In Pursuit of Balanced Perspective on Consumer Agency and the Power of the Social: Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffé For Consumer Research

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The debate of consumers as agents versus dupes has been widely discussed in the literature of social sciences and consumer research (Arnould 2007; Schor 2007). To accommodate the need to balance between consumer agency and structuring power of the social, we draw on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. After introducing the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe we offer the implications of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory for consumer research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The debate of consumers as agents versus dupes has been widely discussed in the literature of social sciences and consumer research (Arnould 2007; Schor 2007). Consumer images of single minded, status seeking (Veblen 1979) individual or the helpless, manipulated consumers in the Frankfurt School’s theorization gave way to a view of “consumers as motivated, discerning, even demanding in their relationship to the producers of cultural texts, products, and advertising” (Schor 2007, 23). However, if zooming out to the more macro level of actions, we can see that the structuring power of the social is still working strong. To accommodate the need to balance between consumer agency and structuring power of the social, we draw on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe.

Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory sees all reality as discursively constituted and in principle it is legitimate to use discourse analytical tools to analyze all aspects of the world including physical reality such as the body and the material world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Their analysis rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. Instead it affirm that every object is constituted as an object of discourse and that any distinction between what are usually called linguistic and behavioral aspects of social practice is an incorrect distinction (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) because the boundary between the linguistic and the non-linguistic in a certain social practice is not clear (Laclau and Mouffe 1987). They propose that discourses fix meanings in certain ways and therefore exclude all other possible meanings through hegemonic closures and that the discursive constructions appear as natural through myths about society and identity. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), no discourse is a closed entity but it is constantly being transformed through contact with other discourses. Different discourses, each of which represents particular ways of talking about and understanding the social world, are emerged in a constant struggle with one other to achieve hegemony, fixing the meanings in their own way (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Although Laclau and Mouffe are mostly interested in more abstract discourses, the idea that these discourses are created, maintained and changed in diverse everyday practices is implied in their theory (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Especially their concepts including nodal points, articulation, and the logic of equivalence and difference have potentials to be used effectively in detailed empirical analysis to answer the questions such as how each discourse constitutes knowledge and reality, identities and social relations.

By drawing on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, consumer researchers can have a means to balance between consumer agency and socio-political forces structuring consumption. In consumer research, the term discourse has been examined in relation to the construction of consumption narratives (Thompson & Haytko 1997; Murray 2002; Kozinets 2008) and mainly focused on the linguistic performances of consumers. By concentrating on consumer narratives, consumer’s agency in consumer culture was emphasized while the influence of structural forces was under-investigated. Another problem of looking at discourse in the context of consumer narrative construction is that concrete practices of consumption are missed in the discussion of consumer behaviors. Concrete practices of buying clothes, putting things together to make an ensemble, and accessorizing only exist in the narratives of consumers. Considering that a consumer’s narrative is also an act of representation (Hall 1997), consumer researchers need to understand how certain consumption practices and the narratives about them are produced in the socio-political context beyond the relationship of specific consumption behaviors to consumer’s life project and life theme.

As another benefit of utilizing discourse analysis consumer researcher can overcome the limitation of thematic analysis. Consumers’ narratives have usually been analyzed according to hermeneutic or phenomenological approaches and these approaches are mainly interested in the text-content relationship and therefore overlook the discursive conditions of production, diffusion, and reception of complex discursive configurations (Sitz 2008). However, the hermeneutic circle approaches used for discourse analysis may raise a problem by treating quotes from transcribed interviews as thematic evidence of discourse although the quotes should be analyzed as the evidence of local production of discourse (Cloyes 2007). In fact, Foucault was deeply critical of the conventional notion of the subject as the independent, authentic source of action and meaning. He challenges the privileged position of the subject in relation to meaning. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the discursive formation of a particular period and culture (Hall 1997). Another problem in using thematic analysis for discourse analytic studies arises from the loss of the detail and discursive subtlety of the original (Antaki et al. 2002). Discourse analysis is more concerned with ‘parole,’ which pertains to the particular acts of utterance, rather than ‘language,’ which refers to underlying rule-governed structure of language. Therefore summarizing data into several themes may lose sight of the subtle ways that the ‘I’ as author construct stories with the character ‘I’ to produce certain effects, which can be the justification of his or her consumption choice or impression management in the interaction with researchers.

In this vein, discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggests specific strategies to overcome the drawbacks of using thematic analysis in researching discursive aspects of consumption behaviors. Their work is not strictly methodological texts (Cloyes 2004), the concepts in their theorization provide useful guidelines to study discursive formation in consumer culture.

REFERENCES


