An Existential Analysis of Consumers As “Incarnated Beings”: a Merleau-Pontyian Perspective

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ABSTRACT
As consumer research continues to be dominated by a ‘disembodied’ perspective predicated on the ‘mind-centred’ school of cognitive psychology, it has also witnessed the growing prominence of interpretive research, for example Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). As such, the field has begun to embrace the idea of consumers as incarnated beings, whose embodied experience sutures them to their lifeworld in a particular time and space. This paper proposes that the existential-phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty illuminates the richest account of the body as the experiential locus of existence and knowledge. As such it provides consumer researchers with a fertile ground on which to theorize from an embodied standpoint. This paper will explore several concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology including (1) the body-subject (2) perception as a perspectival mode of embodied engagement (3) the phenomenal body (4) corporeal schema and the enfoldment of material possessions (5) habitual schema (6) intersubjectivity and (7) situated freedom and embodied projects. In so doing, we will be able to provide insights for an embodied re-reading of various theories including self-identity, materialism and the dialogical relationships between structure-agency and therefore address the quiet presence of the body within consumer research.

INTRODUCTION
We shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, as it were, the subject of perception.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961)

Despite the shifting agenda in consumer research focusing on cultural consumption, the concept of “embodiment” remains a relatively uncharted terrain within the discipline. Instead, priority is given to other aspects of consumer culture such as subculture, marketplace symbolism and meanings, self-identities, gender politics. While such topics are exciting areas of consumer research, lurking within these inquiries is the quiet presence of the body.

Joy and Venkatesh (1994) lament the absence of studies pertaining to the theorization of the body within consumer research, which is, in part, attributable to the continuing domination of a “mind-centred” epistemology influenced by cognitive psychology (Thompson et. al, 1989). Consequently, this has significantly marginalized the exploration of consumers as “embodied beings”, in favour of an information-processing model of consumer behaviour. In other words, consumer research has, until recently, been epistemologically disembodied, trapped within the iron cage of the Cartesian legacy that has informed much of Western philosophy.

The body, however, whether explicitly or tacitly, has been variously implicated within consumer research. It has been regarded as a canvas of (sub)cultural and tribal inscription (Rook, 1985; Goulding and Follett, 2002); a vehicle of aesthetic expression (Meamber and Venkatesh 1999) and experience (Joy and Sherry, 2003); a theatre where identity is performed (Butler, 1993; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2004), constructed (Patterson and Elliot, 2002) managed (Banister and Hogg, 2002; Valtonen, 2004), transformed (Schouten, 1991; Seebaransingh et al. 2002); a site of discursive formation and disciplinary biopower (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995); a representation and construction of ‘cyborgic’ coupling (Giesler and Venkatesh, 2005; Lai et. al. 2005).

Increasingly, then, consumer scholars are beginning to embrace a more ‘embodied’ perspective of consumers. Embodiment has been explored from various ontological positions; ranging from Foucauldian post-structuralism (e.g. Thompson and Hirschman, 1995); Goffmanian dramaturgy (e.g. Valtonen, 2004), to postmodern feminism (e.g. Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Meamber and Venkatesh, 1999). These are broadly described by Grosz (1994) as the ‘inscription’ perspective, which provides an account of the body as a tableau of symbolic imprint and a site of discursive production-as such a socio-historical construction (Shilling, 1993).

While the ‘inscription’ perspective has been especially prominent among consumer researchers, we maintain that there is a need to address the ‘lived experience’ (Grosz, 1994) of consumers as embodied beings. We will therefore adopt a phenomenological perspective, which entails a “repositioning of the body as a site of knowledge/experience and intention/action, shaped (never determined) by social structure” (Howson and Inglis, 2001: 302). The ‘lived’ perspective is beginning to gain momentum within the broader social sciences predicated mainly on the work of Merleau-Ponty (e.g. Csordas, 1994; Crossley, 1995; Williams and Bendelow, 1998; Leder, 1990).

Consumer scholars such as Thompson and Hirschman (1998), Thompson (1998) and Joy and Sherry (2003) have subscribed to the phenomenological inquiry of embodiment. There is, however, a danger of overgeneralizing the tenet of phenomenology by combining the concepts of various phenomenologists and ignoring the different strands of thought these philosophers embrace. Thus while these scholars provide an impressive account of the body as the existential immersion into the lifeworld, it is the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) that they are indebted to, in conceptualizing consumers as incarnated beings.

As Merleau-Pontyian’s philosophy challenges the dogmatism of Cartesian philosophy (Williams and Bendelow, 1998), it has the potential to break its hegemonic hold on consumer research. Merleau-Ponty presents the richest account of human corporeality, and thus provides a fertile ground for researchers to conceptualize the consumers from an embodied standpoint. Yet while his contemporaries have implicated the centrality of the body as a foundation of knowledge, it has never been their central concern. For example, Husserl (1936/1970) prioritized the transcendental ego qua consciousness; Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasized the ontology of Dasein while Sartre (1943/1956) failed to transcend the dualism of the in-itself/for-itself in which consciousness remained the priority of his philosophy. Thus while consumer researchers have certainly acknowledged Merleau-Ponty’s contributions (Thompson and Hirschman, 1998; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Churchill and Wertz, 1985; Patterson and Elliot, 2002), they have only provided a partial
account of his philosophical assumptions. For example, limited attention has been given to Merleau-Ponty’s endorsement of the ontology of the flesh—i.e. what does it mean to be bodies?

Far from a disembodied thinker, consumers are what Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) called ‘body-subjects’, whose embodied experience sutures them to their lifeworld in a particular time (historicity) and space (socio-cultural context). As such, Merleau-Ponty is able to engage in a dialogue with the ‘inscription perspective’ (Crossley, 1996) by attending to the meanings and ‘lived experience’ of consumers. Body subjects are dynamically involved in a network of social relations (intersubjectivity) and are therefore subjected to the production of discursive power (French, 1994). In short, a Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology endorses the:

“experientially grounded view of human embodiment as the existential basis of our being-in-the-world, one which overcomes past dualities (e.g. body/mind) and in doing so helps us move outwards toward a broader understanding of the relationship between body and self, culture and society.” (Williams and Bendelow, 1998: 8, italics in original).

In this paper, we will discuss the basic tenets of Merleau-Pontyian’s phenomenology in order to explore the consumer as incarnated subject. In so doing, we will be able to present an embodied re-reading of various theories within consumer research including self-identity, embodied projects, materialism and the dialogical relationships between structure-agency.

**BODY-SUBJECT: EXISTENTIAL SUTURING OF EMBODIMENT AND LIFEWORLD**

Traditionally, the external world was assumed to be distinct from the experiencing subject. This has given rise to the subject/object dualism. For example, through the methodology of radical doubt, Descartes posits that the external world is a projection within the inner theatre of the mind. Therefore perception1 of the external world (object) becomes a representation of mental (pure) consciousness (subject), a notion devoid of embodied experience (Crossley, 1995). Husserl (1936/1970) proposed the phenomenological bracketing of the external world in order to arrive at the notion of ‘pure essence’ or *transcendental ego* (Fontana and Van de Walter, 1977).

For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not an object separate from the embodied subject; rather it is a ‘field of possibilities’ in which the body-subject is intimately entwined. As ‘body-subject’, one does not possess nor create the world like it is an innate entity. Perception is therefore an active and practical mode of incarnated engagement with the world (Crossley, 1995). Thus, the theory of the body is already a theory of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002). The world is always already there (Heidegger, 1927/1962), but it only comes into being through my experiencing it. Following Heidegger, then, Merleau-Ponty introduces the incarnate subject as already situated in-the-world. By perceiving, the world and I come into being. The communion between the embodied subject and the world becomes the locus of existence and therefore the site of knowledge formation (Howson and Inglis, 2001):

“The perceiving mind is an incarnated body. I have tried to…re-establish the roots of the mind in its body, and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of the external things on our body as well as against those who insist on the autonomy of consciousness…..And it is equally clear that one does not account for the facts by superimposing a pure, contemplative consciousness on a thing-like body…..Perceptual behaviour emerges…from relations to a situation and to an environment which are not merely the working of a pure, knowing subject.” (Merleau-Ponty 1963:3-4 quoted in Grosz, 1994: 87)

To understand the relationship between subject and object is to understand the notion of intentionality. Husserl (1936/1970) stressed the philosophical concept of intentionality—a concept that traditionally refers to the relationship between the subject and the object as the basic structure of consciousness. Thus “consciousness is always a consciousness of something”. Phenomenologically, the principal of intentionality implies that the body-subject is always directed at the object of his experience (the world). To eradicate the cognitive overtone of Husserlian’s phenomenology, Heidegger posits that “the person exists only in the performance of intentional act” (Heidegger, 1962 in Dreyfus, 1999: 49). Intentionality for Heidegger, therefore, refers to the human comportment who is already situated in the world as ‘being-directed-towards’ its activity (Dreyfus, 1999).

Although Heidegger has never adopted an embodied perspective, it is Merleau-Ponty, his ardent follower who later embraces the body as the site of intentionality. The body-subject is comported towards the world whose experience opens up inexhaustible, meaningful possibilities (Young, 1990a). For Merleau-Ponty, then, human beings cannot simply be reduced to ‘purely mind’ (subject), or merely bodies (object), for the mind is always incarnated and vice versa (Grosz, 1994; Howson and Inglis, 2001).

Thus, consumers, as embodied beings, are immersed in their practical world and seek to act upon it in a purposeful manner (intentionality). The world in which consumers are embedded is already imbued with primordial meanings. Through intentional comportment, they take up meaningful positions within the world in a purposeful fashioning of their personal lifeworld (Langer, 1989; Borgerson, 2005; Thompson, 1998). In short, consumers receive the world through their embodied comportment and in turn personalized the world (eigenwelt) by engaging in:

“an active process in which the organism interrogates its worldly surround, guided by both biological sensitivities and behavioural-perceptual schemas, thereby creating for itself a subjective ‘milieu’ or ‘lifeworld.’ Moreover, it is events as experienced within this subjectively meaningful lifeworld which trigger and shape our other behaviour. We respond to the world as we perceive it.” (Crossley, 2001: 71)

Thus, the body becomes the point of insertion, which opens out onto the (cultural) world (Leder, 1990) to form a meaningful gestalt—i.e. our embodied life is inextricably bound to the world through which meanings emerge as an experiential whole. The world and the embodied subject thus reach out to each other in a dialectical fashion:

“Parts and wholes evolve in consequence of their relationship, and the relationship itself evolves. There are the properties of things that we call dialectical: that one thing cannot exist

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1Perception is traditionally understood as the effect of the sensation of external objects on the perceiving subjects (Matthews, 2006)

2Intentionality is a concept first introduced by Franz Brentano (1837–1917) to understand consciousness. To say that consciousness is intentional is to say that it is always directed towards or refers to some objects. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. (Matthews 2006)
without the other, that one acquires its properties from its relation to the other, that the properties of both evolve as a consequence of their interpenetration.” (Levins and Lewontin, 1985:3 in Burkitt, 1999:12).

PERSPECTIVITY

The primordial bond consumers have with the world implies the ‘situatedness’ of being-in-the-world. Given such ‘situatedness’, our perception is therefore essentially perspectival—i.e. one always observes from somewhere, never from nowhere (Crossley, 1995). Such a view posits that researchers do not assume an objective view of the world, (i.e. a view without perspective operating on the principle of universality), for its richness is only revealed to the researcher from a particular perspective within a particular context. Accordingly the world both precedes and exceeds our ability to grasp it (Churchill and Wertz, 1985).

Absolute objectivity in a rationalistic way is, therefore, difficult to achieve. Such a disembodied worldview is what Merleau-Ponty called the “God’s eye view” of scientific knowledge, which portrays the researcher as a distant and dispassionate observer taking an omnipotent worldview—a view devoid of subjective human traces. The disembodied perceiver is thus a ‘transcendental subject’ (Matthews, 2006). As an embodied being, it is not possible to leap out from the body and occupy an objective space (Langer, 1989).

In short then, the ‘lived body’ affords us an anchorage in the world and situates us within our ‘perspectival horizon’, where we realize our place in the world. Therefore our view of the world is always figurally partial and incomplete against the background of real schema, deposited as habits through their everyday praxis and, over time, has acquired the ‘know-how’ (maximal grip) of synthesizing with the world. In turn, their reliance on their body as ‘taken-for-granted’ liberates them to focus on their goal/destination of reaching the campus. In short, their corporeal schema, represented as habits, enables them to ‘automatically’ engage with the world without resorting to their cognitive faculty. Their world and their body are coordinated in a harmonious pre-reflexive dance. Thus, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002:173) asserts that our existence is not a matter of ‘I think’ but rather ‘I can’.

THE PHENOMENAL BODY

Although we are biological creatures, as human beings we do not experience our bodies as if they are machines, in a strictly Cartesian manner (Burkitt, 1999). The body is permeated with intentionality, which acts as our experiential pivot of being-in-the-world. As body-subjects, we actively act within our surroundings and possibly transform them (Crossley, 1995). This mode of embodiment is what Merleau-Ponty called the ‘phenomenal body’—a body-lived-from-within, which privileges the first-person perspective (Leder, 1990).

Yet, Merleau-Ponty never denies the material basis of our existence: “To be a lived body is also to be a physical body with bones, tendons, nerves and sinews, all of which can be scientifically characterized” (Leder, 1990:6). Our personal existence is rooted in our materiality but we experience our body as an active transcendence over the immanence (Young, 1990a). We both have (possess) and are our bodies (being):

“But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it. … The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather a work of art… In this sense as a work of art…the novelist’s task is not to expound ideas or even analyze characters, but to depict an inter-human event, ripening and bursting it upon us with no ideological commentary. It is a nexus of living meanings.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 173-175)

The ‘phenomenal body’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002) is the body as ‘lived’, through our practical engagement with our everyday habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Giddens concurred that the body is “‘an action-system’, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interaction of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity” (1991:99). Although Merleau-Ponty has never used this term, his thesis displays striking similarity to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus which is a:

“system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” (Bourdieu, 1990: 53 in Burkitt, 1999: 85)

Merleau-Ponty refers to our habit as bodily orientation of being-in-the-world (Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 2001). Like Bourdieu (1984), Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the intentional arc can be understood as acquired skills/habits sedimented within our corporeal schema. Such sedimentation of acquired skills equip us with bodily dispositions (dispositions) to respond to situations in the world (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999; Joy and Sherry, 2003). As such our corporeal schema orientates us to the world and enables us to have a ‘maximum grip’ (competence), which frees us to accomplish our life projects (Langer, 1989).

It is through our phenomenal bodies that we can competently live and cope with the world without needing to think about it. When an individual walks towards the University, they do not need to think and command their foot to place itself in front of the other. This is because their body (foot) is incorporated into their corporeal schema, deposited as habits through their everyday praxis and, over time, has acquired the ‘know-how’ (maximal grip) of synthesizing with the world. In turn, their reliance on their body as ‘taken-for-granted’ liberates them to focus on their goal/destination of reaching the campus. In short, their corporeal schema, represented as habits, enables them to ‘automatically’ engage with the world without resorting to their cognitive faculty. Their world and their body are coordinated in a harmonious pre-reflexive dance. Thus, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002:173) asserts that our existence is not a matter of ‘I think’ but rather ‘I can’.

Leder (1990) extended Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the phenomenal body in his seminal work, The Absent Body. Leder reminds us that our lived experience is typified by the bodily state of continual ‘disappearance’, so enabling our life project to unfold without disruption (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). In order for us to competently engage with the world, the body recedes into the background (taken-for-granted) while the world surfaces and comes to life. However, our body comes to the fore of our perceptual field and becomes the thematic object of experience when it is in the state of dysfunction (Leder, 1990), or when it is subjected to objectifying gazes (Sartre, 1943/1956). In such a state, our bodily intentionality is inhibited and so melts away our taken-for-granted structures of the world, causing us to experience a disjunction in our self-narratives (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). We therefore experience our body as an objectified alien presence (Leder, 1990). As such it is through the ‘absence’ of our phenomenal body that we can participate in the cultural world, and it is this which we will now discuss.
COPROREAL SCHEMA AND THE ENFLESHMENT OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

As the point of insertion into the cultural world, the phenomenal body is malleable (Shilling, 1993), plastic (Bordo, 1993) and bionic (Synnott, 1993). The plasticity of the phenomenal body enables us to acquire cultural skills as well as social structures (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999) and to assimilate cultural artifacts, such as technology and language, into our corporeal schema. As such, our phenomenal body is a means for us to ‘have’ and participate in the cultural world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). This provides further insights for researchers to explore consumer’s cultural embodiment (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999) which connects the self, material possessions, the body and the cultural world.

This is exemplified by Merleau-Ponty’s illustration of the blind man’s stick. Through gradual mastery, the blind man appropriates the stick as an extension of his bodily schema to help him find his way in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). The blind man’s stick becomes pregnant with practical, emotional, sensual and imaginative meanings as a result of the blind man’s response and engagement with the world. Once incorporated into the blind man’s corporeal schema, the stick is no longer experienced as an external object. Instead the stick becomes ‘well in hand’ sedimented as habitual familiarity and then recedes into the background of the blind man’s perceptual field in a taken-for-granted manner. The stick blends in unison with the blind man’s body and his world:

“To get use to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our ‘being-in-the-world’, or changing our experience by appropriating fresh instruments.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002: 166)

The blind man’s stick illustration resonates strongly with Belk’s theory of the extended self (1988). A phenomenological re-reading would hopefully enable consumer researchers to appreciate possessions not merely as an extension of the self but a holistic chiasm between consumers as embodied beings, their material possessions and the cultural world.

As Borgerson (2005) observes, Belk (1988) presumes that consumers form attachments to their possession as an expression of agentic control over material objects. Belk contends that objects and the body can be incorporated into the extended-self through control, mastery, creation, knowledge and contamination. A Merleau-Pontyian perspective affirms that possessions can become a sensate (i.e. sensible) world (Crossley, 1995), and, as such, is able to control (subject) and be controlled (object).

For Merleau-Ponty, social structure could not sustain itself without the continuous reproduction of cultural repertoires (in the form of habitual schema) generated by body-subjects. Similarly, body-subjects could not participate in the social world without embracing the various cultural repertoires and resources. Due to its reversibility, such chiasmatic relationships between the incarnated consumers, their material possessions and their world are never absolute distinctions (Crossley, 1995). This problematizes the enduring dualisms between structure/agency and subject/object which has haunted the social sciences.

HABITUAL SCHEMA, SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND DISCOURSE

As embodied beings, we are already in the world, more specifically, we are ‘thrown’ into the social world, which is always already there. Just as we come to know the presence of others through the human imprint of cultural objects (Langer, 1989); we are born into the pre-existing social and cultural conditions—which we embody as the ‘residue’ of collective habitual schemas. Merleau-Ponty therefore suggests that we are socialized into the world through the province of the phenomenal body that “comprehends, appropriates and sediment[s] the human world into its own dynamic structure” (Langer, 1989: 101).

Language is one such collective habitual schema we adopt in order to competently participate in the social world. Although Merleau-Ponty’s thesis is never intended to be structuralist, he nevertheless recognized that body-subjects are practical agents who adopt and appropriate cultural resources such as language (qua social structure) in order to occupy their place in the world (Crossley, 1995). Language is a relatively stable cultural resource. We are therefore able to construct and make sense of our and other’s narratives through shared language:

“In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his...
are inter-woven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator….we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002: 413)

As habitus is relatively enduring, body-subject is able to derive certain stabilized ways of being and to sustain a coherent sense of self (Giddens, 1991; Crossley, 1996). By adopting various habitual schemas, we are also emitting and reproducing the cultural codes deposited within our embodied comportment (Crossley, 1995). Inevitably, then, body-subjects are interpellated into particular discourses by means of their embodied comportment; hence unwittingly entangled in the power configuration produced by such discursive interplay (Burkitt, 1999). Discourse a la Foucault is therefore a “fleshy process”-produced through the work of the active body (Crossley, 1996; 2001) and as such the body is both the locus of action and a target of power (Crossley, 1996). A dialogue can therefore be facilitated between the work of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault (Crossley, 1996).

In her seminal paper, Throwing Like A Girl, Iris Young (1990a) adopted Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analysis to illustrate how women’s lived bodily comportment3 expresses their embodied subjectivity of being female in a patriarchal world. Young observed that feminine motility produces modalities that disempower women and render their experience of the body as being a ‘thing’. First of all, women experience the world in ambiguous transcendence, where they typically refrain from using their whole body and tend to occupy a constricted space. Merleau-Ponty argued that by virtue of our body intentionality, we are able to open out and participate in the world and thus, transcend the immanence of our body. Women, however, experience an ambiguous transcendence for fear of eliciting unwanted gazes and spatial invasion in a culture where the female body is often objectified and defined as the ‘Other’. As such, women’s bodies are underused and fail to realize their full bodily potential, or what Young called inhibited intentionality. In sports, for example, women often limit the mobilization of their whole body and concentrate instead on a specific body part. This limits their ability to swing, throw and hence engenders their inability to take command of their surroundings. According to Young, women often stay bodily immobile, rooted to their space instead of reaching out to an incoming object (ball), if they have not already ducked to avoid getting hurt. Such discontinuous unity with their surroundings has contributed to women doubting the competency of their bodies and thus perpetuating the myth of women’s bodies as fragile and passive.

Such inhibited corporeality and spatial constriction are equally manifested in women’s consumption, especially clothing. Womens’ clothing (ranging from high heels to brassiers) are remnants of enslishment that traces women’s embodiment of a culture that tends to bind their bodies and restrict their postures. Hence, women experience a spatial confinement and discontinuity when they engage with their lifeworld. Wearing high heels, for example, hinders women from engaging in full bodily movement (inhibited intentionality) and inhibits their occupation of space. As such women’s bodily comportment creates an invisible prison that reproduces the gendering process and obstructs their bodily intentionality. Corsets and foot binding are traditional examples which, to a certain extent, maintained the gender/power relationships (Bordo, 1993). Such manipulation to constrict the body resulted in an ambiguous transcendence, which prevents women from fully connecting with the world of potentiality. Young (1990b) also noted how the wearing of brassier has contributed to the ambiguous transcendence of the breasts into a fetishized object. Specifically breasts are fetishized objects of male desire, in which the brassier functions to restrict female sexuality, by creating a barrier to touch. Encased within her brassier, women are confined and bordered, engaging the chest (which is the centre of a person’s being in-the-world) from fully opening out onto the world and its possibilities (Young, 1990b).

Young’s observation is perhaps best captured by the comedic portrayal of organizational dress code on Six Feet Under (Episode 57: The Rainbow of Her Reasons). The character, Claire Fisher was narrated against the background of an organization that upholds the consciousness of her job (torture chamber). Claire is subjected to a masculine discourse, which constrains and imprisons her within a confined space (torse chamber). Pantyhose are the mode of objectification that Claire describes how wearing pantyhose restricts her entire torso. I feel like I can’t even breathe. I mean none of this work would seem that hard if I didn’t feel like I was sitting here in some kind of a torture chamber all day.

Colleague: Maybe you should try a different brand. Mine energize me.

Claire: It’s just these pantyhose…They’re like squeezing my entire torso. I feel like I can’t even breathe. I mean none of this work would seem that hard if I didn’t feel like I was sitting here in some kind of a torture chamber all day.

Colleague: Men have to wear ties.

Claire: Right, but they don’t suffocate you. And it’s not on their penis.

Colleague: [Embarrassed] I’m gonna go wash out some mugs.

A dialogue with Foucault’s poststructuralist perspective (1976) can generate some rich insights into the ‘lived perspective’ of discourse. Claire’s description of her embodied experience is narrated against the background of an organization that upholds the masculine-defined ideal. The organizational dress code is a manifestation of this patriarchal reproduction of gender/power dynamics. Claire describes how wearing pantyhose restricts her bodily intentionality from engaging with her job (squeezing of torso, difficulty breathing) and imprisons her within a confined space (torse chamber). Pantyhose are the mode of objectification that re-sculpts women’s body in the form of Barbie’s smoothness. In other words, Claire is subjected to a masculine discourse, which disciplines the female body through the production of a normative representation that defines acceptable dress code in terms of ‘professionalism’. Women are further disempowered through the
fetishization of their legs, (Kaplan, 1983 in Young, 1990c), where the body is objectified by isolating a specific body part to represent the unity of the phallus (Young, 1990c). While a tie is the male-equivalent of representing male professionalism, it does not impede their bodily intentionality (they don’t (deliberately) suffocate you), nor does it emphasize gender objectification and fetishization (it’s not on their penis).

**INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

Being-in-the-world necessarily means being in a social world where body-subjects co-exist in a shared ‘intermundane space’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 269 in Crossley, 1995). To be intersubjective is to have a reciprocal appreciation for other human beings as subjects with intentionality, thoughts and emotions (Matthews, 2006). Thus consumers and researchers are embodied beings, belonging to the world through ‘carnal intersubjectivity’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), and as such share the experience of humanity as ‘a primordial carnal bond between human beings’ (Crossley, 1995: 57). We project towards each other as a prolongation and fulfilment of mutual intentionalities. Our incompleteness of being anchored within the horizon of perspectivity, means that we enrich each other and complement our myopic worldview (Langer, 1989). Our perspective slips into one another and gives birth to shared social meanings. It is, therefore, through other incarnated subjects that we are able to find ourselves. In other words, our embodied self is rooted in the world through which we weave a social fabric of shared cultural meanings. To paraphrase Shakespeare, the world is a stage through which we, as embodied beings play out the narratives of our social lives (Thompson, 1998):

“My body and the world are no longer objects co-ordinated together by the kind of functional relationships that physics establishes. The system of experience in which they intercommunicate is not spread out before me and ranged over by a constituting consciousness. I have the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002: 408 italic in original)

In short, it is through the ‘reawakening’ of our senses, so to speak, that we can be re-connected with the world and thus, rediscover ourselves and our place in it. Such a humanistic approach has major implications for consumer researchers who are reflexively considering their role in “enhancing consumer welfare”, as mirrored in the recent call for Transformative Consumer Research (TCR). Researchers and participants are embodied beings who share an intersubjective bond as human beings, mutually enriching each other’s worldview-in the manner of a hermeneutic circle (Thompson, 1997). Research is necessarily a collaborative practice (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) that calls for mutual respect and should therefore aim to be power-neutral (Shankar et al., 2001).

**FREEDOM AND EMBODIED PROJECT**

So far, we have discussed the notion of consumers, as incarnated beings, who are sutured to the social world that provides the setting where the embodied selves can unfold in a coherent manner. By virtue of their incarnated subjectivity, consumers are active agents who exercise freedom in deciding how their life project will unfold. However, to what extent is our freedom constrained by our situational circumstances? Such existential anguish concerning freedom is poignantly expressed in Jean-Paul Sartre’s masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956). Sartre depicts the existential paradox of being–(1) being-in-itself (*en-soi*) and (2) being-for-itself (*pour-soi*). On the one hand, the body is a ‘being-in-itself’–i.e. body as the brute *facticity* of one’s existence (Thompson and Hirschman, 1998). Our *factitudes* include our social circumstances (Thompson and Hirschman, 1998), choices we made in the past, but more fundamentally the sheer nakedness of being born with a body and thus subjected to a corporeal existence (Catalano, 1980). We share a ‘horizon of carnal experience’ of inheriting a body which eats, sleeps, excretes, dies, feels etc. (Fontana and Van de Water, 1977). The body-in-itself is the terminus state of being.

Yet our body is also primarily a ‘being-for-itself’–i.e. body is a lived consciousness that reconnects one to the world of invested possibilities. As such the ‘body-for-itself’ is a body that is in the continuous process of coming-to-be. Such continual fashioning of the body project is a state of constant flux, seething with uncertainties (Fontana and Van de Water, 1977). As such humans constantly seek to rid themselves from such continuous transcendence by striving to be a thing-in-itself–i.e. to be in the end state of being (for example, by conforming to social convention unquestioningly). Thus we have a tendency to live under the grip of what Sartre called ‘bad faith’, in which we fool ourselves into believing that we are not really free to transcend the given circumstances of our life (Wood, 2000).

Although Sartre, at times, acknowledges that our freedom is situated, his central thesis maintained the possibility and the need to exercise absolute freedom, unburdened by our *factitudes* (Matthews, 2006). For Sartre, we are what we make of our lives and we, solely, are responsible for what we commit ourselves to be (Fontana and Van de Water, 1977).

Freedom according to Merleau-Ponty cannot be absolute, as it denotes making meaningful choices. In making meaningful choices, it necessarily involves obstacles–i.e. in making certain choices, we forego another. Freedom without obstacles is a meaningless endeavor–“when there is no obstacle there is nothing to do” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002: 509). As embodied subjects, consumers are liable to the existential condition of ‘thrownness’–i.e. being born into the preexisting sociocultural circumstances (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Thompson, 1998). Consequently the actualization of existential possibilities can only materialize within the ‘given’ circumstances to which the consumers are situated. It is within such *situatetness* that consumers fashion their embodied project (Thompson and Hirschman, 1998).

Embodied projects involve the commitment of exercising freedom in an ongoing and purposeful manner through which our personal history comes into being. Our life project is akin to the working process of an artwork. We weave together a meaningful tapestry by plaiting the threads of our past (including our past choices), which reveal a meaningful pattern of our present through which we base our choices in the perpetual unfolding of our future (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). Our life project is the foundation of our self-identity that endows us with a sense of purpose and direction (Thompson, 1998), and as such, gives rise to the notion of life themes (Mick and Buhl, 1992).

Constraining choices enable us to mark out the ‘field of possibility’. By making choices, we confer meaning on them by our very existence of being free (Langer, 1989). As such, freedom must be rooted in the world in which we commit ourselves to our life project and thereby transform ourselves and our circumstances in a durable way (Crossley, 2001). For Merleau-Ponty, the potential for resistance arises through *intersubjective interactions* with other body-subjects, whose *mutual intentionality* opens up choices and possibilities for transcendence. The stability of our *habitus* provides us with a sort of “ontological cocoon”, (Giddens, 1991), where we are able to adopt, appropriate and resist shared cultural meanings (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Our *habitus* is therefore
not a determining force; rather it creates a ‘situation’ through which we implement personal choices (Crossley, 1995). So, although consumers are subjected to the facticities of their given circumstances, (e.g. socio-historical, biological), this does not dictate how they are going to live their lives. Rather it provides them with a framework through which they are able to fashion their embodied narratives and thus personalize their world (eigenwelt) into a meaningful field of experiences (Thompson, 1998; Churchill and Wertz, 1985).

CONCLUSION

As consumer research continues to witness the burgeoning prominence of interpretive research (Sherry, 1991), as espoused more recently by Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), the discipline is beginning to acknowledge that consumers are incarnated beings whose embodied experience is paramount to the formation of theory (e.g. Thompson, 1998). As a methodology, phenomenology, has been well established over the years (e.g. Churchill and Wertz, 1985; Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1989). As a philosophical concept, phenomenology is informed by numerous strands of thinking, which at times are contradictory, and therefore cannot be read in a totalizing manner. This paper therefore offers some insight into embodiment, from a Merleau-Pontyian perspective.

Unlike his contemporaries, Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology has the potential to create a dialogue with interpretive consumer researchers. For example, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh emphasizes the notion of reversibility where binary constructs are reconfigured as dialectical and chiasmatic. Thus it is able to avoid the extremist and idealistic view of consumers without sliding into dualisms so often characterized by the work of his contemporaries (e.g. Sartrean absolute freedom; Husserlian’s transcendental ego). Through their CCT project, Arnould and Thompson for example have stressed the need to

“push beyond the dichotomous opposition between sociological determinism and existential autonomy/agency (Sartre, 1956) or models of consumer which entail untenable and or culturally naïve models of sociological agency.” (2006: 11)

A Merleau-Pontyian account of embodiment, for example, upholds the call to acknowledge the dialectical interplay between agency and structure (Murray, 2002). It resonates with the CCT notion of consumers as embodied agents embedded within a network of marketplace cultures (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Accordingly, consumers are able to forge a personalized identity project by scripting the countervailing discourses emerging within their cultural frame of reference (Arnould and Thompson, 2006). As embodied subjects, consumers engage their ‘incarnate potentiality’ of being-in-the-world, to affect the formation and transformation of marketplace culture (Crossley, 1995; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). To reiterate Crossley (1995), embodied subject is the locus of action as well as the target of power.

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, not only enables researchers to explore how the configuration of discursive power shape consumers’ embodied experience but also how this is played out through the ‘work of the body’ as lived (Crossley, 1995). As such, a dialogue between the ‘lived’ and the ‘inscription’ perspective of the body can be facilitated, (Crossley, 1996), by transcending dualisms such as structure/agency, subject/object and mind/body inherent within traditional sociological inquiry (Arnould and Thompson, 2006; Murray, 2002). This paper has therefore raised a number of methodological and philosophical insights from a Merleau-Pontyian perspective in advancing consumer research to embrace the incarnated consumers. As such, researchers can begin to address the ‘quiet presence of the body’.

REFERENCES


An Existential Analysis of Consumers as “Incarnated Beings”: A Merleau-Pontyian Perspective


