Philosophy and Consumption

Discussion Leader: Janet Borgerson, University of Exeter
Jonathan Schroeder, University of Exeter
Stephen Brown, University of Ulster
Fuat Firat, University of Southern Denmark

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13118/volumes/v33/NA-33

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
This session’s purpose was to survey recent efforts by consumer researchers to draw upon philosophical concepts and theories in accomplishing consumer research. Turning to philosophy can help clarify assumptions, theory, and methods within consumer research. Initial examples of areas that could benefit from such philosophical grounding included research on consumer objects—or material culture—as resources for consumer identity work (Marcoux 2005; Miller 1987); brands as resources in symbolic consumption (Holt 2002); and constituting consumer subjectivities, including gendered and racial identities, through interaction with marketing representations (Schroeder and Borgerson 2005; Borgerson and Schroeder 2004). Indeed, the roundtable gathered together over forty researchers engaged in philosophically informed consumer research; provided a platform for learning about attendees’ ongoing projects; and pooled knowledge, offering suggestions regarding theoretical resources for future research.

Clearly, the concerns of philosophy and the marketplace intersect. Some of the most famous philosophers have backgrounds in economics and political theory. Historically, these writers engaged with labor, production, and value issues, and the economic interactions—broadly conceived—of individuals, particular cultures, and the world as a whole. Further, many theorists in economics, management, and finance look to, reflect on, and write documents based in philosophical concerns for global justice, human capabilities, and cultural practices. At a more pragmatic level, philosophical considerations and ethical investigations, and the ability to undertake both, allow for thoughtful, careful, and aware research, including an understanding of epistemological and ontological issues regarding, e.g., consumer identity, corporate social responsibility, and consumption generally.

Issues around agency and materiality provide but one illustrative example of the work philosophy does in consumer research (Borgerson 2005). One might ask, What do consumer researchers mean when they claim that consumer selves are “transformed”, “created”, “expressed”, or “emancipated” in relation to consumer objects and contexts, such as branding, in consumer culture? What are the relations between subjects and objects, or to put it another way, what versions of materiality are being proposed, called upon, or assumed in such consumer research? How does consumer research conceptualize the self? How much agency should be attributed to objects and subjects in becoming who and what they are?

Assumptions about who or what the consumer is matters. How consumer researchers conceptualize consumers, consumer identity, and consumer self crucially impacts upon appropriate research assumptions, contextual understandings, and potential insights and outcomes in consumer research: Yet, effects of agency and materiality-related assumptions often remain under theorized, or simply absent, leading to conceptual confusion, inaccurate description, and simplifications rather than complexity even in sophisticated attempts to understand relationships between humans and life contexts.

This is not to claim that attending to the relation between philosophy and consumption leads only to a single version of subject constitution. Many theoretical conceptions exist; and these are drawn upon, often, in qualitative, interpretative research focused, for example, upon branding, retail environments, material culture, and research methodologies, especially that which is informed by social sciences and humanities disciplines (e.g., Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The goal is to widen the conversation among scholars with a variety of interests and approaches, providing support and resources for interested researchers.

The researchers who attended the roundtable introduced themselves and briefly discussed a topic with which they were engaged and indicated how particular philosophers or philosophical notions and concepts helped them think through complexities, or made certain questions and insights possible. A number of philosophers were mentioned, from historical figures Plato, Hume, and Kant to twentieth century names, such as, Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Foucault, and Donna Haraway. One researcher suggested that contemporary philosopher Judith Butler’s work Bodies That Matter (1993) helped her conceptualize the constitution of ‘consumers that matter’. Another researcher warned against looking only to long dead canonical or typical philosophers (the usual suspects, as it were), urging instead turning to plentiful contemporary sources of philosophical and ethical ideas and innovations. This means taking into account work in feminist philosophy (e.g., Oliver 1998; Young 1990) and philosophy of race (e.g., Goldberg 1993; Gordon 1997), as well.

Materiality, as mentioned above, and related concerns for co-creation, interrelationships, and intersubjectivity emerged as a topic of particular interest among several participants. Issues of meaning construction, aesthetics, mundane practices, and identity also sparked a turn to philosophy and philosophical thinkers. Further, philosophy sheds light on methodological concerns: moreover, philosophy questions, and thus adds rigor to, the coherence of arguments. Future roundtables will offer opportunities to focus in on particular topics or figures and extend this fruitful, yet often missing, conversation in consumer research.

REFERENCES


Young, Iris Marion (1990), *Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
SESSION OVERVIEW

Over the last ten years, there has been increasing attention focused on understanding how consumers’ beliefs about a firm’s motives affect consumer response to marketers’ actions. Much of this research has focused on beliefs about the persuasion process, or persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2000, Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Specifically, consumers often appear to question marketers’ motives, resulting in diminished trust and skepticism about relationships with firms (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 2000). Fournier et. al (2000) suggest that in order for companies to build strong relationships with consumers, they must be honest about their motives. Further, a consumer’s ability to accurately perceive a firm’s motive and respond accordingly is important from a consumer welfare perspective.

The papers in this session examine how consumers’ make inferences about a marketer’s motives and how skepticism about such motives affects consumers’ reactions to a firm’s marketing efforts. Building on an idea suggested by Wright (2002), the research in this session investigates theoretically and empirically how meta-skepticism influences the manner in which the consumer interprets a firm’s actions. In fact, the research presented in this session suggests that marketing tactics can have a very different impact depending on how the consumer views and interprets the motives of the influence agent.

The first paper, by Dan Ariely and Ayelet Gneezy establishes in a convincing way the extent of consumers’ meta-skepticism about marketers’ actions and statements. In three studies, they show that consumers’ default view is to be skeptical about marketers’ offers and to distrust statements made by companies. Importantly, this skepticism about marketers stands in contrast to peoples’ inherent trust of others in interpersonal relations. Skepticism about a firm’s motives can also influence how specific marketing tactics (i.e., changes in price) influence attitudes toward the company, as shown in the paper by Priya Raghbir and Meg Campbell. Their research shows that depending on the types of inferences consumers make about the marketer’s motives, price increase announcements can result in either positive or negative attitudes toward the firm. The third paper, by Barbara Bickart, Mimi Morrin, and Ratti Ratneshwar, examines salesperson communications. They show that the effect of admitting a lack of knowledge to a consumer’s question (versus obfuscation) depends on whether or not consumers question the salesperson’s motives. They also show that the effects of persuasion knowledge operate not only through skepticism (that is, lack of trust in the salesperson), but also via feelings towards the salesperson (i.e., the likeability of the agent).

To summarize, we hope that by presenting these papers in a single session, we encouraged further dialogue on the role of meta-skepticism in consumer behavior. The session included a lively discussion led by Connie Pechmann.

SHORT ABSTRACTS:

“Truth and False in Marketing”
Dan Ariely, MIT
Ayelet Gneezy, University of Chicago

In social interaction it was shown that people first believe others, and disbelief is triggered only as a result of a correcting procedure. We hypothesize that, in contrast with the standard finding from social interaction, consumers are primarily disbelieving and distrusting of information provided by marketers. One field study and two lab studies support this hypothesis. The results show that ambiguous (experiment 1) and unambiguous (experiment 2) statements that are endorsed by a firm are judged as false more frequently, and that when they are judged as true, they are judged more slowly.

“Benefit of Doubt or Betrayal? The Effect of Priors And Reasons on Response to Price Increases”
Priya Raghbir, University of California at Berkeley
Margaret C. Campbell, University of Colorado at Boulder

Four studies show that fee increases are ambiguous events that can be perceived as positive depending on the customer’s inferences based on priors about the company and its competitors, and the reason provided for the fee increase. When reasons are perceived to be valid, then priors act as a buffer, allowing customers to give a company the benefit of the doubt. However, when the reasons appear to be an infraction, there is a feeling of betrayal. The fee amount has a limited downside, and a potential upside effect: with improved attitudes with higher fees for customers with a positive prior.

“Does it Pay to Beat Around the Bush? Salesperson Motives and the Effects of Obfuscation versus Honesty in Communications”
Barbara Bickart, Rutgers University-Camden
Maureen Morrin, Rutgers University-Camden
S. Ratneshwar, University of Missouri

Communication between a salesperson and a consumer plays an important role in how long-term relationships are developed and maintained. In two studies, we show that consumers’ beliefs about a salesperson’s motives affect how consumers’ interpret communication with the agent. Specifically, when the salesperson’s motive is to earn a commission (versus provide information), consumers believe the agent is more likely to obfuscate versus admit not knowing the answer to a question. Further, when the agent is on commission, behavioral intentions and satisfaction are significantly higher when the agent admits to not knowing an answer relative to obfuscating. We discuss these findings in the context of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (i.e., Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995).