Understanding Consumer Culture: the Role of “Food” As an Important Cultural Category

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Food represents, in a symbolic manner, the dominant ways of a given society. Through an analysis of its habits and consumption practices, it is possible to understand a series of meanings associated with the production of identities, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and cultural changes in a society. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify, through the classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) regarding the different research programs on CCT, a group of studies which, in some way, has dealt with the food topic in different contexts associated with consumer culture.

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ABSTRACT

Food represents, in a symbolic manner, the dominant ways of a given society. Through an analysis of its habits and consumption practices, it is possible to understand a series of meanings associated with the production of identities, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and cultural changes in a society. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify, through the classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) regarding the different research programs on CCT, a group of studies which, in some way, has dealt with the food topic in different contexts associated with consumer culture.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on consumption are not the privilege of a specific area. Several approaches are found in the most distinct knowledge fields, including sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, economics, and business, among others. In the field of marketing, consumption studies find their home in the broad area of consumer behaviour, characterized by having a diverse variety of approaches, ranging from those more oriented by a rational, microeconomic theory-based bias to those with a subjective and interpretive nature, focused on the understanding of symbolic and experiential meanings of consumption. Among the latter are studies related to the cultural issues associated with consumption, the focus of this work.

Every act of consumption represents a cultural act. Even the most trivial consumption events, such as those related to eating, bring along a structure of meanings and practices through which identities and social relationships are formed, maintained, and altered. Within such context, the aim of this paper is to identify, through the classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) regarding the different research programs on Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), a group of studies which, in some way, has dealt with the food topic in different contexts and through different views.

To review food studies through the CCT lens, the method employed consisted in a literature review of different publications from within and without the marketing field. The purpose was not to make and exhaustive survey on a given journal or a certain time period, but an exploratory identification of different possible examples of work illustrating the role the study of “food” may play in our understanding of consumer culture.

Starting with a contextualization regarding the experiential perspective in consumer research, the work initially focuses on the anthropological approach to the subject, and the contribution of the main authors in the field that have devoted themselves to deepen consumption analysis. After that, the subfield of knowledge called consumer culture is presented, by focusing on concepts and underlining the building of this research tradition.

The “food” topic is then introduced, by discussing its role as an important cultural dimension and a genuine locus of study on consumer culture. Lévi-Strauss said that food is good to think about (MACIEL, 2004). Food represents, in a symbolic manner, the dominant ways of a given society. Through the analysis of its habits and consumption practices, it is possible to understand a series of meanings associated with the production of identities, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and the cultural changes in a society.

At last, on the basis of the classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) regarding different research programs on consumer culture, a group of studies is identified which, in some way, has dealt with the “food” topic in different contexts associated with consumer culture. In the end, the results are discussed and a few possible study focuses are proposed, aiming at expanding food comprehension as a determinant variable in cultural issues related to consumption.

THE STUDY OF CONSUMPTION THROUGH AN EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Along its history, the study of consumer behaviour has been mainly guided—and it may still be today in some schools—by an understanding of the choice processes involved in purchase decisions. This more rational approach became known as the information-processing model. This perspective’s hegemony starts to be called into question in the late 70’s and early 80’s, when Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) offer a more experiential approach, which recognizes the importance of previously neglected variables—the role of emotions on behaviour; the recognition that consumers feel, think, and act; the meaning of symbolism in consumption; the need for pleasure and entertainment; the consumer’s role beyond the purchase act. The experiential perspective is an essentially phenomenological one; it considers consumption as a “primarily subjective state of consciousness, with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p. 132).

Nowadays, even though consumer behaviour research is still strongly oriented by a more positivistic, microeconomic-based perspective, which finds its priorities in the experimental studies and quantitative methods of data analysis (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), the understanding of consumer culture requires a simultaneously holistic and contextualized analysis, whose natural study context is the field, and not the laboratory. The space for the experiential perspective is thus clear. For investigations with such nature and with such purpose, the contributions of anthropology on consumption are vested with an extreme importance.

THE STUDY OF CONSUMPTION THROUGH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Only recently has anthropology started to let go of its refusal to examine its own culture. According to McCracken (2003), anthropologists have traditionally turned their attention to the strange and the marginal, missing important opportunities to understand cultural movements in their surroundings and within their very own context. As the interest for material culture awakens, anthropology starts to apply the development of theories of culture, meaning, and symbolism to the reading of consumer behaviour and communication of goods.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, Baudrillard (1993 and 2007; first editions 1968 and 1971, respectively) writes the books “The System of Objects” and “Consumer Society”. The author deals with consumption as a communication process, in which the objects represent a broad sign system, whose appropriation by the individuals provides them with a language code through which society is presented. The consumer society is then evidenced through the logic of individuals that seek to appropriate signs as a way to
differentiate themselves from the others. Such process tends to be unlimited, as others may also have access to the same signs. Baudrillard’s ideas started to provide support to several studies in the marketing area, whether related to the role of object seduction (Belk et al., 2003), the existing codes in consumer culture (Holt, 2002), or self-expression (Oswald, 1999), among others.

Also important is the contribution of Sahlins to the topic, arguing that the pragmatic and utilitarian goods must be part of the symbolic systems constituted by the culture. For him, production absorbs a perspective far beyond the logic of functional efficiency, appropriating a cultural symbolism in which meanings are produced as a way to generate social meaning to material objects (Sahlins, 1979).

By the same time, and with a similar approach, Mary Douglas starts to stand out for her anthropological view of consumption. The book of Douglas and Isherwood (2006), whose first edition also dates from 1979, represents an important reference in the subject, and proposes a greater dialogue between economics and anthropology, particularly in regard to consumer behaviour. Specifically in the chapter “The Use of Goods”, the authors propose a redefinition of consumption, by stating that it is “the very arena in which culture is the subject of struggles that give it form” (Douglas and Isherwood, 2006, p. 103). For them, it is fundamental to understand that goods are not only necessary to subsistence and competitive exhibition (as approached by Veblen, 1980), but must give visibility and stability to the categories of culture, building meanings and establishing and maintaining social relations.

More recently, comes the work of Colin Campbell (2001; 2006), who also underlines that consumers seek much more in the goods they choose than emulation and a demonstration of wealth, having the role of increasingly mediating certain aspects of social relations. For him, even with significant restrictions, the ideal would be a plentiful, abundant table, regardless of the combinations made among products; an easy and free style. In contrast, for the former, even with significant restrictions, the ideal would be a redefinition of consumption, by stating that it is “the very arena in which culture is the subject of struggles that give it form” (Damatta, 1986).

The existence of important works in anthropology on the topic does not prevent Miller (2002) from arguing that it is necessary to advance in the form of consumer analysis, and argues for deeper analyses that consider the full complexity—illustrated in previous comments on important works in consumer anthropology—and the diversity of motivations and meanings attributed to consumption. Therefore, the study of “consumer culture”—a field of important studies in the area of consumer behaviour—needs an interdisciplinary outlook that will allow for the unveiling and the understanding of such complexity.

**CONSUMER CULTURE**

Culture represents a key interest in every human science, and provides to understand the organization of people’s experience and action through symbolic means (Sahlins, 1997). Geertz (1989) refers to culture not as an experimental science in search of laws, but as an interpretive science in search of meaning.

It should be expected that the marketing area focusing on studies on consumer culture would turn to anthropology for some guidance on what and how to research. The first author to propose a broader dialogue between those two areas may have been Winick (1961). In the work entitled “Anthropology’s Contributions to Marketing”, Winick states that the subfield of anthropology focused on cultural questions, which studies people’s behaviour within their cultural context, may be the most appropriate terrain for success in such dialogue. However, the first works that effectively showed this relationship were those conducted by Levy (1978; 1981) on the mythologies of food in daily life.

Therefore, consumer culture studies have started to represent an important subfield in consumer behaviour research. Investigations with such nature focus on identifying how the meanings attributed to a given brand or product shape and influence consumer identity, social relations, and market cultures, as well as understanding how such meanings are individually and collectively appropriated and built (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). For Slater (2002), consumer culture represents a condition in which consumption is seen as having the role of increasingly mediating certain aspects of social relations. Consumption has the symbolic ability to represent affiliation to a certain group and its lifestyles, as well as to generate a sense of identity.

As a relevant effort to create an academic brand that would represent and encompass a twenty-year long research tradition on consumer culture, Arnold and Thompson (2005) proposed the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). According to the authors, CCT “refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (Arnold and Thompson, 2005, p. 868). That is, much more than identifying the existence of a homogeneous culture shared by a certain collectivity, CCT analyzes the diversity of cultural meanings in contemporary society, marked by globalization and the hegemony of capitalism.

With the aim of building such heuristic framework on the various topics, the authors have proposed four broad research categories in CCT: a) consumer identity projects; b) marketplace cultures; c) sociohistoric patterning of consumption; and d) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies (these categories are explored in a further section of this work).

Among the several cultural categories that might be found in those studies, “food”–for being at the same time something so mundane and extraordinary, so simple and ritualized, so traditional and innovative, and, above all, so present in daily life–definitely represents an important topic for the comprehension of consumer culture.

**FOOD AS AN IMPORTANT CULTURAL DIMENSION**

The discussion on the cultural meaning of food must start from an understanding of the difference between eating and feeding. For DaMatta (1986), the well-known Brazilian anthropologist, “… in regard to food, feeding is what a person does to keep alive; eating is what one does with pleasure, according to the most sacred rules of communion and commensality. […] Feeding is universal and general; eating is something that defines a dominion, and puts things in focus” (DaMatta, 1986, p. 55).

That is, the act of eating is used to establish an identity and to define a certain group, class, or person. Much more than a feeding substance, food represents manners, styles, and ways involved in feeding oneself, which define not only what is ingested, but also the one who ingests it (DaMatta, 1986).

Food has always been present in studies from various fields of knowledge. In sociology, Pierre Bourdieu approached the subject of food in his well-known analysis on class distinction, by contrasting food-related practices between the working class and the bourgeoisie. For the former, even with significant restrictions, the ideal would be a plentiful, abundant table, regardless of the combinations made among products; an easy and free style. In contrast, for the bourgeoisie, the emphasis would be on formality, the meal being a way to generate social meaning to material objects (Bourdieu, 2000).

In anthropology, classic authors as Mauss, Malinowski, Boas, Levi-Strauss, Elias, Douglas, among others, have dealt—with a
stronger or lesser emphasis—with the topics of feeding and eating, their rituals, and their practices (Mintz, 2001; Maciel, 2004). Levi-Strauss, for example, analyzed in different works the way people build their worlds in relation to the practices, rituals, and preferences regarding food (Brownlie et al., 2005; Levi-Strauss, 2006). For the renowned French anthropologist, the act of cooking marks the transition between nature and culture.

In fact, it is not possible to think in anthropology without considering, in some way, the subject of food. Mintz (2001) supports such stance by stating that food and the act of eating have always been topics of interest for anthropology, as there is a direct relationship between food-related behaviour and the meaning we attribute to ourselves and our social identity. The author underlines, in the same vein, that the social implications of the eating act have received much more attention from anthropology than food itself.

Therefore, the prominent role of food is noticeable as an important expression form used with the purpose of communicating something (Valli and Traill, 2005). It shows food as a language, something that expresses a series of social and cultural dimensions. When we choose what to eat, we are “communicating” meanings and projecting identities. “The behaviour relative to food repeatedly reveals the culture in which each of us is inserted” (Mintz, 2001, p. 2). DaMatta (1986) pointed out that food is one of the most important “languages” through which a given society manifests itself; it represents a social and cultural act that is determined by and determines a series of factors associated with symbolisms, rituals, and representations.

Therefore, food represents a key area of culture; and consequently, a genuine subject of social investigation.

THE ROLE OF FOOD FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF CONSUMER CULTURE

One of the most important ways by which cultural categories are chosen is through the material objects of a culture (McCracken, 2003). Thus, if food is understood as a consumer material object, it represents a cultural expression that takes part in the process of objectification by which we create ourselves, our identities, social affiliations, and practices lived in everyday life. Turning to contemporary culinary practices and their representations is an interesting way to enhance our understanding of consumer culture.

Therefore, in order to verify the presence of the food subject in consumer culture studies, this study begins with the previously mentioned classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) on the distinct research programs in CCT. After a brief description of what each program includes, a few studies are identified in which the “food” topic is present with greater or lesser emphasis as one of the analyzed dimensions.

Consumer identity projects

The appropriation of goods and services in everyday life is an important symbolic mechanism for identity formation. This body of research is based on the assumption that the market represents a rich source of mythical and symbolic resources, through which people seek to build identity narratives, regardless of contradictions, ambivalences, inconsistencies, and instabilities (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Mediated by the market, consumers choose the identity positions they intend to constitute and represent.

In this line of research, according to everything that has been discussed in this work, the “food” topic should be expected to play a prominent role. The identity issue is key to an analysis of food-related behaviours. In fact, the presence of the topic may be identified in Levy’s (1981) early study on different dimensions of food consumption analyzed through an interpretive structuralistic approach. The author examines the myths found in eating-related stories told by consumers, and argues that such qualitative investigation process goes beyond the findings usually obtained in research with a focus that is limited to the products’ attributes. The emphasis of the work is precisely in understanding small particular and cultural myths related to the products and feeding practices through a qualitative approach.

Jackson et al. (1985), in an analysis of differences between the physiographic characteristics of working women and housewives, identified disparate behaviours and attitudes in regard to food purchase and making, also finding distinct identifications to food and their practices between both groups.

Consumption and the identity-building process comprehend not only the products’ symbolic capacities, but also the way those products are used. In this context appears the study of Bugge and Almas (2006), who studied the way some cultural values are internalized. More specifically, they analyzed how social identities are actively built through the practices involved in the making of a dinner, showing how food habits are able to shape and are shaped by the person.

Marketplace cultures

This research program focuses on an understanding of the emergence of consumption as a dominant human practice that reshapes cultural projects. Also, it attempts to reveal the way consumers “create feelings of social friendliness, and design distinct, fragmented, self-selected, and transient social worlds through their search for common consumer interests” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 873). In sum, the body of research contemplated in this program seeks to identify and understand consumer cultures, subcultures, and microcultures.

The “food” topic is also present in this research vein. Fonseca (2005) analyzed the new trend of restaurants known by the designation Nuevo Latino Cuisine and its popularity in the USA. The author identified the consolidation process of a brand (Nuevo Latino Cuisine) that attempts to represent a gastronomic experience as a huge spectacle. The feature that provides her study to be included in this research line refers to the consolidation process of the brand, carrying its meanings within certain communities.

Goldstein-Gidoni (2001; 2005), on the other hand, dealt in her studies with the complexity and the dynamics of the cultural categorization of the “Japanese” and the “West” through an analysis of material cultural objects, underlining the role of food in the interaction process between the local and the foreigner.

As an example of the market cultures characterized by an opposition to the hegemonic, and in a way near the context of feeding, is the work of Thompson and Arsel (2004), who attempted to investigate the consumer practices of café flâneurs, coffee-shop lovers who prefer the local shops as an opposition to the imposition of large chains as Starbucks. That is, an analysis of the market culture based on the study of one of the most common feeding practices—choosing a place to have a cup of coffee.

The sociohistoric patterning of consumption

Studies included in this line of CCT research have focused on institutional and social structures that systematically influence and shape consumption (class, community, ethnicity, and gender, for example). Their objective is to examine what a consumer society is and how it is constituted and maintained. The identification of how brand communities employ traditional community symbols and how ethnic identities are built and rebuilt in different contexts is among the main foci of investigation (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

In such context, the issue of ethnic identity must be underlined. It refers to a subjective and multidimensional construct, involving
behaviour patterns that may result from ethnic origins and also from changes in cultural components (Laroche et al., 1999). For Verbeke and López (2005), ethnic identity relates to the retention or loss of behaviours and attitudes from a person’s culture of origin. It refers not only to the inherent features of a racial group, but also to the process of identification with a group whose members use ethnic labels that affect the perceptive, cognitive, affective, and knowledge structure for their own definition.

Along with the retention of language, feeding habits are among the most recognized dimensions of a given ethnic identity. The analysis of immigrant consumer experiences usually deals, though not necessarily as a central topic, with the maintenance, creation, and/or transformation of feeding practices, food-making procedures, and product preferences (Peñalosa, 1994). This subject has motivated a series of food-related consumer culture studies. Laroche et al. (1999) examined the relationship between ethnic identity and food consumption patterns in Italian immigrants—and descendants—finding, on one hand, a greater preference for traditional dishes from their culture, and on the other, a stronger rejection by such public to convenience products. However, the study of Verbeke and López (2005) found receptivity to ethnic food in one society (Belgic), underlining that the main factors responsible for such acceptance are personal interest and the circle of friends. Jamal (1986) examined the way people negotiate culturally constituted differences that occur as a result of distinctions between experiential practices of traditional and contemporary food consumption. Through an analysis of the ethnic food consumption behaviour among the English, the author explored the various meanings attributed to this kind of food by the natives. Cervellon and Dubé (2005), in a cross-cultural study on cultural influences relative to food, found that the French behave more on a dominant affective basis, whereas the Chinese balance feeling and cognition in their food choices. The study also pointed out that dishes that are traditionally made according to the culture of origin always find greater acceptance and preference in acculturation processes.

Other studies on sociohistoric patterning of consumption may also be mentioned. The work of Reilly and Wallendorf (1987) found that regional proximity and a minority status are the forces causing the strongest impact on food consumption (other forces examined included national identity, ethnicity, and income). Food culture is seen by Valli and Traill (2005) as a culinary order whose traits are permanent within a certain group of people, from the micro (family) to the macro (social classes, regions, countries) level. Pettigrew and Charters (2006) examined the perceived relationships between food and two of the most important alcoholic beverage types—wine and beer—underlining that, whereas the former acts as to give value to food and vice-versa, the latter has the opposite effect, and, when beer is drunk, the food acts only as a complement. Khare and Inman (2006) studied the nature of habits relative to the consumption of nutritious food, and concluded that the existence of habits, whether of a more cultural and enduring nature or even more context-dependent ones, provides a more efficient management of cognitive resources.

Coupland (2005), through an ethnographic study, examined the appropriation process of consumers for common and worldly-minded brands—called by the author as “invisible”—on the basis of familiar habits and daily home practices. The interesting part in the findings of that study is the small relationship between the choices of those brands and aspects as brand subcultures, brand communities, brand loyalty—subjects that are traditionally studied in this field of investigation. In the specific case of brands considered common, the consumer cannot capture their meanings; he or she only appropriates them as part of the domestic system as a function of pre-established social patterns.

Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies

This fourth body of CCT research focuses on understanding consumer ideologies, seen as meaning systems that tend to channel and reproduce consumers’ thoughts and actions as to advocate dominant interests in society. This includes the identification of different forms through which the capitalist cultural production systems “invite” consumers to ambitiously pursue certain identities and lifestyles (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). More specifically, it seeks to identify, through an analysis of popular texts (ads, TV programs, and movies, for example) and actions in servicescapes, the symbolic meanings, the cultural ideals, and the ideological styles encoded in them. Which messages are transmitted by the commercial media about consumption, and how consumers give meaning and reply to those messages are questions that guide this research program.

The “food” topic also appears in an article by Jones and Taylor (2001), who examined texts written and published on gastronomy and culture. That study focused on two important works on the topic, and its findings point to the valuing of authenticity in the culinary art and the preservation of original flavours, as opposed to the advancement of modern food production techniques. In the same vein, Brownlie et al. (2005) went to the culinary books to examine the meanings associated with food preparation, presentation, and consumption, finding in the process an interesting way to understand and problematize representations of contemporary culture.

Also based on gastronomy books, Martin (2005), in an interesting piece of work on food, literature, and art, examined the role of certain cultural artefacts (in this case, books on the subject), as vehicles that encourage a challenge to the “I/other” dichotomy. Based on an extensive analysis of important books on food, the author explores the thesis of philosopher Deane Curtin on the centrality of food for the process of rethinking the bases of human identity and autonomy. Once food is ingested, it becomes part of the self, forcing people to reconceptualize not only the other (the food), but also such permeable identity, to the point of physically incorporating the other.

Brewis and Jack (2005), however, studied the contents of advertisement for fast food restaurants in England, finding that the campaigns seek, on one hand, to rescue the best things from the past (encouraging pleasure and nostalgia through food) and, on the other, to show the convenience and agility of today’s services. More specifically, their article focuses on the importance of the “time” dimension in people’s lives, and mainly on their practices and preferences regarding food consumption.

CONCLUSION

The subfield of consumer behaviour known as CCT constitutes an area of increasing repercussion and an extremely fertile field for more transdisciplinary approaches focused on understanding consumer culture. Starting from different, but complementary, perspectives on consumption, this work has sought to explore the role of “food” as an important cultural category and a promising dimension of analysis on the consumption phenomenon.

Nothing has more of an everyday nature than the feeding habits of people or a given community. Food represents people’s guarantee of survival. It is responsible for fulfilling the most basic needs of the human being. However, as stated by Montanari (2003), food is also pleasure, and between these two poles a difficult and complex history unfolds, though a central history, intrinsically related to other histories, which food determines and is by them determined.
It is exactly through the study of the most trivial practices of consumption (of objects also trivial) that a broader understanding of a social culture and its mediators is made possible. Therefore, the analysis of food’s role—seemingly so trivial—in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of consumer culture is presented as an important and instigating field of investigation, as it was possible to verify through the studies presented.

The results show a significant number of studies dealing with food in different perspectives, contexts and fields. From publications in the area of consumer behaviour (ie. Journal of Consumer Research and Consumption, Markets and Culture) to more industry-identified journals (ie. British Food Journal), it was possible to verify the role of food in representing and illustrating an important facet of consumer culture in contemporary societies. Examples of studies related to consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures, and specially to sociocultural patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies were presented and commented. It was found that the classification proposed by Arnould and Thompson (2005) represents an appropriate framework to encompass a considerable diversity of food studies, regardless of the methodology employed or the environment studied. It was also seen that the omnipresent nature of the topic in consumer’s life suggests a greater inter-relationship among the various categories. For instance, rare is the study dealing with the existence of certain market cultures associated to food that will not illustrate, in some way, an important evidence of certain sociohistoric patterns on such type of consumption.

Another important outcome from this work refers to the finding that, in spite of distinct food studies being absolutely permeated by a cultural approach on the analysis of consumption and its practices, few works use the views from anthropology to further the interpretation of their findings. Considering the rich history of such knowledge field on food studies—as exemplified throughout this paper—an engaging opportunity is seen for seeking a more interpretive and symbolic outlook on this topic in the area of consumer behavior.

As further actions, there is an opportunity for deepening the studies on consumer culture through an analysis of food consumption and related practices. In this vein, some possible study foci would be:

- examining the constitution of communities formed around certain consumer experiences with different products and food establishments;
- examining codes found and instituted in the growing number of TV programs on gastronomy, as well as their impact on the construction and reconfiguration of consumer identities (only the Brazilian cable TV GNT network currently has five gastronomy-related shows);
- investigating the acculturation processes of Brazilian people—so passionate they are about their food—in face of new cultural contexts and their food products, practices, and rituals;
- examining the growing interest of the population in practicing gastronomy and the impact of such process on identity projection.

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