

An Exploratory Study correlating Quintessence with Brand-Related Behaviour and Perceptions of Value

Abstract

Quintessence is a socially-constructed, phenomenological experience in which products ascend from the mundane to the sacred. Although quintessence can be constructed in several ways, this paper examines quintessence that arises from customer-perceived perfection in form and function during the product experience. The authors use quantitative data from an Australian online video entertainment rental service to correlate quintessence with other brand-related behaviours. The literature review explores the connection between quintessence, which comes to marketing through Consumer Culture Theory, and Service-Dominant Logic. The results indicate positive preliminary correlations between quintessence and perceptions of value, cultish behaviour, word of mouth marketing, and customer satisfaction. The authors also begin to draw a correlation between quintessence and customer evangelism.

Introduction

Consumer religiosity is a concept pioneered by Russell Belk over twenty years ago. Recently, as individuals use digital platforms to express themselves as consumers and individuals, the ideas around consumer religiosity are becoming more relevant to academia and industry.

A recent study of Customer Evangelism (Collins & Murphy, 2009), proposes a model that includes the concept of quintessence as the igniter for extreme word of mouth behaviour by particularly devoted brand community members. This paper examines quintessence, and attempts

PAGE 2

to quantify it. This builds on a previous smaller study about quintessence by the same authors (Collins, Murphy, & Glaebe, 2011).

A seminal paper in 1989 introduced the concept of quintessence (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry).

Quintessence is a means by which an object transcends its profane status and enters the realm of the sacred from the consumer's point of view. Quintessence differs from *Quintessential*, a similar term. Quintessential objects are imbued with qualities that make them iconic. They suit their purpose exactly, in effect a perfect specimen of what they should be. Examples include the Q-tip, Ray-Ban sunglasses, the Volkswagen Beetle and Coca-Cola (Cornfield & Edwards, 1983).

Quintessence is phenomenological, and socially and culturally constructed by the individual. It arises from an authentic, experiential component of product use. It is a type of magic when the planets align in a cultural sense; the product experience transcends the ordinary for an individual in a given space and time. The consumer then transfers the sacredness of the experience to the object itself, imbuing it with sacred qualities. Although studies have examined religiosity in iconic products (Arnoud & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Belk & Tumbat, 2005), the authors of this paper had the opportunity to explore consumer religiosity in a service context for what would be considered a more mundane product (entertainment rental services) than religion.

This paper complements a wide study of Customer Evangelism, of which quintessence forms an essential part (Collins & Murphy, 2009). Quintessence, it is posited, is akin to a switch that turns "on" a unique energy and enthusiasm for a product that shapes behaviours and points of view. Quintessence transforms the consumer's life. Although this paper does not look at Customer

PAGE 3

Evangelists, some of the behaviour resulting from the examination of quintessence suggest behaviour consistent with Customer Evangelism.

This paper uses an existing consumer satisfaction survey to examine quintessence and the correlation between quintessence and specific behaviours and views about the product and the brand.

Theoretical Perspective

Quintessential products can be designed with intent. Steve Jobs of Apple was renowned for his ability to engineer the quintessential computer, MP3 player and smartphone. He would attempt to integrate design and function that was aesthetically pleasing and enhanced the consumer experience.

Quintessence is not imbued into a product, because it originates from the user's authentic experience; not the producer's. One can have quintessence with something as complex as a smart phone or something as simple as a Christmas tree. This is because the experience is fully constructed by the consumer. From a theoretical perspective, this constructivism limits the paradigms to examine quintessence and other phenomenologically based consumer experiences. Consumer Culture Theory and Service-Dominant Logic provide the paradigms and theoretical basis for exploration of this phenomenon.

Consumer Culture Theory

PAGE 4

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is a group of theories centred on consumers and their identities, as individuals and collectively. CCT approaches consumption as a sociocultural practice, examining relationships among individuals, groups, culture, and consumption (Arnoud & Thompson, 2005).

Consumers, through the marketplace, create a bricolage of their identity (Miller, 2003). The choices about their consumption are rooted in context. Advertising and the media compound consumer identification with consumption, and encourage people to find meaning in products (Featherstone, 1991). The symbolic value of products can, therefore, substitute for other aspects of cultural life that are on the wane, such as organized religious activity (Putnam, 2000).

Producers therefore manufacture more than goods and services; they are manufacturing culture itself—and for a profit (Miller, 2003). Every time someone consumes the product, or the media around it, the cultural object becomes validated in its place in the cultural context.

Quintessence: Contextual and Sacred

Quintessence stems from the subjective experience. This experience is contextual, relying on specific feelings arising from experience-in-use. Whereas, other concepts such as flow and affinity rely on psychological feelings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), quintessence arises from a cultural perspective. This is because the religiosity aspect of quintessence has a specific type of cultural significance, and feeds into identity in a cultural way.

PAGE 5

For example, commonly quintessence is felt for engagement rings. The cultural context of a wedding, and marriage, give these rings their significance. However, not every engagement ring carries that type of religiosity of feeling for the wearer.

For some, their wedding and the marriage afterwards changed their life in such a positive way that they imbue their jewelry with the feelings present for those occasions. The ring's personal value is much higher than its market value. The experience of wearing the ring is ritualistic. The ring symbolises the emotional and the sacredness of marriage, and the ritual promises inherent within the contract.. Mixed into those feelings are the memories of the proposal, the first impression of the ring, the size of the stones and how both she and others thought of the proposal, the husband and the ring.

If a marriage fails, the symbolic value of the ring also changes. Quintessence with a ring during a marriage may look quite different to a bride after a divorce. The variance in quintessence stems from the feelings that arise from the product-in-use. As quintessence arises from the product-in-use experience, a relevant marketing paradigm through which to view quintessence is Service-Dominant Logic.

Service-Dominant Logic

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) posits that value does not arise from exchanging products, nor are products imbued with value. Value arises from products in use—from the experiential, or service, component of products (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This significant departure from a goods-

PAGE 6

based paradigm opens the door for a thorough examination of the phenomenological and cultural perspective inherent in the product experience.

Goods-based paradigms restrict the product experience to delivering on the promise imbued within the product. The experience arises from what the producer has infused into the goods and that value is uniform across all the products in the same batch (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Goods-based logic then, would argue that the symbolic value of an engagement ring is imbued within the ring itself. The sacredness of marriage is part of what the husband-to-be purchases and when he gives the ring to his bride, she derives value from the positive matrimonial experience the ring gives her.

From an SDL perspective, the groom purchases the ring for his bride, and in doing so obtains an object with the potential for value within it; however no value is yet realized. When the ring is in use, as part of the proposal, ceremony, or worn afterwards, the bride's feelings toward the ring are the value-in-use she co-creates with the producer and other actors in the value network—one of whom is her husband (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010)

Her feelings toward her husband reflect back to her in the ring while it is in use. These reflections could include the size of the stone, and what others think of it, as well as her views on marriage, her thoughts about how much the ring cost, her impressions of other rings and the ring as a marker of her status as a wife-to-be. How important these things are to her at the moment she experiences the ring play a role in how the value is created; and that changes over time. SDL

PAGE 7

accounts for the variances inherent in phenomenological experiences as it allows for individual experiences of using the product to be the centre of the creation of value, rather than the product itself.

Quintessence is an authentic connection arising from the moment in use. Generally, once experienced, the quintessence halo effect touches subsequent experiences, unless something drastic (in the case of the engagement ring, a divorce for example) changes it.

The halo effect of quintessence has yet to be explored in the literature. How can one tell if someone has quintessence? How will they describe quintessence? And how does the halo effect correlate to their other behaviours? The next section examines quintessence closely and then leads in to an exploratory quantitative study.

Investigating Quintessence

Quintessence arises in a variety of contexts. Family heirlooms often have quintessence to their owners. The cultural and historical significance of an object passed on to family members over time affect how the owners view it. Gifts may also have quintessence to the receiver, depending on the social and cultural context, and on the value of the gift to the receiver (Belk, et al., 1989). Collectors often have quintessence toward specific objects in their collection that are rare or unique (Belk, et al., 1989).

The focus of this paper, however, is not the quintessence achieved through family heirlooms, gifts or collections. This paper investigates a product perceived as authentically achieving

PAGE 8

perfection in form and function; all other versions of the product (other models, other brands and the competition) are simply not what they should be. Quintessence based on form and function can relate to quintessential products; however this is only if the consumer perceives the quintessentialness. An example is the smart phone made by Apple, Inc—the iPhone.

For many, the iPhone is the quintessential smart phone. Other phones predated the iPhone, the Blackberry for example. And many phones after the iPhone, Android-based phones for example, draw on the principles of design and function engineered by Apple. The iPhone is the quintessential smart phone because it was the first such phone that encapsulated the form and features that attracted mainstream smart phone users. The smart phone is still a minority of the mobile phone market. Some would argue that, from a technical perspective, it is not a well-built smart phone. However it is the iconic model and the one with the highest profile in western countries.

Even though the iPhone is the quintessential smart phone, a minority of iPhone users will experience quintessence with their phone. And when they do experience quintessence, it is generally not with their particular phone rather with the brand and the type of product. The quintessence can transfer to a new model, or another iPhone if they lost their original one.

Quintessence in this context is the authentic consumer experience with the product. The user experience is so profound that the user credits the product with a life changing, sacred experience. This life changing experience is rooted in the existential; that is, it is the product in use that delivers the feeling of authenticity, of rightness, of perfection, of something beyond the

PAGE 9

profane (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Belk, et al., 1989; Wang, 1999). Quintessence arises from that feeling and the halo effect resonates beyond the product itself. This study uses a quantitative methodology to examine the halo effect that quintessence delivers.

The study

The online video entertainment rental service (OVERS)

This study draws on a data set from a recent Australian customer satisfaction survey. The researchers analysed the data for by selecting survey questions that reflected behaviours relating to quintessence. The company is an Online Video Entertainment Rental Service (OVERS), where members pay a standard monthly fee to order video entertainment. The customer can select from a variety of plans, and can cancel at any time—there are no contracts or obligation on behalf of the customer to continue with the service.

Once a member, the customer logs on to the web site and selects from tens of thousands of videos and games to rent. They can organize the titles in their queue in any order they wish. OVERS then selects the highest ranking available title and posts it to the member through surface mail. The member keeps the title as long as they like; there are no late fees or return dates. Once the video is returned (via pre-paid post), the company dispatches the next highest-ranking available title in the member's queue.

OVERS membership fluctuates, with 60,000 and 70,000 members across Australia. Each year OVERS offers one 12-month free plan as a prize for a randomly selected member who completes a customer satisfaction survey. The following data is from the September 2010 survey.

The survey

An external online survey provider hosted this survey. The link to the survey was delivered to all current subscribers by email, promoting the prize. The OVERS membership team designed the survey and the number questions ranged from 60 to 70; many questions had subcategories that were questions in themselves. There were no required questions to complete.

The survey asked demographic, psychographic and behavioural questions and questions relating to the respondents purchasing and consumption habits and preferences. The answer formats varied with most measured on a multi-point scale. Four reverse-coded questions in the survey relating to psychographic and behavioural data were used to validate cases.

The data from the OVERS survey was not designed for academic analysis, and therefore the survey and the data are lacking in some respects. The survey was long; and answers may have been more accurate with a shorter survey. The response scales differed from question to question. These factors led to unusable cases as validity could not be verified. Deleting cases where the respondent took less than a minute to respond to all the questions, demographic data not answered and at least two of the four reverse coded questions were invalid left 3,995 valid cases. A previous study using the same data set explored relationships between quintessence and extreme word of mouth behaviour on the full data set (Collins, et al., 2011).

To discover which of the members had quintessence, the authors selected one survey questions as their “quintessence-related” question: “My life wouldn’t be the same without OVERS”.

PAGE 11

Respondents who answered “yes” were labeled “quintessence-positive” or Q+. Those who answered in the negative were Q- or “quintessence negative”.

The Q+ respondents had significantly ($p < .001$) more females (35%) than males (29%) and similarly, significantly ($p < .001$) more rural (37%) than urban (30%) residents. Furthermore, the sample ($n=3995$) over-represented by females (62%) and to some extent, urban residents (35%). In Australia, one third of the population live in urban areas (Capital City Growth in Australia, 2011). As large samples ($n=3995$) may yield false positives, the researchers stratified the sample ($n=600$) to provide an even distribution of males and females, as well as one-third rural residents and two-thirds urban residents.

Findings and Discussion

Q+ population is in the minority

Based on the literature, the authors estimated that the Q+ population would be about 10% of the sample. The Q+ population came in higher (33%) in the total sample ($n=3995$) and (31%) in the stratified sample ($n=600$). The higher number may be because OVERS members who completed the survey were predisposed toward the product, and therefore this survey produced more of a pro-OVERS population. If OVERS members were randomly selected to answer this question, the expectation is that Q+ may be less than 30%.

The Q+ population does not significantly skew toward either gender

The total survey population ($n=3995$) was predominantly female (62%), hence the Q+ population (35%) skewing female seems understandable. However, the stratified sample ($n=600$) adjusted

PAGE 12

for the skew toward females, with 50% in the sample identifying as female. In this sample, 86 of males and 98 females were Q+. Although in the expected direction, this was not a significant difference ($p=0.288$) to build on the assumption that for this product, the Q+ population would skew female.

People in rural areas are more likely to be Q+ with this product

In Australia, two thirds of the population live in urban areas, with one third living in rural areas of varying densities, regional to remote (Capital City Growth in Australia, 2011). In the total survey population ($n=3995$), 35% of respondents identified themselves as living in a rural area, which is over representative of the Australian population. That the Q+ respondents in the overall sample also had an overrepresented population of individuals from rural areas makes sense.

The stratified sample ($n=600$) adjusted for locale by providing a distribution of one-third rural and two-thirds urban respondents. Even with this adjustment in the stratified sample, the percentage of rural users who were Q+ was 38%. The urban population, two-thirds of the sample, only had 27% identifying as Q+.

Why would OVERS resonate more strongly in a rural context than in an urban one? One possibility is access. Rural areas in Australia would not have the population to sustain wide varieties of entertainment choices, and local entertainment rental services lack the depth or breadth in their collections to compete with OVERS. If one is predisposed to consider entertainment important, a film aficionado for example, access to a wide enough variety of titles would be very important. Moreover, movie theatres in rural areas tend not to show foreign and

PAGE 13

independent films, and therefore rural residents would not get the opportunity to view hard to find films or even non-mainstream titles.

Moreover, distances in rural areas may be vast and a postal delivery service is convenient.

Internet access can be patchy outside urban areas, and the ability to stream entertainment over the internet may be limited. Hence the postal options may resonate strongly with rural audiences.

Q+ respondents were less likely to own their own home or have high incomes

Of those who owned their own home, 26% were Q+; of those who did not own their own home, 38% were Q+. Furthermore, when looking at income, 73% of respondents whose income was under \$20,000 per year, less than a full-time minimum wage in Australia, identified as Q+. This result suggests that quintessence tended to be strong amongst those who were unwaged, such as stay-at-home parents, for example, the elderly, or those who worked part time such as young people and students.

Generally speaking, as one moved up the income ladder, the less likely that the respondent would be Q+. In the highest income brackets (\$100,000 and above) quintessence varied between 21% (\$100,000-\$120,000) and 28% (\$150,000+).

OVERS fees would be a substantial portion of income for those who earn under \$20,000 per year. Their choice to invest in the service is a signifier of how important entertainment is to them. Those with higher incomes have access to more resources and therefore are less likely to view purchasing the service as a high involvement decision.

Q+ populations were more likely to engage in cultish behaviour

In studies about brand cults (Belk & Tumbat, 2005), brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), consumer tribes (Shanker, Cova, & Kozinets, 2007) and subcultures of consumption (Chalmers & Arthur, 2008), members of a community are more likely to believe they have something in common with other members than the general population. Consumption is part of one's identity and a bond among users of the same product.

A Mann-Whitney test of likert-scaled questions in the stratified sample, with quintessence as a binomial variable, indicated that Q+ populations were more likely to engage in cultish perspectives with the OVERS community. Members with quintessence think that they have a stronger bond with other OVERS members based on their love for entertainment generally ($p < 0.001$). More research in this area would be needed to understand how this behaviour would manifest, whether through more credibility given by Q+ individuals to online community postings. Or perhaps Q+ individuals are more likely to communicate with each other within and outside the online OVERS environment.

Q+ populations are more likely to perceive value in OVERS and not in the competition

Mann-Whitney tests on the stratified sample also indicated that the perception of value amongst the Q+ individuals is high, and grows over time. Unsurprisingly, Q+ members compared to Q- members were more likely to continue their membership ($p < 0.001$) and more likely to indicate their household is satisfied with their membership ($p < 0.001$). They were also more likely to

PAGE 15

indicate that in the last six months, the value of their membership had increased ($p=0.014$) within the last six months.

Relative to Q- members, Q+ members were more likely to eschew the competition, indicating that their DVD store did not stock a wide enough range of titles ($p<0.001$) and they had not used a local DVD rental store for at least the last few months ($p<0.001$). They were also less likely to visit their local DVD store in future ($p<0.001$).

The above analysis suggests a cogent point. In a service-delivery business, such as entertainment rentals, where an ongoing subscription is required and can be terminated by the member at anytime, loyalty is a financial lifeline. The importance of quintessence in service-only products or goods-based products that require frequent purchases or subscriptions can be more paramount than in industries where purchases are limited.

Certain service aspects resonated with Q+ users more than the Q- users. Their perception of value for money was significantly higher ($p<0.001$), as were convenience ($p<0.001$), the ability to get the titles of their choice ($p=0.027$) and the huge selection available ($p=0.002$). Items which the Q+ members indicated were important to them were OVERS emailing them suggested new titles ($p=0.013$) and the quick delivery of titles ($p=0.029$).

All of the above speak to Belk's argument for perfection of form and function (Belk, et al., 1989). Quintessence is more than the content of the service or how it is delivered that resonates. The

PAGE 16

gestalt of the experience, wrapped up in the way that the customer perceived the importance of entertainment in their life, their access to it and more, bring on the feeling of quintessence.

Q+ populations are more likely to spread word of mouth in an evangelistic way

A previous study (Collins, et al., 2011) using the entire sample (n=3,995) found a significant positive relationship between quintessence and extreme word of behaviour. The data in this sample (n=600) was subject to different tests and yielded the same results, with the Q+ population having recommended the service to others significantly (Mann-Whitney, $p<0.001$) more often than the Q- population.

The Q+ population also indicated that showing other how to use OVERS was important to them ($p<0.001$) and that they were more likely to recommend OVERS in future than the Q- population ($p<0.001$). They also were more inclined to indicate that showing other people how OVERS worked was important to them ($p<0.001$). Q+ members indicated feeling compelled to share knowledge if they know someone else will benefit from the knowledge ($p<0.001$).

The Q+ populations seem to believe their familiarity with OVERS is knowledge that would benefit those around them, rather than a product that they are recommending. Sharing “good news” about a product is the essence of Customer Evangelism (Collins & Murphy, 2009; Kawasaki, 1991; McConnel & Huba, 2007). This data confirms that quintessence is an indicator that evangelistic activity is taking place when an Q+ OVERS member is telling other about the product. Q+ OVERS individual see themselves as informants, not recommenders. When they spread word of mouth, they see it as educating someone rather than on-selling. This is why

PAGE 17

incentives do not often motivate evangelists effectively. The incentive for an evangelist is

“saving” others from their current situation. The evangelist’s perspective is not that they are on-selling, rather they are showing others a better way.

Conclusion

Quintessence is an area ripe for exploration beyond the qualitative environment of Consumer Culture Theory, where it is an already recognized phenomenon. The research in the paper is an exploratory step toward bringing quintessence into a quantitative context where it, and its effects, can be measured and harnessed.

Contributions of this study

As a first step toward measuring the effects of quintessence, this study used a single phrase to indicate a quintessence positive respondent or quintessence negative respondent. The statement “My life wouldn’t be the same without OVERS” clearly was an indicator of increased positive brand related behaviour. However whether the data was correlative, or if there was causation, could not be proven in this study.

The authors posit that other elements in the survey such as the demographic, psychographic and behavioural data sketch out what the quintessence-positive behaviours are, and the cultural factors that would lead to quintessence for some users. However as the data was not designed to specifically explore quintessence; and as the behavioural data relating to ordering, referrals and online purchase behaviour was not available to the authors, this study remains exploratory, with more research in this area to come.

The benefit of this study, however, is showing that quintessence is significant in its ability to draw out brand-positive behaviours from a sample population. The brand devotion of the Q+ population is consistent throughout; using quintessence to segment a consumer population, and bring one closer to identifying one's own customer evangelists is of benefit to industries where producers seek to harness activities such as word of mouth marketing.

Another contribution of this study is to use cultural factors and a service-dominant approach in a quantitative environment. Exploring quintessence using the tools available in anthropology and sociology are effective in describing the phenomenon and its effects. Studies such as this one add value by moving toward a generalizable, predictive form of market research, which strongly appeals in academic and industry contexts.

Area for further research includes designing surveys which are more robust to enable verification of the quintessence phenomenon; linking quintessence to extreme word of mouth marketing behaviour and customer evangelism in a variety of contexts with different product types and industries; developing a Quintessence scale, rather than exploring quintessence as exclusively a binomial phenomenon; and designing studies which explore causation in Quintessence.

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PAGE 21

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