

Nov 8th, 12:00 AM

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Jorgensen, Jennifer, "Seniors' Analysis of Movie Characters as Consumers" (2016). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 69.

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Seniors' Analysis of Movie Characters as Consumers

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Keywords: Consumer Decision Making Process, Media in Classroom

Observing consumer behavior can be challenging within a classroom setting. However, gaining experience with observing consumer behavior is essential for students, as individuals who learn from experience tend to absorb knowledge more readily (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). To initiate such behavior, an assignment was created in a senior-level course to facilitate the observation of the five stages of the consumer decision making process within student-selected movies. The movie that the pair of students watched served as a catalyst to understanding and experiencing consumer behavior.

According to Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (2001), the experiential learning theory states that there are two ways in which adults can obtain experience. The first is through a concrete experience in which the individual completes the action. The second is through abstract conceptualization in which the individual assimilates the action into abstract concepts (Kolb *et al.*, 2001). This assignment employed abstract conceptualization by allowing the student to actively observe the consumer decision making process. By enticing students to observe consumption behavior within a cinematic context, students were given the opportunity to experience the consumption behavior and repeat the observed action by viewing it again to gain an in-depth understanding of course content.

The objective of this assignment was to motivate students to identify the various stages of the consumer decision making process by analyzing and associating observed behaviors to learned course material. Students worked in a group of two and selected a movie of their choice to observe the various stages of the consumer decision making process. Movies included *Beyond the Lights*, *Devil Wears Prada*, *Father of the Bride*, *Clueless*, *Mean Girls*, *South Paw*, *Talladega Nights*, *Hitch*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. Students were encouraged to select a movie that depicted “real life” situations, as sci-fi and animated films could have been difficult to identify consumption behaviors. Within the movie, students were asked to identify two different characters in two different scenes that depicted two different steps of the consumer decision making process.

The consumer decision making process has five stages. The first is *need recognition*, in which the consumer identifies a need or a want that would take him or her from an actual state to an ideal state of personal attitude. The second stage is *information search*, where the consumer conducts an internal search through the memory to identify any potential solutions to the need. If a satisfactory solution is not found, an external search will ensue, providing the individual with information from chosen sources. Such sources can include searching the internet or social media and asking friends and family. The third stage is *alternative evaluation*, in which the consumer determines which product will most efficiently fulfill the need. At the fourth stage, the consumer makes a *choice* as to whether to purchase the product. Once the product has been consumed, the consumer engages in the *post-purchase evaluation* stage, where the consumer

communicates with family, peers, or the retailer about the product. These communications can be positive or negative in nature, dependent upon the satisfaction with the product (Rath, Bay, Petrizzi, & Gill, 2015).

In addition to identifying stages within the consumer decision making process, students were asked to determine the possible motivations and attitude behind the consumption behavior. The demographics, psychographics, cultural influences, social influences, personality, and lifestyle must also be identified for each of the two characters discussed in the report. The report was approximately three to six pages in length and accompanied by a presentation to their classmates of their findings. Presentations consisted of identifying the two characters, discussing demographic and psychographic information, and describing the scenes which depict stages in the consumer decision making process. The use of video clips from the selected movie was encouraged and led to a highly engaged audience.

Student feedback for this assignment was highly positive. After the project was complete, students were asked to fill out an anonymous online survey asking how the project fulfilled learning objectives. Responses indicated that watching various stages of the consumer decision making process unfold in the movie, allowed for those concepts to be fully learned.

“The movie characters as consumers project also helped me be able to use what we’ve learned and apply it to the situation outside of the classroom. I found myself learning vocabulary and concepts better this way.”

Watching characters in movies also helped students to identify the different stages of the consumer decision making process in a simple and coherent manner, as well as apply other knowledge on consumer behavior.

“My group picked a movie character that changed her behavior throughout the movie. It was interesting to apply the knowledge and watch the character change to be accepted by her peers. The consumer decision making process is overwhelming at first, but breaking it down to a character helped me understand it better.”

Movies were deemed to be an enjoyable medium in which to observe and experience the consumer decision making process in action.

Providing an experience for students through abstract conceptualization of a movie in relation to the consumer decision making process has proven to be beneficial. Students had the ability to identify stages within the consumer decision making process, and based on the experience, were able to obtain conceptual knowledge on the topic. Using movie characters as consumers, students were also able to relate to how the behavior would deploy in a retail setting.

References

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