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**Implication of the Symbolic  
Interactionist Perspective For the  
Study of Taboo Consumption**

Cornelia Mayr

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**Discussion  
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**Abstract**

The sociology of consumption should see consumption as a central part of people's daily life, self-expression and social order. It should therefore examine the act of purchase not only by the means of rational supply and demand principles, but rather as a set of beliefs, attitudes, identities and norms. This discussion paper narrows the scope of investigation to one common normative influence on consumption: taboos. Despite their social significance, taboos have been scarcely recognized in the fields of consumption sociology. The purpose of this paper is to present symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for the study of taboo consumption with the aim to expand the dialogue about new theories and methodologies in the research of consumer behaviour. Symbolic interactionism is suggested as a potentially very useful theoretical basis for examining the relations between individual consumers, consumption activities and taboos through social interaction. The paper concludes with a discussion of future directions in the study of taboo consumption from interactionist perspectives.

**Keywords:** taboo, taboo consumption, taboo products, symbolic interactionism, consumer behaviour

## Introduction

Consumption acts as an embodied practice to fulfil ideas of how to live one's life and how to create a sense of the self. In fact, consumer behaviour and consumer decision-making are not only influenced by personal preferences, wants and desires, but also by moral perceptions, norms and taboos which regulate what can be bought, by whom, when and how (Zelizer, 2005; Pellandini-Simányi, 2014, p.4-6). The sociology of consumption should therefore see consumption as a central part of people's daily life, self-expression and social order. It should examine the act of purchase not only by the means of rational supply and demand principles, but rather as a set of beliefs, attitudes, identities and norms. As Warde (2014) argues that studies of consumption generally neglect the normalisation of practices and "pay little attention to the creation of norms, standards and institutions which produce shared understanding and common procedures" (Warde, 2014, p.295). Given that norms are tied to one's social identity as definitions of who we are and what we do, an integration of normative influences can open up new directions for research in consumption and consumer behaviour.

This discussion paper narrows the scope of investigation to one common normative influence on consumption: taboos. Despite their social significance, taboos have been scarcely recognized in the fields of consumption sociology. Yet, since some taboo products are solely unmentionable but still permissible to buy and not prohibited by law (Katsanis, 1994; Wilson & West, 1981), it seems to be instructive to study how people perceive and buy these products. An analysis of the literature shows that only a scarce repertoire of research concerning factors that influence taboo consumption is available at present. The concept of taboo has been mainly studied from marketing perspectives. Yet, the relationship between taboo perceptions and consumer behaviour may open an interesting research path in the fields of consumption sociology. It can help to understand why consumers reject or accept certain taboo products and what impacts them in the decision to infringe a taboo. Several persistent questions could, thus, be answered. For instance, how far is taboo consumption embedded in people's everyday life? How and why do taboo perceptions of a product change over time and vary across cultures? What consequences does a taboo transgression involve and what impacts does it have on society and consumer behaviour? Given all these considerations, the study of taboo consumption appears to be a promising field of research from sociological perspectives. Especially the fact that taboos are constantly changing implies that ongoing research into their influence on consumer behaviour is essential.

This article aims to fill a gap in literature by establishing the relevance of taboos to sociological analysis of consumption. It particularly argues that research on taboos in

consumption can be enhanced by the application of the symbolic interactionist perspective. First the meaning and the literature from various fields in consumption and marketing that specifically integrated the concept of taboo into their research is briefly reviewed. Next, the symbolic interactionist perspective is described and its relationship to consumer behaviour is discussed. Finally, the implications of the perspective for taboo consumption are discussed, and research issues are presented.

### **The Meaning of Taboo**

Despite their social significance, research into the concept of taboos appears rather limited in the sociology of consumption. Hutton Webster (1942) was one of the first sociologists who studied the nature of taboo. According to him,

“a taboo, in its sociological aspects, refers to a system of prohibitions observed as customs and developing [...] into an institution. The objects forbidden are as numerous and varied as human experiences, for any persons, things, acts, or situations may be considered so dangerous that meddling with them recoils upon the meddler” (Webster, 1942, p.13).

By studying data from ethnographical literature, Webster found out that every society has its good standards of living and prohibitions codified as taboos and based on shared beliefs, customs, rituals or values. Once a taboo is declared and socially recognized, a sense of duty in people’s conscience impels to unquestionably accept this taboo. In primitive societies, taboos forbid, for example, the touch or sight of sacred things, the consumption of impure food or the slaughter of totemic animals (Durkheim, 1995; Webster, 1942). However, the more civilized, modern and knowledgeable a society becomes, the more decreases the status of ritual taboos as means of control and regulators of conduct (Webster, 1942). What can be taken from Webster’s study is that while traditional definitions describe taboos as a strict prohibition for religious or social reasons, the word taboo is less specific in a more modern context and often defined as an action that is considered socially unacceptable or controversial, but not necessarily forbidden. The meaning of taboo has, thus, semantically weakened in modern Western societies. Although taboos still generate fear of sanctions in case of transgression, a more relative and less imperative form exists now. Furthermore, according to Walter (1991), the taboo’s role is not only to prevent certain behaviours from happening. It can also imply a restriction to speak about a specific topic in public or to generally mention it publicly (Walter, 1991). For instance, study results show that certain products concerning subjects like death, sexual intimacy, personal hygiene or medication arouse problems in discussing and advertising them in public due to moral, social or cultural

conventions (Sabri, 2012; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012; Waller, Fam, Erdogan, 2005; Katsanis, 1994; Wilson & West, 1981). A taboo can therefore be understood as a behavioural or verbal act that moral, religious, cultural or social beliefs condemn, prohibit or consider to be publicly unmentionable due to its controversial nature. Beside legal prohibitions on wrongful possessions (Brennan & Jaworski, 2016), secular laws (e.g. sumptuary laws) and legal regulations (e.g. drug and tobacco consumption, forbidden consumption of alcohol by minors), this paper focuses on taboos that are primarily cultural or social in nature and not enforced or prohibited by law. Now the question arises when and why do people consider certain forms of consumption as taboo? To answer this question, it is useful to refer to Émile Durkheim's classic distinction between the secular and sacred realms.

Durkheim (1995, [1912]) viewed a taboo as a rite that withdraws things from ordinary usage and hence established the idea of sacredness and profanity. Interdictions that characterize these rites separate sacred things from the profane and vice versa to prevent all contact between the sacred pure and the secular impure. Durkheim exemplified this distinction with the consumption of food and prohibitions of contact, speech and activities. Certain foods are forbidden to the profane because they are sacred, while profane foods are forbidden to persons with special sacredness. Similarly, certain objects are not allowed to be touched, certain words are not allowed to be spoken or certain activities are not allowed to be performed (Durkheim, 1995, pp.304-312). Durkheim's separation of the sacred life from the profane can be well bound to his conception of the role of symbols in society. For Durkheim a symbol is a representation of thoughts, ideas and meanings of the collective. He claimed that people attach and project symbolic meaning to objects or activities and thus constantly create sacredness out of the ordinary. These shared collective symbols provide a socially powerful sense of connectedness to each other as well as a deep moral vitality (Durkheim, 1995).

Durkheim's conceptions arouse associations to Mary Douglas classic work "Purity and Danger" (1966). In her book, Douglas argued that societies try to impose meaning and social order through classifying some things as "dirty", "polluted", "impure" or "taboo" and other things as "clean", "pure" and "safe". Because of this dualistic perception, people judge objects or activities as either right or wrong, good or bad. Things that are socially endowed with impurity should be avoided in order not to get contaminated with them (Douglas, 1966). What can be taken from the distinctions between sacred and profane, pure and impure is that what a culture considers as sacred and pure or impure and secular is socially constructed. Taboos are not universally valid, they vary across cultures, time and place. Above all, Durkheim's and Douglas' assumptions to explain the origin of taboo perceptions

can be usefully applied to the research of consumption. Taboos in consumption offer illustrations of how the sacred is made real through the things people eat, what people wear, purchases people do not talk about, material objects that arouse disgust or repugnance and the products or services people generally do not buy. From dietary restrictions, sanctity of objects due to sacredness, aversion to impure objects or activities to ineffability, taboos can serve many functions in consumption (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014, pp.4-6).

Besides, taboos are deeply implicated in the process of markets, as they regulate market access to objects and services, the way how markets sell those objects and services, and the manner in which markets distribute and advertise them (Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Beckert, 2002, p.291). Since certain values or domains are perceived as sacred or pure, most people deny putting a price on them, exchanging them and mixing them with secular values. Conversely, domains or purchase practices that imply danger or impurity to society are equally socially condemned. Not every type of consumption is generally taken for granted or socially accepted. Some products that are offered for sale can produce social ambivalence and challenge social normative beliefs because buying them transgresses taboo boundaries (McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tetlock, 2003). The sort of consumption that is of interest here, is this involving the purchase of products that internalize both a behavioural as well as a conversational taboo.

### **The Purchase of Taboo Products**

Wilson and West (1981) were the first researchers who identified taboo products in society. Based on their work, taboo consumption can be defined as the purchase of “products, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear, tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage when mentioned or openly presented” (Wilson & West, 1981, p.92). Furthermore, Wilson & West classified unmentionable, controversial products into products that may be harmful, but are tolerated, like cigarettes, alcohol or drugs, and products that people buy, but do not discuss openly, such as sexual and hygiene products or specific medicines (Wilson & West, 1981). Other studies have also used the concept of taboo to explore the characteristics and marketing of questionable products. They defined taboo products as “sensitive” (Fahy, Smart, Pride, Ferrell, 1995), “offensive” (Fam & Waller, 2003), “controversial” (Fam, Waller, Yang, 2009; Waller, Fam, Erdogan, 2005; Xu, Summers, Belleau, 2004), “embarrassing” (Londono, Davies, Elms, 2017; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008; Dahl, Manchanda, Argo, 2001), “unethical” (Phau, Lim, Liang, Lwin, 2014; Morton & Koufteros, 2008; Chang,

1998) or “nebulous” (Slater, 2014). Examined goods and services ranged from harmful, unhealthy such as drugs, alcohol, guns, tobacco, death-related like funeral services, illegal like software piracy, intimate such as genital hygiene products, tampons, lice removals to sex-related products like contraceptives, sex aids, lubricants, porn media or pharmaceuticals like Viagra and sexual dysfunction medicines (see for a literature review Sabri, Manceau, Pras, 2010; Katsanis, 1994). Sabri et al. (2010) classified the products according to their taboo nature into (1) conversational taboos, products that people don’t talk about in public, (2) behavioural taboos, certain consumer behaviours that are subject to controversy, and (3) sacred or religious taboos, religious values or beliefs influence what consumers consider as indecent (Sabri et al., 2010, p.79).

Taboo consumption practices may be seen as disordered forms of consumption that present a social or moral “danger” (Douglas, 1966) and generate a fear of consequences in the case of transgression. People who perform a behaviour that does not match moral standards are believed to be a danger to others, because they may corrupt or contaminate them. A transgression of taboos can, thus, become a threat for the group and damage social cohesion. Sanctions in the case of transgression often result in disapproval, ostracism or social punishment depending on the taboo’s relevance to maintain social order (Durkheim, 1995; Douglas, 1966). Similarly, Freud (1950) noted that “[...] anyone who violates a taboo by coming into contact with something that is taboo becomes taboo himself and that then no one may come into contact with him” (Freud, 1950, p.32). People may particularly sustain feelings of guilt and shame after transgressing taboo boundaries. Afraid of being depicted as “dirty” or “dangerous” to others, of being isolated, and of feeling negative emotions, many people, thus, keep a taboo consumption in secret or refuse it. And yet people engage in such purchases. They are actually embedded in people’s everyday life.

Sandikci & Ger (2010), for example, show how a religiously contested consumption practice becomes an attractive consumption choice by exploring women’s interpretations and practices of veiling. The interrogated women willingly chose to cover themselves in a fashionable way to express identity and resistance and thereby transgress existing norms of veiling (Sandikci & Ger, 2010). The study is a considerable example that indicates the adoption of a stigmatized taboo consumption practice by markets as well as by consumers and the contribution of markets and consumption to socio-political changes. With focus on sexual consumption, Lieberman (2016), for example, examined experiences of female consumers through correspondence to Eve’s Garden in the United States. Studying approximately 60 consumer reports that mentioned dildos or vibrators from 1974 to 1989, Lieberman focused on showing how women struggled to merge the consumption of sexual

products and sexual desires with the tenets of the sexual revolution. Some women mentioned shame and moral conflicts after using sexual products because they felt that they behaved against normative rules (Lieberman, 2016). As can be seen from these two study examples, taboos in consumption can be linked with a particular ambivalence in which the consumer is torn between the urge to adhere to norms and the temptation to transgress normative or taboo boundaries (Bataille, 1962, p.38; Freud, 1950, p.77). The concept of ambivalence can help to explain why people are uncertain or doubt about purchasing specific taboo products. It can also provide a clearer picture of its role in transgressing taboo boundaries. Depending on the level of ambivalence, beliefs and attitudes towards the taboo product, people either more likely purchase or do not purchase the product (Sabri et al., 2010, p. 78).

Besides, the consumption itself is not always the subject of contestation or taboo transgression. Rather the object's function or the behaviour and consequences which result from the usage of the consumed product makes buying it taboo or controversial. Taking Sandikci & Ger's study of veiling (2010) as an example again, there is actually nothing wrong in buying a scarf in general. However, the particular case of veiling combines the consumption of an ordinary product with political and religious beliefs. The study clearly shows that a permissible act, like buying a scarf, can be rendered impermissible if the consumption is imposed by religious and normative influences. Other examples present Chang's study (1998) concerning the consumption of illegal software copies as well as Penz & Stöttinger's study (2014) concerning the intentional consumption of counterfeit products. Both studies exemplify types of consumption in which the behaviour is contested. Copying illegal software and using it can be perceived as an unethical behaviour as it is associated with stealing of property rights or copyrights. Intentionally purchasing fake products violate accepted norms of market exchange and represent a misbehaviour in consumer practice. Additionally, extreme consumption of alcohol or junk-food, meat consumption of certain animals or genetically modified food consumption (Ajzen & Sheikh, 2013; Chiles, 2013; Zoellner, Krzeski, Harden, Cook, Allen, 2012; Cooke & French, 2011; Verdurme & Viaene, 2003) are often seen as controversial and taboo because of harmful health consequences, religious beliefs or ideological reasons.

The perception of consumption depends on time, place and manner and can even change. However, changes in beliefs and norms can alter social and cultural perceptions and may remove taboo perceptions to certain goods or services (Brennan & Jaworski, 2016, p.29). In this sense, consumption practices that were once marginalized and stigmatized can become ordinary or even fashionable and de-stabilize existing normative constructions and social

codes in societies (Gollnhofer, 2015; Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Wilson & West, 1995). One example shows the consumption of condoms. Using condoms serves not only as a contraception but protects also from sexually transmitted diseases. Condoms are therefore mainly perceived as an important medical device now (Wilson & West, 1995, p.41). On the contrary, consumption that was socially accepted once, can become controversial or even illegal today. Slave markets represent an example of markets and consumption that are currently prohibited by law, although they were once openly conducted (Roth, 2007, pp.39-40).

To sum up the results of the studies concerning taboo products, many of them have highlighted the social and moral condemnation associated with these products. They focused on unmentionable, controversial, harmful or offensive products that are contested for reasons of morality, decency, social or religious beliefs. Some of them attempted to classify taboo products according to their unmentionable nature and people's difficulty to talk about them or reveal themselves as consumers of these products (Katsanis, 1994; Wilson & West, 1981). However, the analysis of the studies showed that despite the notable diversity of taboo concepts as well as their economic challenges to markets and consumption, taboos have been scarcely recognized and explored in the fields of consumption sociology. Taken as a whole, the research on taboos in consumption largely neglected the influence of the social structure in which people interact and products are consumed. Although the majority of the studies recognized the importance of the influence of social, cultural and normative factors on consumer behaviour, they lack a theoretical framework that could aid in understanding the influence of social interaction on consumers. A deeper understanding of taboos in consumption requires research that examines how, why, and under what circumstances people perceive and engage in these consumption practices. This paper argues that the symbolic interactionist perspective can facilitate such research.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Consumer Behaviour**

Within the symbolic interactionist perspective, consumption is located in the natural world of human behaviour and social life. Instead of examining how common social institutions define and impact individuals, symbolic interactionism shifts the focus to micro-level processes that emerge from interactions among individuals. Central to symbolic interactionist thought is the interpretation of how individuals make sense of their world from their subjective viewpoints and social relations. Summarized succinctly, three basic assumptions underpin symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969): (1) people, individually and

collectively, attach meaning to things and act based on the meanings that these objects have for them; (2) meaning is defined through the process of interaction among individuals within a particular social and cultural context; and (3) through interpretation, individuals constantly create and recreate new meanings and ways to respond to situations. Meaning is thus ever changing, relocated, realigned and intersubjective. Snow (2001) synthesized these three premises into four principles: the principle of interactive determination, the principle of symbolization, the principle of emergence, and the principle of human agency. Perhaps the most important tenet of symbolic interactionism is the principle of human agency. Blumer understood the individual as free, autonomous, and integral in creating his/her social world. Although the individual's choice is constrained by societal and cultural norms, each person can use his/her own capacity for agency to navigate those constraints and create the proper response to a situation on his/her own accord (Blumer, 1969).

What can be concluded from Blumer's theoretical orientation to symbolic interactionism is that an understanding of social life requires an understanding of the processes individuals interpret meanings, situations and experiences, and how they act based on these individual interpretations of reality in a social context. As Blumer noted, symbolic interactionism is simply "the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings" (Blumer, 1962, p. 179). In this view, society should not be understood as a fixed, deterministic structure, but as a continuing, ever changing, social creation of human interactions and interpretations. Thus, symbolic interactionism seems to have tremendous potential to broaden the understanding of consumer behaviour. It can particularly provide a theoretical perspective for studying how consumers interpret products and how this process of interpretation influences the purchase.

Various authors laid the foundation of an examination of symbolic elements in consumer research (Belk, 1988; Mick, 1986; McCracken, 1986; Bourdieu, 1984; Solomon, 1983; Belk, Bahn, Mayer 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman 1982; Veblen & Chase, 1934). In symbolic interactionist terms, the meaning of products is defined by social consensus. Consumers reflexively interpret and evaluate the meanings assigned by others to products and forms of consumption and incorporate this interpreted appraisal by others into the self-concept. Consumer goods can be, therefore, seen as intricately bound up with processes of social interaction, communication, identity creation and the construction of society. A study of symbolic interactionism exactly encompasses the meaning, functions, details and influence of objects concerned with their reciprocal relationship between society and individuals. Consumers define themselves in terms of their relations to their perceived material reality and construct their identities out of the things they consume. In this material culture,

objects act as scripts with which people constantly create self-narratives (Giddens, 1991) in which they can stage and perform a sense of self (Goffman, 1963). However, these narratives of identity can be marked by social norm influences, conflict, internal contradictions and ambivalence that all together may influence certain consumption practices. Purchase activities are, thus, not made in isolation. People consume not only for themselves, but also for others, to relate to friends and family members and to contribute to society. Consumption is therefore social, as consumer behaviour is mostly influenced by others, and cultural, as commodities communicate meaning to others (Halkier, Keller, Truninger, Wilska, 2017; Zelizer, 2011). Since consumption goods signify and represent a consumer's identity, his/her preferences, his/her lifestyle and his/her behaviour patterns, it is particularly important to consider the meanings that individuals and society attach to specific products. By using a symbolic interactionist perspective, significance and meaning of an object result from social interaction and social dynamics. From this perspective, how a product is labelled by an individual consumer depends not only on his/her own attitude towards the product, but also on his/her level of compliance with perceived product ascriptions of others in the social environment. In this process, a consumer witnesses a whole complex terrain of high important, focal or less important influences that entangle goods with meanings.

By accepting or rejecting certain things, people draw symbolic boundaries, they signal who they are and to which social community they belong by consuming products they and/or others like and by creating distance from consumer items they and/or others dislike. An application of the assumptions underlying symbolic interactionism in consumer research seems to have profound implications for the study of taboos in consumption. Close attention to these assumptions will aid to explain how consumers construct and interpret taboos and how they relate to them in their consumption practices.

### **Implications of Symbolic Interactionist Perspective for Taboo Consumption**

Since symbolism associated with many products can be seen as one main reason for the purchase and use of products (Solomon 1983), a taboo connotation can have particular influences on a consumer's purchase decision. Taboos are social and cultural constructions that result from human interpretation and play an important part in maintaining social cohesion. Members of a society define themselves by taboos that mainly follow dualistic conceptualizations (Durkheim, 1995; Douglas, 1966). Understanding these sociocultural meanings, values, traditions and conceptions helps to receive a clearer picture of how a polarization between sacred/pure/normal and impure/dirty/perverse operates in the

construction of taboos that concern consumer behaviour. In this sense, consumption seems to act as a key axis along which members of a society draw symbolic boundaries. These symbolic boundaries mark the distinction between those products and forms of consumption that are labelled “normal”, “pure” and “clean” and those that appear transgressive, “dirty” or “dangerous” to social standards of normality (Douglas, 1966).

From a symbolic interactionism perspective, a consumer learns how to classify products and in that process he/she also learns how a person is expected to behave with reference to those goods. The purchase of taboo products may affect how an individual is perceived by others. Important or non-important referents evaluate the consumer based on the meanings they themselves attach to the product. Before a consumer engages in a taboo consumption practice, he/she anticipates the reactions and evaluations of others regarding the taboo perception. The consumer’s interpretation of and response to the potential reactions of others can then serve to reinforce, modify, or reject the purchase of a taboo product. Thus, meaning-making and understanding is an ongoing interpretive process in which the initial taboo ascription might remain the same, is re-established or changes. A consumer’s individual definition and interpretation of the product’s meaning can, in this view, help to answer the question why a consumer buys a product even though it is collectively perceived as taboo.

An application of symbolic interactionist assumptions should, therefore, acknowledge that individuals interpret meaning on the basis of their viewpoints, attitudes, perceptions of the responses of others and perceptions of the consequences of action. In particular, research in taboo consumption should take social meanings into account and interpret consumer behaviour not exclusively in terms of needs and wishes but also in terms of traditions, customs, beliefs, and aspirations. Using theories of symbolic interactionism can effectively contribute to an examination of how consumers behave when confronted with a taboo product and of factors that influence them in the decision whether to engage or not to engage in a taboo consumption. Since consumers are exposed to a variety of economic, social and cultural factors that serves to develop and/or reinforce the symbolism associated with products, it seems to be interesting to incorporate these influential factors into the interpretive process of taboos in consumption, as well. These complexities combined with current taboo issues in consumption, present significant research opportunities. However, any theoretical perspective includes its biases and limitations. While symbolic interactionism can improve the level of understanding of taboo purchases, it can never fully reveal all there is to know about consumer behaviour. To wisely apply symbolic interactionism, one must be aware of its limitations.

## Criticism of Symbolic Interactionism

There are certain criticisms directed towards symbolic interactionist paradigm. One of these criticisms is that symbolic interactionism is exceedingly "micro" in its focus and neglects the macro level of social interpretation. The theory pictures meaning as something emerging by itself during interaction and is perceived to miss the influences of social forces and institutions (e.g. education, government, the family) on individual interactions. Blumer (1969) originally noted that sociologist should pay more attention to the joint actions of people who create these institutions. Social structures and their constraining characteristics or patterns of human organization such as class hierarchies or power relations seem thus to be under-emphasized since the theory's development. However, an understanding of the relationship between individual action and social institutions could equip symbolic interactionism perspectives and bridge the analysis of macro and micro levels. In particular, symbolic interactionism seems to have the potential to integrate both, how attitudes, meanings and perceptions of individuals establish, conform, and constantly recreate social structures and how individual behaviour is shaped by culture, structural forces and social institutions. In this sense, a more holistic approach would be needed that considers mental, social and behavioural characteristics of the individual along with ongoing processes of interaction within the material, social and cultural aspects of the individual's environment. This expansion of the symbolic interactionist framework would especially permit an elaboration of structural and social concepts to better examine the complexities of taboo consumption. It would leave more room to analyze the reciprocity of the self and society, a basic theme of symbolic interactionism, but one which has not gained much truism because of the way in which it traditionally has been formulated.

Furthermore, the symbolic interactionist perspective has often been accused of being too narrow in its research and approach as well as too general in its conclusions. This criticism mainly results from contradictions in methodological stances. Blumer's methodology emphasized a more qualitative approach to understand the processes individuals use to interpret situations and experiences, and how they construct their actions among other individuals in society. He particularly neglected the testing of hypothesis and stated that the nature of social life and human behaviour cannot be statistically measured (Blumer, 1969). However, critical writings in the symbolic interactionist perspective missed the testability and saw it as not limited to qualitative approaches. Manford Kuhn (1964) and Sheldon Stryker (1980, 2008) advocated, therefore, a more structured and empirically testable approach to symbolic interactionism. Kuhn's symbolic interactionism is much more oriented to the development of a precisely rigorous, scientific testing of symbolic

interactionist principles. He asserted that the use of quantitative methods could provide a systematic testing of individual's attitudes and their organization of identities that emerge from symbolic interaction with others

(Kuhn, 1964). Stryker's work is similar to Kuhn's in its scope as well as in its methods. Stryker (1980, 2008) believed that symbolic interactionist assumptions can be tested by using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. While incorporating elements of role theory and examining relationships between persons and social structure, Stryker expanded symbolic interactionist assumptions through ideas of structuralism. By demonstrating structural aspects of interaction, he was able to construct a conceptual framework that was more relevant to sociological thoughts (Stryker, 1980, 2008).

In response to the criticisms outlined above, the choice between quantitative or qualitative approaches depends on the research's priority and questions, rather than on a methodological application of the symbolic interactionist ideas. In rebuttal, symbolic interactionism was originally intended to be a theoretical framework to direct examination of the social world and not a methodological theory or tested model. Besides, far from being deficient in its ability to deal with "macro" sociological phenomena, symbolic interactionism can be expanded and mixed with structural-functional theories to allow the perspective to address macro levels of social interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

Taboos in consumption play a significant role in understanding how far they are embedded in consumer behaviour and why consumers reject or accept certain products. Although there exists various research on this topic, most of the studies belonged to the fields of marketing, rendering the concept of taboo consumption rather unexplored in sociology. This paper has attempted to demonstrate the potential for combining taboo consumption with concepts of symbolic interactionism. Taboos can be seen as complex normative influences on consumer behaviour, therefore, its investigation requires a theoretical frame that can facilitate and enhance the exploration of those complexities. This paper proposes that a conceptual application of symbolic interactionism corresponds compellingly to issues pertaining to the consumption of taboo products. A symbolic interactionist perspective can significantly contribute to the study of processes that involve the transfer of meaning from taboo to consumers. Since consumers are often strongly influenced by interaction with society or reference groups, symbolic interactionist assumptions can help to understand how taboos in consumption are established, maintained, and changed through processes of social interaction and individual interpretation. As an initial attempt to introduce the symbolic

interactionist perspective into research of taboos in consumption, the theoretical framework is not broad in its scope. The focus has been on individual and interpersonal factors affecting the purchase of taboo products. For this reason, the paper suggests incorporating structural, cultural, and material conditions to the meaning-making process. A combination of individual attitudinal, social, functional and cultural factors that influence taboo consumption might add additional insight if integrated into this framework in future research.

An abundance of products is rich in symbolic content. It is important to integrate the nature of consumers' interaction with these symbol systems to explain how consumers use intangible product attributes, like taboos, in the course of consumption practices. Specifically, taboos attached to a product may cause a consumer to act. The consumer's individual perception and salience of the taboo can serve to either increase or decrease the likelihood of purchase, depending on whether the consumer recognizes the taboo as focal and problematic and seeks to comply with social expectations or break these norms. In particular, the taboo nature of the product can trigger a social normative pressure to comply with the opinion of others that either reduces or supports the purchase intention (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). Although taboos originally emerged out of a need to protect society's members and keep social order (Durkheim, 1995), some taboos seem to be unable to accommodate shifting meanings and changes caused by social progress. The perception of taboo products depends on time, place and manner. Changes in beliefs and norms can alter social and cultural perceptions and may even remove taboo connotations to certain goods.

The present paper viewed taboo consumption as a kind of social interaction by which consumers handle taboo purchases and the related normative expectations and negotiations. It approached this relationship between individual consumers, taboos and society by melding the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism with consumer behaviour research. Since symbolic interactionist assumptions have evolved primarily at an abstract level, there is a need to emphasize an empirical validation of this framework. Given the central role of taboos in social life including consumption, consumer research particularly needs to address the lack of interactionists theories, for instance theories that elucidate symbolic meaning of products through interaction (Blumer 1969) and the relationship between people and objects (Belk 1988) as well as incorporate economic, social and cultural influences. By expanding interactionist perspectives, the complexity of taboos in consumption can then become readily apparent and present significant research opportunities to theoretically and empirically investigate the relations and dynamics between individual consumers, consumption activities and social constructs of everyday life

and interaction. The research of taboos in consumption represents an important field for consumer research, and such investigation would be significantly enhanced by a research program that applies interactionist perspectives.

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