Ontological Flattening, Vibrant Matter and Consumption: Sending Canonical Theories Back to School

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Ontological flatness is a neomaterialist perspective on socio-technical assemblages, which are in constant transformation through the interrelations of actants such as natural processes and individual consumers. This paper advocates the reinquiry of classic works in marketing and consumer behavior from neomaterialist ontologies.

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It’s a Material World: Revisiting Established Consumer Behavior Theories From Neomaterialist Perspectives
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Paper #1: Ontological Flattening, Vibrant Matter and Consumption: Sending Canonical Theories Back to School
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Paper #2: Maven 2.0: The Newly Assembled Interactive Ex-Pat Market Maven
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Paper #3: Practice Interrupted: When Fatal Disruptions and Irreconcilable Distortions Erode Mutual Understanding and Destroy Social Order
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Paper #4: Understanding Dynamism in Consumers’ Relationships with Brands through Assemblage Theory
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Those who live along the San Andreas Fault in Southern California are jolted periodically by the movement of the Pacific plate and the North American plate as the two outer shell pieces slide over the Earth’s mantle into new positions. Strain against resistance and release of pressure toward movement result in earthquake shock waves. This change is inexorable and even predictable. The geographical landscape is changed. But largely, residents in this fault zone stand upon what feels like stable ground, as the plates maintain their relative places until the pressure of moving in different directions builds to a breaking point. Scientific paradigms, like tectonic plates, move against each other and reach the breaking point periodically as well, and the jolts change the research landscape. We may experience small magnitude tremors and readjust our research accordingly. Rarely, “The Big One” knocks us for a loop and we have to rebuild our ontologies large scale. Frequently cited scientific philosophers Lakatos (1970), Kuhn, (1970a, b, c), Popper (1992 [34]; 88 [56]; 1970) and Laudan (1986) had differing opinions on progressions in scientific paradigms. We argue from Laudan’s standpoint that different paradigms can function side by side, like tectonic plates, albeit in tension. Indeed, in the social sciences we see multiple paradigms co-existing and maintaining an uneasy stability (Laudan 1986; Walker 2010). We argue that the field at large benefits from open-mindedness toward these insights, and cooperation in reaching them, as researchers from multiple ontologies discover competing insights about the world of consumer behavior.

In the spirit of ACR 2015’s theme “Advancing Connections” and breaking down paradigmatic silos, this session brings together and connects a neomaterialist ontological view (Coole and Frost 2010; DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Bryant 2011) with a re-envisioning of classic and established consumer behavior theories. “Neo”—or “new”—materialism is a reinterpretation of the debate between idealism and materialism that has unfolded in sociology since Hegel Vs Marx. Thus we begin with a conceptual paper to outline the theoretical understanding of neomaterialism, as it relates to other paradigmatic studies. This paper looks at seminal papers in the interpretive vein, such as “Possessions and the Extended of Self” (Belk 1988), to see what might be gained by reexamining foundational works while holding a neomaterialist ontology. The result is a call for re-inquiry on a larger scale. What follow are three empirical papers that reexplore classic theories within an ontological framework embracing materiality, assemblages, and practices. The second paper reinvestigates the market maven concept (Feick and Price 1987) in the context of Chinese expatriates living in the United States and acculturating to a complicated retail system. It specifically examines the active agency of language and the interactive web on mavens and “newbies.” The third paper revisits practice theory with an emphasis on practices as emergent phenomena. The last paper explores the almost ubiquitous concept of consumer-brand relationships (McAlexander et al 2002; Fournier 1998) within an assemblage-theoretic framework. It reveals a more nuanced understanding of the way consumer-brand relationships evolve. The first question this session raises is: what can be gained by re-investigating seminal contexts (e.g. self) with new ontologies? The over-arching question, however, is: how can co-existing ontologies and epistemologies benefit consumer research? We expect a lively session as the values of diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks for research are discussed.

Ontological Flattening, Vibrant matter and Consumption: Sending Canonical Theories Back to School

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A cursory examination of cultural research in the pages of marketing and consumer behavior journals in the last few years reveals a growing concern for understanding the roles of materiality in such basic areas as consumer experience and market dynamics. This same trend, fostered in part by scientific developments that have called into question our understanding of the most basic aspects of matter and existence, is sweeping through other social sciences as well (Coole and Frost 2010). Neomaterialist thinkers, although by no means completely unified in their views, agree that the idealist cultural turn in social sciences and philosophy has run out of steam. They tend to agree on other principles as well. Matter is vibrant, they say, not inert. The boundaries of bodies are porous; systems are open, not closed, and they are characterized more by complexity than by linear cause and effect. Objects have agency that resists, shapes and even defies human will. Every phenomenon is emergent, becoming, and constantly materializing. Finally, the vibrancy of matter and the agency of objects naturally lead to what DeLanda (2006) calls a flat ontology—flat in that it is non-hierarchical, flat in that it refuses to automatically prioritize human agency over that of objects or nature or other actors in a system.

This paper brings the flat ontology and object agency of neomaterialist thought to bear on key, even canonical, theories and...
constructs from marketing and consumer behavior, and it poses the question: What might we gain by bringing materiality to the forefront? For example, consider the seminal article “Possessions and the Extended Self” (Belk 1988). From an ontologically flat perspective it would make just as much sense to discuss “Selves and the Extended Possession.” In neomaterialist terms the reality lies somewhere in between. To plot the actual path between social construction and material structure we would begin by construing the self not as an extension of some agentic and essential individual into and through animate objects, but rather as an assemblage of vibrant matter of all kinds, of which the human consumer is but one (mostly) conscious manifestation and organizing force. We might argue for an alternative conceptualization along the lines of “The Assembled Self,” as Belk begins to (2014)—a constantly emergent constellation of the individual consumer and all of the various other materialities and meanings with which the consumer intersects in a meaningful way. Any perceived essence of self would emanate from the assembled self’s relative stability due to territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) through meanings produced by the consumer in conjunction with the consumer’s cultural context, which itself is a territorialized socio-technical assemblage in a constant state of becoming.

Considering an assembled versus an extended self we might pose certain hypothetical questions. Does a consumer, for example, extend her capabilities, her power, and her public persona into the world through her choice of an automobile? Certainly, she does. But does not the automobile also choose the consumer and thus extend its power into the social world? We answer yes, for the automobile is a vibrant assemblage, not only of artfully combined materials but also of all the meanings, communications and representations focused, through a logic of market segmentation, on the consumer. The consumer’s potential is enhanced by the automobile, and the automobile’s potential is unleashed by the consumer—differently, we would add, than it was by the dealer or would be by subsequent owners. The consumer-plus-automobile constitutes a new assemblage that is different in both function and meaning than either of the assemblages that comprise it, or even than their sum, and it is different in every social context through which it rolls.

One specific neomaterialist epistemology, actor-network theory (ANT), would conceive of the assembled self as an actor-network, that is, as a techno-social assemblage of both humans and non-humans acting in relation to one another to co-constitute identity. Normally ANT scholars, with their background in science and technology studies, don’t engage in individual identity-level research. They do however consider every actant in an assemblage to be a black box, which is itself an actor-network (Latour 1987), which opens the door to examine identity as an actor-network. Taking Callon’s (1986) view of an actor-network as the product of translation, the individual would problematize identity and then enroll and mobilize identity resources in the identity construction project. The individual’s consciousness would act as an obligatory point of passage for other relevant actants, including possessions broadly construed, but also ideologies and entertainment, food and drink, and all the technologies, toxins, viruses, flatteries and other forces visible and invisible, hidden or otherwise, that act upon the individual. The individual’s agency would not automatically prevail, however, over the agencies of other actants in the assemblage. It would, rather, attempt continually to achieve a stable, albeit contextual, identity assemblage in the face of destabilizing actants.

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The market maven construct, introduced by Feick and Price in 1987, has been examined for retail markets (Abrat and Nezer 1995), for couponing (Price and Feick 1988), and in industry (Natarajan and Angur 1997). It has been tested across product categories (Slama and Williams 1990), extended into Internet activities for teen internet mavens and others (Belch et al. 2005) and looked at in WOM (word of mouth) and “what goes viral” studies (Ho and Dempsey 2010). These studies and more on the maven construct yield different findings in different retail, institutional, and especially changing media contexts. Yang and Zhou (2012a; 2012b) and Yang (2013) examine the market maven concept online for Chinese consumers. They show cultural differences further complicate this variation. When more and more extensions have to be made to fit a construct to developing trends, it may be fruitful to look at the phenomenon with a new ontology. In this paper, we examine the market maven construct with the ontology of neomaterialism, to uncover the effect of the actors, including technology, upon each other in an interactive online community of Chinese retail experts and newbies in the U.S.

With the advent of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005), the Internet has become a new medium for community-based social interaction, where people share information, exchange opinions, and discuss ideas about various topics (Kozinets et al. 2010). Therefore, this medium can play an important role in maven behavior by providing a two-way communication platform to acculturation agents and new entrants. Tracing posts on a widespread Web 2.0 social vehicle (Abbas and Chen 2008), our study focuses on a Web forum platform, where different people can initialize or join discussions to learn from, or teach others about, the American retail environment. The US marketplace is governed by a host of contradictory situational norms that can confuse even the savviest American consumers. For example, depending on the retail circumstances, consumers pay full asking price (i.e., groceries, clothing boutiques, and department stores), haggle (i.e., automobiles, and bundled goods and services), bid (i.e., antiques and eBay), barter (i.e., co-operatives), and tip (i.e., restaurants and bars). Consumers may pay in advance, pay at the time of purchase, pay in installments, pay a third party over time, or even lease. A consumer is unlikely to have perfect market information, therefore, the most favorable price or “best deal” on a given product across stores is virtually unknown (Urbany, Dickson and Sawyer 2000). Those consumers less familiar with the rules and norms of the American retail environment (e.g., immigrants, temporary residents and tourists) are at a severe disadvantage, and often use Web 2.0—that is, interactive web platforms—to understand the markets. Here, within forums and other interactive platforms, they can correspond with, or lurk and watch, online market mavens sharing their knowledge, and grow their capacities to work with the US retailing system.

Our study site is the largest, most popular and most active Web forum among the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students and professionals scattered throughout the U.S. and living elsewhere abroad. The forum is not accessible within China. The forum has a dynamic set of approximately 400 different sub-boards across many topics ranging from legal residency to child care and education. On these platforms, newbies ask questions, and experts offer help, guidance, and advice. With longitudinal archived data, we use empirical qualitative and quantitative data, including linguistic analysis, to analyze a large database of specific sub-forum posts focused on explaining the US couponing system. We demonstrate that the online forum, MITBBS (http://www.mitbbs.com/), serves not only as an ac-
culturization platform where Chinese immigrants and foreign nation-
als interact to discuss the rules and norms of American retailing, but
that it also serves as a place where market mavens act as accultur-
tion agents.

Most importantly, we revisit the market maven concept with a
neomaterialist ontology to show the agency of the material as it acts
upon the consumers. Web 2.0, the mavens, the couponing systems,
the retailers, the newbies, and the lurkers act upon and co-create each
other. By focusing on the materiality of the system, including the
actant nature of language and the Web and Internet forums them-
selves, we find the agency of language as a collective phenomenon
as it appears on the site, the agency of Web 2.0 as its features both
constrain and free mavens, newbies and lurkers in their actions, and
the agency of couponing bundles as their force shapes the types of
interactions. We find that the medium and agency of Web 2.0 has
been under theorized in the literature of either acculturation or the
market maven phenomenon. We argue that bringing a neomaterialist
to the maven construct reveals previously hidden social dynam-
ics by foregrounding the materiality inherent in what is a complex
and emergent system.

Practice Interrupted: When Fatal Disruptions and
Irreconcilable Distortions Erode Mutual Understanding
and Destroy Social Order

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Neomaterialist ontologies share the perspective that all social
phenomena are emergent, in a constant state of becoming. Within
studies of practice, however, there exists an assumption of stability
as practices reproduce themselves through human carriers. In gen-
eral, theories of practice “account poorly for change” (Southerton
et al. 2012, 240) and most empirical studies do not capture temporal
or cultural changes in practices (Warde 2005). This study revisits
practice theory with an ethnomethodological emphasis on practices
as emergent phenomena highlighting production cohort responses to
breaches and replication trajectories.

Marketing scholars have historically focused on individual
consumers’ brand experiences (e.g., brand loyalty), however, re-
search revealing the complex nature of collective brand relation-
ships has evolved (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and
O’Guinn 2001; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2012; Diamond et al
2009; Arsel and Bean 2013; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Epp and
Price 2010; Epp, Schau and Price 2014). In studies of practice, however, there exists an assumption of stability
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O’Guinn 2001; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2012; Diamond et al
2009; Arsel and Bean 2013; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Epp and
Price 2010; Epp, Schau and Price 2014). In fact, consumers’ experience of products and brands is almost wholly
comprised of practices (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello 2009),
especially those related to use.

Using Reckwitz’s (2002) definition of practices as manifest
behaviors consisting of interconnected bodily enactments, mental
activities, materials, and contextual knowledge, we affirm Warde’s
(2005, 131) assertion that the basic assumption of practice theory
is that “consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course
of engaging in particular practices and that being a competent prac-
titioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession
of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to
the conduct of the practice.” For example, Thanksgiving is a prac-
tice, that is enacted annually according to broad cultural action tem-
plates within local production cohorts that involve objects (heirloom
dishes), recipes (blueprints for use), brands (recipe inputs) and so-
cial norms (who participates and what their role is) (Wallendorf and
Arnould 1991). Practice theorists stress practice continuity, where
practices are routinely carried out by cohorts (Halkier et al. 2011;
Schatzki, Cetina, and Savigny 2001; Warde 2005).

Previous literature on practice replication within kinship col-
lectives primarily addresses intergenerational transfer of holiday
and occasion rituals (Belk 1990; Escalas 1993; Wallendorf and
Arnould 1991), family meals (DeVault 1991; Moisio, Arnould and
Price 2004), recipe transfers (Baker, Karrer, and Veeck 2005; Arnould
and Epp 2006), literacy (Wagner and Spratt 1988), and obesity (Grier et
al. 2007). This research is biased toward practices that replicate with
how meanings of practices shift between generations, and also how
physical distance between family members of different generations
can inhibit transmission of practices. Epp et al (2014) employ as-
semblage theory to understand the continuation of family practices
despite physical separation and address briefly non-replication sce-
narios. Here, we focus on practice replication in dynamic production
cohorts loosely based on kinship, not specifically intergenerational
transfer, and explicitly allow for non-replication of practices.

Drawing on Garfinkel’s (1967) ground-breaking work asserting
the significance of everyday taken-for-granted actions that constitu-
tue social order, we employ ethnmethodology, and specifically the
focus on breaches, or disruptions, to examine the flexibility of prac-
tices and the boundary conditions that enable and inhibit practice
replication among production cohorts. Here, we examine a specific
form of production cohort, collectives loosely based on kinship. We
focus on practices that have been replicated at relatively predictable
intervals across dynamic production cohort memberships and high-
light the breaches that define the boundary conditions for practice
replication.

Linking ethnmethodology and practice theory, Lynch (2001,
141) treats ethnmethodology as both a “praxiology… to investi-
igate the logic or logics of ordinary practices” and the inscribed log-
ics themselves. Likewise, in conversation analysis, Sacks (1992)
proposed that a term can be both “a general analytic concept and
a contingently produced phenomenon” (142). Hilbert (1990) cites
this tacking between the macro and micro levels of phenomenon
(abstract and contingent) to be a key strength of ethnmethodol-
ogy. Here, we wield this strength in the service of understanding
the breaches when a practice failed to happen (Lynch 2001, 141) or
practice non-replication.

Our data consists of 62 informants within 15 loose kinship col-
lectives where it was possible to interview two or more members of
each production cohort. Our long interview protocol was designed
to access the lived experience of replicating practices, as well as
those that fail to replicate. From our dataset, we were able to identify
three broad practice trajectories (replication, revised replications,
and non-replications) based on practice flexibility, or the elasticity
of the practice to sustain mutual understanding in the face of changing
circumstances and improvisation. Practice flexibility is strongest in
replication, appears in a weaker form in revised replications and is
stretched beyond the limits of coherence in non-replication. We find
these trajectories are not static. A practice can move along one trajec-
tory but reverse path and move along a different trajectory based on
patterns of disruptions and distortions that erode mutual under-
standing and destroy the current social order. We identify fatal disruptions
(e.g., production cohort quorum, consumption material access, and
vendor) and irreconcilable distortions (e.g., competing logics regarding authenticity, performance standards, and outcomes) that erode mutual understanding, the central necessary condition for practice replication, and result in practice abandonment and/or production cohort disbandment.

Understanding Dynamism in Consumers’ Relationships with Brands Through Assemblage Theory

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer-brand relationships (CBRs) are prevalent in individuals’ lived experiences. Research acknowledges variations in the types of CBRs, and identifies certain trajectories within them. Prior research treats these relationships as dyadic, governed by interactions between a consumer and a brand with less consideration given to other influences that may affect them. Such a narrow focus may not provide a complete understanding of CBRs; a more systemic view is warranted. In contrast to prior research on CBRs, which privileges communications between a consumer and a brand, we explore a broader complement of influences that support the initiation, transformation, or dissolution of consumer-brand relationships.

Fournier’s (1998) seminal work on CBRs employed interpersonal relationship theory to explain consumers and their relationships with brands. That groundbreaking research changed how CBRs were understood, yet that theorizing provides a limited view. We employ assemblage theory as a lens to explore aspects of consumer-brand relationships that are invisible to interpersonal relationship theory. We focus on changes in CBRs. Assemblage theory takes the stance that all social phenomena result from the relationships among the agentic actants, or forces that generate them. All assemblages are emergent; that is, everything is relational, everything changes, and change is constant—a perspective that is especially conducive to studying relationship dynamics.

In any given assemblage there are periods of greater and lesser stability. Relatively stable assemblages may be deterritorialized by new actants and relationships, leading to reterritorialization and new assemblages. Consumer brand relationships, as assemblages, inevitably change as consumers’ lives, contexts and needs evolve. Brands also evolve due to factors such as the competitive environment, consumer preferences, and the needs and actions of firms. As an example, consider Meredith’s relationships with brands of digital camera:

My first one or two digital cameras were [by] Kodak and I think they were good for introducing me to the world of digital photography. But then they were a little too ‘beginner’ for me which is what I ultimately concluded. They are just a little bit bulkier and a little bit less fancy and stuff... and so I decided that I was ready to try a more heavy-duty one... I researched them online to find out what brand I was most interested in, and what-not, and then I went to the store, because they have them out, and actually felt how they felt in my hand and got an insider’s perspective, I guess, from the people working there, and then went back to the internet after writing it down, and then looked at customer reviews and then ultimately decided on [a Canon] and then purchased it in-store. ~ Meredith

This single, short narrative recounts how a reasonably stable relationship with Kodak becomes deterritorialized through a complex set of interactions—among a consumer, her goals and expertise, brand messaging, product designs, competitor offerings, merchandising, retail staff and other camera users in both on- and off-line contexts—and reterritorialized as a relationship with Canon.

This study examines many such CBR assemblages with a sharp focus on the shifting relationships that shape them. We identify factors that both increase and decrease territorialization or stability. In the example cited above, the Kodak CBR was deterritorialized in part by Meredith’s own growing competencies. If Kodak had participated in that growth, the brand may have been able to lead Meredith through product upgrades within a brand family where she already felt comfortable.

Other findings also promise to enhance our understanding of CBR dynamics. It seems clear that limiting analysis to the consumer-brand dyad ignores the importance of other actants in the assemblage. Meredith’s relationship with Kodak, once deterritorialized, opened itself to a world of information and gave that information room to percolate. It also appears that change trajectories in CBRs are more nuanced than previous research has suggested. A CBR is embedded in a life context, and movement in that context opens many possible lines of flight for the consumer to redefine or exit the relationship. Whether that happens or not may depend on how stable or territorialized the assemblage is as well as the influence of forces upon it.

Further, brand loyalty can be conceptualized as a highly territorialized and therefore stable CBR assemblage. This is consistent with the conceptualization of McAlexander et al. (2002) of brand loyalty as integration in a brand community by way of a network of relationships among human and non-human actants, that is, with other consumers, with institutions, with branded objects and with brand symbols and narratives. Another highly territorialized type of CBR assemblage occurs in what Coupland (2005) describes as brands being sufficiently embedded in consumer rituals as to be completely taken for granted. If consumers accept brands unreflectively as natural parts of their lives, they are less likely to seek replacements.

Through this research, we advance the present understanding of CBRs through the lens of assemblage theory as we explain the means by which CBRs may change through time. Finally, we discuss implications for research and practice.

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