provide individually customized products generally is not a profitable endeavor for most businesses. Regardless of whether individual consumers are able to effectively communicate their needs and desires to retailers, therefore, freedom of choice is constrained to those products directed toward existing market segments of adequate size to be profitable.

The oil industry, or more specifically, the retailing of gasoline, may be an industry which is illustrative of where market segments are viewed as economic entities. The primary focus of the industry is on profits with little desire or need to provide differentiated products to meet varying needs for desires of consumers. Indeed, the only differences promoted in products across companies lie primarily in the cleaning abilities of fuels, which, in fact, differ little between companies. Consequently, consumers possess little power to affect the gasoline offerings available. Their level of choice often consists of only whether or not to purchase the product. As a result, they generally have negligible input into what is made available.

P1: When market segments are characterized in economic terms, a retailer's focus is merely the similarity of the set of product benefits being sought by the members of their targeted segment. Such a view likely results in minimal power for individual consumers.

Market Segments as Publics

Market segments can also be viewed as publics. Within this perspective, retailers perform a societal role. Instead of focusing on maximizing profits, the activities of retailers are viewed as the mechanism through which the needs and desires of individuals (with an emphasis on needs) are identified, addressed, and fulfilled. The primary role of retailers in this setting is to increase society's quality of life by making available offerings which best fulfill the needs and desires of society's members. The primary focus of a retailer as it relates to its targeted market segment is not the

maximization of sales nor profits. Instead, sales and profits are merely the result of successfully meeting the needs of the individuals who comprise a retailer's targeted market segment. Retailing then, is a societal calling. The profits retailers receive merely ensure continued existence of the retailer.

When viewing market segments as publics, the primary role of a retailer becomes that of communicator/educator – to identify the needs and desires of society's members who comprise a target market, to develop the means (product offerings) through which these needs can be satisfied, and to educate the members of the segment as to how these offerings can indeed satisfy their needs and desires. Within this perspective, the power possessed by individual consumers is likely to be significantly greater than when market segments are viewed as economic entities. Market segments are utilized only to the extent that they aid in satisfying the needs and desires of individuals. Since the primary goal is not profit maximization, it is likely that market segments will be smaller in size, permitting closer matches between product offerings and the needs of individuals and, as a result, more freedom of choice. Furthermore, with a societal calling as the basis for operating, situations may exist where consumers' needs and desires vary to such an extent that there will occasionally be a need for market segments comprised of unitary individuals.

Since the focus of companies who view their target markets as publics is not on profit maximization, relatively few of these firms are large or publicly traded. Often such companies represent an outgrowth of an individuals' or a group's desire to beneficially affect society in some way personally important to them. Many independent health food stores target individuals with a particular interpretation of what food is healthy, frequently resulting in relatively small target markets – target markets which are often too small in size for a retailer to realize profit maximization but which may lead to increased customer satisfaction. It should be noted that some companies try to portray themselves as viewing their target markets as publics when, in fact, they are not. In this instance, the attempt to convey target markets as publics is undertaken as an attempted means to convey an image of caring to consumers (even though it is fabricated). The use of this approach most commonly occurs for trendy issues where a social need is addressed, such as the green movement.

P2: When market segments are viewed by retailers as publics, the primary role of the retailer is to increase society's quality of life. Such a view likely leads to greater power for individual consumers than when market segments are viewed as economic entities.

Market Segments as Vessels

Market segments can also be viewed as vessels, or as the means by which the fruits of the industrial process (product offerings) can be effectively disseminated to the public. The individuals who comprise market segments then, become throughput systems of product disbursement, ensuring the continuing success of businesses (primarily manufacturers) and their employees. This perspective views consumers as merely a necessary cog in the industrial process.

When viewed as vessels for the dissemination of products, market segments become a construction of convenience – a tool which retailers use to more effectively and more efficiently move product through the final stages of the marketing channel. Market segments are viewed as a means through which the continued success of the manufacturing sector is sustained. The focus, then, is not on profit maximization (as it is when market segments are viewed in economic terms), nor is it on consumer needs and desires (as it is when market segments are viewed as publics). Instead, market segments are viewed as a means more effective than the overall market by which demand for production can be sustained in the manufacturing sector. Sales is the primary goal of businesses within this perspective.

Viewing market segments as vessels differs from viewing market segments as economic entities by the differences in the goals sought. When viewed as economic entities, the primary goal of market segmentation is profits – the primary concern is not on the volume of production sold. The goal of market segments when viewed as vessels, however, is sales to support the production of goods – the primary concern is not on profitability.

By using market segments, retailers are able to provide more product offerings which will satisfy a larger number of consumers. When viewed as vessels, therefore, the power available to consumers is less than when market segments are viewed as publics, but likely more than when they are viewed as economic entities. Given that the focus is on sales, the needs and desires of individuals when viewed as vessels are more important than when they are viewed as economic entities since there will be a need to provide adequate product variation to maximize the level of sales. The needs and desires of individuals, however, matter only to the extent that they can be directly utilized to increase/maintain sales.

Many automobile dealers, particularly those directly owned by automobile manufacturers, for instance, seemingly take this view of their target markets. The primary goal is to move as many “units” as possible – the focus is on the volume of automobiles sold to support the automobile manufacturers’ manufacturing operations as opposed to profit maximization (where fewer automobiles would be sold, but at higher profit margins). Some commodity food markets have similar views of target markets, with prime importance placed on the dissemination of products to ensure the continued financial viability of a particular group of farmers. (Indeed, the U.S. food stamp program was initially developed primarily as a means to aid farmers by fostering increased demand for their products).

- P3:** When market segments are viewed by retailers as vessels, the segments serve as a means to sustain product demand to maintain the manufacturing sector. Such a view likely results in less power for individual consumers than when market segments are viewed as publics, but more power than when market segments are viewed as economic entities.

Market Segments as Cultural Entities

Finally, market segments can also be viewed from a cultural perspective. From this viewpoint, market segments are not regarded merely as groupings of individuals with desires for similar products. Instead, they are viewed as being comprised of a number of unique heterogeneous individuals who are directly affected by and directly affect others, or, in other words, they actively interact with the individuals and institutions with which they have contact. Individuals, the market segments that they comprise, and the institutions (including retailers) with which they interact, therefore, are not independent static entities, but dynamic organisms which constantly affect one another. As opposed to the other three conceptions of market segments then, when viewing marketing segments as cultural entities, retailers are more intimately tied to their customers. By being more closely tied to retailers, consumers have the potential to either possess greater consumer power or less. Both of these possibilities will be discussed.

When viewed as cultural entities, market segments and retailers become much closer, permitting consumers to better communicate their wants and needs to retailers and permitting retailers to better understand these wants and needs. Since market segments can be expected to more readily and frequently affect the offerings and operation of retailers in this perspective than in the other perspectives, the possibility exists for consumers to possess the greatest degree of power in the marketplace.

Given the social nature of their products, many fashion-oriented apparel retailers, such as H&M, appear to take this view of their target markets. By becoming more intimately involved with their target market, these retailers can become much more knowledgeable of their customers' wants and needs. Indeed, consumers and retailers can jointly develop products. (This "empowerment of consumers" is discussed by Fuchs et al. (2010) who note that businesses can profit from shifting power to consumers by jointly developing products with them). A similar situation exists in the market for designer kitchens. In this setting, significant interaction among consumers and between consumers and retailers can logically be expected – interaction which may possibly change the needs and desires of consumers/market segments seeking this product, and also in the offerings of the retailers made available to consumers/market segments.

P4a: When market segments are viewed by retailers as cultural entities, retailers are more intimately tied to their customers. The retailer and targeted market segment can be members of the same social grouping, allowing retailers to become better attuned to consumers' needs and desires. This view, therefore, likely results in greater power for individual consumers than when market segments are viewed as economic entities, as publics, or as vessels.

When viewed as cultural entities, however, the opportunity also exists for retailers to increase their power relative to consumers. Most individuals are members of numerous social groupings (McQuail 1997). The influence of groups on one's behavior and choices, either directly or indirectly, can be far reaching (Festinger 1954). For instance, groups can often affect an individual's needs and desires, affect perceptions of these needs and desires, and determine how these needs and desires can be satisfied (Girard 1997). Social groupings often serve as an individual's point of comparison and/or as a primary source of information (Ritzer 1997). Market segments can at times serve as social groupings themselves, with members affecting each other in ways which have the potential to profoundly affect each member's activities in the marketplace and their relationships with retailers. Within this environment, some retailers may possess the ability to act as a group member and, as a result, directly affect consumers to a greater extent than in the other conceptualizations of market segments (Dittmar 1992). In this context, some retailers may be able to use the close nature of the relationships with consumers as a tool to manipulate them to perform as the retailers desire. The power which may be exercised by retailers, therefore, may also lead to decreased power for consumers.

The possibility of less consumer power when market segments are viewed as cultural entities exists in those instances where the retailers serve as "discerners of taste". Wedding planners may be one such example. Wedding planners often form intimate relationships with their clients/customers. They can use these relationships to dictate "traditions" or "must haves" to consumers which often consist of additional (often highly profitable) purchases. The close relationships can provide wedding planners with insight into determining the "best" additional purchases to propose. The established relationships, in turn, increase the likelihood that consumers will agree to the "extras." Consequently, consumers possess less power in these relationships.

P4b: When market segments are viewed by retailers as being cultural entities, retailers who can act as "discerners of taste" can use their close relationships with customers to their own advantage by attempting to influence the needs and desires of consumers. Such activities can lead to lesser power for individual consumers than when market segments are viewed as economic entities, as publics, or as vessels.

The Structure of the Relationship between Retailers and Market Segments

The propositions suggest that power of consumers in the marketplace is dependent on the structure of the relationship between retailers and market segments. Specifically, the ability of retailers to have consumers conform to behavior expectations is dependent on the diversity of retailers and their offerings and to the extent to which their offerings are open to the individual interpretation of consumers. Each is discussed below.

Retailer Diversity

The degree of diversity existing among retailers and in their offerings directly affects the power possessed by individual consumers in the marketplace and the degree to which retailers can expect consumers to purchase their products (Davis and Elliott 2006). In the instance where either relatively few market segments exist, or where the market is not of sufficient size to permit the existence of a large number of retailers to meet the needs and desires of each existing market segment (such as can be expected to be found in a smaller town located significant distances from other cities), consumers can be expected to possess less power (Pires et al. 2006). In this case, consumers will likely not face a wide choice of shopping and product choices. Consumers will still generally shop at, and purchase from, that retailer which best targets that market segment of which they are a part, but their choice will likely possess few alternatives from which to choose. In this situation, it is likely that they will become store loyal, purchasing products offered by the retailer which best targets the individual's market segment. With fewer choice options, it is likely that the differences in offerings between existing retailers will be relatively great – making it less likely that a change in store choice will occur.

In the instance where multiple market segments exist and the market is of adequate size to permit retailers to target each of the market segments, a large number of relatively similar retailers will likely exist with each retailer targeting a slightly different market segment, such as can often be found in the women's apparel industry. In this environment, the members of a particular market segment will likely find themselves to be less strongly tied to any one specific retailer – if the offerings of a retailer which targets the market segment to which one belongs are less than satisfactory to an individual consumer, that consumer may be able to locate more attractive alternatives from retailers targeting similar though different market segments (Keat, Ambercrombie, and Whiteley 1994). The growth of alternative shopping venues, such as the Internet, will likely increase the shopping and product alternatives available to many consumers (Pires et al. 2006).

Since consumers have increased freedom of choice in this instance, they will possess significantly greater degrees of power in the marketplace (Davies and Elliott 2006). "If consumers perceive they have alternative suppliers from which to choose, their zone of tolerance is likely to be smaller than if they don't feel this flexibility" (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1991, p. 43). Similarly, Jenner states that a wider variety of products from which to choose "means that consumers do not have to accept or 'take' a product that has features or qualities they do not like. Quite clearly, this represents a substantial real increase in consumer power" (1994, p. 15). Retailers targeting a particular market segment would not be able to simply expect that the members of that segment will always positively respond to the offerings made available to them. With a large number of competitors targeting similar target markets, it is much more likely that individual consumers will be able to locate more attractive offerings from a competitor from time to time. Hence, in this environment, retailers will be forced to be much better attuned to the needs and desires of each member of their targeted market segment to maximize long-term success (Newholm et al. 2006).

P5: When consumers face a large number of relatively similar retailers, they experience greater

freedom of shopping and product choices. Consequently, in this instance, the power of individual consumers is greater than when consumers face a narrow choice of shopping and product choices.

Openness of the Retailers' Offerings to Individual Interpretation

As discussed earlier, the reality for most retailers is an environment where many consumers are not simply desiring products to satisfy their physical needs, but where many are seeking products to satisfy their non-market needs (Shaw et al. 2006) – needs which can be appealed to in the marketplace through the meanings assigned to products. These meanings, furthermore, are not fixed but are transitory and are determined at least in part by consumers themselves. Given this reality, the uncertainty about the likely reaction of consumers to the offerings of a retailer is heightened. Retailers, therefore, generally do not have the ability to unequivocally apply meanings to themselves nor to the products they offer. Similar to the situation with television viewers (e.g. Curran 1990; Fiske 1987), consumers have become active co-makers of the meaning assigned (Senge and Carstad 2003).

In response to this environment, retailers offer “performances” – experiences (product offerings, store atmosphere, etc.) which are coordinated in such a way as to attempt build a particular story in the minds of their target market (Warren and Burns 2002). In other words, retailers can be viewed as theater, displaying their carefully choreographed offerings to their particular targeted market segments (Pine and Gilmore 1999). These performances are intended to convey a specific message, but the ultimate interpretation is left to the audience, the individual consumers. Given this polysemy of meaning, power does not lie in retailers nor in their activities, but in the consumer and how the consumer interprets the stimuli – or what the consumer “does” with the performance (Morley 1999). The ultimate success of a performance lies in the hands of consumers.

Furthermore, consumers' assessments of a retailer's performance will vary over time. A new performance by a competitor, an existing performance of a competitor which has been reinterpreted, or consumers merely growing tired of a performance, can result in a downgrading of a retailer's performance relative to those of the competition and may lead to significant loss of business. Many retailers, therefore, often find themselves facing seemingly increasingly fickle consumers – consumers with a multitude of buying alternatives, and consumers who are active participants in the conveyance of meaning to retailers' offerings. The degree to which a retailer's offerings are polysemic, or open to alternative interpretations by consumers, therefore, the more power which consumers possess in the marketplace – the more freedom that consumers possess to define the meanings of the products.

P6: The more that individual consumers ascribe meaning to stores and products, the greater the uncertainty about the likely reaction of consumers to the offerings of a retailer. In other words, the more that the offerings of a retailer are polysemic, the greater the power of individual consumers.

To complicate issues, many retailers are facing market segments comprised of individuals who originate from a number of different subcultures, and who consequently may assign different meanings to the same products (Morley 1999). Moreover, as cultures become more complex, the range and diversity of the meanings which can be ascribed to performances by retailers increases (Lewis 1994).

Lewis (1994) suggests that the power of the message, such as that of a retailer's performance, may have the ability to successfully reach a number of market segments simultaneously by reaching

different segments with different interpretations. Levi jeans is an example of a product which, in the past, simultaneously met the need of multiple, very different market segments. Levi's jeans, for instance, was a very popular product for working-class individuals, such as farmers, who appreciated the long-wearing qualities of the products. Levi's jeans were also a very popular product for suburban teenagers. The teenagers did not purchase the products for their long-wearing qualities, but instead, they were demanded as a way to differentiate themselves from their middle-class parents and their lifestyles. The teenagers ascribed a counter-cultural meaning to the products – a meaning in sharp contrast to the utilitarian meaning ascribed to the product by many working-class individuals.

Similarly, many large retailers such as Walmart must rely on the patronage of a wide variety of people from a number of not-necessarily similar market segments in order to generate adequate sales volumes. It is likely that when asked to describe interpretations of Walmart's performance, Walmart customers originating from vastly dissimilar market segments will likely report vastly differing interpretations. Indeed, polysemy of meaning may be necessary for large retailers such as Walmart to prosper.

This is not suggesting that a retailer should attempt to be "all things to all people" by attempting to reach individuals from all market segments. History has clearly shown that pursuing such a strategy most often leads to the demise of the retailer (Gil-Saura and Ruiz-Molina 2009). Instead, it may be possible for some retailers to simultaneously reach more than one market segment, segments which may or may not be similar based on traditional segmentation bases. The key is how the retailer's performance is interpreted.

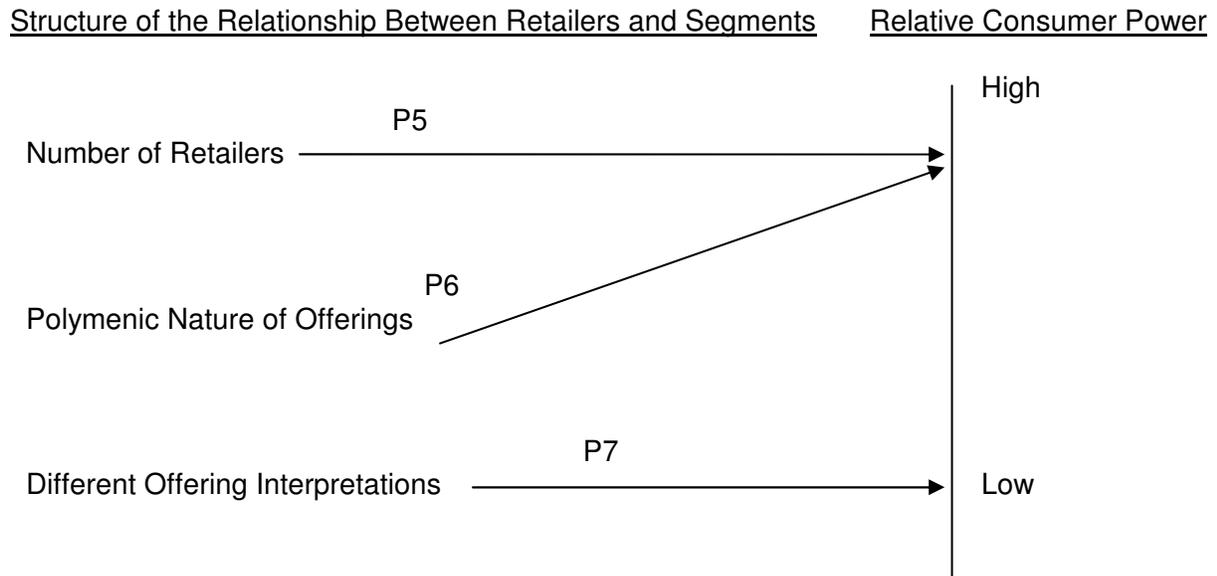
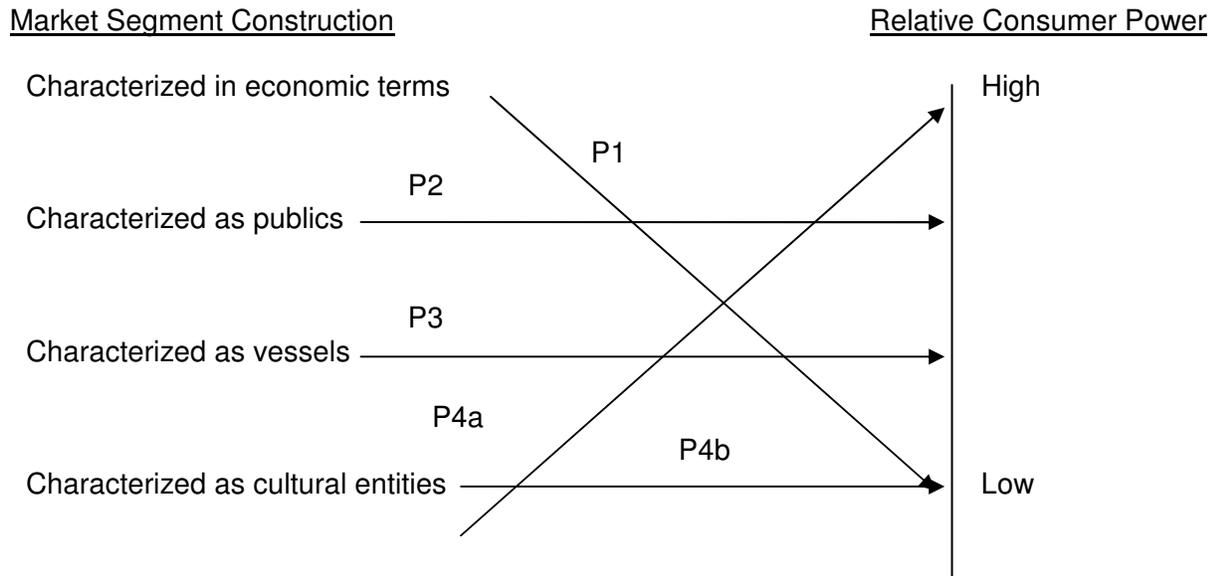
An example of such a retailer may be Aldi in the U.S. Unlike SuperValu's Save-a-Lot chain, Aldi does not segment the market by income, but by psychographics. Consequently, consumers who shop at Aldi represent a very wide income distribution, from individuals with very low incomes to consumers with incomes well into the six figures. The broad income span allows Aldi to build the sales volume which permits them to operate efficiently and offer the low prices which all of its customers demand. In response, Aldi may be viewed by lower income consumers as the only outlet whose prices will permit them to feed their families. Middle-income consumers may view shopping at Aldi as a "badge of intelligence" – a way to display their shopping prowess to others. Higher income individuals may view shopping at Aldi as a way to justify/permit the purchase of luxury products in other product categories.

The presence of large retailers such as Walmart or Aldi in the marketplace, and their ability to serve the needs of multiple market segments, likely results in a decline in the number of retail outlets available to consumers to choose from in a market area. Indeed, a resulting decline in the available competitors in a market area with the arrival of large retailers is often used as a reason to attempt to block their coming (Zimmerman and Searcey 2010). A lesser number of retailers from which consumers can choose may lower the number of choice possibilities available for consumers and, ultimately, their power in the marketplace.

P7: When retailers are able to satisfy the differing interpretations that different market segments attach to products and the performance of the retailer, consumers will possess less choice in the marketplace and consequently will possess less power.

A summary of the propositions is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Study Propositions



Discussion and Conclusion

It appears that the relationships and interactions between retailers and their targeted market segments may affect the degree of power held by consumers in the marketplace. Several conclusions can be drawn. First, market segments appear to be multidimensional phenomena. They can be construed in economic terms, as publics, as vessels, or from a cultural perspective. Each of these conceptualizations is insufficient in itself – each, however, adds to an understanding of market segments. Market segments in differing product markets, however, can logically be expected to be conceptualized differently. The extent to which each of the conceptualizations comes into play may affect the degree of power possessed by consumers in each market segment.

Second, the power possessed by consumers in the marketplace may further be affected by the discreteness of the market segments, or, in other words, by the number and diversity of existing retailers and the openness of their offerings to individual interpretations. A relatively small number of retail alternatives and great diversity between them presents a situation where market segments are fairly discrete and individual consumers are likely to possess relatively little power. In the situation characterized by a multitude of retail alternatives and, as a result, relatively little diversity existing between similar retailers, market segments become much less discrete. Consumers may much more easily move between different retailers, leading to less store loyalty. Within this environment, market segments become more fluidic and less defined, possibly leading to greater consumer choice in the marketplace.

The openness of retailers' offerings to individual interpretations also tends to blur the concept of market segments since market segments are affected by how consumers interpret retailers' offerings. Similarity of desires for a specific set of product benefits, or even similar underlying needs and desires, are often not sufficient bases for constructing market segments. The manner by which consumers interpret retailers' offerings becomes an additional, often vital, basis upon which a market must be segmented. The extent to which a retailer's offerings are open to interpretation, however, may directly affect the power which consumers possess. The more a retailer's offerings are open to individualized interpretations by consumers, the more power consumers may possess. The openness to individualized interpretations permits consumers the freedom to define the meanings of the products in the ways they choose.

In conclusion, market segments are constructions developed to help retailers fulfill their roles and economically prosper. How they are constructed, namely the manner in which market segments are conceptualized and the structural environment of the relationship between retailers and market segments, likely affects the degree to which consumers can prompt retailers to provide the products they desire in the marketplace. The focus of this paper was to examine these issues and to develop propositions to guide future empirical research.

The power consumers are able to exercise in their relationships with retailers can be expected to directly relate to the nature of those relationships and can also be expected to affect the decisions and actions of retailers. Retailers that find themselves with market segments whose members possess significant power in the marketplace will face a greater challenge in retaining those customers than retailers with market segments whose members possess less power in the marketplace. Faced with a market segment whose members possess significant power, retailers will need to place a high degree of attention on ensuring the ongoing satisfaction of their customers. Their customers may easily be lost to competitors if these competitors are able to satisfy their customers better. Hence, there is a continuing requirement to vigilantly fight for one's customers by

continually attempting to improve the shopping experience. However, faced with a market segment whose members possess less power in the marketplace, retailers may not need to invest the same level of attention and resources to serve their market segment and may be better able to pursue and invest in other opportunities in the marketplace. Possessing a good understanding of the power held by one's market segment, therefore, may provide retailers with guidance into the appropriate investment of resources. Consequently, it is an important area of study.

Implications

This paper suggests that the power possessed by consumers may be affected by the nature of the relationships between consumers and retailers in the marketplace. This realization may help consumer educators and activists to see the "big picture" of the relationships between consumers and retailers in such a way to better educate consumers and to better affect the marketplace. With a knowledge of the "big picture," consumer educators and activists may be able to identify where consumers should be able to exercise more influence over retailers than what they are presently experiencing. In these situations, consumer educators and activists may be able to educate consumers to make wiser choices in the marketplace commensurate with the power they actually possess. In the situations where consumers possess little power, however, consumer educators and activists may view these instances as areas where additional governmental involvement in the marketplace may be advantageous to consumers and may actively lobby to increase governmental involvement.

This study also provides insight into how the structure of markets, such as the number and diversity of existing retailers may affect consumer power. Such understanding may aid in the development of appropriate marketplace policies.

The paper also provides a research agenda for consumer researchers. Consumer power is often viewed as a global concept to apply to many or all interactions in the marketplace. The propositions presented will permit analyses into the particulars of the various relationships between retailers and consumers and will provide insight into the range of power consumers may experience in different situations. For instance, although consumer power is expected to vary across the different ways that market segments can be conceptualized, to what extent does the level of consumer power differ?

A better understanding of consumer power can also be helpful to retailers. By further understanding consumer power in the relationships between consumers and retailers, retailers may be in a better position to determine the optimal investment of limited resources. Choices can be made by retailers which will both aid themselves through increased profits and stronger relationships with consumers, such as jointly designing products. However, some choices can be made to increase profits at the expense of consumer power, such as the active analysis and use of loyalty card data. Retailers will need to make explicit decisions concerning their relationships with their customers.

Limitations

The power possessed by consumers in their interactions with retailers is likely affected by a number of considerations. This study, however, examined only two of these issues. Additional issues to be explored include consumer demographics, consumer lifestyles, public policy, and the strengths and techniques employed by activist groups.

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