Utilising Consumer Introspection Theory to Place the Culture of Consumer Research Into the Flow of Life

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Drawing on contemporary thought within anthropology and by utilising Consumer Introspection Theory, this paper examines the relationship between the culture of consumer research and the flow of life. We propose that our discipline would benefit from visualising, sensing and revealing the bodily movements that contribute toward our ongoing formation.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1012347/volumes/v40/NA-40

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ABSTRACT

This article takes initial inspiration from the disciplinary pioneers of humanistic/cultural consumer research (especially Belk 1987, 1988; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Firat 1985; Firat and Dholakia 1982; Hirschmann and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook 1987; McCracken 1986; Mick 1986) who “encouraged investigation of the contextual, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption... from a macro, meso and micro theoretical perspective” (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 871). Such esteemed scholars often reflected insight from macroeconomics, microeconomics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and the humanities into their accounts of consumer research. In this sense, and as Holbrook (1987) suggests, consumer researchers have often adopted a multidisciplinary stance in attempting to view such constructs as acquisition, consumption, possession and disposition through different theoretical lenses. In this vein, and to paraphrase Belk (1987), the aim of this paper is to reflexively examine the relationship between the culture of consumer research and the rest of life. As Dholakia (2012: 221) suggests, this is important as it may allow us to better appreciate the “intertwined and not-so-visible rhizomes, linkages, influences, and flows” within our discipline.

With the preceding aim in mind, we specifically position ourselves alongside marketing and consumer researchers who have either attempted to provide a critical perspective (see Dholakia 2012, 2009; Dholakia and Firat 2006; Firat 2009; Firat and Dholakia 1982, 2003, 2006; Firat and Venkatesh 1995) or those scholars who have adopted an emotionally sensitised and close view of consumer research in relation to, for example; jazz consumption (e.g. Holbrook 1987), introspection (e.g. Gould 1991, 1995, 2008a, 2008b, 2012), place, technology and representation (e.g. Sherry 2000), poetry (e.g. Sherry and Schouten 2002), embodied imagination (e.g. Joy and Sherry 2003), videography (e.g. Belk and Kozinets 2005), post-humanism (e.g. Venkatesh, Karababa and Ger 2002) and transcendental consumption (e.g. Minowa 2011). Indeed, as Joy and Sherry (2003) in line with Pham, Cohen, Pracejus and Hughes (2001) suggest, feelings play a central role in consumers’ (and consumer researchers) day-to-day lives and merit serious investigation. Following on from this, and as Joy and Sherry (2003) posit, studies of embodied realism (conscious and unconscious) have generated some of the most exciting consumer research as it allows us to get closer to the cultural context, atmospherics, texture and undercurrents that surround and permeate day-to-day life (Sherry and Schouten 2002).

THEORETICAL REFLECTION (1) – HUMANISTIC CONSUMER RESEARCH AND CULTURAL DISCOURSE

Following Stone, Hewer and Brownlie (2011) we argue that, within the context of humanistic inspired consumer culture research, it has become relatively commonplace to draw upon, for example, the interpretive anthropology of Geertz (1973) to theoretically ground a broad range of empirical insight. Such scholarship as Stone et al. (2011) suggests, more often than not, either explicitly or implicitly, acknowledges that studies of “consumer culture” tend to fall in line with an anthropological tradition that views “culture” as a system of inherited conceptions and symbolic forms that enables men and women to communicate and further develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life (Geertz 1973). Following on from this, culture, combined with genetic predisposition (Ingold 2011), can be seen to play an important role in continually enabling a coherent and intelligible system of symbols and material artefacts to emerge within and throughout day-to-day lived experience.

Such a theoretical proposition might enable a question to appear in the reader’s mind: How do people inherit symbolic symbols within a cultural context? Geertz (1973) suggests that when human beings are very young; a gap exists between emerging bodily knowledge and meaningful day-to-day functioning. Commenting on this gap, Ingold (2011) forwards the proposition that the fundamental aspects of cultural systems are genetically passed from one generation to the next. From this perspective, some consumer researchers (either implicitly or explicitly) tend to acknowledge that culture is thereby acquired through observation learning and practice (Warde 2005) rather than being innate. As Stone et al. (2011), in line with Ingold (2011) further suggest, freshly enculturated individuals are then subsequently faced with a diverse range of environmental conditions which ensure that knowledge is constructed in such a way that enables individualised expression and subtle variations in observed behaviour. Reflecting upon such a proposition, the notion emerges whereby culture can either be thought of as a relatively natural and subtle “system of inherited conceptions and semiotic signs” (Geertz 1973) or a “significant web of meaning” (ibid.) that organises a wide range of meaningful consumption practices (Warde 2005), individual and shared symbolic experiences and knowledge generation activities.

THEORETICAL REFLECTION (2) – ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURAL DISCOURSE

With such thoughts in mind, we attempt to add nuance to scholarly debate surrounding the theorisation of culture within consumer research by offering an alternative anthropological perspective which suggests that a perspective of culture that is based on an assumed, coherent and static cultural boundary is problematic (Ingold 2011, 1992; Kottak 2008; Palsson 1993; Rapport and Overing 2007; Stone et al. 2011). Such a school of thought, we argue, is problematic because these particular theoretical building blocks seem to have been constructed on the basis that beliefs about the external world are converted into attitudes and behaviour that, in turn, become manifest in terms of outward appearance and verbal expression. Such a distinctive process appears to be shaped (and shape) by a wide range of cognitive rules which situate the person within the world and subsequently enable them to identify differences between the “self” and “others”. By “others” we also refer to material artefacts, the earth beneath our feet, animals, birds, insects and so on. From this perspective, people cannot attend to the world directly but have to figure it out along cognitive pathways that reflect upon a wide and diverse variety of integrated patterns of semiotic signs and material artefacts that come to the attention of the body’s senses (Kottak 2008; Ingold 1992). As a consequence of such embodied mindfulness it is not entirely surprising that people divide and enwrap their understandings of the external world into discrete and meaningful cognitive parcels of knowledge.
From such a dualistic perspective, people are philosophically framed in such a way that suggests that individual and/or communal meaningful activities come into being within inverted, closed and static cultural boundaries (Ingold 2011). However, in practice, “what we do not find are neatly bounded and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them, and in which their lives and works are fully encapsulated” (Ingold 2008: 330). In other words, contemporary society could be thought of in terms of the sheer messy complexity that seems to circumnavigate traditional cultural boundaries. As Rapport and Overing (2007: 298) state, “[t]here is no longer traditional, bounded cultural worlds in which to live – pure, integrated, cohesive, place rooted – from which to depart and which to return, for all is situated and all is moving.” From this we argue that cultural life “does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up its currents” (Ingold 2011: 4). Life, in short, as Ingold (ibid.) reveals, is a movement of opening, not of closure. We therefore argue that there is significant value in trying to recover that original openness to the world within consumer research in an attempt to revive and recover the things that make cultural life less structured and more sublime (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986; Lyotard 1986), magical (Buck 1936), liberatory (Durkheim 1915; Firat and Venkatesh 1995), free (Marcuse 2002), rich (Midgley 2003), impetuous, refined and enjoyable (Nietzsche 1990). Such an open epistemological and ontological perspective may enable us, as consumer researchers, to probe the complexities and nuances of context and environment in a deeper sense, thereby allowing more “disciplined enquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life” (Ingold, 2011: xi).

**METHODOLOGY: EMPLOYING CONSUMER INTROSPECTION THEORY (CIT) TO OPEN UP CULTURAL DISCOURSE**

Reflecting upon the preceding text enables an interesting question to emerge; how do we, as consumer researchers, open ourselves up in order to better appreciate the conditions of human life? In order to address this question it is necessary to align this paper with the way of the contemplative philosopher to propose methods that can be shared in order to experience reflective revelations. Gould (2012: 455) suggests that we should consider employing Consumer Introspection Theory (henceforth, CIT) to extend the reach of cultural theory “by “excavat[ing] the dynamic of self-culture liminality and co-creation.” Such a methodological approach can help to map the gestalt of experience by sensitising like minded consumer researchers to reflect upon dominant ideologies, obfuscations and mystifications playing out within the discipline. Our proposed methodological approach is similar to central Buddhist meditational techniques that explore the realms of consciousness, mind and the phenomenal world (Gould 1995; Wilber 2001). More specifically, we offer you three engaging introspective exercises or thought experiments - (1) You; (2) You and Your Work; and (3) Culture:

**Introspective Exercise (1) – You**

Consider all that makes up you; body parts, mind, thoughts, your name, relationships, aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity or age, or consciousness and unconsciousness. Are any of these you? If not, what is you? Are you the sum of the parts, more than the sum of the parts, or are you multiple, i.e. each part is you – there are many yous. This may strike you as strange at first though it is not unlike deconstructing the self in postmodern terms. This way digs down in very specific ways. How does it make you feel? Is there a you? Or are you empty of you are you-ness? Perhaps the metaphor of the onion skin would be helpful here – you peel away layer after layer and in the end nothing remains. Is this true about you? How does this thought process make you feel? Are you empty or in emptiness? Continue by considering how you relate to your environment; physical, social and cultural. Are you part of it or separate from it? In any case, how are you connected to it? Is there a you that exists apart from it? Are you empty of existence with or without the environment?

This exercise should help you to think about and deconstruct theories of the self (e.g., extended and multiple selves; self-image and concept) in new and very personal ways. It can also help you to further engage with (your)self and your and our consumer research projects in new and stimulating ways. The next exercise is illustrative of one such further engagement with the self.

**Introspective Exercise (2) – You and Your Work**

Take a piece of your writing (it may be a current piece and at other times you may look retrospectively at your own published work) and read it through with special attention to the personal feelings and thoughts it brings up. Sometimes do this with more intention, that is, look for these things. Other times, let them arise spontaneously as you read and/or in other situations, such as post-reading. What do these feelings and thoughts tell you about the work and yourself? Does your work take a position and attempt to open up theoretical discourse or seek in some way to improve the world? Do these points matter to you? Does looking in this way change your understandings and perceptions? Certainly in literary criticism, we consider the idea of authorial intent. What were/are you as author intending in your writings? At the same time, you are a reader of your own work here – reader response. How do you respond to what you have said? How do you feel when you think of others reading your work? How have your views and therefore reading of any particular piece of yours changed? Read the work of others who cite/discuss your work. Do they get it? Does your authorial intent have any connection to their reader response, even to your own? (this exercise is adapted from Gould 2008b: 325).

Based on this reflexive introspection we attempt to suggest how various discursive inversions that present themselves to (and are used by) consumer researchers can be opened up. As such, we hope to sensitise you, the reader, to the role of boundaries in shaping you and your work though reflections that could relate (but necessarily be limited) to the following constructs; internal, external, introspective, extrospective, personal, cultural, narrative, meta-cognitive, objective, subjective, authorial intent, reader response and so on. Next, we provide an exercise which looks at and helps to deconstruct the boundaries of self and culture.

**Introspective Exercise (3) – Culture**

Is the self an outpost of culture? Watch your reactions to various manifestations of culture, such as everyday discourse; various practices in which you engage, especially as contrasted with those of others; and media use. Do you merely reproduce culture in these particular manifestations and expressions, i.e. being more produced than producing? Or do you actually produce culture, i.e. something new and different? Are your self and culture simultaneously produced, synchronously reflexive in relation to each other? Consider (cross)cultural phenomena such as hybridisation. When you encounter something new from another culture such as a new perspective or discourse, where does it go within you? Does it hybridize or does it somehow manifest as another of your multiple selves? Which selves express themselves when you critically access something? (this exercise is adapted from Gould: 2008b: 324).
As consumer researchers, we are all perhaps too familiar with the idea of cultural construction which indicates that meaning is produced by culture, that culture, itself, is produced and that there is no particular essence to be found, it would seem that the concept of personal cultural construction, allowing for the idea that there are such things as personal cultures, would be a parallel, if intermeshed universe. Our personal cultures consist of the meanings, discourse, rituals and practices we hold and engage in. They link to other levels of culture so seamlessly that we do not think of ourselves as ‘a culture’.

THEORETICAL REFLECTION (3) – THE FLOW OF LIFE

Such introspective epistemological and ontological exercises have been carefully designed to sensitise you, the reader, to the proposition that cultural life issues forth through open, complex, dynamic, transformative, interdependent, never ending, cyclical currents of a world-in-formation that are never the same from one moment to the next (Ingold 2011; Stone et al. 2011). Such becomings bring forth the appearance of people as entangled beings that are ontologically incomplete (Minowa 2012). It is within such holistic, atmospheric, textured tangles, “continually ravelling here and unravelling there, that people grow or ‘issue forth’ along the lines of their relationships” (Ingold 2011: 71). Unbounded, people are united in shared and liberating beliefs of a way of knowing and being that is alive and open to a world in continuous birth. Life, seen in this way, flows though complex, fluid, textured atmospheric relationships. Moreover, and by way of clarification, we forward the proposition that our perspective goes beyond stressing the importance of beliefs and attitudes in shaping (and being shaped by) a particular worldview to our perspective goes beyond stressing the importance of beliefs and attitudes in shaping (and being shaped by) a particular worldview to the idea of cultural construction which indicates that meaning is produced by culture, and that, perhaps to a greater or lesser extent, a kind of mutual affective co-operation exists between people and material artefacts, the earth beneath our feet, animals, birds, insects and soon. Thus, according to this perspective, an ontological position emerges in a complex, heterogeneous field of open connections that consist of continual and reciprocal relationships that are actively and constantly being (re)assembled, (trans)formed and (dis)placed within energetic flux (Bateson 1973).

From such an epistemological and ontological perspective, life in is not instantiated within a pre-ordained cultural framework, rather, as Ingold (2011: 83) poetically suggests, it is forever becoming, always moving like the “crest of a wave that overflows any boundaries that might be thrown around it, threading its way like the roots and runners of rhizome through whatever clefts and fissures leave room for growth and movement.” From this perspective, people become meaningful as a consequence of their “patterns of activity and movement signatures” (ibid.) that can be found inscribed into particular identities, relationships, communities, sensibilities, things and so on (Stone et al. 2011 in line with Rapport and Overing 2007).
if there is such a thing as reality, it is likely to reveal itself in different ways to different people. The truth that presents itself is therefore in the encounter and is accumulated through the bodies’ senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling-touch; including interoception, proprioception) and subsequently contributes to the ongoing renewal of the world. Set within this context, the centrality of the senses in human understanding, consciousness and bodily movement cannot be underestimated. If a human being were unable to move and/or lack all of her/his senses she/he would have no experience of existence as we know it, nor would there be any consciousness as we know it. Thus, bodily sensing and, by extension, making sense are indeed central to human existence as the body is in a constant state of cultural (re)construction. The distinction so thoroughly made in modern thought between the body and the mind, therefore, needs to be re-thought. Rather than build our insights on the basis of the mutual influences of the body and the conceptual world of humans upon each other, we have to recognize the complex unity of the body that dwells (Ingold 2000) within an atmospheric world in-formation which gives impulse to the desire for movement and the essential organisation of life.

While consumer research on embodiment provides some useful insight in this regard, our approach takes a more holistic perspective such that these particular manifestations of embodiment are embedded in the (re-)production of cultural practices and meaning. Thus, sensing and by extension, bodily knowledge, movement and atmospherics are central to existence within a world in constant formation. Moreover, when we, as consumer researchers, can sense that we are no longer impeded or constrained by inverted ideologies through a realization that no reality has presence without atmospheric encounters, movement and bodily knowledge; and that different atmospheric encounters, movements and bodily knowledge are possible, we are burdened with a greater responsibility than simply discovering the truth. There is no longer a fundamental to show the way once discovered; no ready formula for life pre-exists to be discovered; no responsibility can be shirked or attributed to something beyond how we encounter a world-in-formation. Whatever truth we encounter is normally (but not always) constituted by our inverted conventions and perspectives.

Following on from this, the purpose of our particular brand of holistic consumer research is to open up the possibility of enabling people to get a deep, yet (in)expressible, understanding of a world-in-formation, an insight into the rich constellation of multiple truths, and, similar to Eastern philosophical approaches, make possible a meaningful recognition of the (in)significance of humanity. That is to not deny humanity of its position or place, but to make a greater sense of it through combining insights from an ever unfolding world-in-formation.

CONCLUSION

By way of a contribution, we have tried to provide the reader with insight into how our introspectively derived view of the culture of consumer research relates to the atmospheric linkages, influences and flows of life (Dholakia 2012; Ingold 2011) within an order of multiple orders (Firat 2009). Our current journey has not only reified the importance of feelings in cultural life (Joy and Sherry 2003 in line with Pham et al. 2001) but has also shown that studies of embodied realism (ibid.) hold the potential to more deeply access the flow of life (Ingold 2011). Moreover, we argue that such fundamental issues should be studied alongside atmospherics of movement and bodily knowledge (ibid.) in order to enable more sublime/holistic and sensitive understandings of consumption to emerge. Thus, and in keeping with the spirit of this paper, we call open-minded people towards the study of more holistic consumer research. Such a movement could seek to further illuminate, for example, the generation of knowledge that relates to the search for the sublime (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986; Lyotard 1986), the weather world (Ingold 2010), earth energies and ley lines, the availability and use of personal energy (Bateson 1972; Gould 1991), states of consciousness, what constitutes personhood, cybernetics (see craphound.com for thought provoking insight) and so on and so forth...

Viewed from this more holistic, and arguably critical-radical perspective (Dholakia 2012; Firat 2009), consumer research becomes the eclectic, open-ended (sub)conscious study of intertwined trajectories of human becomings and doings as they unfold through an atmospheric world-in-formation. In this sense, “there are no insides or outsides, no enclosures or disclosures, only openings and ways through” (Ingold 2011: 168). In short, we argue that the aim of holistic consumer research should be to visualise, sense and reveal the emancipatory and transformative flows (Dholakia 2012) and movements that contribute toward our ongoing formation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors of this work would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Tim Ingold (Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland) for providing the lead author with an advance copy of his unique and thought provoking book entitled Being Alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description published by Routledge.

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