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Twentieth-century consumer society was characterized by a process of "disembedding" as described by Karl Polanyi in The Great Transformation (1944) and the Austro-American consumer researcher Ernest Dichter played a key role in preparing the ideological framework necessary for this process to succeed. In order to assess Dichter’s role and that of Motivation Research in general in the creation of the concept of the disembedded consumer, the paper presents an analysis of around one hundred of Dichter’s unpublished consumer research reports ranging across different countries and industries between 1939 and 1965. Through content analysis and historical contextualization, I will show that Dichter and Motivation Research were instrumental in removing from existing market relationships the "invisible hand of social norms" (Varman and Costa, 2008).

References


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Summary & Conceptualization

Karl Polanyi’s Great Transformation (1944) described the transition of European societies during the nineteenth century from market economies to fully fledged market societies. While the former described one form of economic exchange, the latter term signified a society transformed in such a way that social institutions were built around the needs of supposedly self-regulating markets. Polanyi’s analysis focused almost entirely on the world of work, production and on market-related exchange processes, which meant that the realms of consumer behavior and of value-creation through consumption were ignored to some extent.

I argue that the twentieth-century consumer was characterized by a similar process of disembodiment as described by Polanyi and that the Austro-American consumer researcher Ernest Dichter (1907-1991) played a key role in preparing the ideological framework necessary for this process to succeed. While for Dichter consumer behavior was of course submerged in social relationships and cultural patterns, consumer imagery and consumers’ desire were an essentially personal, individual affair. Dichter believed that human beings across the whole spectrum of cultures, social classes and races had the same innate drive to consume and express their individual needs through the acquisition of material goods. The logic of social relationships which inhibited consumer desires was described by Dichter as inherently restrictive and detrimental because this logic was imposed by religion, social mores and laws. Dichter thus turned on its head the formerly accepted view that inhibited and restrained consumer desires were a necessary part of consumer welfare and wider social stability—he thus removed from existing market relationships the “invisible hand of social norms” (Varman and Costa, 2008).

Dichter’s consumer investigations disembodied consumers and consuming as an activity by differentiating it more sharply from other forms of social existence and relationships behind which consumption normally disappeared. Using Martin Heidegger’s terminology, Dichter’s research turned “being a consumer” from one of the many forms of social existence or social activity (“Dasein”) into a concept that seemed to bring out the very essence of being human per se (“Sein”). This great transformation, in turn, meant that in Dichter’s analysis consumption dominated all other social relationships within which it was once firmly embedded as a secondary activity. In Dichter’s research reports and his various other publications, being a consumer became the central form of human existence, the core of a person’s raison d’être.

Method

In order to assess Ernest Dichter’s role in the creation of the concept of the disembodied consumer, an analysis of around one hundred of Dichter’s consumer and motivation research reports has been conducted. Access to the original reports has been provided by the University of Vienna and by the Hagley Museum and Archive, Delaware. Both archives hold over 4,000 unpublished research reports and studies of the Institute for Motivational Research and this study for the first time subjected a selection of this primary material to a cross-sectional, cross-country and cross-temporal meta-analysis through historical contextualization and the method of content analysis. Hitherto, historical and theoretical analyses of Dichterian motivation research relied almost exclusively on Dichter’s published material and his autobiographical accounts. The unpublished research reports written for clients of the Dichter Institute give a first-hand account of his international activities and the changes they underwent between the late 1930s and the late 1980s. Of these 4,000 consumer and market research studies, reports compiled for American, British, German, French and Australian clients have been selected. Further, reports for clients from the automobile industry (Ford, Volkswagen), the cosmetics (Lever Brothers, Schwarzkopf), foods (Cadbury’s, Nestle, General Mills) and clothing industries (DuPont) from the supermarket retail sector (Tengelmann) have been selected as they are representative of the spectrum of industries that drove the growth of postwar consumer society. The same is true for the countries selected for this study, which represent societies that saw extensive growth of their consumer sectors during the postwar period.

For the analysis, a twenty-five year period from 1939 to 1965 was chosen, the period when Dichter had been at the peak of public notoriety and popularity with industrial clients. The research reports were analyzed through content analysis and close reading, two methods adapted from literary criticism, whereby argumentative patterns, shifts in denotation and connotation, the emergence of new terminology, the strategic application of rhetorical devices, and modes of confusion, contradiction and the re-definition of terms are studied. This study therefore follows a type of marketing research as advocated by Barbara Stern (1990), Stephen Brown (1999; 2005) and others. The study however moves beyond literary analysis and historically contextualizes Dichter’s research reports by, for example, taking into account that from the mid-1950s more competitors moved into the market for motivation research and Dichter had to increase the range of methods he provided. Key moments in the social and cultural history of the United States and Western Europe provided milestones at which changes in Dichter’s language and rhetoric were studied. These milestones were the years of 1945 (end of World War II), 1948 (Berlin crisis and begin of ERP), 1950 (outbreak of Korea War), 1953-54 (US recession), 1957 (Sputnik crisis and publication of Vance Packard’s Hidden Persuaders), 1961 (Apollo program and Kennedy’s tax cuts), and finally 1964-65 (Johnson’s “Great Society” speech, War on Poverty, Civil Rights Act, Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at any Speed and the ensuing consumer rights movement).

Findings & Discussion

Academic interest in Ernest Dichter and motivation research has been growing since the late 1990s (Stern 2004). Yet analyses of Dichter’s research have so far always relied on a small range of published material and have either tended to portray him as a “guru”-type of newcomer (Fullerton 2007) or focused on his role in the emergence of interpretive consumer research (Tadajewski 2006). While these are legitimate perspectives on Dichter’s research they tend to be void of historical-political contextualization and they position Dichter merely within debates over rival methodological-theoretical traditions in consumer research rather than discussing the political-economic role of such traditions and the nature of modern consumer capitalism per se. Explorative and interpretive research into consumers’ emotional relationships to brands, into the uses of group interviews and the psychological reality of consumer fantasies was already conducted by social researchers like Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog and by research-intensive advertising agencies.
like JWT from the late 1920s (Schwarzkopf 2010). The origins of such modes of consumer interpretation are not to be sought in Ernest Dichter and the paradigmatic shift that emerged with Dichterian motivation research does therefore not primarily lie in his methodology, epistemology and axiology as such. The significance of Ernest Dichter and his take on motivational consumer analysis is to be found in the transformation he brought about in the public imagination of what consumer desire was and what significance “libidinal drives” had for the political economy of consumer capitalism. The role of Ernest Dichter and of motivation research within consumer research therefore needs to be investigated using methods and theoretical frameworks that are essentially outside the canon of consumer research today, i.e. the theoretical arsenal of political and economic anthropology and of political philosophy.

References

Spiritual Motivated Tourism of Older Adults
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Abstract
This paper explores the influence of spirituality on the tourist motivations of older adults. Spirituality and spiritual development are explained. Spiritual needs and travel motives of older adults are described and research propositions elaborated which suggest that senior tourism can be spiritually motivated (Key words: spirituality, older adult, tourism).

The need to go beyond the traditional socio-demographic approach of senior consumer markets to integrate elements of human development and gerontology has been suggested (Guiot, 2006). Spirituality and spiritual development are such elements.

The theory of the chronological and sequential development of spirituality (Fowler, 1981) identifies the last part of life as favourable to increased spiritual development and the achievement of spiritual maturity, thus making spirituality and spiritual development legitimate in research work on the consumer behaviour of older adults.

An extensive inter-disciplinary literature review in the fields of psychology, sociology, psychiatry, gerontology and consumer behaviour was undertaken, which leads to the description of the spirituality of older adults and their spiritual needs. Testable research proposals for the influence of spiritually motivated consumer behaviour of older adults are presented, with tourism as the chosen field of implementation.

Conceptual Framework
Spirituality and Related Concepts. Spirituality originates in one’s personal quest for meaning. The identification of the characteristics of spirituality (Ulvoas, 2009) leads to the following definition of the concept: “Spirituality is the construction of the meaning of one’s life. It appeals to one’s ability for transcendence1 and its objects are the inner self, alterity2 and the sacred3. It is the interconnection of these objects that enables the holistic perspective on life and provides its meaning”. Spirituality involves a spiritual identity, which can be religious or non religious, and a level of spiritual commitment. Religion, as “a unified system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred” (Delener, 1990), is the most common form of spirituality. It has two dimensions: religious identity (the tradition within which the members of a specific religious group practice their religion, for example Christianity) and religiosity, which is one’s level of religious commitment.

1 Transcendence corresponds to “an individual’s capability to step out of his/her immediate perception of time and space and to see life from a wider, more detached angle” (Piedmont, 1999).
2 Alterity should be understood in a broad sense and includes other human beings, nature and the universe (Ulvoas, 2009).
3 The sacred is “a perception of either a divine being or a sense of ultimate reality or truth” (Larson et al., 1998): God, gods, a divine being, the supreme energy, the wholeness of life.