

Marketing and the Emergence of Consumption Culture in Social Constructionism Perspective: Christmas Consumption in Japan, 1900-2000

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Do the Japanese simply import and then mimic the Christmas consumption patterns of consumers in Europe and North America? Can one distinguish between genuine/right ways of consuming products and fake/wrong ways of consuming them? How might we define genuine/right consumption, in specific terms? These questions formed the core of the present study. The purpose of the research was to explore what, exactly, constitutes a "right" way of consumption.

Moeran and Skov (1993) say "Christmas in Japan seems to be made up of a vast unstructured accumulation of Western styles and Western commodities put together in a way that bears hardly any resemblance to Christmas in Europe or America" (p.108). These researchers seem to be making the assumption that the "original way of consuming is right" and that "consuming desacralized products is wrong". The author of the present paper questions this assumption. Consumption culture, in general, is open to changes in time and place. It would be improper to behave as anthropologists, who study native islanders and declare that the natives live "primitive" lives or live in the "wrong" way. Their lives and behaviors are simply "different" from the original way or the anthropologist's way. We cannot claim that the original way is always right.

This study develops the framework for ethnomethodologically informed social constructionism, which proposes that the legitimacy of consumption and consumer products exists only when people believe its legitimacy and keep to established consumption practices. The concept of "practices" is taken to mean activities such as manufacturing, selling, purchasing, eating, exchanging, giving and mentioning. The study draws from research on Christmas consumption in Japan throughout the 20th century (1900 to 2000), in order to establish the validity of this framework. Christmas consumption here means any activities related Christmas consumption including the consumption of Christmas products, the copying of Christmas festivities, and making Christmas-season purchases.

The ethnomethodologically informed social constructionism perspective consists of five key concepts. They are (1) practical reasoning; (2) moves; (3) reflexivity;

(4) layers; and (5) the thread of continuity. Each concept is thoroughly explained in this paper.

Taking the ethnomethodologically informed social constructionism perspective, two research methods were used—discourse analysis and personal interviews with key personnel in manufacturing companies and consumers. In the discourse analysis, several data sources are used: (1) 448 magazine articles; (2) 926 newspaper articles; (3) 895 newspaper advertisements; (4) picture-book and juvenile literature; and (5) academic papers and books. In the personal interviews, interviewees and respondents were selected from various geographic areas in Japan. Since this research analyzes a wide time frame (from 1900 to 2000), it relies more on the discourse data than on the interview data.

In Japan, during the 20th century, there were five distinct phases of Christmas cake legitimacy. Each phase had different contexts of consumption, different consumer categories, different types and forms of cakes, and different images and meanings of cakes.

Stage One (1900 to the start of World War II), is the period when Christmas cake was for foreigners living in Japan. Fujiya, Inc. first sold Christmas cake in the Japanese market in 1910. It was intended, not for the Japanese consumer, but for the foreigners. It wasn't until 1922 that Fujiya started manufacturing Christmas cake for Japanese consumers. In 1921, The Japanese cake manufacturer, Juchheim, first sold the German Christmas cake called Stollen. However, this cake initially was not popular.

The arrival of Stage Two (the start of WWII to 1965), when drinking salary men enjoyed Christmas cake during cabaret shows, is marked by the introduction of mass production techniques, making Christmas cakes affordable to many Japanese consumers.

Stage Three (1965 to the mid-1980's) was marked by a growth in family parties, fuelled by newspaper and magazine articles encouraging family gatherings on Christmas day. Thus, Christmas brought out feelings of togetherness and reinforced family ties, since Christmas cakes baked by family members were regarded as more expressive of affection than were purchased cakes.

During Stage Four (mid-1980's to mid-1990's), the consumption culture shifted to a new consumer category— young couples in love. Trendy TV dramas, popular songs, and fashion magazines featured young couples spending a romantic Christmas together. This cultural shift saw young couples enjoying various forms of Christmas cake.

Characterizing the fifth and last stage (mid-1990's to 2000) was the emergence of a certain consumer refinement about Christmas cake. Wives no longer asked their husbands to buy the Christmas cake since men traditionally did not care much about the fine points of Christmas cake. Whereas, many female consumers had developed own specific Christmas cake tastes. In response to this development, Fujiya offered 31 different kinds of Christmas cake in 2000.

Three major conclusions are reached in this paper. First, there is no, a priori, legitimacy in consumption and in specific consumer products. Rather, it is practices such as manufacturing, selling, buying, eating, exchanging, giving, and mentioning which construct the legitimacy. In each time phase in the study, although the members consume different types of Christmas cake, each believes that he/she consumes the genuine/right Christmas cake. This legitimacy that "our Christmas cake is genuine and right" is constructed through the members' own practices. The social constructionism perspective explains it with the concept of "reflexivity". The members' practices construct the reality, and the reality encourages them to maintain their practices. In other words, practices and reality reinforce each other. In this sense, the legitimacy exists, not in the cake as an object, but in the process of the practices of members. When people believe that stollen is fashionable and consume it as it is, it becomes the reality. When a society's members stop practicing a behavior, the legitimacy disappears.

This first finding helps us understand why the legitimacy changes over time. For example, when the German Christmas cake "stollen" first came into the market, it was not regarded as typical Christmas cake. Years later, it became a more popular and relevant cake. The manufacturer had not changed the product in order to make the cake meet the consumer's taste. Instead, the stollen obtained legitimacy because the consumers had put a different meaning on it.

The third conclusion is that, even during the same period, there is more than one legitimacy. If ethnomethodology "implicitly assumes the existence of a socially constructed reality in which all persons participate" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992, p. 25), it is possible that the similarities among consumers outweigh any differences. Moreover, some might claim that the methodology fails to capture pluralistic and multidimensional consumption phenomena. This is not so. Ethnomethodologically informed social constructionism, using the concept of "practical reasoning", can explain such pluralistic and multidimensional consumption phenomena. It holds that, even for the same consumption

phenomena or consumer products, each consumer has different ways of reasoning. Though it may seem that there is only one phenomenon at work, each member, consuming the same product, is reasoning differently about his or her practices. For example, some young couples have started purchasing and eating "stollen". This is because they regard "stollen" as a more sophisticated and more fashionable Christmas cake than cakes fancily decorated with whipped cream. Others might purchase and eat "stollen" because they had lived in Germany and discovered there that stollen is the traditional Christmas cake.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study might help marketers understand that a product typically associated with the Christmas season does not necessarily require any "proper" episodes related to Christmas consumption. For example, some people in Japan eat non-traditional Christmas cakes which are quite different from the cakes of Europe and North America (where the Christmas consumer culture originates). This is because there is no genuine or "right" way of consuming a "correct" or genuine product. One cannot define "correct consumption" in specific terms. Thus, the marketing strategy for a product might need to be changed. Instead of trying to communicate a product's "correct" consumption episodes to consumers, they could give the product an "open-ended" status, thereby allowing consumers to create a legitimacy on their own and to decide the product's appropriateness for a given need or consumption situation.

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