

Systems of Consumer Practice as Context for Service Usage

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents activities within consumer practices as context for service usage, and shows how consumers' requirements for a service differ depending on their surrounding systems of practice. Practices are units of socially informed and meaning-laden behaviour that people carry out as a part of their daily life. Interviews with five wine consumers revealed five different contexts for the services of a wine store. Activities within the practice were divided into having cognitive, affective or informational purposes, and were arranged into an "activity tree", where the position and function of the service could be observed.

INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the SD-logic discussions, Arnould (2008) suggests that researchers develop sociologically enriched and complex models of inter-agent resource resource exchange. One way this challenge has been tackled is through applying theories of practice or social construction. Edvardsson et al. (2010) suggested that customer value should be understood within its social context, and that understandings of value are influenced by shared social meanings. The concept of *practices* has been used to explain how consumers create value for themselves using services (Holttinen 2010, Korkman et al. 2010). Practices are systems of routinized, socially meaningful activity that consumers carry out as a part of their daily life (Bourdieu 1977). Current discussions within service marketing are focused on understanding the constellations of social influence that effect understandings of value that are realized through activity. There is an opportunity to look also at the meanings of services as parts of consumer activity from a more phenomenological perspective. This paper analyses consumer practices as systems of temporally separate activities, and investigates how services fit into such systems using the consumer's own phenomenological point of view (Thompson et al. 1989, Baron and Harris 2010).

The paper suggests a technique for illustrating how services fit into consumers' practices. The technique consists of identifying activities that belong to a particular class of practice through an interview, then finding out

the most important function for each identified activity, and finally exploring how the activities relate to each other as elements in the overarching practice. This information is used to create a graphical representation of the consumer's practice: An activity tree. The representation provides an overview of consumers' perceptions of their activity patterns and the position of one or several services in this pattern. Comparing different consumers' patterns, it shows the differences between their practices, and provides insight into how services are used to create value within them.

The technique is used to describe the wine-related practices of five wine consumers. The technique reveals that each consumer has a uniquely shaped wine consumption practice, but that each contains elements shared with other consumers. In line with earlier research, the activities within the practice can be classified as having mainly hedonic, instrumental or knowledge-seeking purposes. When the activities are viewed in relation to the central service provider's offering, the cases show that consumers bring with them their own unique but stable contexts to the offering, and have different intentions when using the service. The information provided by mapping consumers' practices can help firms when designing their service or communication, and can even provide insights for business reconfiguration. The paper contributes service literature, where there currently are no clearly described techniques for visually mapping out service usage in the context of consumer practices.

CONSUMER PRACTICES AS CONTEXT FOR SERVICE USAGE

In line with Edvardsson et al. (2010), this paper sees the consumer as acting within a social context where the consumer's understanding of which consumption activities are viable is socially constructed. This puts the study in the realm of practice theory, where human activities are seen as socially created and maintained, and reproduced as well as modified by individuals in social context (Bourdieu 1977, Schatzki 2001). This paper uses Reckwitz' (2002, p. 249) definition of practices:

[...] a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to each other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

In practice theory, activities are seen as existing in a social sphere. Individuals are aware of practices, and can choose to carry them out if it fits their context. Practice theory also allows for room for manoeuvring within the activities of a particular practice, so that a practice does not need to be carried out in the same way by everyone. In fact, consumers modify practices and invent new ones (Warde 2005, Holttinen 2010). So if consumer activity is

seen through the lens of practice theory, it must be understood as systems of reoccurring, meaning-laden behavior that is context-appropriate and creatively modified. This indicates that the individual's context of service usage is not stable, but dependent on the shape of a person's practices. In this paper, practices are analyzed as a set of recurring but temporally separate activities that have a common theme or overarching purpose.

THE PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY IN PRACTICES

Practices have many different purposes, but the basic view is that practices are carried out as an expression of meaning within human culture (Bourdieu 1977, Schatzki 1996). Based on Schatzki (1996), Holttinen (2010) describes how a practice can have teleological (goal-oriented) dimensions as well as affective dimensions. This is similar to the division between instrumental and hedonic value of consumption (Batra and Ahtola 1991; Babin, Darden and Griffin 1994; Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann 2003).

Practices have been presented as fundamental units of value-creation, where the nature of value is socially constructed (Holttinen 2010, Korkman et al. 2010). Within the SD-logics, the question of value creation has been approached from the perspective of operand and operant resources (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2008, Madhavaram and Hunt 2007). Operand resources are physical goods, while operant resources are skills and knowledge, which are combined with goods to create value. If these are seen as resources needed for producing value, then an important purpose of consumer activity must be to acquire such resources. Thus, the consumer's consumption-related practices can be expected to aim for either acquiring objects (operand resources) or skills or information (operant resource), either of which then are applied in use to produce hedonic or experiential value.

METHOD

To investigate how consumers' practices can serve as context for service usage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students at a university. The focus was to understand the context for the services of the state monopoly alcohol store within the students' wine-related practices. The respondents were asked to consider the following question: "*What things do you do that are related to wine in some way?*" To assist the respondents' thought process, they were also asked:

- "In what contexts do you drink wine?"
- "How do you acquire your wine?"
- "Do you ever read or communicate about wine?"

These questions were intended to uncover the respondent's wine related activities, thus creating a picture of the consumer's personal context for service usage. The respondents were encouraged only to mention activities that they felt that they do regularly, so that they actually would be practices that play a significant role in the respondent's life. To categorize the respondent's activities according to their purpose, the respondent was further asked to consider two follow up questions for each mentioned activity: "Why do you do this activity? What good is it for you?" and "Where do you use what you obtain from doing this activity?" (Referring to the other mentioned activities.) These questions were intended to give an understanding of the drivers and reasons of the activity, as well as how the different activities are related to each other. This intended to reflect the surface meanings of practices, intentionally excluding more complex meanings. To understand practice as a system, activities need to be connected to each other.

FINDINGS

The interviews were analyzed, and nine different types of wine-related activity were found. The activities fell into three different categories: Those that had a primarily experiential or hedonic function, those that had a primarily instrumental function and those that had a primarily information-seeking function. For example, a wine dinner with family primarily has a function of enjoyment and social connectedness, while reading wine reviews has a primarily information-gathering function. In order to draw up a system where the function of activity is immediately understandable, the three activity types were given three different symbols, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: The tree basic types of consumer activity in the study



Information- and knowledge-gathering activity































Instrumental-provisional activity



Experiential-hedonic activity

The lightbulb is meant to symbolize knowledge and ideas, the cogwheel functionality (the "gears of the machine"), while the heart symbolizes positive emotions. Table 1 shows which activities were carried out by which respondents, and uses the symbols to categorize the activities.

Table 1: The wine-related activities of the respondents

Respondent	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No.5
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Age	21	21	20	23	26
Drinking wine at parties					
Drinking wine at dinners					
Drinking wine in bars					
Drinking wine at home without food					
Buying wine from state monopoly store		 	 		  
Buying wine on trips abroad					 
Talking to friends about wine					
Reading about wine in newspapers					
Reading about wine in magazines					

There was a lot of variation in the patterns. Respondent number two regularly carried out only three types of activity, while respondent number one carried out six activities. As could be expected, the activities where the wine was actually used were completely experiential-hedonic, while the activities where wine was acquired were mostly rated as instrumental. Three of the respondents mentioned that visiting the state monopoly store had informational functions as well, while respondent number 5 said that it actually was a fun and enjoyable experience, not only focused on the acquisition of wine. Finally, three of the respondents carried out activities that

were mainly informational, providing facts and opinions about wine in its different forms. The interviews revealed that the knowledge from information-seeking activities was mostly used within the wine-purchasing activities, while the wine purchased was in most – but not all – cases used in the activities where wine was being drunk.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to investigate practices as systems of consumer activity, working as a context for service usage. The findings from the interviews indicated that consumers combine the outcomes of different activities, where many different types of service providers are involved. This paper proposes that consumer's service systems can be illustrated as a system in the manner presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: The wine-related activity tree of respondent 1

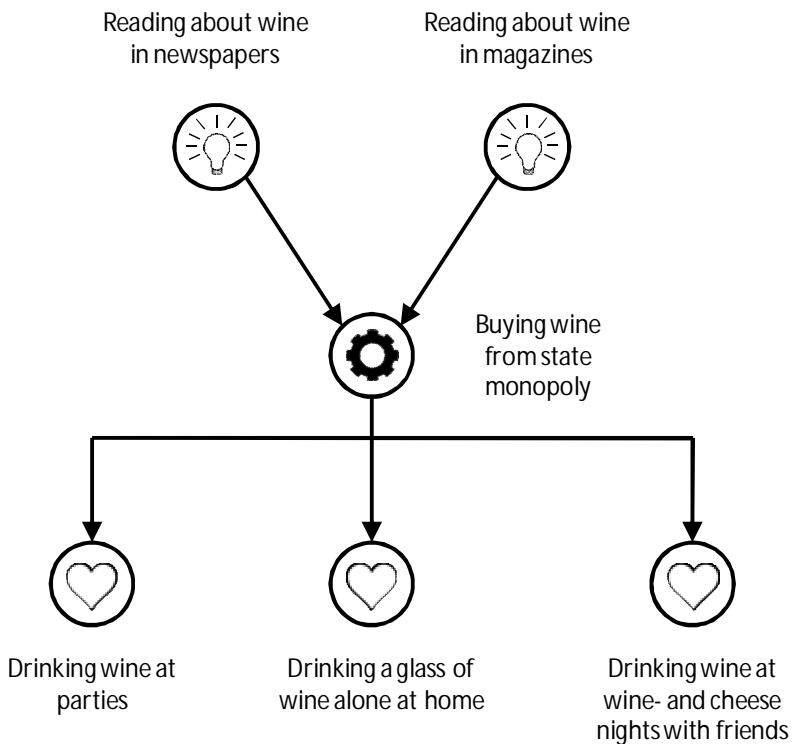


Figure 2 contains those of the first respondent's wine related activities which could be connected to each other. The respondent claimed that he used the knowledge he got from reading about wine within the activity of buying wine, so that he could make an informed choice. The activity of buying wine was

carried out so that the respondent could maintain three types of experiential-emotional activities: Drinking wine at parties, drinking wine alone at home, and at wine- and cheese nights with friends.

This very simple system of consumer activity shows how different types of resources are continuously combined within the consumer's practices. Operant resources (knowledge) are acquired and used in the acquisition of operand resources (wine), which then are employed in a set of end-usage situations. It can also be noted, that if the systems of the other respondents were drawn up, they would look different from figure 3. The respondents were in general not very involved wine consumers, and thus maintained simple systems. One can imagine more complex systems for more involved consumers. In summary, the consumer can be said to create and maintain personal, often unique practices, the shape of which is not determined by the provider, but the end user. Effectively, the consumer creates the context for service. Because of different types of information seeking activities, the five consumers had different levels of knowledge when coming into the purchase situation, as well as different requirements for the contexts where the purchased wine is actually used.

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