

From consumer interpretivism to consumer empiricism: Consumers' quasi-scientific strategies to evaluate consumption products.

How do consumers evaluate consumption products? Prior consumer research suggests that consumers use interpretive strategies to evaluate consumption products. For instance, research reports that consumers use brands (Beverland, Eckhardt, Sands, & Shankar, 2020; Dietrich & Russell, 2021; Holt, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Wieser, Luedicke, & Hemetsberger, 2021), myths and ideologies (Holt, 2012; Huff, Humphreys, & Wilner, 2021; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2009; Peñaloza, 2001; Thompson, 2004), aesthetics (Arsel & Bean, 2012; Dagalp & Hartmann, 2022; Wilson & Bellezza, 2021), or symbols (Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004; Epp & Price, 2009; Giesler, 2006; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Türe & Ger, 2016) to evaluate consumption products.

Complementary to these interpretive product evaluation strategies, prior consumers research reports instances where consumers take a more analytical and structured approach to product evaluation. For instance, by studying the contexts of wine and beer tastings, Maciel and Wallendorf (2016), Latour and Deighton (2018), and Rocklage, Rucker, and Nordgren (2021) show how consumers use empiricist (analytical and evidence-based) strategies to evaluate consumption products. However, we miss a holistic understanding of consumers' empiricist product evaluation strategies. Therefore, we ask: 1. *Why* do consumers use empiricist strategies to evaluate consumption products?; and 2. *How* do consumers use empiricist strategies to evaluate consumption products?

To answer the research questions, we study consumers who use empiricist product evaluation strategies. Both online and offline, we find a great number of consumers who conduct what they call 'tests' or 'experiments', such as before and after comparisons, longitudinal

monitoring of product effects, comparisons between products, or self-experimentations. These consumers believe they are taking a scientific approach in order to rationally confirm or refute expectations towards experience products and to objectively evaluate and compare experience products. We conceptualize this phenomenon as consumer empiricism.

To study the phenomenon of consumers empiricism, we conducted qualitative research between 2019 and 2022. We conducted 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews and netnographic observations. For triangulation purposes and to better grasp the significance of the phenomenon, we conducted an exploratory qualitative analysis of consumers' product reviews on the e-commerce marketplace *Amazon*, subsequent to the above-described explorative data collection and analysis (Humphreys & Wang, 2017). We limited our data collection to consumers who use empiricist evaluation strategies primarily for themselves (in contrast to influencers). Yet, these consumers might talk about their results or share them in online reviews. We exclude individuals that are professional product testers or consumers with large social media channels.

Answering the first research question, we find that consumers use empiricist product evaluation strategies as they are driven by four cultural discourses: 1. *Institutional mistrust* (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson & Troester, 2002), 2. *self-optimization* (DuFault & Schouten, 2020; Etkin, 2016; Lupton, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2021; Pentland, 2013), 3. *individualization* (Firat, Dholakia, & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1997), and 4. *the knowledge society* (Frank & Meyer, 2020; Stehr, 1994, 2017, 2018; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006). Our findings show that these cultural discourses prevent consumers' interpretive strategies from leading to satisfactory evaluations. Therefore, consumers use empiricist strategies to evaluate consumption products. Further, we find that consumers use empiricist strategies with two different intentions: First, consumers use empiricist strategies to evaluate a

specific product. Second, consumers use empiricist strategies to evaluate which product they like best (in the case of a selection of different products of the same product category).

Answering the second research question, we find that consumers use *the self as a laboratory* or *the home* or *the home as a laboratory* to evaluate experience products against the background of their individual contexts. Our findings show that consumers use four empiricist methods to evaluate products in these contexts: 1. *Observing* (Consumers use pictures and try to observe effects.), 2. *Quantifying* (Consumers quantify effects.), 3. *Triangulating* (Consumers involve others to ‘objectify’ effects.), 4. *Sensing* (Consumers try to sense effects.).

This study reveals the phenomenon of consumer empiricism. In philosophy, empiricism is a theory of evidence. Empiricists believe that accurate assumptions can only be made by means of empirical results (Curd & Psillos, 2013). Previously, this worldview has primarily been ascribed to philosophy, experimental research, and natural sciences. We find it with consumers who seek to evaluate consumption products.

Identifying and conceptualizing the phenomenon of consumer empiricism helps to disclose how consumers form product evaluations. Specifically, we stress attitude formation towards products as an explicit process, in contrast to research that theorizes implicit attitude formations (e.g., Wirtz & Bateson, 1999). Further, we contribute to understanding how consumers develop lay theories (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). In contrast to naïve theories (Deval, Mantel, Kardes, & Posavac, 2012; Faro, McGill, & Hastie, 2010), we show how consumers believe to develop empirically-grounded logical and profound theories. In addition, we offer managerial implications for marketing practice.

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