

# Elusive Consumption in retrospect

report from the conference

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# CFK-RAPPORT

# 2005:01



Handelshögskolan  
VID GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

**CFK**



## Introduction

This CFK-report is from the conference “Elusive consumption, tracking new research perspectives” which took place in June 2002 at the Center for Consumer Science (CFK), School of Economics and Commercial Law at Göteborg University. The conference gathered a large number of internationally renowned consumer researchers. The aim was to problematize the elusive concept of consumption, to reflect upon new research perspectives, theories and methods within consumer research. Researchers from a vast area of disciplines from both sides of the Atlantic were invited. The participants represented the disciplines of anthropology, ethnology, marketing and sociology, which are not often combined within one conference. It led to interesting and exciting discussions reflecting the importance of having reciprocal exchange between disciplines. This CFK-report is an attempt to capture some of the discussions from the workshops at the conference.

At the conference, 8 keynote speakers were asked to give a talk. The conference was organized as follows. Two key note speeches were presented in a row followed by two workshops where the issues raised in either one or both of the keynote speeches were discussed. The discussion leaders were asked to summarize the discussions or to reflect on a certain theme discussed at the workshop. The workshop summaries or reflections are presented in this CFK-report together with two dinner speeches and our own speeches on current research projects.

Since the conference took place we have edited a book called “Elusive consumption” published at Berg 2004, where a majority of the keynote speakers present their speeches in chapters. The book also includes chapters written by the workshop leaders. We think this CFK-report can complement the book and be of interest for consumer researchers in different disciplines. We hope the report brings back memories to researchers who attended the conference, but also results in discussions and reflections on the field of consumption among people who did not attend the conference. As researchers we depend on keeping the debate going, never settling for final answers, but constantly looking for new perspectives and nuances. The conference shows that consumption is a multidimensional phenomena representing different meanings and practices.

Göteborg in July 2005

Karin M. Ekström and Helene Brembeck  
Conference co-chairs

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## Welcome address to the conference

“Elusive consumption-tracking new research perspectives”:

### A family of pluralists

*By Karin M. Ekström, Center for Consumer Science*

#### Introduction

Welcome to Göteborg, to the Center for Consumer Science (CFK) and the School of Economics and Commercial Law and to the conference Elusive consumption – tracking new research perspectives. This is a magnificent moment – to see so many well-known consumer researchers visiting us here at the same time – it is just as a dream has come through and I feel a great amount of respect and admiration for your work and contributions to the field of consumer research. Thank you for making this conference possible.

We share a common interest, consumers and consumption. I think of all of you who are here today as a research family, a family of consumer researchers. Therefore, it feels like this conference as well as other conferences with the focus on consumption is like family reunions when old and new family members meet and interact. Helene Brembeck and I want you all, conference contributors and conference participants, to feel very welcome.

#### Center for Consumer Science

Centrum för konsumentvetenskap (CFK) is a newly established consumer research center in Sweden and situated at GRI, at the School of Economics and Commercial Law at Göteborg university. It is founded by Göteborg university and Chalmers university of technology and has received money from the government who when giving us money for developing CFK clearly stated that they want to see CFK to develop to become a strong national consumer research center. Thanks also to the Swedish government for financially supporting this conference.

The purpose with CFK is to initiate and co-ordinate interdisciplinary research, serve as a forum for consumer researchers nationally as well as internationally. We think it is very important to establish formal and informal networks with researchers abroad. Another aim of CFK is to initiate a dialogue between researchers, consumer organizations, companies, and authorities interested in understanding consumers. CFK has at the moment five different research programs: 1. Consumer decision making, 2. Consumer culture and the value of consumption, 3. Sustainable consumption, 4. Consumers and technology, 5. Consumers and design.

This conference is organized within research program two, consumer culture and the value of consumption which Helene and I are in charge of. Research within this programme focuses on creation and transformation of consumption cultures studying consumption as a way to express identities both as an individual and as a group member. Questions of interest are: What does living in a consumption society mean? In what way(s) are lifestyles and identities expressed through consumption? How can consumers affect what and how products/services are produced and sold?

A family of consumer researchers

I mentioned that I look upon you as a family of consumer researchers. A research family consists of individuals to which we have work relations. For example, a department, institute, committee, or people working on a joint project and sharing common research interests. Depending on our research interests, we may belong to one or several families.

Research families represent different disciplines. While some researchers belong to one discipline, others belong to a family representing many different disciplines. The family meeting here today includes many disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, marketing and sociology etc.

A research family also has its history including traditions, norms and rules. Family members are reminded of the past in terms of testaments and heritage of heirlooms. In research families, new research is related to previous research. Studying family trees or doing geneological research is simple in research families where as a field living on the merits of publications, this documentation is easily available. Also, the system of references facilitates the process of tracing ideas and people. By studying the family tree, we will better understand the development of our field of study and sources of inspiration, the branches or research orientations which have continued to grow or stopped to grow and reasons for this. Some research orientation may need more nurture than others.

Processes of family life

Researchers form relations and research families, for example by being introduced to someone nice by a family member or via the Internet. There are many different relationship forms in research as well as in life. Relations over scientific borders are like having relations with or marrying families of different ethnic origin. It brings new holiday traditions, different spices, expressions, etc. Each family brings its own history, a history which will influence the way it functions and the way it interprets things. The same can be seen in research, resulting in new insights and broadened perspectives, but also vivid discussions. Doctoral students or academic children are just as children continually socialized to become members of their families. The German term for advisor, "Doktorvater" implies a family bond between the Ph.D. student and the supervisor. The

outcome of the child rearing process is difficult to forecast both regarding children and Ph.D. students. Different views on upbringing exists.

#### Family relations and interactions

Family relations differ in terms of bonds, cohesiveness, individual independence. A family as well as a research family can provide security and comfort, but can also be perceived as setting limits on a family member's own personal development. Some families may be closely-knit while others have relations of different strength and character.

Family interaction depends on resources. Resources can be time for research, assistants, money, equipment, offices, libraries etc. Lack of resources may put restraints on family interaction. For example, a lack of time for research may result in a department lacking publication records and ultimately limited intellectual discussion and growth. Family life is also dependent on institutions like governments etc. The same is true for the research community, which depends on universities, funding institutions, deans, academic networks and organizations, conferences, journals etc.

Relationships are not unproblematic. While we sometimes experience cohesiveness, anxiety can also be felt at certain times. A researcher can avoid engaging in interdisciplinary research, because of being afraid of losing identity in his/her own field of study. Family members as well as researchers have different perceptions and opinions. Conflicts occur even if they are covert at times. Unresolved conflicts can be very destructive and create tension and separation among family members. Family members use different strategies to resolve conflicts, for example problem solving, persuasion or bargaining.

#### Keeping the family together

The family dinner is often an expression of family unity and togetherness. The extent to which this represents ideal more than reality is likely to differ across cultures. Different family members have their individual activities and time schedules which may not fit with the rest of the family. In the academic world, it may result in a lack of participation in research seminars, but this is not a problem if family members interact in other ways or settings. Also, in the academic world, we may think that family cohesiveness is stronger at other universities or departments. Maybe it represents an illusion of an ideal family?

The essence of family is cooperation. In the future – we can keep the family conversation going by co-authoring. Eventhough new Ph.D.s often publish their dissertations together with their parents, it seems as if co-authoring thereafter happens less often in their academic career. Is the reason related to the pressure on assistant professors to produce their own and to have their own research identity. Co-authoring involves intellectual exchange and maybe opposites attract. Besides the intellectual mix, there is also the joy of working with the other person. Other ways to keep the conversation going



is the review process when anonymous family members sometimes dare to be more outspoken than during family gatherings. To solve a research problem with different methods, theories, and researchers having different disciplinary background, could also create better research.

A family of consumer researchers for generations to come  
Family members interact and their relations are of different strength and character. To be part of a family involves moments of happiness as well as moments of anxiety. The perception of whether something is good or bad and strategies for dealing with different situations differ. It is here suggested that family problems should be brought out into the open to be discussed. Vivid debates are encouraged.

In a similar manner to the behavior of an average teenager, it is common that each generation of researchers criticizes the generation before. The disrespect we sometimes show for the elderly in the Western society can be compared to the lack of respect that we on occasions show earlier consumer researchers. We may neglect the context and the circumstances under which their research was carried out. Instead of being too critical towards their research, we should appreciate what they have done to develop our family and field of research. Also, when thinking of our family, we need to recognize that elderly consumer behavior researchers may still have much to contribute with. On the other hand, it is as important that elderly consumer behavior researchers make room for younger researchers, as younger generations often provide fresh ideas.

A family of pluralists is advocated for developing consumer research. Increasing connections with more distant relatives over scientific borders will affect how research problems are defined. Different disciplines and different perspectives will contribute to a vivid family discussion. We hope this conference will consist of dynamic, exciting, and interesting discussions. Thank you.

*Parts of this welcome address was later published as a paper Ekström, K. M. (2003): "Revisiting the Family Tree: Historical and Future Consumer Behavior Research", at Academy of Marketing Science Review, [www.amsreview.org](http://www.amsreview.org)*

## CHAPTER 1

### I shop therefore I know that I am: The metaphysical basis of modern consumerism

#### 1:1 Abstract

*I shop therefore I know that I am: The metaphysical basis of modern consumerism*  
Keynote speaker: Colin Campbell, University of York, England

This paper is an attempt to explore the fundamental assumptions that might be said to underlie modern consumerism. The starting point for this investigation is the assumption that the latter is characterised by an emphasis on feeling and emotion and by a practice and ideology that is markedly individualistic. The connection between this system of consumption and metaphysical premises is then first explored through an examination of the relationship between the activity of consumption and the notion of identity before going on to consider its role in the provision of ontological reassurance. At the same time the existence of a distinctive consumerist epistemology is also noted, together with a tendency to endorse a belief in 'magic'. Finally these features are shown to be consonant with a widespread and explicit philosophy present in contemporary society, that espoused by representatives of the New Age movement, a parallelism that seems to justify the contention that the modern West really is a 'consumer civilization'.

*This lecture has after the conference been published as a chapter "I shop therefore I know that I am: The metaphysical basis of modern consumerism" in the book Elusive Consumption. Below follows a report from the workshop which took place immediately after the lecture. Daniel Miller was the workshop leader. He has published "The little black dress is the solution, but what is the problem?" in the book Elusive Consumption.*

#### 1:2 Workshop summary

I shop therefore I know that I am: The metaphysical basis of modern consumerism  
By the editors

The mechanisms of desire were first discussed in the workshop. Campbell described desire as a diffuse state of attraction. In relation to longing which he described as: "more interesting, in a sense, because it is a more generalized state of feeling that something is missing that you require but you don't know what it is. Desire on the other hand is when that state translates into attraction for a particular object". Campbell was then asked by Jonathan Schroeder whether desire can be produced if it does not exist. He answered: "the thing that always intrigued me from the very beginning was how the presence of wanting occurs as a presence of need...we seem to be able to want things that we have

not previously had experience of”. He continued that in modern consumption: “we appear to have a greater desire for what’s novel in favor of what is familiar”. Campbell discussed that according to conventional economics theory, it would be more rational to spend your scarce resources on buying products you already know to satisfy your need. He continued: “that’s why I started to speculate on the importance of being able to engage in this imaginary activity of creating for yourself an imaginary scenario where you actually consume something that resembles what you already consume or even an improved version of it. And that is where I think the process of generating desire comes from. It comes from working upon our past experiences and then improving the imagination so that we are always capable of imagining a scenario in which we get more pleasure from consuming something that we have already in the past”. No matter how pleasant the consuming experience is, we are always capable of imagining it being better. Campbell gave the example of a holiday and says that if some part of it is unpleasant, you always imagine a version that is more pleasant, more sunshine, less traffic. In our reality, we desire a more perfect version of reality. He said that is why we end up desiring the novel rather than the familiar. Also, it is a quite complicated mental process which requires imagination, something he refers to as a psychological trick.

Schroeder asked whether Campbell’s way of thinking then implies that desire can not be satisfied. His answer was: “It implies that desire will always be generated somehow, it implies that the consuming experience is always literally disillusioning. Yes, which is why we never cease this process, why the cycle is endless. Desire, a contact with the desired object, some pleasure comes from that, but disillusioning in the sense that it can never be as perfect as the imagined version we already consumed in our imagination, and therefore we move on quickly to the next object, that is what I see as the cycle of the process”.

Russell Belk asked whether it is not social factors rather than the psychological we talk about when needing a holiday or a new coat. He expressed “... what we claim to be needing is a social construction and that what we see as a legitimate need is also a social construction”. What we desire is very much about the social processes rather than the individual. Belk wondered where the social is in the phenomena Campbell talks about.

Campbell: “I am not going to suggest that there is no social dimension, I am just concerned to emphasize the fact that there is a psychological process which is also in my mind critical to a cultural version. I mean in a sense I work with the psycho-cultural as the emphasis in order to understand the process and then you arrive in, as you rightly pointed out the social context on top of that”. Campbell continued: “a thing I would like to go back to is the need and wanting because I really think that this is important. I mean it is absolutely crucial. This is a very difficult thing to discuss because as you rightly point out, linguistically you simply have to change these terms, and it is very difficult, therefore, to know whether

we are actually talking about a real distinction. I think we are and I would insist on my distinction being, wondering which needs are externally determined in the way of wants or not, and if they indeed may directly conflict. I mean I am told quite categorically, I need new tires to my car, I may not want new tires to my car, I may have much better things to do with my money but it is against the law. Need in that sense is, as I understand it, something that is a function really in the sense of the situation you find yourself in where you maintain desire. And it doesn't, in this sense, relate necessarily to want at all, which is, as I see it, a truly subjective kind of desire to motivate a response". Campbell thought a critical key to modern consumerism is the way in which we continually expand the want area and expenses on top of that. He gave as an example the spectacles: "... I am sure that nobody that wears them would say that I want them. It is a question of need because of sight". Previously it was an external examiner who told the consumer about his/her needs. Now the market of frames makes it possible to choose the frames you want, Campbell explained: "We have all the designer frames and here we are no longer talking about external definitions of need by an expert, we are talking about subjective desire in terms of what we may want. Now of course you are correct in that the whole range of influence is aloud at work, social influences, advertisement, peer pressure and the rest of it, in terms of how you specify the nature of want". Campbell concluded by saying that you have to come to the decision in the end that you want that or that you do not want that.

Daniel Miller said that he has two papers in opposition to Campbell's presentation, "Style ontology" and "Fashion and anxiety". Miller continued: "what interest me about consumer society is the evidence that people actually do not know what they like and decreasingly do not know what they want. They got their wardrobe, they have all these things and they look at it and they do not know what they like, they do not know what to wear. And their problem is precisely that faced by those things, they are probably less and less secure about either want or desire but particularly about liking itself. For example, when I was working with Trinidadians and clothing the interesting point I felt was that I started with the assumption that it was going to be a study of people wanting something, buying it and then discovering themselves in it, this is the kind of scenario I draw. That was not at all like this, people hesitantly ended up buying things because they were going out and needed something. It wasn't until they had a response by others to them in that clothing that they decided weather they actually liked it. And I think that increasingly people are not self-sufficient in their relationship to either desire or to the sense of who they actually are. So what is happening I think in consumer society is the location of being, in other words, the place where a person is, is actually examined, it is not fixed by the things that they purchase, the interesting thing is why people get things that doesn't do it for them. What I find is that it is only in a socialized context where they get a response". He continued: "...in the scenario that you present where there is a self sufficiency in constructing desire, in monitoring desire, then the objects speak to that and actually help fix that".

In response to Miller, Campbell clarified that rather than giving the impression that people are self sufficient in a sense, he wanted to emphasize the authority of the self. Campbell said: "I think people need a great deal of help, help to decide what is all right, but I still think that in terms of authority, the idea that if people have a sense of who they are as an individual, then that is seen as a profile of their own desire, of their own want, that's how they see themselves. Now it may well be true as you say that they need help from others and guidance from others, they need responses from others in order to be certain of their desire and taste". He emphasized that it is increasingly common that people make a profession out of helping other people find their own taste. Campbell also said that he is concerned about the issue of authority. If people have difficulties deciding what the nature of the self is, they need a lot of help from others to do it.

Janet Borgerson: "I mean it seems to me that the point is about the emergence of the self's authority and the incorrigibility of personal experience, that is, once the self's interpretation has emerged – and this might happen after others have helped me come to this decision – the self at some point states that it is the authority on its own desire or experience. And the satisfaction and desire comes about through my own claiming of authority over my own experience, so it depends on where in the process you think that the social has to come in; and it could be that the social comes in prior to the point at which the self claims authority over its personal experience. Yet, ultimately the self is able to claim that no one else can tell the self what the self is experiencing. For example, I experienced a positive relation to what I was wearing this evening; and at this point the individualism comes in: I claim my right to tell what I experience, a phenomenological description of my sensibility tonight. I am the only one who can, at this point, claim that authority; so it seems to me that the point is about the self's authority to claim what it wants...but it does not have to happen prior to the social, I mean the social aspect can occur, and the whole point of the individuality, or the individualism, isn't about the construction of the self via consumption, its about the ability to claim the authority over when my desire has been satisfied. That's when the individuality comes in of course: an authority of self could emerge, but not necessarily, in contrast to the social; but at some moment claiming the authority over my understanding of my own experience...so it is a phenomenological point about personal experience".

She continued: "...you could be the authority of your own your experience...what within philosophy for example is called the incorrigibility of personal experience. That means that no one can tell you that you are not feeling something if you feel that you are. Pain, for example. Incorrigibility of personal experience means that even though someone can look at a brain scan and say, 'we do not see the brain process occurring that would mean you are in pain'...I may still feel, and can say with authority, that I am in pain...and I am the authority over my feeling of pain". She added: "Well what it might mean is... say, in a 'phantom limb case', my left leg has been cut off. My doctor asks me where I am feeling pain, I say

– in my left foot. And the doctor can say – but you do not have a left foot anymore, how can you have pain. Yet, that fact doesn't matter, I am still feeling pain in what feels to me like my left foot, so it is at that level of personal experience that I have my authority. It is not necessarily that I am constructing the pain or it is not about self construction... it's about the authority of the self over personal experience”.

Audience: “It seem to me that there is a danger in this discussion of becoming embedded in a modernist dichotomization between the individual and the social. And it seems to me that it is quite possible that the beingness can be distributed over a range of positions that involves varying proportions of phenomenological belief in the self and a phenomenological belief in the authority of a group to define beingness and that this would be a predictable result of this sort of, of a postmodern condition rather than a modern condition. It seems to me that one does not want to regress to the sort of a self society sort of dialectical”. The audience said that this should be consistent with Daniel Millers findings in Trinidad and not disputed by Colin Campbells claims or Janet Borgerson's claims about the authority of the self. Multiplicity positions are possible.

Campbell: “I am not interested in trying to explain psychology, where the concept of the self comes from, how it was constructed, or to what extent the social influence. All I am interested in pointing out is, if you actually look closely at the way people authorize decision making, what do they include as criteria justifying doing one thing rather than another? What is the ultimate authority that they evoke to justify their actions, small and large, individual choices of consumer goods right down to that they want to get a divorce and re-marry or change their career? In almost all these instances you will find that the language used relates to the self, and the notion of the authentic self, the real self, this is the God that is worshiped, I would say. It is the authority that yields to justify these choices. That's what I meant by epistemological individualism”. He said that consuming are central areas in society and continued: “But I am not trying to advance any theory about the self. I am merely making observations about the way people legitimate decision making”.

Adam Arvidsson: “...you could argue perhaps that it is not so much a matter of individualism, it is not as much a logical action as it is a logical attribution. You have of course consumer choice and consumer agency that is determined by a vast area of institutionalized social factors and so on but you still have a certain formal consumer subjectivity which tends to attribute that agency to some kind of idea of individualism as a choosing act... If you look at contemporary marketing techniques you see the importance of the consumer experience as themed environments and things like that”. Arvidsson continued: “you are a different person in Starbucks than you are in McDonald's, than you are in other shops”.

Franck Cochoy: “I appreciated very much in your speech the point you made about the importance of consumption for the building of consumer identities...you say that con-

sumers are profiled by preferences and I think that it is a very good point, but are you interested with another question which is where do our preferences come from? Because they are usually given by the commercial environment, for example some people have now strong preferences for GMO or products or they dislike it, that's a preference. Do I want to by GMO-cereals or cereals without GMO:s. But how can you know that before having it written on the packages? So are you interested in the way our preferences are designed by market professionals?"

Campbell replied that we have preferences for all sorts of things that are made in our environment whether they are made by marketers or not.

Audience: "I think that you are completely right in the individualistic trend in our modern or postmodern society, that is not questionable, but when you move from marketing to translating this knowledge into marketing strategies then you must realize that the choices you make are social". The audience indicated that the individual approach has some limits because we are social beings.

Miller: "My sense of family conversation, particularly when they take the form that does shatter the authority of the subjective desire when somebody says I want something, the reply is often they can't have it".

Belk: "I was intrigued by your point about our quest today being for intense experience, and as I recall you started early on with other versions of social comfort. I wonder if this has come sort of whole circle from that to desire for discomfort. I knew you described desire itself as being a sort of enjoyable discomfort in a sense, and if you take extreme sports as an example for an activity like mountaineering, that's not a quest for pleasurable intense experience but simply for intense experience perhaps for another goal, but the experience itself is quite uncomfortable and risk death, frozen toes and every step is painful. I use this to clarify is this a desire as you see it, a quest for intense experience to define identity and then seek reality, whether or not it is pleasurable or is the pleasure itself a construction that we lay upon the experience".

Campbell: "Well, remember pain is not the opposite of pleasure, it is terribly important to appreciate this. The opposite of pleasure is the absence of variation and stimulus, so the idea that pain and pleasure conflict is not really true, they co-exist, in a sense. They are intimately linked in the kind of experiences we are talking about, adventure sports and the rest of it. But I think I really had in mind something much more significant...The intensity of the experience that you hope to have in any kind of religious context or that you hope to have when falling in love. The point about these intense experiences is that they are seen by the subject as ones which resonate with the real true self, this is who I really am, this is when I am intensely alive. What I was trying to argue was I think there is



an implicit ontology of emotion intensity of desire. How do you know something is real? Well, I know it is real because it really got hold of me, you know, I really experienced it, I was really alive. I think, that was what I was trying to suggest. Comfort is totally different in the sense that to be truly comfortable nothing is changing. Comfort is where you never allow hunger to build up, you never allow discomfort to build up”.

Karin Salomonsson: “I was thinking of your intriguing concept of consumer civilization, but there is no consumption without production. Behind every act of consumption there is an act of production, somebody has to produce. But does this imply that production is now drawn in underneath this umbrella concept of consumer civilization? Cause I can certainly see that a lot of the words you brought out – desire, experience, intense experience, challenge, that is how you talk about working life today, do you have any comment on that? Where is the production today?”

Campbell: “You talk about the industrial society; industrial civilization and it seems to me that we have a very good case for the idea that we are actually not the consumption civilization. Consumption society, that’s what leads and it is from the activity of consumption that our values and ideas/deeds arrive rather than from the activity of production. I mean we have a question of causation here...our role as emitting a role in society as consumers not as producers is significant”.

Arvidsson: “Couldn’t you argue in a way that consumption is increasingly becoming production, and what I mean by that is that the distinction between consumption and production that are usually used to these circumstances goes back to a fairly specific fairly dated. Marxism. The way which Marx has been read by the labor movement. But there is no reason why you can’t interpret the concept of production in Marx much more widely, for example talk about production and the kind of activities that contribute to, what he calls the valorization-process of capital, that which of course includes both consumption and circulation. I mean what you can see again within contemporary marketing, at least I think, is a tendency to attempt to involve consumers as producers of value in very concrete economic terms in the consumption process or in the shopping process and so on and I think that you can praise these kinds of efforts to that extent, institutional developments in retailing, within the use of qualitative market research and so on that seems to somehow appropriate what people are actually thinking and doing about consumption. I think you could give a Marxist interpretation of that and talk about it as a society in which not only the productive activity on the factory floor but in a way all of social life has been subsumed on the capital as a source of value”.

Schroeder: “I have to comment also on one of the issues, its gender, where the production has operated in the spirit of masculinity, consumption in the spirit of femininity. Richard Wilk uses a sentence from a designer called consumption as a trivial disease. But that is



just the way medicine has treated the case of femininity. To be female was an aberration form, the normal and pregnancy was a disease, so consumption also operates in the spirit of the feminine and production operates in the spirit of the masculine. And it hovers over everything we do as consumer researchers, we consumer researchers as a discipline has also be feminized and operates in the spirit of the feminine”.

Arvidsson: “I mean consumption has always been work in a way. At least from industrial capitalism and onwards the whole kind of beginning of and orchestration of consumer society. Then in fact you had to discipline consumers, make them consume according to particular rationality, a particular logic, invent personalities like the housewife and so on and somehow have a predictable and calculable logic of consumption and logical preferences so that it somehow fits the overall system of accumulation. And that way you could argue that the boundary as you say is more or less a matter of attribution and social construction than actual reality”.

Audience: “I think you should jump in here and talk about consumption again as a critique of Foucault talking about the sacrificial role of mundane consumption in the household as not being about what I want but about consumption for others... I wonder where the ontology of which you speak is so firmly fixed in the self and not in some sense still distributed over the household, or the family or somebody else”.

Campbell: “...increasingly you see a situation were people are individualized within the household, their own walls of entertainment rather than all sharing. You know, the first time I went to north America I discovered teenagers had their own supply of food with their own bedroom, their own television, their own life. They were part of the household, they were totally individualized and I mean increasingly that is the pattern. I am not saying there is not such a thing as a household where there is not collective consumption, but what is the value, what is the cutting edge, what is the belief that is dominant in our society? It is catering to an individualist taste and a notion that individuals has a right to have their individualized taste catered for, and that is the dominant value preference in the society”.

Miller: “...I think if you are going to go into authority, then to my mind you come across controversies. In certain societies that authority is more grand than others, certain people have a discourse of individuality...claiming authority about what I want that seems selfish, it seems as a misunderstanding of who you are, it seems childish. In other societies it seem precisely to gain opportunity, being a competent authority of the self, and having control over what you desire...”

Campbell: “A point at the end that I never had the chance to develop fully though about this being essentially part of the new age movement. Going to the local bookshop you

look on the shelf, you look under new age, personal growth, personal development, eastern religion – all of it and you take these book out, they are all about the authority of the self, they are all about discovering the authority of the real self. This is true in America, this is true here, it is true in most of the western world. And this is were I am pointing to, I am pointing to the fact that the common persuasive dominant rhetoric of our time about the authority of the self, now whether that is seen as selfish... one of the interesting things is the way new age has revoked the notion of selfishness and, narcissism...and the way which they claim on the contrary what they are in fact doing is improving the self in such a way that they are able to make a valuable meaningful contribution to society. This is not selfish and narcissistic in any sense, this is a way of reconstructing utopia. I mean that's a dialog that goes on. It is at that level that I am concerned...one of the authority structures in our society. I don't se how you can escape coming to the conclusion that it has all to do with the self, which is positive as in an animation notion, I mean the real self is always there, we do not really release it. It has noting to do with other people it has to do with the fact that it is already prohibited. If we are going to talk psychologically about the nature of the self and the influences on the self, then we can say with total and absolute authority that there is social influences on the nature of the self, there are psychological influences on the nature of the self, there are cultural influences on the nature of the self, there are biological influences on the nature of the self, there are biographic...I mean all these statements are equally truth and equally false..."

Pirjo Laaksonen: "You are talking about right for individual taste, so that we have a right? Is it a right or do we have to do that? Is this society putting a pressure to have an individual taste, to find our individual identity, to find out what we want?"

Campbell: "Part of this, I mean why we ended up in this situation, as I understand it, is because all other sources of authority collapse. I mean you have to understand the rise of the authority of the self in terms of the collapse of other sources of authority within our society within our time. Whether that source of authority was religion or the church, whether that source of authority was science or the source of authority was position, whatever it was, those sources of authority is no longer accepted. And therefore you have to find alternative sources of authority within society and this is the one people have produced and there are various interesting reasons to why it is so. You have a situation where social institutions are seen as fluctuating. They have lost the sort of civility and traditional authority behind it. It is essential, why one has to retrieve to the self to find alternatives to the authority when you can no longer appeal to the institutions and structures that formerly provided a basis for authority..."

Audience: "You ended by saying we are entering a consumer civilization and you base it on this idea on the authority of the self as the self of the individual senses... But does it necessary end up in a consumer civilization? You say people are really searching for pleasure

rather than boredom, now what can you get pleasure out of? Can you also get pleasure out of leisure, and you get pleasure from acting in society and whatever, can you get pleasure out of working very hard? I mean what, how is the connection between the authority of the self and just consumer civilization? Are there other possibilities also?"

Campbell: "I don't think so, I mean what I was trying to imply was that it's the values and activities related to consumption which are the dominant in our society and you can say we are a consumer society in the way that the peasant society was a handmade society. you know military society is based on warfare, as the consumer society is, consuming is the central activity, it drives the central values... What we are consuming if we go back to, the pleasure part is, because I don't think we consume objects. I think we are consuming experiences and that objects are only of interest to us since they are devices of experience. That is where the pleasure comes in and is essentially consumption. What we are consuming all the time are experiences. The reason we are consuming them is because they give us stimulus, and stimulus give us pleasure, but it also give us ontological reassurance, tells us who we are, that we are alive and the rest of the things. That's why I suggest that consuming is so important to us, because it has to do with the reassurance that we gain, not just the pleasure, but the reassurance that we gain through diverse experience and reactions to stimulus, that we are actually alive, that we exist, that we are an actual person. We can't get back any longer from the surrounding social institutions and social constructions, we don't get it from our roles and statuses any longer, those are questionable, those are uncertain, those are changeable. You know what does it mean to be male, what does it mean you know to be female, what does it mean to be a father, what does it mean to be a Christian. I can't get a sense, a satisfying sense of who I really am from those roles and statuses, which I would suggest that our grandparents would have done. They would not have responded as I suggest people do today by defining their identity in terms of taste, their identity would have been statuses that they occupied. But I don't feel that we have that sense that those statuses give us reassurance, we search for some other kind of reassurance as to who we are".

Audience: "It is a very strong statement ...I mean we are all academics and we all claim to work very hard and we all claim to be, sort of have our understanding as academics, sometimes workaholics".

Campbell: "Well I did say that I think that those kinds of things as occupation, provide a frame to our lives within which we see our identity being formulated, but I still think that in terms of who we regard ourselves to be, really be, we see that as a unique, an individuated notion of the self, located within the profile in a larger sense. When you try what that is, well it seems to me it comes close to the position of taste, the issue of preferences. These are things that people say...you are the only one that really understand me, you are the only one that knows the real me, because you share my preferences you share my taste".

Audience: "Preference of what? Preference of consumption or preference of other things?"

Campbell: "Preferences for various kinds of experiences of life, the whole thing, preferences to everything we want relates to consumption".

Audience: "Doesn't it make us consumers?"

Audience: "...I mean the way we seek pleasure that you can say is biologically determined somehow, but what we are seeking must be socially culturally granted to make sense".

Campbell: "No doubt. That's not my point; my point is that they are treated as if they are equivalent to gastronomic taste, they are treated as if they are equivalent to if I like that wine or if I do say that I do like that wine. What I am saying is wherever they originated from, they are treated as if they are located in the self and not challengeable. I am not saying that they originate there, that's how they are treated".

Søren Askegaard: "Claims of authority of the self to have this right or duty to make these preference judgments, is that not caught as a similar kind of chasing life process as desire that you were originally talking about, because the major background that you also referred to is also personal history of past experiences that were pleasurable, and that we would use this as standard for making these judgments. But increasingly the experiences that we exchange in terms of consumption, consumption opportunities, consumption possibilities, come from elsewhere. I mean lots of suggestions of consuming experiences that we are confronted with, all which we do not have any personal experience with, these are other people's experiences that might come from commercial channels, social surroundings. So, we are again relying on, we have to rely on authority judgments about these other experiences, from external sources before we can actually make this choice that we hope will be personally gratifying".

Campbell: "It is interesting that you mention duty, because I think that is very important in the more elaborate version of the ideology I am talking about. If people consider they have a duty to the real self, to engage in these experiences to engage in a wider variety of experiences possible because it is in the true experience that you learn who you truly are and you learn to get expressions to that self, real self... You see it very clear in the new age movement. If you have this process of being reincarnated you have a whole lot of new experiences in the next existence and the life after that. So that there is a quite elaborate ideology of the self and experience in this framework where it is our duty to seek out new experiences in order to give further expression to the self that is already there that demands that it should be liberated and expressed".

Schroeder: "In some sense you started out with a critique of some aspects of postmodernism and I like you to kind of clarify your approach. The specific question is are you claiming that anchoring the self in consumption is less stable than previous forms of anchoring status, class, race?"

Campbell: "Less stable".

Schroeder: "There might be a way to read this, well in the past we have an identity based in class or status and that was fairly stable and now. Our identity is based in consumption. Is that stable, is that unstable?"

Campbell: "If as I claim, why do you believe this is the self? The self is already preformed, it is there in existence and merely requires a given expression...it does however lead to a process of endless becoming in the way you have to give expression to that, but in terms the firmness of the beliefs it is quite stable. Now what I am not sure of is how far that assumption has spread more widely throughout our society. My suspicion and this is really what I want to argue is that this is actually convertible and it is one that people do very wisely. I mean when they are talking about the real self they are talking about something which they are assuming. It is already there and it is fixed in some sense... If someone is searching kind of desperately for something they are not finding and that's what I think that postmodernists do, they are failing to accept that there is indeed an underlying metaphysical paradigm taken for granted. And therefore all based on what looks like a rather desperate and meaningless attempt to flip from one identity, one experience, to another without any pattern or sense to it".

Borgerson: "This fits actually perfectly with what they do with this style and its relation to ontology, because in the sense that you contrast surface with depth and you talk about femininity and blackness, you also deal with the gender and race issue that is related to surface and depth. Style versus something more profound or deep ...and, what its making me think of is, it seems like in the [Miller's] essay on style and ontology there is a sense that the people that you are talking to can construct themselves, and that there is an attempt to give value to the peoples' attempt to construct themselves through the clothing and to give that a sense of depth rather than just assuming that style is always and only surface".

Campbell: "If you look at alternative and complementary medicine, one of the key features of all those dreams is the extent to which the practitioners insist that the individual has to cure themselves. All they do is to help the person do it...What they are doing is helping the individual cure themselves, it has to come from within and I think that the same model applies to consuming, that the style journalist help people to develop their own intrinsic style, help people to develop their own intrinsic identity".

## CHAPTER 2

### Morals and metaphors

2:1 Abstract

*Morals and metaphors*

*Keynote speaker: Richard Wilk, Indiana University, USA*

Most studies of consumption have two things in common; they do not define consumption in any concise way, and they incorporate, consciously or unconsciously, moral values about consumption. Are these two phenomena related to each other? The very meaning and content of the term "consumption" is an elusive object, despite many attempts at definition and specification. Recent research in cognitive linguistics by George Lakoff and others can show why consumption is such a fuzzy category, and why consumption and moral issues are always related to each other. By exploring the structure of the concept of consumption, and the central metaphors that link it's meanings together, we can better grasp our elusive topic. More importantly, we can also avoid some of the pitfalls that so often occur in the social sciences when we use folk-categories as if they were empirical and universal.

*This lecture has after the conference been published as a chapter "Morals and metaphors: The meaning of consumption" in the book Elusive Consumption. Below follows a report from the workshop which took place immediately after the lecture.*

2:2 Workshop summary

Morals and metaphors: Further reflections on consumption metaphors

*By Jeppe Læssøe*

Due to the presence of Rick Wilk we chose to take the point of departure in his speech on "Morals and Metaphors: The meaning of Consumption" – and actually the whole workshop became a dialogue with him on the metaphors of consumption. There were no attempts to oppose or reject the relevance of this approach to consumption.

We where as Rick afterwards described it, "painfully polite" to him. So, rather than theoretical fighting the workshop became a trial to clarify and elaborate on the perspective and points of his speech.

I will not try to cover every question or every point made during the workshop. The following is a more personal and structured version of the discussion.

Does it make sense to approach consumption as something that is conceived on the basis of different kinds of metaphors rather than as a strictly defined issue? Yes, definitely. If you have tried to agree on an exact definition of consumption together with researchers from other disciplines you will know that it is a terrible difficult exercise. I have tried it myself as a member of a national committee for consumer research. In this case we ended up with a very pragmatic and nearly tautologic definition saying that research on consumption and consumers is characterised by research projects where the consumers are at the centre of the topic. At the workshop Karin Ekström told us that CFK had tried, but now abandoned, to define consumption at their homepage. Consumption is not an exact but a fuzzy concept. As Rick Wilk stressed in his speech, concepts in ordinary language are always embedded in a net of relations to neighbour concepts. Rather than trying to separate a concept from its context, like scientific definitions, you need to explore how it relates to other concepts. This point, which I think was made by Wittgenstein, makes it reasonable to approach consumption by focusing on the applied metaphors: If you regard consumption as "money" you relate it to one context and a specific set of meanings, if you regard it as "eating" it implies other neighbouring concepts and meanings. Thus, to approach consumption as metaphors makes sense, either as an enlightening or critical project revealing the implicit metaphors in the ways the concept is used or as an emancipative project trying to use alternative metaphors to unfold new meanings and projects. Studies on the use of metaphors can be approached historically in order to show the continuity or change in the use of metaphors in relation to consumption. Or it can be approached with a focus on social differences – e.g. showing how different social classes or political ideologies apply different metaphors with different kinds of inherent morals.

Furthermore it makes sense to clarify the hidden metaphors behind consumer policy and consumption research. This is indeed not new. As one of the participants mentioned there has been a change from regarding the consumer as a victim who needs protection towards regarding him or her as an proactive agent who has to be involved in more participatory arrangements.

#### Alternative metaphors

During the discussion we got a number of questions and comments on the potentials of approaching consumption by means of alternative metaphors.

In his speech Wilk mentioned few alternative metaphors born in critical opposition to the dominant consumption metaphors. For this reason they were rather negative: Consumption as aliens and consumption as drowning. They are real in the sense that they reflect empirical observations on how some people conceive and talk about consumption. They motivated, however, some of the participants to propose some more positive alternative consumption metaphors.



That is, some analytical constructs that perhaps can help us as consumption researchers to transgress the dominant conceptions and approach consumption in new, innovative ways. As the following sections show, these ideas to alternative metaphors as analytical tools gave rise to some critical comments from Rick Wilk.

#### Consumption as sharing

The argument here was that consumption is much more noble than production. You don't share production. It is something you have to do - it is a chore. Sharing has always been used in the context of consumption. Consumption gives meaning to the community.

Rick Wilk remarked to this that contrary to Marx, who saw work/production as the basic dynamic behind the creation of societies/social connections, anthropologists have always emphasised giving (exchange, gift giving) as the kind of activity by which we create social connections. However, Wilk was not pleased with the idea of approaching consumption as sharing. He regards consumption as implying a dialectical tension between individualism and social interests, i.e. between getting as much of the cake as possible vs. sharing. If we regard consumption as eating we have the potentials to be selfish or to share. It is a fundamental moral issue, probably the fundamental moral issue, whether I should eat it or share it. Generalized it is about the tension between conformity and individualism. Wilk made a reference to Simmel: Consuming is both standing out and fitting in. And it is both at the same time.

People are constantly negotiating and talking and worrying about this line. "Am I standing out too much or am I fitting in too much? We are doing that all the time through consumption.

#### Consumption as art

Another positive, alternative metaphor might be consumption as art. Art, aesthetics, style?

Wilk's first comment was that it reminded him of the British colonialists and the British upper class who had this whole mystique about cultivated consumption. Emphasising quality and long lasting durability, e.g. tweeds. In some ways there is a kind of gardening, artistic and aesthetic metaphor there. Also present in luxury consumption, e.g. in advertising for diamonds: "diamonds are forever": Poor people consume, but the rich keep things and cultivate them.

An objection to this was that it is long time ago. Today the growth in material consumption in the rich parts of the world is a serious threat if we want a sustainable development. The Finnish consumption researcher, Mika Pantzar, has proposed to regard



consumption as an art in contrast to superficial consumerism as well as to the ascetic demand on just cutting down our consumption level. It relates to the voluntary simplicity movement who argues that we can improve our quality of life by a reduced and more reflected way of consumption.

To this Wilk replied that the voluntary simplicity movement is a mix of religious people, downshifters who want to move out to the country side, environmentalists, people who just want to save money so that they can retire early, old traditionalists who do not want their women working etc. They have so little in common. It is remarkable that they can talk to each other. But they have difficulties in communicating their utopian ideas because not consuming things is difficult to communicate. If I buy a Coke everybody can see it, but if I don't buy a Coke it is invisible. A lot of what goes on in voluntary simplicity circles is a validation of not consuming. So you have a group of people who knows that you are not eating meat etc., it is all about not doing things.

One comment to this was that you can get other kinds of responses: The simple way of living gives you more time for social relations – and then you receive social responses on that.

Wilks replied that the reactions are more negative in the US. It is difficult for the voluntary simplicity people to avoid the label "unemployed".

Consumption as magic

Another idea was to use magic as a consumption metaphor.

Wilk agreed that a lot of people's ways of thinking about consumption is very magical, e.g. in the sense that touching things can host pollution. People think of objects as having magic. On the other hand it is not the way they think and talk about their own consumption. Rather it is an analytical metaphor.

Consumption as related to children

The argument here was that we are talking about consumption in certain ways when it is related to children. Either as protection or as participation/something they have to learn. The basic figure here seems to be a plant you have to take care of.

Wilk found it inspiring especially in relation to food: The focus in conflicts between parents and their children from age 3 to 12 is on food. It is very rich on moral instructions. Especially because people feel so strongly about the right way to raise their children. And it gives rise to tremendous conflicts: moral vs. desire. For this reason it might be very interesting to approach this issue by means of a metaphor analysis.

Consumption regarded as network/web

The question here was whether new technologies and the changes in production – not least the IT-revolution – are changing the ways we consume, the ways we reflect on consumption and the moral dilemmas? If so, it might be an idea to approach consumption by means of metaphors like "network" or "World Wide Web".

Wilk agreed in the importance of being aware of the rapid ongoing changes. On the other hand it is also an example that shows the limits of metaphor analysis. The problem is that the cognitive linguistic approach is static, descriptive. It is separated from historic approaches trying to explore dynamics - barriers or potentials in relation to change of the state-of-art. You might ask: if metaphors influence behaviour, what changes metaphors?

The use of the consumption metaphor approach in consumer culture studies

While most of the discussion was concerned with the potentials in approaching consumption by means of different kinds of metaphors, analytical constructs made by us as researchers, the perhaps most important message from Rick Wilk was to regard and use metaphor analysis phenomenologically; that is to listen and reveal the consumption metaphors used by different agents/people. He mentioned, as an example, a study of peasants in Columbia. The economist could not understand their behaviour, but a metaphor analysis revealed that they conceive their household economy as a house. What is inside the house (the values produced inside the household) is not something you throw out of the window, while values produced outside the house do not belong to the household, which cause a totally different attitude toward the use of them. In continuation of this example Wilk concluded that "the idea that people have their own mental models and their own ways of thinking about their own desires and needs and their own consumption, I think is worth pursuing."

We did also touch the methodological question: What kinds of methods are adequate for catching and exposing consumption metaphors? Behavioural studies? Projective methods? Comparative studies? Guliz Ger's answer to this was simply to go out and talk with people about their consumption and draw out their metaphors from this. She added, on the other hand, that it is important to look at how they behave as well.

Metaphors and interdisciplinary co-operation

As a final but crucial point I will go back to the difficulties when different disciplines tries to agree on a definition of consumption. The problem is that also research disciplines have their own and rather different consumption metaphors. We think we are talking about the same thing, but we are not. This is, however, not an argument for abandoning interdisciplinarity. What should be abandoned is the idea of a common definition and approach to consumption. The potential of interdisciplinary co-operation is to apply

different perspectives on the same matter. In order to unfold this potential, and not to go past each other, it is necessary to raise an awareness of the differences in the ways different disciplines conceive a certain practice. To Focus on the applied metaphors seems obvious in this connection. Related to organisational development, Gareth Morgan, has described basic metaphors in different scientific disciplines. e.g. it does make serious differences whether organisations are regarded as "machines", "organisms", "cultures" "power-relations" etc. Perhaps a similar kind of awareness of disciplinary metaphors might be useful in relation to consumption research.

## CHAPTER 3

### Culture, consumption and marketing: Retrospect and prospect

#### 3:1 Abstract

*Culture, consumption and marketing: retrospect and prospect*

*Keynote speaker: John F. Sherry, Jr., Northwestern University, USA*

About a decade and a half ago, I surveyed the emerging subdiscipline of postmodern consumer research for its principal contours and probable programmatic progress. That effort was primarily consolidative and conjectural. In this present address, I revisit and revise those original observations. I explore the ways the subdiscipline has fulfilled some of its promise, and examine some of its shortfalls. I dwell in particular on the possibilities of rapprochement between the postmodern tradition of consumer research in Marketing and the rapidly proliferating silos of investigation of consumption arising in contiguous disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

*This lecture has after the conference been published as a chapter “Culture, consumption and marketing: retrospect and prospect” in the book Elusive Consumption. Below follows a report from the workshop which took place immediately after the lecture.*

#### 3:2 Workshop summary

Culture, consumption and marketing: Retrospect and prospect

*By Pauline MacLaran*

What's in a postmodern name: experimental moments or "mass debating"?

For some time now, philosophers and literary theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin have argued convincingly that language is inherently unstable, that meanings are always in flux, and, consequently, that there can be no fixed interpretation of a text. Rather, language is perceived as a process in which readings of text are multiple and dependent on the interpreters' personal, professional and cultural backgrounds which together comprise the context from which meaning is created. Such theorising has given consumer researchers important new insights, particularly in relation to marketing communications. Consumers co-create the meanings of advertisements alongside marketers, and their interpretation is not necessarily the meaning that is intended by marketers (Scott, 1992, 1993; Stern, 1993; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; O'Donohoe, 1997, 2002).

In this session we witnessed language in process and how, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, 'meanings are never singular or uncontested but plural, debatable, contradictory, open

to multiple interpretations'. John Sherry's paper, *Culture, Consumption and Marketing: Retrospect and Prospect*, provided the stimulus for our workshop discussions. In this paper he up-dated observations made some fifteen years ago in his oft cited *Postmodern Alternatives: The Interpretive Turn in Consumer Research*. This chapter gave an overview of the 'other stuff' that was emerging in the field of consumer research at that time, or what he then referred to as 'postmodern' consumer research, a term that was to prove controversial and provoke much lively debate in our session!

Of course, we know well that postmodernism is a contentious word (as John himself acknowledges in his paper, it is 'one that is flanked by weasel words'). Postmodernism is also a concept that is hotly debated even between postmodernists themselves, a 'battleground of conflicting opinions' (Cova, 1996, p. 15) that is frequently dismissed as a blurred and blurring invention of inaccessible French thinkers (Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, Barthes, Kristeva, Deleuze, Guattari and so forth).

Nonetheless, within consumer research the concept of postmodern consumer culture, with its concomitant characteristics of fragmentation, reflexivity, hyperreality etc., has enabled some deep insights into consumer lifestyles and marketplace behaviour (Belk and Bryce, 1993; Firat, Sherry and Venkatesh, 1994; Brown, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh<sup>1</sup>, 1993, 1995; Holt, 1997; Thompson and Troester, 2002). Most recently, Thompson (2002) takes a postmodern perspective to unpack what a piece of research reveals about a research community and to propose a critical-reflexive approach to re-enquiry in consumer research.

However, as consumer researchers are well aware, it was not specifically to the above research that John referred when he originally coined the term 'postmodern alternatives'. Rather, he was using the term as a temporal categorisation to denote the emergence of interpretivist perspectives that were challenging the traditional positivistic perspectives in consumer research at that time. In the discussions that follow he explains this in more detail. When reading these, please remember that these are very much 'edited' highlights of the debates. Although I have tried to make this summary as polyvocal as possible and let others have a voice, there are many (postmodern?) issues of representation, particularly whenever I have had to paraphrase because I couldn't hear the tape clearly!

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<sup>1</sup> At a later stage during this conference, Alladi Venkatesh related how his initial engagement with postmodernism was grounded in empirical work carried out in Orange County when he used the concept to make sense of the emergent findings.

### Session highlights

Question: It seems to me that there's been a socio-cultural turn in academic marketing since the early 80s. Where do you see this linking to the contemporary socio-cultural turn in marketing practice? Could you expand on the cultural turn in marketing practice and the cultural turn in academic marketing research?

John Sherry: I don't know if I'd call it a cultural turn. The image of managerial marketing research practice has been notoriously trendy – it'll be neuro-linguistic programming next week! There have been qualitative researchers, people who used projective tasking, ethnography and so forth at least as far back as the 1930s on both sides of the ocean. Managers have never, as far as I'm aware of (certainly the ones that I work with that are professionals and executives, and the ones that I train to become managers), been sceptical about methods per se. They see them working together – if it's generalisable, great and if it's not, they see this as giving them some deeper understanding of what particular issue it is and they're happy with it. Inside academic marketing departments it's been a different story because there's been this process of scientific legitimation that's been going on the whole time. If we want to be a reputable discipline we have to be able to compete with the harder sciences whatever they might be i.e. economists etc. The softer, more contextual side has been academically mostly undervalued all the time, but since the mid 80s you have this influx of people coming into marketing departments, and people outside of marketing departments doing work of interest. I think the resistance is starting to break down. I tell you a case in point, a colleague of mine at Northwestern stuck his head round my door and said 'What do you know about price perception and what goes on in consumers' heads when they think about prices?' I replied, 'Not much', and he said 'We've really reached our limit here but I know you guys have some really interesting ways of getting into people's heads. Can you help out here?' And I've always wanted to do a pricing paper so....! But this indicates an increasing awareness and gradual acceptance of what these other methods could bring to the established canon of the marketing departments. So I don't think it's a turn per se, it's something more gradual.

Question: How do we increase the dialogue across disciplines for research on consumption – across anthropology, sociology, history, geography and so forth?

John Sherry: When I make a presentation I send it out to various people to get it checked out and what you got here today was a draft copy of some thoughts – some of which were half-baked- and may have ignored the really important and interesting developments that are occurring in parts of the world that I'm not aware of. So, for instance, some of the work that's going on at Guliz Ger's centre I was marginally aware of but didn't include in the paper. I don't know what the hell's going on over half of America. For example Latin America and the Caribbean, that seems to me to be territory that's incognito too. So if I've inadvertently stepped on anyone's toes I apologise.

However, the way to build the quickest institutional bridges from my perspective, I think, is the policy board at JCR as the single most elective institutional arm of consumer research on the social science side in the US. We've got 12 sponsoring associations that ought to be developing their own disciplines like the American Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association and so forth. The representatives on the policy board should be going back to their own disciplines to cultivate people that are working in the area of consumer research and see what they can do to divert some of the articles that would normally go to mainstream journals in those fields. This would introduce an inter-disciplinary forum, synergise it somehow. I don't know if it would involve negotiating with these different fields to recognise the JCR as a legitimate outlet. For instance, a lot of schools if you publish an ethnography of customer behaviour in an anthropology journal you don't get credit for it but if you publish in a psychology journal you do get credit for it. So there's different dual accreditation going on. But where we've got existing institutions that seem to me to be tailor-made for this kind of research, we just don't do it.

Question: Regarding inter-disciplinary dialogue, I'd like to ask Danny Miller why he never cites our work in consumer research?

Daniel Miller: You'll probably be horrified that I'm going to start by saying that in some ways if you want to give a paper that makes absolutely sure that people like myself do not engage in anything to do with consumer research, then that was probably it. Let me explain why. I don't want to be negative but I just want to explain the logic by which one would come up with that kind of response. There was a sense in your paper where you were turning to people outside the particular disciplinary area and asking so how come these people are not so engaged in citing works in consumer behaviour and marketing research? At one time I could understand that because there was this very scientific, simplistic research, but now we have this 'other' research which has expanded into all sorts of directions, qualitative stuff, and surely now all of it is there and yet these people are still not apparently getting engaged. Well, how come? And actually the problem revolves partly around the very term you did end up using, the term 'postmodern'. Here I speak for myself – although I think I can speak for Colin Campbell as well because of what he said this morning about the postmodern is very similar to the things I would say and I think a lot of the people I work with would have the same response and it's this.... When consumer research and marketing research tended to use a certain kind of scientism that was based around questionnaires and hypotheses, the problem that people from my background would have with that is that it is intrinsically shallow – there's an arrogance behind this position but I'm trying to be honest about it. It couldn't get beyond a certain kind of encounter, it couldn't really give you a sense of the experience in context. With the arrival of interpretivism it looked like there was a bit of an ethnographic turn and that this work was going to be recognised outside consumer research. And what

prevented that is that the making of another, alternative, critical, whatever you want to call it, form of consumer research coincided with the development of what was in other terms called 'the postmodern'. The problem from our point of view was that if our past perception was that things were shallow, we were looking for some development. Yet now, instead of things coming towards us, I would argue that the whole postmodern movement goes absolutely in the opposite direction. If things were shallow before, it was nothing compared with the shallowness that we see as being associated with the term postmodernism whether it is to do with research analysis or whatever. I will admit to my prejudices but I think they're shared by others. When people use the term postmodern what do I actually think? Okay, I think that once upon a time people were engaged in trying to understand other people, whether its other societies or any society, and had a certain humility in respect of that and therefore didn't talk about themselves very much. With this new phase of research it tends to be extremely self-referential, people are using other people to say something either about themselves or their trajectory etc. It's much more about their self-discovery etc. That's one of the aspects of it.

The second aspect is the problem that we had with that kind of research was not being deep enough in terms of scholarship and in terms of its engagement. Whereas with post-modern research I think of it as not deeper or more scholarly research, I think of it, on the whole, as less scholarly research – it's quicker and dirtier than what was there before and that's what the connotations of the term are. Even when it comes to reference to theory there was a time when we would have said the relationship to theory was again a scholarly reading, where people dealt with theory they knew that it was scholarly theory, systematic theory and they were engaged with it. Whereas when we hear the word post-modern, we assume this is going to be: a) a series of citations; b) it will be by someone like Baudrillard who we don't respect anyway; and c) instead of engagement with theory, it tends to be increasingly engagement with 'debates'. What does this contribute to the debate on gender? What does it contribute to the debate on the postmodern etc. etc. So I must admit when I talk to my students I tend to call this whole movement 'mass debating' (pronounce it fast to get the full subtlety!), it refers to the self indulgence....

To summarise the point I'm making is this, that you characterise a whole movement called 'the other' – what I'm trying to say is that there is another 'other' that doesn't want to be associated in any respect with what your are calling the 'other' research, what I would understand as critical research, alternative research that is intended to be a scholarly engagement with the practice that it is trying to understand. On the whole we would see the postmodern movement, instead of coming closer to that, as absolutely going in the opposite direction. Compared to that, the old style questionnaire, hypothesis testing etc is welcome stuff because at least there is research there that one can engage with. There are quite a few books and articles, without quoting any names in consumer research that would characterise a style of research analysis with which I wouldn't want



to be associated. But the answer to that, so as not to be totally negative, is partly disaggregating that 'other', because obviously there are people with whom non-consumer researchers would want to engage. But that disaggregation is vital because there are pre-criteria with which one distinguishes frankly good, and frankly bad, research analysis which are central to that. I would actually say also that my loathing of that kind of research is by no means associated specifically with consumer research – it happened in anthropology, sociology, geography and so forth. So there is a whole wide movement out there.

John Sherry: It's always interesting to see where the disconnects are. If you pick the number of articles that have postmodern in the title of JCR, my guess is you're likely to come up with 1. Whereas if you go for ethnography, ethnology, any of the other 'ologies' or whatever, they turn up in the title, they turn up in the abstract and so forth. The use of the term postmodern was meant to indicate just this notion of an experimental moment when things seemed to change radically. In our field the term got postpositivist connotations, different from mainstream consumer research. But the principle way of contrasting this 'other stuff', as it was being called, was under the umbrella term of interpretivism which I find to be even more perverse than the concept of postmodernism. Everybody interprets, interpretation is intrinsic to the research enterprise and quantitative works are no exception. There are as many interpretive quantitative works - many of them more projective and fantastical than their qualitative counterparts – and we never call them interpretive. So it's kind of an intellectual dishonesty to promote this interpretivist versus whatever we call the mainstream approach. I like to beat up on the cultural critics, cultural studies folk, in the way that you describe. A good friend of mine from cultural studies has written on carnival culture, luxury and so forth and he gave a presentation to our faculty one time about his work on luxury and how he would hang out in shops, watching consumers handle merchandise, interacting with the sales people etc. I asked him "What did these people tell you about luxury goods?" and he replied "I didn't ever talk to people". You know, it would never actually occur to him to do that! So he'll go home and he'll interpret that data, and he does it supremely well for the kind of work that he does. However ethnographers would not recognise it as ethnography.

I read what I thought was a brilliant study on ambient television – it never occurred to me how many places in the world television exists in public spots. Since I've read this book, I've seen it everywhere and whilst it's an interesting interpretation of how these presences are in public place, there's never an interview of the viewers, never any interaction between the researcher and the subjects that were being embraced by this television presence. So this seems to me to be a brilliant jumping off point for some good detailed ethnography. So I guess my problem with what you had to say is that you tar an entire emerging sub-discipline with a label that has maybe multiple meanings without checking out what the individual substantive contributions are.

Thomas O'Guinn: I find the comments incredibly dismissive. In fairness, John used the term postmodern at a time when it was apropos, it was the result of a heartfelt search for something to make a contribution for a friend and editor. But to categorise all the interpretive work in the US, or that published in JCR, as postmodern - as John says, I know of only one article that lends itself to that. You're certainly free to call it shallow. We'll agree to disagree. For example, the distinction between needs and wants in Colin Campbell's talk this morning, there's an amazingly deep and related discourse in the US about this. There is a distinction between it may be easy to call something shallow and therefore not worth citing but also being lazy. So from people on the other side of the pond, I'm not sure your characterisation is right.

Daniel Miller: Let me stress that I was not trying to characterise consumer research. Let me just recap on what I was trying to do and that was to explain why the positing of it around a particular term (and it wasn't me that suggested this all going under the term postmodern - it was John Sherry's paper today) would set up inadvertent alienation, not that he intended this. It's a characterisation that would not appeal because of these views. Heaven forbid that I would be trying to characterise anybody's research or a discipline's research as shallow. But there is a point in explaining how, when you go from discipline to discipline, certain discourses, certain terms have certain sets of connotations which can have certain effects. So the effect of packaging it that way, it doesn't attempt to ascribe things to a whole set of studies.

Comment: This is a very interesting discussion in a way because I think you can see, not only that it's been in consumer research, but also disciplines like anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literature and all across the board of the arts and humanities and social sciences in a way. You have two parallel developments that both take off in the 1980s. One is, of course, postmodernism, postmodernisation - you have this postmodern canon that enters in which there is good research and bad research, but it also produces a certain kind of debate and citation style. On the other hand you also have rational choice which kind of expands at the same time and you could argue that there is a parallel between these two ways of writing academic discourse in the sense that both of them are shallow in a certain way. Both of them are discursive machines and you have a citational network that is already there and you can put in relatively little amount of initial data and get an article fairly quickly done through this kind of program in a way. (There is such a site on the Internet where you can have a paper written in postmodernese!). What I'm trying to say, my hypothesis is if you look at this from a sociology of science point of view maybe you could relate the development of a postmodernist form of discourse and a rational choice model to the transformation of some kind of relations of production of academic work.

Comment: So, the prison-house of language is quite efficacious in policing the disciplinary boundaries. One of the issues that hasn't come up is the moral character of disciplines and the relative moral judgements about the moral character of disciplines. I think my own perception as a renegade anthropologist is that, having crossed the pale to the business school, I'm in a taboo category as far as most anthropologists are concerned, and so by definition the work is suspect, and not worthy of examination. It doesn't really matter what the content of the work is, it's because of the categorical change. So it is the moral questionableness of business schools, which have money and all sorts of other things, that is part of the problem. And it seems to me that this is a serious issue.

John Sherry: Isn't it ironic? As anthropologists we pride ourselves on going where the phenomena are and yet we clearly don't practice what we preach.

Daniel Miller: Is it necessarily a good thing to focus back on disciplines? In a sense I was trying to open up the discussion and move away from a disciplinary focus. I think most of us who work in anthropology are much more down on work within anthropology, most of which is parochial, boring, things you don't want to be associated with either. It's not the categorisation of disciplines that's the problem. The problem in my mind is a disaggregation of the work that is going on across the fields – there are at least as many people in anthropology, sociology etc that call themselves postmodernists as there would be in consumer studies. The question is rather the kind of research that we want to engage in, the research problems, how you want to go about it and what kind of work you want to respect. I mean what discipline am I? I'm an anthropologist, sometimes I call myself material culture but what the hell. I work with sociologists, geographers and I don't care about the disciplines unless you're going back to these structures of publication etc where it's a meaningful dialogue. But on the whole it seems to me it's much more important to work out criteria for the kind of research one wants to engage with and one doesn't want to and that cuts across the disciplines.

Russell Belk: I guess that I'm not very bothered by disciplinary distinctions although I guess there are traditions that it's hard to break out of – there's publication tradition and so forth. But I'm for academic promiscuity, that we should read broadly. Not only is postmodernism, not in the way John is using it, but in the way Colin was using it this morning, a formulaic solution in search of a problem, so is Bourdieu, so are many of the theories that we have. I think if you're pursuing a phenomenon rather than pursuing a theoretical line of enquiry, you're much more open to crossing disciplinary lines. I think one thing that we need to watch and be aware of, if we want to facilitate that, is adopting disciplinary vocabulary that is indecipherable without a huge amount of preparation within reading, background and so forth. So I think common publication outlets that are emerging like CMC (Consumption, Markets, Culture) are one of the potentials for crossing disciplinary lines and I think reading as broadly and with as few a

set of biases and pre-dispositions as we can is the way to facilitate that. Yes, I would agree with Danny's comments that there's a lot of shallow writing in marketing. There's also a lot of shallow writing in anthropology, there's also a lot of shallow writing in sociology and I don't cast more aspersions on one discipline than the other. I think we are yet in search of good profound ideas and understanding of what is really a changing phenomenon that is the consumer and the consumption milieu in which we find ourselves, and rather than harboring or nurturing would-be antagonisms, I think that it's bridges we should be looking for and those bridges are not as likely to come in publications citing an obscure (for us) set of references as they are in interpersonal connections, and I think those interpersonal connections like this forum are a good way to nurture that, and you'll respect good ideas and good people that will hopefully carry over into research collaborations, citations and so forth.

Comment: Just to continue with that a little bit. I think that's the whole benefit of these kinds of conferences – people travelling and learning more about other peoples' work. But I guess one of my fascinations and also a frustration is that when you want to cross a border, or maybe a border crosses you, or your work is seen by some people or whatever, it's always interesting how resistant some of these borders can be and some of these distinctions. Coming from the US and in a marketing department as I am, it never ceases to amaze me how, much as we want to cross, somebody's typecast or you've got this group and that group and it becomes very useful to understand and at least to be aware or to negotiate. So when I went in and gave a talk a few years ago at the National Association for Ethic Studies, it was beautiful. It was a whole audience at the University of Colorado of about 500 people that I'd never seen and then they see that I'm from a marketing department and this is not a good thing! They're like saying "Oh, you just want to sell Latinos whatever..!". It's interesting how we navigate these groups and we're not trying to navigate critical studies within marketing. I think sometimes the pastures really green on the other side and I think about sociology and anthropology, "Wow cool! – this critical tradition will be recognised" and then I'm learning that quantitative work is dominating anthropology and I go "Oh no", because I need that hope in this other area. It's a source of energy and that's what's nice and so at a personal level we can do some things, but Jesus, let's not forget about some of these realities for some of us who are in the US and have to deal with things like tenure. So, you want to publish in an anthropological journal, maybe at one level the solution is to just say, "screw it", but then maybe you want tenure, maybe you want some of the kind of rewards and that's where it's not just the social part but the institutional part that I see will be a real challenge. We need to work together to move these borders!

John Sherry: It seems to me that Russ embodies the kind of thing that we do best. If something is out there he goes out and he finds it. If it's in the field fine but if he doesn't find it there and it's in the library, he finds it. If work has been done on a topic he manages

to acquire it somehow and master that and I see that kind of approach diffusing. I see more and more people trying to emulate that style and I don't see that happening in many other places. Where I would expect to find it I don't see it happening and yet in marketing where I wouldn't expect to find it, I see it happening. So, I wonder if there is some way to catalyse that? If there's some way to generate that kind of attitude i.e. that I probably stumbled onto a really interesting topic that somebody else has probably thought about as well. Why don't I go and find out what's been done first and then add to it. Somehow, I'd like to see that happening across disciplines.

*Pauline has after the conference published a chapter on her own together with Margaret K. Hogg, Miriam Catterall, and Robert V. Kozinets. "Gender, technologies and Computer-mediated Communications in Consumption-related Online Communities".*

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## CHAPTER 4

### Malleable identities: Coastal disturbances & border crossings

4:1 Abstract

*Malleable identities: Coastal disturbances & border crossings*

*Keynote speaker: Richard Elliott, Oxford University, England*

Many conceptualisations of self and identity used in consumer research are psychological in their ontology and epistemology and individual in their methodology. A profoundly social approach to identity is to conceive of identity as situated social practices, "who we are lies in the way we live day to day, not just in what we think or say about ourselves". Displays of social competence in a particular "community of practice" become reified into language labels we use ourselves and the experience of being labelled is the experience of being the situated self. So identity is not an object but a constant process as we travel along trajectories of identity which are fundamentally temporal as we move between a variety of social communities with multi-membership across family, work, culture. In this perspective, consumption is but one element of identity practice, a resource for social action and shared interpretations. An explosion of consumption choices threatens current identity trajectories and necessitates the development of new social competencies as a member of new consumption communities. Advertising, for example, can demonstrate particular consumption practices. But there are serious limits to our ability to construct the self as we are also constructed and constrained by historical, material and discursive positions which are resistant to change.

This social action perspective raises profound issues for methodology, in that instead of studying just what people say and think we must also study what they do. This requires studying the lived experience of the consumer as a social being and suggests the use of ethnography and participant and non-participant observation of situated social practices. But people also "do things with words": language is a medium oriented towards action and function, and people use language to construct accounts or versions of the social world. Critical discourse analysis is a truly social method in that it focuses on the intersubjective constitution of the mind as the person converses with others, and thus provides a social account of subjectivity. It differs significantly from other interpretive methodologies in its focus on social practice rather than individual perceptions, and its acceptance of the post-structuralist assumptions of language as the site of the construction of a social world replete with contradiction, paradox, and contest.

These methodological issues are explored through a number of current empirical research projects which study identity in the domains of gender, age and technology.

*There is no summary to this workshop.*



## CHAPTER 5

### The human consequences of consumer culture: An historical and cultural perspective

#### 5:1 Abstract

*The human consequences of consumer culture: An historical and cultural perspective*  
Keynote speaker: Russell Belk, University of Utah, USA

This presentation begins by defining consumer culture and attempting to distinguish it from developments that tend to co-occur, such as industrialization, urbanization, globalization, capitalism, colonialism, and wage labor. Because the effects of consumerism depend upon the time and culture in which it develops, several case studies are considered including China at several points in time, Eastern and Central Europe after communism, and post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. Additional consideration of effects is sought in examinations of materialism, tourism, collecting, and gift giving. In the course of these examinations I seek to debunk several common contentions regarding consumer culture, including those involving premature consumption, consumption as a female domain, consumption supplanting citizenship, egoism replacing altruism, and luxury promulgating weakness. The conclusion offered is neither a celebration nor a condemnation of consumer culture. It is instead a more balanced view of the effects of adopting consumer culture.

*This lecture has after the conference been published as a chapter "The human consequences of consumer culture" in the book Elusive Consumption. Below follows a report from the workshop which took place immediately after the lecture.*

#### 5:2 Workshop summary

The Human Consequences of Consumer Culture: An historical and cultural perspective  
By Torsten Ringberg

Torsten Ringberg: There seems to be an implicit assumption in your presentation that harmful consumption behavior comes from abroad and is transferred into or incorporated by a local culture. To me it seems that consumption practices always existed regardless how we classify them. This means that local practices are not easily replaced by external practices. Even though external practices may be dressed up in foreign lingo, so to speak, culturally embedded practices are difficult to displace overnight. Local cultures have always relied extensively on bartering, trading, and the exchange of goods as means to establish and maintain social systems as well as power and personal relationships. So my question is; how much does the West influence the rest? Are Western values being wholesale adopted within a local culture or are they assimilated according to local values?



Russell Belk: I think that is a good point. I don't think consumer culture just comes from the West and spreads to the rest. If you look at Japan, China, and even Africa there we had prior consumer cultures without the influence of the West. I mentioned Lake Ming, China, in the traditional hierarchy farmers are at the top and merchants are at the bottom. At a certain point when the economy was growing merchants were getting increased financial power. The group that the merchants sought to emulate was the *Liderati*. The *Liderati* had a closed circle of a certain sort of consumption. They would bring in artists and residents to work for them and they were to pay for them, they kept them on their estates for months and years at a time and so within that closed system the merchants couldn't get accepted by *Liderati*. Instead, what began to surface, as what happens in many consumer cultures, was a counterfeit market. It was estimated at one time that out of ten paintings that were done (art along with poetry were important consumer goods at the time) only one of those would be genuine, the rest were forgeries. This is a good example of a consumer culture originating in a place outside the West. Also, if you look at contemporary China there is a resurgence of fascination with things that are Chinese. The notion that China as a nation is an important part of consumer ideology is developing as well.

Torsten Ringberg: I have another question. You seem to imply that there is a good and a bad consumer culture?

Russell Belk: Yes, that gets to be a particularly contentious issue in terms of cultural altruism when you look at something like simplicity versus complexity. Americans are very fond of doing this; blame Brazilian farmers for cutting down rain forests and causing environmental calamities and neglect the acid rain and industrialization and proliferation of waste and consumer goods at home. The West hypocritically say don't do like us because you know we've learned that it's wrong and it is not really satisfying to have all of these consumer goods, and so you should not make the mistakes that we've made. That's paternalistic and egoistic to claim that we know best, and so certainly the local perspective on what is good and what is bad is important which is not to say that we cannot make judgments in the long term about wasting resources, polluting, harmful consumption, and replacing unhealthy diets. I suppose you can argue that what constitutes waste can be construed differently depending on the cultural framework, but I think supporting life in the short term and the long term is something that we can probably agree on, although cross-cultural value judgments are always contentious.

Audience: I am interested in hearing your comments on how you view consumption historically. What drove consumer culture, consumption or production?

Russell Belk: The traditional notion in the West was that the production produced the industrial revolution and forced consumer goods upon the population. I think histori-

ans of the past twenty years have pretty much turned that around and showed evidence that the consumer culture came first, and brought about the industrial revolution. The desire for luxury goods is really what promulgated the industrial revolution. Consumption has been rising in importance as a cause rather than an effect. Furthermore, we tend to privilege the masculine production side and to disparage the feminine consumption side and so perhaps it is an overcorrective but certainly there are combinations of things that are included. If you look at China today, the consumption revolution is occurring mostly in cities, mostly in the coastal areas and the South with the exception of Beijing and a few other places. Wright talks about the global focus and about flows of finance, people, ideas, technology, as all being interrelated flows that affect one another. Of course that is happening a global scale now, as well, it is not something that can be looked upon within a single cultural context. With mass global media it becomes more spontaneous and more instantaneous. To draw a map of what causes what is difficult. In trying to separate out the impact of consumer culture I was trying to restrict myself mostly to the individual level but the environmental consequences, the consequences on cultural values, the consequences on nationalism and ideologies, and so forth, are really all a part of that process too so they can't be separated. I was intentionally trying to restrict myself to looking at impact of Western consumer culture on other consumer cultures.

Audience: But in the environmental area you try to establish what are good and bad practices?

Russell Belk: At least to a certain degree I think that is possible. We can talk about good goods versus bad goods. We can talk about changes in health and we can talk about changes in aspirations. Now, that is itself a value judgment; is it better to find our hope in material things? Or should we find our hope in nonmaterial things, for example, nature, religion, whatever it might be which might lead to a more satisfying sustainable way of living? Of course, that is a value judgment that is likely to change according to the culture and the time periods. Also, increasingly affluent cultures have different values than non-affluent cultures. It is relatively easy to give up material things if you have never become accustomed to them. I think relatively affluent nations can make judgments of what's good and what's bad but it comes back to Torsten Ringberg's distinction that judgment is itself culturally specific, context, and time period.

Audience: I have a question about sustainable consumer behavior. I am interested in the moral and political dimensions of consumer behavior. In the interesting speeches both yesterday and today it was stated; that we are consuming individuals. We must consume in order to survive. I wonder how do you handle environmental degradation resulting from a consumer society.

Russell Belk: Well, Craig Thompson talked on this issue, too, because he talked about natural solutions or at least the illusion of natural solutions. I guess the normal conse-

quences are multiple because some consequences are caused by production, and industrial pollution, and then there are some that are caused by consumption. For example, consumer-packaging material that is bad for individual health. And some consumption practices that deplete limited natural resource. I guess any consumption has environmental consequences, some of which are good and some of which are relatively less bad, and some of which are worse. Perhaps, what we are arguing about is where we should draw the line -- what is excessive and what is not excessive in terms of consumption. If you would agree that energy, at least in terms of the sources that we have today, is largely depleting limited resources. All of us could get by, by using less energy, less artificial energy, less electricity, less gasoline and so forth. But coming here from America it would have been a little more difficult to row a boat across the ocean. Just being here led to a huge amount of fuel consumption.

Within a Western context we view it as my right. I think what we are trying to do it to define for ourselves what is our own just level of consumption. It is a cultural judgment on my part that this is a legitimate thing to do. I think what we are trying to do is to define for ourselves more than others what is our own just level of consumption. Certain cultures like Denmark, for example, are relatively less energy intensive than the U.S. However, Denmark is consuming far more electricity per capita than African nations. Eric Arnould (taking notes) is running a computer and using electricity while he could be writing by hand, but we have a certain addiction to technology. All of these judgments are culturally relative. In the 1950s to be using a computer with all those tubes would be horrible but today it is something that we take for granted. When young school children just entering school are using cell phones we now take that to be a normal activity rather than decadent which it would have been a couple of generations ago. I don't know the answer to these problems but I think that the general liberal bias to make no changes is not a realistic solution. It is not necessarily even an accurate statement that consumption is something that brings about human well-being.

I think we get into the technical value judgment problems when we try to impose on others what are acceptable and unacceptable levels of consumption. I don't know if simplicity or downsizing is necessarily the solution. I don't know that they are viable solutions. When we go back to the 60s, Wayne Nelson was talking about voluntary simplicity as being a lifestyle and by then it had caught on to 5% of the population. By 1980 he predicted it would be 20% of the population. By 2000 it would be 50% of the population. Obviously those projections have gone by the wayside. It is also more complicated than that. There is voluntary simplicity and there is involuntary simplicity among people who are impoverished. By the same token there is voluntary complexity using a computer versus involuntary complexity in society where we can't get by without

doing that. To live without a computer and e-mails make it hard to be part of an academic community. I think if you look at those four cells the problems are quite unique and quite different to each of the cells. Involuntary simplicity, poverty, and impoverishment are different sorts of problems than involuntary complexity, but we are all part of the system. All of those four cells need to be approached in different ways because they involve different types of problems. It is a hugely complex system that raises the question of how do we separate these things and how do we engage in political actions so it is sustainable?

Eric Arnould: I actually would like to throw that question back at you. Why is it that whenever I come to Scandinavia I hear somebody enunciate the position that you just enunciated. Where is this concern or anxiety about sustainable consumption situated within the political and economic discourses of Scandinavia. Why is it construed problematically in Scandinavia? It is not an objective problem it is a cultural construction that is the problem and needs to be redressed. I have yet to hear a reflexive discourse on sustainable consumption discourse among Scandinavians.

Audience: I don't think it is purely Scandinavia problem.

Eric Arnould: I didn't say it was a Scandinavian problem. I said it is a Scandinavian articulation. There is a rhetoric of 'consumption being a problem' in Scandinavia. I want to know where is that rhetoric located, culturally. What is its sources and consequences?

Audience: I don't have a very good answer to that.

Eric Arnould: Does anybody? I think it is an interesting issue.

Audience: The first thing, you see is that Scandinavian people are concerned with the authenticity of nature. How real it is? How, when left untouched and uncontaminated by people, it is like a paradise.

Eric Arnould: That's interesting, because this is one way of getting at the kind of moral judgment issue that Russ Belk mentioned before. I liked what Craig Thompson was doing because it interrogated and exposed our moral universe. That helps us understand judgments about good and bad. Our judgments are located within a moral universe. It would be interesting to hear what the British perspective on this is, as well, because I believe it is articulated somewhat differently in the U.K.

Richard Elliott: There is a huge difference between Scandinavian and the U.K.'s interests in, and discourses on, the environment. Basically, the environmentalist discourse is completely nonexistent in the U.K. as a generalized phenomenon. I have lived in Ger-

many for short periods of time and I had to learn to sort out the trash. I used to think if any government in Britain ever tried to get the British to do this there would be riot in the streets because no one cares. No one is interested. The only thing you can see undergraduate students involved in is animal rights. Human rights, Amnesty International is a minority interest on campus. So, it is interesting to identify the cultural locations of these discourses.

Richard Elliott: In regards to what is consumption and its benefits, I do think that 19th Century religious approaches to right and wrong are still living and working their way out now in relation to consumption.

Russell Belk: We are living in a particular technological era of the digitization of the world. There are certain parallel reactions very similar to the industrial revolution. In the book *Pandemonium* by Frank, the author looking at accounts of first locomotives coming through what was originally natural space. There was a horrifying reaction against the factories going up, and chimneys belching up smoke and this huge industrial engine began to gobble up natural resources. In contrast, now we are less concerned with that as we are caught up in the throes of the electronic and the digital. But there are others that are adamantly opposed to that, and see that we are losing control of privacy, we are losing control of our lives, that big brother is a part of that, that we are all becoming numbers, we are losing our personal identity. It is interesting that two so different viewpoints can exist side by side; there is a horror and fear and then there is also opportunity associated with technology and computers.

Torsten Ringberg: It seems to me that we have been caught up not so much in an electronic revolution as much as a discourse of electronic revolution that gives power to technology. There is much else going on in the world, but this particular discourse has been emphasized to a point where all solutions in the world have to include technology. This discourse is not being challenged efficiently by other discourses. The problem is that discourses come with material consequences. The technology discourse provides the foundation for justifying particular types of behavior, including setting up factories, polluting, and uprooting social practices in the name of technological progress. Of course, ultimately, an external judgment of the technology discourse is necessarily embedded within another discourse. We cannot objectively evaluate material consequences because an evaluation includes making judgment and consequently will always be made from a point of view, a particular discourse, so we are always caught in a discursive bind. It might interesting to combine Craig Thompson and Russ Belk's analyses by comparing discursive formations on environmentalism, technology revolution, and progress in various cultures, as well as how these discourses emerged and/or were repressed. In Denmark, for example, I was part of the initial group that launched the Costa Rican rainforest preservation campaign under the rainforest group *Nepenthes* in which we suc-

cessfully embraced and sold a very idealistic and paradisiac notion of nature. Interestingly, the aggressive economic development discourse exists side by side with the preservation discourse. Of course, it might be argued that technological development may bring us to a place where we can have a higher living standard and consume less, and thus protect the environment. The only problem is; the route to this pristine stage includes the depletion of the resources, first. It would be interesting to do an analysis from a discursive perspective and ought to include in-depth interviews as well as a semiotic one of texts.

Russell Belk: You can take a tour to the rain forest and buy a ticket to go there. It feels good having done that, yet you consume resources doing that. Going back to the sustainability argument and speaking to your comments, computers are not a pure ecologically friendly development but introduce a huge environmental contamination hazard when they are discarded and go into landfills. There is a city near Bonchow in China that recycles computers. They break them up and take out the Cadmium and the gold and other parts. The village near Bonchow is now contaminated! The Cadmium has leached into the water, the water is no longer drinkable, there are problems with children being born with deformities, so computers are polluting even though we think of them as pure and crystal technology. It's not all that, it just allows us to feel better about the rain forest as we think that this is pure, this is natural, that the technology development ideology is guilt free.

Torsten Ringberg: But again your judgment is embedded within a romantic environmentalist framework.

Russell Belk: I agree.

Torsten Ringberg: I believe, this was the case in your analysis and your presentation, as well. What is perceived as an overarching negative consequence to a community, such as pollution, may be framed entirely differently from a development (economic progress) position. It shows how vulnerable our efforts are to be deconstructed. It also shows what we consider to be objective facts only gain meaning through subjective (political or ideological) socio-cultural frames. What is perceived as good in one discourse might be looked upon with disdain within another. It is not enough to refer to facts, we need to understand how these facts are engaged or represented within dominant and less dominant discursive practices. You may have so-called identical facts, e.g., pollution, but different representation. Of course, even nailing down an objective fact, such as pollution and social disruption, is difficult. What constitutes pollution and social disruption to one group might be viewed as social progress and economic development to another. So stopping pollution becomes a matter of either changing the way others view it or, alternatively to argue within the premises of their discourse and show it makes sense.

Torsten Ringberg: There were a couple of questions.

Audience: What I was going to say was related to why we worry so much about the nature in Scandinavia on the one hand, and on the other, we are among the first ones to accept technology waste. So there is distinctions, on the one side we look for what is natural and untouched, no human beings in there. It is our nature. And on the other hand we invite technology development. This passivity is perhaps due to the belief that the government will take care of the issue and support the necessary research. In Finland there is a great discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. When asked, people state: of course, we have to consume less in whatever way we can do it. Yet, when it comes down to it, it is always perceived as somebody else's (i.e., the state) responsibility. It becomes accepted to consume as long as you portray to the world the right frame of environmental mind.

Russell Belk: We are environmentalists in a safe sort of way. If you live in Norway and Sweden, you have a summer home that doesn't have electricity, but you only accept this because you have the security of living in a heated and secure home the rest of the year.

Torsten Ringberg brought up the notion of purity within the romantic discourse. In most non-affluent economies being clean and using a higher amount of soaps and detergents to get very clean is very important, but in the affluent societies we can play with dirt, we can go mountain biking, and we can do things that make us dirty because it is not what we are struggling to overcome we have already overcome it. I wonder if we treat nature more playfully because we are secure from nature as opposed to people who are truly struggling to survive in the natural environment are less predisposed to interact with nature in such a way?

Eric Arnould: People perceive, at least in my experience in West Africa, nature as 'the bush'. The bush is where spirits of all sorts, including very malevolent spirits hang out and of course dangerous animals and snakes. So people's attitude about the bush in Africa is not that nature is a great thing, far from it. People are always burning down the bush and clearing forest to keep animals and spirits away, except for certain sacred groves. You contrast that with native experience in Australia where the indigenous are inscribed in the landscapes and the landscape is inscribed literally on their bodies. So, I don't think that contact with nature leads to a greater respect and appreciation of nature. It would be nice if that were that simple, but it doesn't appear to be.

Torsten Ringberg: I would take the argument a step further. I am working on a particular research project on nature-perception within a Western culture. In one particular group, Caucasian, I found that the perception of nature ranged from being a utilitarian resource to something spiritual, with a number of discursive positions in between.



An interesting example might illustrate this: When I interviewed farmers in rural Pennsylvania, located in beautiful forested and hilled areas and off the main road, on several occasions the farmer would take me around and show me all the trees and say this will produce x-amount of cubic-feet of first class timber, while this stand of trees is not worth much. I mean we walked through some immensely colorful and vibrant groves but that would be all they talked about. They did not see beauty as I saw it. There exist so many different ways of seeing (i.e., discursively framing) and I think it would be very useful to explore people's perspective rather than stipulating our own views. We should try to get a better understanding of how people understand a particular issue. In this way we do not become the judge but the illuminator. I think it is in this capacity that we serve our constituents (i.e., the consumers, the government, etc) the best.

Russell Belk: In regards to materialism, in Turkey, Romania, and Western Europe we found that there was a uniform discourse of opposition to materialism. Materialism is bad, it's tacky, it's evil, and yet all of these people aspired to have more things. Interestingly, they were able to embrace both positions without revealing a sense of conflict. In Turkey, for example, they would say; this is not for me it is for my children. I want to provide my children with a better way life. In the U.S. they would say; I succeeded I deserve it. In Romania they said we've suffered long enough; we deserve to have the good life. In Western Europe, the notion of materialism was neatly relegated to the "ugly Americans" because they are so crass and they only know how to consume. In Europe, the discourse of consumption is veiled in and justified as knowing the finer things in life, in traveling, in literature, and in music. "We" are not materialistic at all it is really the "ugly materialistic Americans" that do that crass sort of things.

Eric Arnould: That raises an interesting issue about how people construe the consumption of others in the global discourses of consumption. To what extent are we drawing on our perception of other's people's way of consuming to justify or rationalize our own way of consuming although we are all doing the same thing?

Audience: It is not easy to change discourse. There always seems to be conflicting representations and interests which negate one another. What constitutes aesthetics to one group represents a livelihood for another group.

Torsten Ringberg: Yet, in both of these discourses we control and own nature either to be used for aesthetic pleasure or for a livelihood. Native Indians, for example, provide us with a different discourse in which owning nature is a very foreign concept. So it depends very much on the particular narrative. Another interesting aspect relates to how these narratives or discourses travel from one culture to another. Where does the great preservation discourse in Scandinavia come from? It must have emerged from somewhere.



Eric Arnould: I'm curious about the role of the protestant ethic. I think one could argue that a romantic ethic account for the technophilia of the Swedes. It is a part of an utopian project which justifies the co-existence of high tech and environmentalism.

Audience: Social processes and discourses are combined and played out in particular situations. They are organized in particular expressions but are not very stable as they are prone to power influence. There exist many contradicting discourses in Finland regarding the meaning of the mobile phone that plays out in different social contexts and are constantly negotiated.

Eric Arnould: That is interesting because in the United States, at least initially, the mobile phone was looked upon as a status product. So how did they diffuse in Finland, how is the status?

Audience: It was the status of yuppies and the business people and those who have to get in touch in every moment — I 'm busy, to be busy was something to be admired. But very rapidly, it went to younger people and other social classes. The period was amazing short before other social classes adopted mobile phones. Interestingly, more recently people have begun to look down on people having to use mobile phones. Not having a mobile phone sends a status signal; that I don't have to work as hard to make a living!

Russell Belk: It was the same way with having a suntan. To be tanned used to be terrible because it meant you worked outside. Now it means that you have the leisure time to go to get a suntan.

Audience: In Finland, the porches used to be glassed-in and people would sit and have coffee showing that they could afford not to work.

Torsten Ringberg: That is interesting because that suggest that the Finns rely on a discourse on success that drives consumption. In returning to the initial question I had on whether Western discourses emphasizing the glory of consumption are wholesale incorporated within local culture I have the following little anecdote. In Vanuatu where I did some fieldwork, the younger generation very quickly embraced Western consumption practices. Yet, it was often done in peculiar ways. In one instance, the local chiefs had acquired a flatbed. However, the truck never made it to the outer island but was located for display near Port Vila (the capitol) as a totem of power. Consequently, Western goods were being incorporated into the local culture although they initially remained within the local power discourse. Interestingly, when the younger people began to move into Port Vila and were able to buy Western products their prestige and power at home increased dramatically. Thus, since the older generation couldn't find work, in an insidious way the Western discourse on development (having goods and money), initially inconspicuously Whether this change was good or bad is difficult to assess, and would benefit from including viewpoints from the people who were affected by these changes.

In general, it would be fascinating to investigate how other discourses on power, consumption, and technological development travel cross-culturally and influence local socio-cultural-political systems.

Having run out of time we will need to end here. I would like to thank everyone here for contributing to an interesting discussion.

## CHAPTER 6

### Getting closer to nature: A critical hermeneutic analysis of a paradoxical marketplace ideology

#### 6:1 Abstract

*Getting closer to nature: A critical hermeneutic analysis of a paradoxical marketplace ideology*  
*Keynote speaker: Craig J. Thompson, University of York*

This study presents a critical hermeneutic analysis of the ideology of holistic well-being which circulates in the natural health marketplace. I argue that the cultural content of this marketplace ideology draws from a system of mythological meanings that underlie the technology-nature opposition. This mythology is structured by Gnostic metaphors that render technology as a divine tool for transcending natural limits (as well as controlling nature) and Romantic metaphors that privilege nature as a sacred realm for physical and spiritual rebirth and that is threatened by technological encroachments. I then analyze the paradoxical ideological alignments between these competing Gnostic and Romantic metaphors that arise in natural health advertisements and in the narrative of a natural health consumer. In the advertising context, the paradoxical alignment among these metaphors reflects conflicting institutional conditions and competitive demands that situate the natural health marketplace. The consumer narrative profiles the health-care experiences and perspectives of a woman using this marketplace ideology to contest the degenerative implications she attributes to her medical identity as a rheumatoid arthritic. Her narrative presents a very different set of ideological paradoxes and it reveals ideological effects that would not have been anticipated by the analysis of the advertisements. This study extends prior accounts of the paradoxes of technology by shifting attention toward the ideological uses of the nature-technology opposition and its constituent cultural meanings. It also enriches theoretical understanding of consumers' relationships to marketplace ideologies by showing how ideological meanings are recruited into struggles over institutional identity. I conclude that the paradox concept provides an important critical tool for analyzing marketplace ideologies, once adapted to the rhetoric of hybridity that characterizes postmodern ideological representations.

#### 6:2 Workshop summary

Getting closer to nature: A critical hermeneutic analysis  
of a paradoxical marketplace ideology

*By Güliz Ger*

The group focused on Craig Thompson's presentation, titled "Holistic Well-Being and Gnostic/Romantic Metaphors of Return: A Critical Hermeneutical Analysis of a Paradoxical Marketplace Ideology". The audience, being international and multidisciplinary, raised interesting interpretations and points based on their different perspectives.

The topics we discussed:

#### Reversal of authority

A major issue of discussion was that of resistance to authority. If alternative health care practices constitute resistance, a reversal of authority, is that resistance to the state or the market, whose authority is reversed? One view was that alternative health movement is an attempt to develop the market and the liberal individual so that people take responsibility for their own health; it is a resistance to the state and hence is indicative of market individualism and liberalism. Going against the state is the American liberal position. This view was based on the assertion that under the welfare state, it is the state's responsibility to take care of people's health. The alternative health movement then developed a market taking the responsibility from the state and placing it in the hands of the individuals themselves. Craig responded that alternative health in the USA is in opposition to insurance companies and the marketplace pressures. Of the two forces that drive alternative medicine, one is the institutional system in the USA where insurance companies control medicine, and the second is the marketization of healthcare, giving customers more information and choice. Yet, ironically, by choosing into the alternative health system, the individual who is taking responsibility and making choices is also trying to get out of choosing and the market individualism. On one hand, there is choice, care of the self, and market individualism. On the other hand, once a customer buys into alternative health, s/he feels that it is Karma that takes care of him/her. That is, once the customer makes the choice to get into alternative health, then it is Karma - s/he is guided by a sort of faith, putting her/his faith in a kind of secularized religion, mother earth. Craig also mentioned the differences in such faithfulness between mainstream customers who use alternative medicine versus those really immersed in it.

Another angle to the reversal of authority discussion was the possibility of a connection between the alternative health movement and other strong movements in the USA such as UFO believers, Christian Science, and Christian fundamentalism. Can these movements be linked through an anti-authoritarianism (anti-government), which is based on an old American theme, an old historical legacy of liberal individualistic market aspect of American ideologies? Can it be that rather than being conservative, Christian Science and Christian fundamentalism are liberal movements going against the state? Craig vehemently refused any such similarities, arguing that despite some discursive linkages between such movements, and some shared general antipathy toward authority, they have very different specific histories and should not be lumped together. The puzzling idea of whether the American historical legacy of the liberal anti-state position has an overarching effect on alternative health as well as on the seemingly conservative religious or UFO movements probably calls for further research.

A final angle was the postmodern nature of alternative medicine. Consumers go to the doctor but don't believe the doctor and there is a reversal of who has authority in matters of health. Craig argued that the reversal of authority makes alternative medicine a post-modern phenomenon. This discussion involved a carry-over from previous criticisms of postmodernism during the conference.

Historical development of myths and belief systems and the related history of advertising  
Second topic of discussion was about how myths and belief systems develop in a society historically and the related history of advertising. While there is a polarizing discourse that pits nature against technology that marketers play with, there has also been a discourse in the USA integrating these two. The tradition of American pragmatism says "enjoy nature but bring your technology to make nature better and to enjoy it safely," so that you will not die white water rafting if your boat turns over. The American pragmatism integrates nature and technology and alternative medicine people are critical consumers who are willing to take both. However, while Americans think nature can be enhanced by technology, the European attitude is "don't mess with nature".

An observation was the reversal in how the American pragmatic emphasis was reflected in the 1930s ads in the USA versus the present ones. In the 1930s there was an emphasis on the benefits of technology along with the recognition of its down side and the need to mediate its effects by the comforting ideas of nature and family. Now, it is the opposite: the belief is that nature is beneficial but needs to be mediated by having a little technology. Advertising in different countries switch myths from time to time. There is an ideological instability in these discourses - they vary over time.

Craig commented that advertising plays with certain anxieties – about pollution, stress, but also about lack of sufficient testing of natural remedies. Anxiety about efficacy opens up critique of "you are crazy to take this because you don't know what is in it". Yet, at the same time that modern medicine is rejected, there is also an emphasis on the scientific testing and validating of natural medicine. This seems to be a paradox of marketing, but integration of nature and technology is not that paradoxical if we think that they are both means of recovering a certain past, an ideal.

National differences and institutional basis of consumption

The audience pointed to the differences in Sweden, France, and other European countries from the USA. One argument was that, rather than involving a rejection of authority, alternative medicine and mainstream medicine in Europe are more accepting of each other and alternative health is under the authority of mainstream health system, with strict European Union or national regulations. This brought us to the important point, once again, that institutional conditions and local histories shape consumption. Different governmental structures, state systems, health systems (insurance, private medicine

versus public), advertising institutions, and medicine market structures obviously create differences in alternative health practices and discourses in different nations. Each national context has different structures and institutional conditions, creating different patterns of consumption. Despite similarities in some aspects of discourse, the nature of discourse and the dynamics will be different. So, we concluded that as the histories and structures are different in different societies, we need a more fragmented mode of analysis, while trying for general theory; and any study has to be framed and results interpreted accordingly. We need to analyze consumption meanings and practices within their specific institutional settings, without making the mistake of generalizing across.

Other forces: market and demography

A related point was the presence of other factors such as the market forces and demographics, which also drive consumption of alternative medicine. The upscale aging population in the USA makes alternative health a more prominent domain than other demographic situations. Craig explained that alternative medicine in the USA is being appropriated by the mainstream as, for example, hospitals are putting an acupuncturist on the staff, and that this is not coming from doctors or hospitals, but rather from insurance companies. The rise and appropriation of alternative medicine in the USA is then a response to both the upscale aging population and the specific market forces and pressure from insurance companies trying to appeal to the profitable upscale customers.

Optimism of advertising versus the doom of the stores  
and the different types of alternative medicine customers

One interesting observation was that in advertising of natural medicine there is an optimistic tone whereas in natural health stores there is an atmosphere of doom, sadness, depression, and failure – a tension between optimism and desperation. Craig responded that mainstream consumers using alternative medicine looked at such odds and were different than those who are deeply immersed in and committed to alternative health. As they also were different with respect to their anxieties and nature-technology beliefs. So, he emphasized, once again, that there is no one broad brush to characterize consumption.

The topics we did not discuss

Although audience comments referred to practice and/or discourse, we did not discuss the differences in practice versus discourse and the implications for focusing on one or the other for consumption theory and research. Secondly, we did not discuss why there is an emergence of alternative medicine in many Western countries despite different institutional conditions and local histories, or, the conditions under which alternative medicine appears on different stages and with different decor and actors.

## CHAPTER 7

### Ads, brands and things: The messy struggle for meaning and identity

#### 7:1 Abstract

*Ads, brands and things: the messy struggle for meaning and identity*

*Keynote speaker: Thomas C. O'Guinn, University of Illinois, USA*

This paper provides a rhetorical overview and critique of our field's treatment of advertising, brands and the objects they mark. I begin by discussing why the field's way of thinking about advertising is so thoroughly impoverished, inappropriate and inadequate. I then shift the focus to the messy manner in which advertising and the commercially marked things (brands) are thought to give meaning and identity to human existence. I alternate between criticism and praise (mostly the former) of extant thought on the subject.

#### 7:2 Workshop summary

Ads, brands and things: The messy struggle for meaning and identity

*By Jonathan E. Schroeder*

Thomas O'Guinn, well known for his research in advertising and consumer behavior, surprised us by stating that ads are rarely studied in a meaningful way. Before discussing what he meant by this provocative statement, he briefly reviewed the rise of advertising, along with brands, advertising agencies, and mass media, during the 20th century. Today, the average consumer in the U.S. sees, or is exposed to, at least 600 ads each day. Despite the concurrent growth of the advertising research industry, O'Guinn argued that most advertising research suffers from severe problems that interfere with the field's ability to understand how advertising works.

First, advertising research adopted 'scientific' methods at the same time ads themselves invoked science and scientific evidence to bolster product claims. This focus led to the dominance of claims-based copy research and memory-based copy research to the neglect of all other aspects of advertising processing and reception. Second, this information-processing paradigm led researchers to study advertising in the laboratory, trading realism for experimental control. Third, most advertising models are asocial; they do not take into account social and cultural processes that influence advertising production and consumption. For example, many firms actively construct market segments or audiences via their marketing communication, and brand communities have grown up around many advertised brands. Most models of advertising, however, limit their analysis to individual consumer cognition.

O'Guinn discussed visual issues in advertising as an especially pronounced lapse in advertising and consumer research. Apart from a few studies on visual rhetoric, he claimed, consumer researchers rarely consider visual issues in advertising, apart from a narrow information processing view. Little research, then, treats visual materials as cultural rhetoric rather than mere illustration. He used the example of 'white space' to illustrate this point. Many ads feature white space surrounding the product. For example, Tiffany often shows an entire 'blank' page in their upscale jewelry ads. In typical information processing paradigms, this space represents 'nothing' – it is meaningless because it contains no overt information or words. However, it is obvious in viewing these ads that nothing is something – the use of white space adds a tremendous amount of meaning to the ad. If nothing else, white space contributes to the overall look and feel of the product or service advertised, and may signal luxury, breathing room, or tranquility.

O'Guinn finished his talk by describing his research into visual issues in advertising. His paper on white space made an excellent counterexample to the dominance of information processing approaches, and he convincingly argued that much of current advertising research is off the mark of how consumers interact with the pervasive force of advertising.

Frank Cochoy, a French sociologist, provided another counterpoint to information processing based consumer research, as he sketched three 'enigmas' about elusive consumption. Cochoy's approach drew from the semiotic tradition, so much a part of the European research perspective that offers a powerful riposte to reductive cognitive research prevalent in the US.

He argued that within consumer research, the consumer has become an undefinable actor, caught in a web of social, cultural, and market forces. Further, evidence from sociology and economics has not produced a coherent picture of the consumer; each discipline is mired in its own biases (different than the cognitive biases that O'Guinn discussed, but limiting in similar ways). Finally, the picture that emerges from economic and sociological perspectives is not in agreement, each emphasizing conflicting aspects of consumption.

Cochoy then suggested that a useful way to study consumption is to ask: what do consumers look at? How does the market structure consumer choice via images in advertising, promotions, and packaging? He compared his emphasis on consumer looking as somewhat at odds with calls to study what consumers do, yet he finds what consumers look at useful in addressing the enigmas. He argued that packaging is both the condition and the solution of consumer choice, and then presented an in depth example of



the symbolic aspects of packaging, using popular French consumer goods as illustrative examples. He drew on the semiotics of color, cultural symbols, and French history and pride to draw out the symbolic implications of Gauloises cigarettes. He claimed that packaging tells consumers more than we could learn from our own experience by tapping into cultural referents (such as the ancestral Gauls as an important site of French identity and pride), subtle meanings (such as the Blond in Gauloises 'blond' cigarettes), and semiotic codes. Through what has been called 'the logic of appropriation,' advertising turns culture into consumer signifiers by drawing on symbolic referent systems. First, advertising imagery colonizes and appropriates existing referent systems from literature, art, science, or other cultural discourses. For example, Nike, of course, existed first as a Greek god. In Scandinavian countries, the Norse myths are routinely drawn from to provide vivid corporate imagery. Telia, the huge, recently privatized Swedish telecommunications company, took its name from the ancient Icelandic word *telia*, to narrate or reveal, as used in the mythical sagas that are part of every Swedish child's reading. Via packaging, consumers learn ways to evaluate products, both through 'information,' such as package contents, and through symbols, such as the mythical figure found on the Gauloises cigarette package.

This presentation offered a stark rejoinder to O'Guinn's claims – Cochoy is part of a well developed tradition in Europe that places consumption, advertising, and branding firmly within the cultural sphere. In the discussion groups that followed, O'Guinn joined my group, so we heard more about his opinions. We opened with speculation about the reasons for the mainstream approach to advertising (and consumer) research. We discussed how information processing approaches, particularly the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion from social psychologists Petty and Cacioppo, dominate advertising and consumer behavior textbooks, and offered many other approaches that deserve attention, such as interpretive research, semiotic research, sociological perspectives, and so on. O'Guinn discussed his research on 'brand communities' as one avenue worth pursuing, in which market segments are constructed via strategic management, including creative development, product planning, and website management. For example, Proctor & Gamble manages about 80 websites, complete with product information, chat rooms, and feedback forms. He stressed the web as a powerful research tool to both identity consumer issues and as a research technique.

The group also brought up potential US biases of O'Guinn's critique, particularly in light of Cochoy's compelling talk. Many saw limitations in terms of literature cited, which was mostly from a narrow band of US marketing journals. Several disciplines were mentioned that study advertising from a more holistic view, including visual studies, film studies, and semiotics. We discussed research on the production of ads and packaging as one area that offers a more balanced view of advertising and consumer response.

We then broke up into small groups to facilitate intense discussion, and then came back together to share our thoughts. One common theme among the comments was that information is symbolic – a fact hinted at by O’Guinn’s white space example, and strengthened by Cochoy’s semiotic reading. The white space, rather than having no meaning, symbolized something, depending upon the overall ad context. This simple observation offers a powerful counterexample to information processing approaches that attempt to subsume everything into cognitive models. What these models do not, and cannot, account for, are the semiotic, cultural, and social issues that O’Guinn and Cochoy invoked, from quite different points of view.

Another issue that sparked interest was media purchasing, that is, what role ad agencies and others play in placing ads in particular media. O’Guinn suggests that these processes are tremendously influential in constructing market segments, and further, that the media context of ads are critical for understanding their meaning as well as effectiveness. Yet, mainstream research rarely takes media into account, indeed most lab studies present ads devoid of any information about where they appear, or what kind of media outlet they might be from.

Several participants urged multiple approaches to study advertising and consumption. Only through an interdisciplinary approach will we approach a useful understanding of consumption, they claimed. Others called for an interaction of approaches to balance the perceived biases of current consumer research. Many participants offered suggestions and examples from their own work. For example, I routinely call on art history and visual studies in my research. This includes reading in those disciplines, taking courses, attending conferences and interacting with scholars, not merely citing an art history text or two in my reference list. O’Guinn discussed his research on brand communities, which drew on sociology, anthropology, and consumer research. Others suggested cross-disciplinary research teams. One mentioned conferences like this, which bring together researchers in several fields, united by a common topical interest.

Finally, we discussed issues in the sociology of knowledge and disciplinary practice, that is, how do certain approaches achieve dominance, and how do various models compete for attention and hegemony? We invoked the Elaboration Likelihood Model as an example of an approach that has established intellectual dominance within consumer research, partly due to the disciplinary history of the field, as least as defined by US and the Association for Consumer Research. Others stressed that this is not the case everywhere, that in France there is a strong tradition of research that draws on intellectual figures such as semiotician Roland Barthes and philosopher Michel Foucault, and Finland has a strong tradition of semiotics and aesthetics influenced research in the social sciences. We also mentioned the intellectual history of visual issues, and noted that the

visual has long been neglected in comparisons to the verbal, and that consumer research apparently shares this historical bias. Thus, the anti-visual bias in consumer research is also cultural influenced, making a nice, reinforcing point to our enlightening, lively discussion.

*Jonathan E. Schroeder has after the conference published a chapter on his own research, "Visual Consumption in the Image Economy", in the book Elusive Consumption.*

## CHAPTER 8

### Is the modern consumer a Buridan's donkey? Product packaging and consumer choice

8:1 Abstract

*Is the modern consumer a Buridan's donkey? Product packaging and consumer choice*

*Keynote speaker: Franck Cochoy, University of Toulouse, France*

In this keynote speech, I'd like to deal with three enigmas. The first enigma is of course the consumer himself. I would define the consumer as this indefinable actor that consumer research has been trying to define for thirty years. The second enigma emerges from the coexistence of the remarkable efforts of consumer research on the one hand and the certainties of economics and sociology on the other hand. For economists and sociologists, the consumer is not an enigma at all! But here comes the third enigma: if the consumer is an evidence both for economics and sociology, the evidence of the one is at complete odds with the evidence of the other.

These enigmas are so difficult to understand that I do not pretend to solve them. I would rather ask one question only: is there not an other way to deal with consumption choices; would it not be possible to study consumption without studying the consumer first? The perspective I'd like to put forward proposes in fact to leave the consumer in peace in order to look elsewhere, and to bet of course that such a detour will enable us to learn something about the consumer's driving forces. I suggest to dwell upon a very simple and evident observation we often do not care about: the products chosen on today's markets are not products, but packaged products. Symptomatically, the Buridan's donkey inaugurates our modern packaging economy. The Buridan's donkey is this thirsty animal who dies of thirst between two identical buckets of water... because he does not know how to make his choice between the two! Indeed, no choice problem is possible between two buckets of water without the mediation of a packaging.

Starting from this statement, I intend to show how this a priori trivial container (its purpose is to be thrown away!) is on the contrary one of the most powerful market devices that works to bring supply and demand together. In order to study the contribution of packaging to consumer choices, I will start from very simple and concrete examples (through a series of slides). My examples will be politically very incorrect, since I propose to study the packaging of three products that are inseparable in French bars: alcohol, tobacco and politics. More precisely, I will talk about the "Ricard" alcohol and the "Gauloises" cigarettes, then I'll deal with the political debates that stemmed from their consumption, namely: the voter's choice between Chirac and Jospin or (sadly enough) Le Pen.

*This lecture has after the conference been published as a chapter "Is the modern consumer a Buridan's donkey? Product packaging and consumer choice" in the book Elusive Consumption. Below follows a report from the workshop which took place immediately after the lecture.*

8:2 Reflections: Unwrapping packaging strategies

*By Karin Salomonsson*

This short summary is a personal reflection on the discussions in Workshop nr 7, following the keynote speakers Thomas C. O'Guinn and Franck Cochoy. Issues such as branding, advertising, packaging, consumer choice and social agency were raised. In this text I will relate the discussion to examples from my own research about marketing food through different packaging strategies.<sup>1</sup>

Packaging and labelling today functions as an interface between the producer, the product and the consumer. It can be seen as one voice in a whole choir of branding initiatives. Different theories of consumer behaviour are built into packaging design. Therefore it is methodologically interesting to study packaging strategies. But we need more empirical studies of how this interface between producer, product and consumer actually "happens", and how packages can be analysed. What can be revealed about global flows and local networks, about European policies, about the nation-state and transnational regions, about social differentiation and social identification, and about the distribution of responsibility between state and individual, by looking at labels? Texts and pictures offers a symbolic field that is redolent with meaning, where questions of distinction and categorization, belonging and anchorage in a changeable world are both raised and answered. Declarations of contents, symbols and recipes, along with illustrations, shape a cultural pre-understanding of the commodity. Different genres for the description of for example foodstuffs, its fashion-bound narrativity and poetics, indicate the changing relationship between humans and food in different periods and different social spaces.<sup>2</sup>

The semiotics of packaging contains a number of different authors of messages. Messages that are both rational and informative, rhetorical and seductive. The package also signals

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<sup>1</sup> Salomonsson, Karin, 2000: "Ut-märkt mat. Om genealogisk längtan och mimetiska relationer" i Rogan, Bjarne & Gullveig Alver, Bente (red): *Norden og Europa. Fagtradisjoner i nordisk etnologi og folkloistikk*. Oslo: Novus forlag, 2000a: "The Fate of Quorn™: Looking for a Heritage in Times of Postmodern Foodstuffs". Paper presented 14 International Ethnological Food Conference; 2002b: "The E-economy and the culinary heritage" I Belonging to Europe, special edition of *Ethnologia Europea*.

<sup>2</sup> Caplan, Pat 1997: *Food, Health and Identity*. London: Routledge; Mennell, Stephen 1985: *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Oxford: Blackwell.

what life-style the buyer wants to be associated with. The wrapping itself carries an aesthetic value, and can with advantage be placed on an open kitchen shelf as an ornament expressing social and cultural “belonging”.

Elaborate packaging, by no means a (brand)new invention, has become an increasingly important factor in marketing and selling. Let us again look at food. Labels, stamps, and certificates are crucial cultural symbols at the intersection between the consumers’ anxiety and ambivalence about modern food production, and the producers’ attempts to convince people and improve their tarnished reputation in the wake of BSE, salmonella, synthetic additives, and genetically modified vegetables. The EU regulations for “new foodstuffs” underline the safety assessment, possible risks for the consumer, misleading marketing claims about, for example, health benefits, and how much the new food differs nutritionally from the food that it is intended to replace. The need to legitimate and control, to classify and label, is found in consumer organizations and ecological associations, as well as among EU officials and food producers. The labeling of food has to cover increasingly larger fields of information: health aspects, allergenic substances, and religious, ethical, and political considerations. For many people, labeling has become a symbolic issue which is a matter of democracy and citizen’s rights.

Geographical lore and cultural biographies<sup>3</sup>

Franck Cochoy pointed out in his inspiring lecture that “the products chosen on today’s markets are not products, but packaged products”. That is true, but not in all cases. The other day I went to the local market to buy some fruit. When critically probing some pears the market-woman came up to me and convincingly urged me to buy them because “the were real pears, a genuine old Swedish kind”. Even though this pear was not packaged or labeled the arguments for choosing it (natural, genuine, locally grown, Swedish, supporting a cultural heritage) were parallel to the discourse on consumer-confidence found on food-packaging. The locally produced food that is sold at markets and in farm shops rarely has any declaration of contents. On bread that is baked right in the grocery store, no one demands a list of ingredients. We trust in the quality and genuineness of the product, since the transparency and presence act as a guarantee. It is more difficult to convince the customer of this guarantee when the food is produced in a distant factory. Here transparency and direct contact are replaced by quality guarantees and environmental certificates.

Food production today shows a high degree of what we could call displacement, a reduction of the significance of physical space, in the direction of freedom of movement but also homelessness. Production no longer automatically takes place near the consumer; imports and exports criss-cross the globe. In multinational capitalism with rapid communication

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<sup>3</sup> The concepts originate from Crang, Philip, 1996: “Displacement, Consumption and Identity” In *Environment and Planning A* 28.

technology, “globalization”, with all its social relations and meanings, is intensified, redirected, and speeded up. One result of this can be “a new order of uncertainty”.<sup>4</sup> Many researchers have responded to this uncertainty by reappraising and dissolving established concepts, such as culture and identity. A contrary way to handle this feeling is to consolidate and define words like culture and identity, often in terms of regional, local, ethnic, or original, and use them as tools in the ongoing organization and conceptualization of everyday life. Many consumers ask questions about traceability and production methods. They receive important answers in words that associate goods with certain places like “the region”, “the locality”, “the home”. Similarly, words like “genuine” and “traditional” insist on an explanation that includes determining origin and history. This genealogical interpretation of food calls for concepts which can problematize a specific understanding of time, space, and place.

In the construction of the regional, certain places are formulated and articulated. Districts and provinces, towns and villages are pinpointed and become particularly “regional”. The representations that emerge – regions with distinctive regional features – are used to include and exclude, to demarcate and define what is in and out. The EU’s different designations to guarantee a geographical origin are helpful in this process. In the justification for the designations and in advertisements for the certified products, we find an emphasis on the importance of “belonging” somewhere, and how crucial local characteristics are. It is a matter of creating order by placing products on a certain point on the map and protecting this unique position against the threat of pirate copies. At the same time, the result of a “guarantee of geographical designation” is a paradoxical lack of place. The actual geographic place of production is of no interest; the decisive thing is the ideal type of an Alpine environment, a coastal climate, or specific social conditions. This form of displacement makes it easier for products and producers to move between different markets and still be perceived as “genuine”. This is a time when the particular has great chances of becoming universal. The recipe for the authentic and unique regional cuisine can be found in Skåne, in Slovenia, in Galicia, and in many other places where people have realized how useful the region is for strengthening – or weakening – identities.

When food is given a face

Another popular way of marketing a commodity is to associate it with a person. The faces that meet us on various goods today come from two different categories: those who have actually made the things we buy, and those who have been selected to represent a product with a picture taken in a completely different context. The latter group isn’t new - the good old Marlboro man still thrives. A more recent trend is to present the actual producer, or a symbolic picture of the producer, on the package to give the product an aura of being home-made.

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<sup>4</sup> Appadurai, Arjun 1998: “Dead Certainty. Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization.”  
*Public Culture* 25

Different aspirations are clear in this type of marketing. One is to regain the lost confidence of the consumer in food produced on a large scale. The manufacture is given the illusion of having been moved from the factory back to the home. This type of marketing is a guarantee that nothing “unnatural” occurs in the production process, which is intrinsically natural and genuine. New products are launched with the aid of personalization and intimacy. Mamma Scan, Mother Anna’s gherkins, pictures of genuine farming couples stuck on the chicken wrapper, rosy women at the baking table, wine growers in berets screwing up their eyes, ancient Asians on packages of frozen dumplings.

The cultural representations are important for convincing the customer. Above all this concerns “lifestyle food”, for which the advertisers want to establish a mimetic relation with the buyer. Here the photographer has shifted the focus from the supposed producer to a metaphorical image. On the pasta dish there is a fat Italian restaurateur shaking a tablecloth at his trattoria; on the Mexican beans we see a bent woman with a child in colourful clothes; the Swedish meatballs are accompanied by a sturdy, healthy-looking young blond woman in wellington boots. The calm, uncomplicated, sincere life radiating from these pictures can be shared by anyone who eats the same food. This way of marketing and labelling a commodity may be called mimetic because it seeks to resemble a particular lifestyle and particular values by material transmission, that is, by eating.<sup>5</sup>

Sitting down to an inviting Mediterranean meal with home-produced wine among friends and family hour after hour is enticing for those who have a round-the-clock career in one place, a family in another place, and friends in a third. Time is an important component in these picture-based narratives. Calm, harmony, a relaxed tempo or timelessness are in stark contrast to one of the product’s strongest sales arguments: that it takes only three minutes to cook in the microwave oven.

The market’s stylization and iconization of certain ideals and ways of life is one way to answer the consumers’ questions, similar to what the EU is attempting with its quality labelling. Origin, history, and local character are captured in pictures and snappy sentences. According to a venerable catering company named Maison Pierre, this is a sign that “the emotion society is replacing the IT society. The consumer of the future wants to buy something more than just food, preferably something that tells a story, or food with a home-made character that you recognize”.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the consumer chooses the unwrapped pear, the tomatoe with a heritage-certificate or the frozen pasta-dish with a Mediterranean landscape on the package she does

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<sup>5</sup> Taussig, Michael 1992: *The Nervous System*. New York/London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> *Gourmet* 1998/6:18



make a choice. A choice that is neither predestined or made of “free” will. Instead of tackling the heterogenous group of “consumers” we should speak of “consuming practices” , in turn producers of identity. Franck Cochoy suggested that we should interpret consumer behaviour as part of a larger networks, or consumption-scapes. Here Bruno Latours suggestion that objects “make us do” things could prove useful in analysing why consumers choose one product before another.

## CHAPTER 9

### Elusive consumption: Tracking new research perspectives

#### 9:1 Abstract

*A social construction of children's experiences in electronic environments*

*Keynote speaker: Alladi Venkatesh, Center for Information Technology (CRITO), University of California*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues surrounding children and the electronic environment. More specifically, this study aims to examine children's use of computers and other electronic devices and the impact of these technologies on their daily lives and its impact on the construction of their worldview.

This analysis focuses on the understanding of the categories and patterns that have emerged from interviews conducted with teenagers between the ages of 14 to 18. The interpretive approach concentrates on the children's conceptualization of computers and other electronic media as an integral aspect of their lives. We approach this study using a social constructionism perspective.

#### 9:2 Report from workshop

*A social construction of children's experiences in electronics environments*

*By Margaret K. Hogg*

I begin this summary with the abstract of Alladi Venkatesh's paper; and then identify a number of themes which emerged from the discussion including: computers as connectivity; impact of computers on social interactions; gendered aspects of children's experience of consuming technology including multi-tasking; computer games and simulations; and family relationships and the concept of childhood.

#### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore issues surrounding children and the electronic environment. More specifically, this study aims to examine children's use of computers and other electronic devices and the impact of these technologies on their daily lives and its impact on the construction of their worldview. This analysis focuses on the understanding of the categories and patterns that have emerged from interviews conducted with teenagers between the ages of 14 to 18. The interpretive approach concentrates on the children's conceptualization of computers and other electronic media as an integral aspect of their lives. We approach this study using a social constructionism perspective.

Computers as connectivity. Have computers risen to the level of master metaphor? Do we need longitudinal data to explore all these areas of interest e.g. music, television, and computers and so forth? For instance, when the telephone came in we started to see things in terms of two way communications, and making connections. Now there are some important terms from computer technology like networking and multitasking; hardware and software. As we incorporate more of this computer metaphor into our lives, do we think of ourselves more in terms of this computer terminology, and therefore as more computer-like? And is this likely to affect our interactions with other people and things?<sup>1</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: I explored the children's view of the world, rather than the adult view of the computer as master metaphor for the world. The children's view – what they think of computers – is that children don't differentiate computers from other ways of communicating. Instant messaging, for instance, is done on the computer but they couldn't care less. I think for children ~ if there is a master metaphor ~ I think that it is that they have the ability to interact socially and through communications. It is the connectivity to the external world; and to be able to access it freely. I think that would be the connection. I don't think they use computer-as-technology as a metaphor from that point of view. It is a social activity.

Social interactions. One of the most intriguing things to me is about the increased social differentiation that some of the kids felt. And I've been thinking a lot about social interactions and social groups. Do you see changes in the kinds of cliques or the fluidity of the kinds of groups that the kids form? From kids I am meeting and who I know I get the sense that this technology has sped up on a lot of kinds of group formation and dispersion, and formation of cliques; and it has also increased kids' awareness of the wealth differences between them, which leads to lot of uncomfortable situations.<sup>2</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: First of all, I haven't actually included any low income people in my study. However there is a lot of evidence that what is happening is that low income people congregate in the public arenas of cyber cafes, much more so than other groups. The low income parents use computers as the technology of achievement and means of access to the mainstream; whereas for the middle class and upper class the computers are really already there. So the fact that the schools do not have computers is not a major issue for the middle and upper classes, because all these families already have computers. Most of these kids have quite sophisticated knowledge. In lower income areas they are trying to get associations to fund the technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wilk

So there are going to be quite substantial differences between the two groups in terms of their initiation and introduction into and interaction with computer technology – and also their respective ability to use and exploit the computer. There is no question about this.

In terms of the social effects of creating groups – I am reading a lot about this at the moment. In terms of the model building we are doing at the moment there are three important things in the case of computers: access, skills and resources. These three are essential to participation in the new technology. However does access necessitate skills? And if you have access and skills does that imply you necessarily have resources? So you can segment the market or social groupings in terms of these three factors or elements. These in turn seem to define the respective social spaces.

Genderedness

Can you expand on the male and the female differences in terms of communication e.g. females were more likely to use forms of technology for cultivating friendships?<sup>3</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: There is evidence that quite a gap is opening up. In a recent conference on work and families, the social life of the average young woman becomes much more internalised; whereas boys don't start so young. Girls start using the telephone which is an important foundational social technology for girls, both for their relationships and also for activities such as organizing birthday parties, meetings, going to the Mall.

I have recently been in China and Japan where in terms of instant messaging – 180 messages a day, doing it with their thumbs, 100 words a minute – females appeared to be doing more; whilst males were using it more for information, quick text messages, maybe hiding behind it rather than connecting with it. Is that overreading what you said?<sup>4</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: No I think that is perfectly true. I think that girls, certainly in the context of the US, also demonstrate these behaviours at that age, where social life is very important, and the technology comes to play an important role in this; in permitting participation.

Girls use messaging more than boys, whilst boys are more into games. However, we see with boys, at about 16, 17, 18 that there is definitely a drop in computer usage, so maybe that is when they are becoming more active in social relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>4</sup> Russell Belk

### Multi-tasking

My daughter spends a lot of time on messaging, which strikes me as having different characteristics from both telephone and email. She keeps eight sessions open at once; and each of her friends keeps each of these sessions open. Essentially it's talk conferencing.<sup>5</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: An important notion here is that of technological density, which is a crucial way of describing technology. Technological density involves both the number of possibilities provided by one technology (e.g. a computer which gives you opportunities for email, games playing, internet) as well as the number of possibilities from a range of technologies (e.g. computer, television, telephone for spoken and text messages). Another interesting question relates to the notion of the technological density of the average child. It is much higher than what it was ten or fifteen years ago. What is important for me in the question above is the notion of how these compliment or substitute for each other; and also create new opportunities. From our point of view we are interested in exploring the need for new skills for negotiating these technologies simultaneously.

In your paper you showed a picture of a girl simultaneously using a variety of mediums – is multi-tasking a gendered practice?<sup>6</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: I did not see any special gender differences in terms of multitasking. There would be variation in the kinds of tasks (boys versus girls). Girls, for instance, use the telephone at same time, more than boys do.

What about fantasy websites –did you see significant gendered differences on these?<sup>7</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: In our study we looked at website design; and we used the metaphors of the postbox; and the car dashboard. We didn't use these metaphors when we talked to our informants, but when we analysed our data. What we are trying to find out in this context is: what is the world view of the user? What would these informants' websites look like if they were on the screen e.g. colours, gendered aspects? Websites are an important personal space and the differences will potentially be quite significant between boys and girls.

Computer games and simulations. I have done some work with sims which are a great projective exercise about what children would like their lives to be like – there was big generational difference there too. The kids would buy the hugely expensive stereo and the liberal lifestyle, they couldn't really live in real life in the simulated game. Whereas the parents would play the game and instead of being fascinated by the game, would

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Willk

<sup>6</sup> Risto Moiso

<sup>7</sup> Pauline MacLaran

see the emptiness of their life, is this all there is to my life. Were simulated games part of your study?<sup>8</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: Games are a very important area but I am not looking at the games, but at the whole field. My collaborator has done a lot of work in this area. I am not focusing on games in my analysis because games are just one of the components. I would not be able to do justice to the games unless I went into the whole subject matter very deeply. They are obviously extremely important – there have been numerous books on games. Many schools see games as an important part of education.

Family and childhood. In Sweden, adults are very concerned about computer games and violence and all those sorts of things- do children have a lot of different strategies for using computers and technology?<sup>9</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: My study looked at children's views and how children are reacting to these things, rather than at what parents think. My study was not so different from other studies of the family. It showed children as sensitive to what they are allowed to do; they rationalized and understood their behaviour in terms of norms, and fitting into the boundaries as they saw them as established in the home. A good example came with a sixteen year old's discussion of her automobile. I was talking to her about her computer, and she said, "you don't ask me about my car". That was when I started to think that the car should be part of this interview. So I asked "what is it about your car?" – She replied "I just scratched my car last week". These teenagers talk about the symbolism of the car, and how the usage of the car is regulated by the parents, so similarly with other technologies such as computers, parents are censoring certain behaviors, and children are also self-censoring certain behaviors in relation to certain technologies in the family household (e.g. cars, computers).

Childhood

One result of the computer concept is the way we view and regard children, do you think that the concept of children and childhood is changing now?<sup>10</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: The concept of childhood is changing but it is changing in the way other concepts are changing e.g. the family. I am not going to speculate whether the concept of childhood is changing as a consequence of the technology. In the context of the US in the last two hundred years the concept of childhood has changed dramatically and I think a new concept might come in now and I am just seeing how technology fits in there.

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<sup>8</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>9</sup> Barbro Johansson

<sup>10</sup> Barbro Johansson

I don't think it would be of such concern in Scandinavia, but American parents are concerned about access to pornography on the web amongst their children, and if that is just one element of the broader access that children have to knowledge thanks to computer access. You might argue that this is not as bad when you consider what they might hear there as opposed to on the streets,— are they becoming more sophisticated, more adult like earlier on in any respects that you have detected?<sup>11</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: First of all, most parents are comfortable about these issues, and they don't seem to be laying down many rules. Secondly, in my family study two years ago the non-children households expressed higher anxiety, than households with children, about pornography and other things.

There seems to be a struggle between parents and children: children want more and parents try to hold them back. They say, "You need to be outside more"<sup>12</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: There are some important difference between Swedish and European families, and U.S. families. In Sweden parents said they wanted their children to go out and play more often, more frequently. We rarely heard this in the US environment, except in sense of going out – and then the parents meant going out to see a soccer game, or something like that, rather than going out to play.

If you could speculate on the long range consequences of these changes on behavioural patterns, over and above what you have talked about, but on the more general level - do you think this means that children learn to develop larger social networks which they also benefit from? Are these social contacts more intense, or are they more superficial? What did these kids, and what did earlier generations, do before the arrival of computers and telephones?<sup>13</sup>

Alladi Venkatesh: In my study I am not using the normative rhetoric about what might or should happen. I am not making judgements, but there is obviously room for speculation here. Since I am using a social construction perspective I am trying to understand how children are reconstituting the technological culture. I think that premise is very important. I don't think it is about shifting children's technological-cultural domain, but about how children themselves are negotiating this technological domain, this is very fundamental to the question I am researching right now. In that context I am interested in the social world they are creating. They do not seem to be worrying about what their adults think of them. And that is what is critical in my study. Their articulations are fairly complex and fairly sophisticated. Where is this all leading to? The social networks

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<sup>11</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>12</sup> Barbro Johansson

<sup>13</sup> Orvar Lofgren

will develop from the technology, and the technology will be more a part of the social network. Some things will remain the same, like links with the family and so forth; I don't think this will be a superficial culture. This is going to be an extremely substantive culture.

9:3 Abstract

*Generaciones/Generations: Mexican American consumers in San Antonio Texas speak about cultural identity, memory and the market*  
*Keynote speaker: Liza Peñaloza, University of Colorado, Boulder*

The diffusion of specialized marketing strategies has been credited with the increasing fragmentation of mass markets and the increasing centrality of consumption in social life (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), even as global marketing efforts encourage greater cultural homogeneity (Costa and Bamossey 1995). Notably, what appears to be fragmentation from the perspective of those in the mainstream can entail validation and legitimization from the perspective of those in various minority subcultures (Peñaloza and Gilly 1998; Penaloza 1994). However, as will be demonstrated, there are limits in this market enfranchisement, as compared to more traditional forms of political representation and agency. In this research we draw from depth interviews with 46 Latinos/as in San Antonio, Texas, who vary by age, sex, social class, and number of generations living in the U.S. Questions address various consumption behaviors, as well as expressions of ethnic identity and relations with other cultural subgroups. We are particularly interested in consumers' subjective understandings of being in a targeted subgroup, in this case, Latinos/as in the U.S., and the way culture operates in the marketplace. Latinas/os have garnered much attention since the mid 1980's for tremendous market growth and future potential. Currently we number approximately 35 million persons, and are expected to become the nation's largest minority by 2005. Implications relate to specific strategies for negotiating minority status in multicultural society, as well as more general theoretical issues regarding how culture is produced and consumed in the marketplace, and comparisons of market versus political enfranchisement.

The abstract was co-authored with Barbara Robles, University of Texas, USA.

9:4 Report from workshop

*Generaciones/Generations: Mexican american consumers in San Antonio Texas speak about cultural identity, memory and the market*  
*By Margaret Hogg*

I begin this summary with the abstract of Lisa Peñaloza and Barbara Robles' paper, and then identify a number of themes from the discussion, which examined the intersections between identity, ethnicity and nationality linked to consumption and marketplace behaviors.



This discussion began with the question “*to what extent is ethnicity a choice?*”<sup>14</sup> .

There is considerable debate about how far there was choice in relation to ethnicity and identities; and how much individual agency there was to navigate amongst the various subgroups in relation to mainstream culture. Lisa Peñaloza argued that there is increasing evidence that for many individuals there is now a larger spectrum of choice, and considerable agency to navigate their positions within and between Latino groups. However this had not always been true. It was clear that the intersection of ethnicity, age and generation was important here.

Lisa Peñaloza gave the example of Sister Maria Helena from her study, who had not had any choice about the way she had been positioned. Lisa felt that her own generation had a greater freedom and choice compared with her parents’ generation, for example in the use of terminology and language. Her parents’ generation, for instance, had been reluctant to use the term: Mexican-American. There also seemed to be a greater drive for assimilation among many members of her parents’ generation, in terms of acculturation choices, almost like a repression of their identity in response to their experiences at school when they had been punished for speaking Spanish. This was in comparison with the experience of Jane Gonzales (an informant in the study) who is going through a bi-lingual education programme (although this is now under threat). Lisa’s generation had come of age post-60’s when lots of battles had been fought, including around issues of identity and acculturation. Lisa gave the example of the personal choice she had made about how to spell her name.

Latino/Anglo/Black relationships: The discussion then moved to consider the relationship not only between Latino and Anglo society, but also between the Latino and the black community. How far are these contentious relationships which might be relevant here? Is the black community a relevant ‘other’.<sup>15</sup>

Lisa Peñaloza argued that the black community probably weren’t a particularly significant ‘other’ in relation to San Antonio where 65% of the population were Latinos/Latinas, whilst African-Americans made up only 13% of the population. Although Latinos/as represent 65% of the population of San Antonio, there have only been two Latino/as mayors in the whole history of San Antonio since it became a city. A couple of city council members were interviewed for the study. They talked about the multicultural dynamics within the inner city of San Antonio, as represented on the city council which has African-American council members from the east of the city, as opposed to the south and west which is predominantly Latino. However even that is changing as the Latinos/as are moving out to the suburbs, and you see some class mobility.

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<sup>14</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>15</sup> Russell Belk

However there were important local variations to this in other parts of Texas. In Houston, for instance, African-Americans were a very significant political presence in the city, and this related to their historical position in relation to Texas and the importing of labour for the cotton and rice fields.

Relationship between two of the largest minorities, Latinos/as and African-Americans: The next question turned to speculation amongst demographers in sociology that the population self-identified as Hispanic is growing and will be the majority culture in the US in 30/40 years. The US will be non white and Latinos/as will represent the largest minority non-white group. How does that relate to the African –American population in terms of markers of social and economic standing? Is there a growing rift between two of the largest minority populations in the US: Hispanics and Blacks, especially if the Hispanic population is becoming more and more upscale – and generally more and more politically conservative?<sup>16</sup>

Lisa Peñaloza: About 21% of the white population is at or below the poverty level, compared with about 22% of the African-American group in the U.S. However an upper middle class has emerged in both the Latino and the black communities. Important differences exist between these two minority groups including language (i.e. Spanish and English); marketing programmes (more directed towards African-Americans); and the institutional educational framework of black colleges.

There are some interesting indicators of change. Looking at the marketing professions, for instance, there are many more African-Americans than Latinos on academic PhD programmes. Why is this? One reason is the black colleges, so you have an institutional framework where people are centered as opposed to de-centered. Socially and economically the distributions of these two groups are pretty similar. However the Latinos/Latinas have overtaken African-Americans because of birth rate and immigration, so that there has been a move towards the mainstreaming of the Latino market. There is evidence that the largest growth rates amongst Latinos/Latinas is in rural areas and country districts, followed by small towns, and then the suburbs of big cities.

This has many important structural implications e.g. for schooling; and for community living, including gated communities.

So far Latino/Black relations have been marked by political competition; but Lisa Peñaloza was starting to see some political and economic alignments; and also some divisions within the Latinos/as community (e.g. Chicanos distrust the more prosperous sections of the business community).

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas O'Guinn

Is Mexico maybe a model of what may happen in the US in terms of ethnic identity? We don't hypenate and call them Spanish-Mexicans, and there was a colonial presence there as well, but it is long forgotten.<sup>17</sup>

Lisa Peñaloza: But it is not forgotten in the market though. These colonial pasts remain. Not only in the language, but also in the trade.

What about Mexico? Is Latino identity stronger in the U.S. than in Mexico? – possibly so. There is a global diaspora from Mexico ~ a sense of a mythical homeland as part of the self, this part of the Southwest which used to be our home and will be once again. And the demographics show that. These emigrants send back \$9 million annually to Mexico, which clearly has an important effect on the Mexican economy and associated structures. They are attuned to Latino economics in Mexico. The Mexican government has begun offering dual citizenship. But it is also forcing us to think further about boundaries of nation states and boundaries of markets. There are between 35 and 38 million Hispanics in the US; and half a billion in South America. They represent a very important market.

How much interaction is there amongst ethnic groups; and within the subgroups?<sup>18</sup>

Lisa Peñaloza: In San Antonio it is a little odd because it is 65% Latino. Neighbourhoods remain separate; but integration is beginning to come via media, music and sports. If you look at the music and the patterns of social relationships, then you see a lot of contact. It is as if there are 'social membranes' where people are interacting, but they leave these traces of separation as well. There is a fear of losing their Mexican-American identity on one side, but on the other side, this might not be such a bad thing because we are such numbers.

Comparisons were drawn with two different sites of ethnicity, British South Asians in Leicester; and the multi-ethnic society of Belize.

Comparison with British South Asians: First of all, are there were tensions between Mexicans passing through, and the resident Mexican-Americans in San Antonio? Leicester has a large British Asian population, often two or three generations in the U.K, and there are often tensions between the established ethnic groups and new arrivals from Asia<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Russell Belk

<sup>18</sup> Risto Moiso

<sup>19</sup> Pauline MacLaran

Lisa Peñaloza: Some tensions arise because of different political allegiances. Some in the Latinos/as community have traditionally been conservative, e.g. the upper middle class immigrants from Cuba in the 1950's. However some groups within the Latinos/Latinas are becoming much more conservative.

This raises the question “who is fighting for immigrants’ rights”. Is it the immigrants? In the US for Mexicans it really wasn't the immigrants. Some immigrants say: “we got in, and now close the door”. You can see this in San Antonio, Colorado, California. As a result you end up with some very interesting alignments whereby the mainstream Anglo-left is vying for immigrant rights; some of the politicised Latinos are fighting; and some other conservative groups are maybe more progressive or even vote Democrat on some issues but get quite conservative about immigrant rights. You get this really odd alignment with business groups who want immigrant labour and the politics of the left. Many people travel back to Mexico where they have family – so it is like a junction. They want their family to be treated right. Traditionally the Left and progressives have fought for immigrants’ rights, rather than the immigrants themselves.

Secondly, a comparison with Belize, which is a multi-ethnic country with ethnic politics: What kind of empowerment do you have as a consumer, compared with the owners and producers? A consistent pattern that you see in Belize is that if an ethnic group aspires to music, art or food and they create a market for these, maybe by setting up small stores which specialize in goods for the ethnic group. The government of Belize is very happy about this and encourages this form of ethnic expression and puts it on display, not just for the tourists but also for the country's inhabitants. Belize portrays itself as a multiethnic community where everybody gets along. However as soon as any ethnic group starts to play politics, and says we are also workers, and we are getting low wages, and we want to organize our labour; or small farmers want to organize about land. As soon as anybody plays that politics card, they are repressed immediately. However once labour or land becomes linked to politics then ethnic politics is repressed immediately.

It would seem that consumption communities are regarded as less threatening to political power base and structures of the country compared with people who are agitating about land and labour, and the issues which surround the owning of land. If members of the ethnic group rise and become rich, then they become members of the ruling elite, they don't represent their own ethnic group's interests any more.<sup>20</sup>

Lisa Peñaloza drew a similar comparison with the actions in the U.S of the INS which raids companies for its immigrant workers but not for its immigrant consumers.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Wilk

Lisa Peñaloza then posed a question herself: what does the term consumer identity mean in relation to ethnicity and nationality? I think it still means ethnic and national identity; rather than consumer identity. In terms of consumer groups, some signs of an ethnic warrant is starting to emerge. I think we are starting to see it with the Apple group, and these groups are starting to make demands on Saab, but how radical are these demands really? Ethnic groups do not seem to be conscious of their identity as consumers, and thus their potential power, although clearly ethnic groups have affected the products we buy (e.g. food, home furnishings, clothing) and the music we listen to. They are aware of being labelled as a market. But have not challenged businesses to reinvest in their communities.

The mainstreaming of the Latino market is altering the social fabric in the US, e.g. altering the products we buy, the music we listen to, how we think of ourselves. This is no less political in the long run. So if we try to marry up those two things – people's identities as consumers, and their ability to make claims on the state, and on the marketplace. They are very aware of being identified and labelled and targeted as a market, which is gratifying initially...but what does this really mean for us? What does this mean for developing our community? What can we do as academics to imagine the kinds of things which help to further develop the consumer subjectivity of the community, if you like, in terms of making certain kinds of demand on the system.

What does the term consumer identity mean in relation to ethnicity and nationality<sup>21</sup>? Ethnic groups do not seem to be conscious of their identity as consumers, and thus their potential political or economic power. My study was initially about how people learn about consumer behaviour, and the impact of different social relationships and different agencies on this consumer socialization; however I also explored the ways in which ethnicity impacts on their daily lives, either when working or when shopping.

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<sup>21</sup> Lisa Peñaloza

9:5 Reflection on workshops 9:1 and 9:3

## What is a culture?

*By Adam Arvidsson*

The social sciences used to know what they were talking about: societies (cf. Wagner, 2001). A society was a bounded set of social relations held together by a common value system: a common culture. Societies had national extension. The spatial reach of the network of social relation that made up 'a society' coincided with the geography of a national territory. Spatial boundaries quite simply translated into cultural boundaries. One could thus cross borders, step from one society into another and, correspondingly, from one culture, say 'Mexican culture' into another, say 'US culture' (which in this Parsonian view of things held the worlds most advanced position on the universalism/achievement axis). If one would move in a more permanent fashion, one could become assimilated. One could take up a position in, say, the 'US social structure', work and consume like an 'American' (rationally, cashing in on future earnings with one's credit card) and delegate one's 'difference' to the intimacy of the private sphere. Alone, or with one's family or friends one could eat 'ethnic' food, listen to 'ethnic' music or engage in other quaint activities, but this did not effect the role one played as a citizen and public persona. Today things are no longer this simple, if they ever were. On the most obvious level it would seem that the main reason for this is that the number and size of trans-national movements, of money, people, goods, signs and symbols have increased to the point of undermining the feasibility of the very idea of nationally contained 'societies' and with that, of national cultures. Globalisation has quite simply exploded the nation state.

This certainly makes sense. Global media, more or less voluntary migration, global flows of capital and technologies, all the different trans-national 'scapes' of Appadurai's (1990) classic article have increased their influence, while states have retracted from their role as the guardians of national culture, commercialised education, sold out the opera houses and, at least in Europe, embarked on a process of self-fragmentation into regions. But on reflection we find that the history of the modern world has always been a history of movements: that modernity has always been 'at large' as Appadurai would have said. The modernization process (or processes) have always been marked by flows and movements: of money, goods, signs and, importantly, of people: migrant labourers, itinerant craftsmen, slaves. This is evident in the case of the US, but also in the European case where, as Saskia Sassen (1999) sustains official historiography hides a history of deportation, migration, vagrancy and uprooting (cf. Moulner Boutang, 1998). It would be time, as Paul Gilroy (1993) points out in his classic work, to reconstruct the history of modernity from the point of view of the slaves. Similarly, ethnic diversity has never

been a purely private matter. Rather most histories of nation building contain a, usually untold story of ethnic conflict (Bhabha, 1990, Chakrabarty, 1992). So, a recent transition from a 'static era' when people and cultures were fixed, to one of movements and 'flows' can not be the only reason why the idea of national society and culture seems increasingly untenable.

The idea of culture as a given, unproblematic entity has also been a central part of the classificatory grid of modern social science. 'Culture' or 'values' have been semantic tools that have provided some kind of unity to the empirical diversity of social phenomena that has made it possible to speak of societies. This unity has, in itself always been invisible. Values could never be observed in themselves. For Parsons A, G and, I referred to actual empirical phenomena (respectively: economic activity, systems of power and forms of social integration) while L, the value system, referred to intangible things that could only be observed in a situation that was constructed by social science itself: the answering of questions. Values were the 'factishes' of sociology, to speak with Bruno Latour (1991). Today this 'value factory' no longer works as well as it used to. One reason is of course its loss of privilege: Today, with the fall of most modern Grand Narrations (Lyotard, 1979) claiming to be 'scientific' is no longer in itself enough to legitimise one's knowledge claims. Indeed, there is really no a priori reason to believe why the anthropologist, who might not even know the language, should be in a position to attribute a 'culture' to people, or why the sociologist, who seldom ventures beyond his or her middle class surroundings would know if a 'culture' really motivates the 'underclass'. But this loss of privilege only captures part of the story. Or, rather, that discursive privilege, when in force, had very real effects. In 'organized modernity' (Wagner, 1994) social science supplied the knowledge necessary for the exercise of state power and for the administration of society. Social science took part in the great project of organizing modernity, producing a culture for people, that they could make their own. (This, of course was precisely one of the points of Horkheimer & Adorno's (1972[1944]) (in)famous essay on the culture industry, a branch to which empirical sociology, through the work of Lazarsfeldt and his colleagues (among others), made a rather substantial contribution.) To the extent that this was successful, people accepted, with greater or lesser recalcitrance, the status assigned to them in this organized system: They embraced the desires and motivations provided by the 'culture': when the state apparatus called 'Hey You!' they responded (Althusser, 1984[1970]). By the state power invested in it, social science made national culture into a real and tangible social fact, into which one could be assimilated. This was particularly relevant for the people that modernity moved: those who moved from the working class into the vast and anonymous middle class (the people who according to C.Wright Mills (1951:ix) 'slipped quietly into modern society' to become 'familiar actors of the urban mass'), those who moved from the countryside to the European cities, from 'ethnic communities' into mainstream America, from the inner city to suburbia (and much less so, those who moved from former colonies to former colonial



powers: from Jamaica to England, Algeria to France). To most of these people that were moved, to become a 'member of society' was to assimilate: to accept the work ethic, the civic culture, and the consumption norm provided by the 'host culture'. Today however, people are no longer 'hailed' (to continue with the Althusserian terminology) as passive subjects, as subjects that happily take up a predetermined 'role' (indeed that concept has virtually vanished from social science discourse). A combination of the transformation of the mode of production, the movement towards what is known as post-Fordism, and the impact of the protests against 'square' mass culture that took off in the Sixties, and maybe most importantly, the complete saturation of everyday life by a media culture that continuously appeals to our capacity to 'just do it' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), has given rise to a situation where the primary condition of subjectivity is to be active, to have agency. At work (at least among the 'knowledge workers') one is asked to use one's wits, to produce knowledge, innovations, solutions, and not just to follow the rules, as a consumer one uses goods, media, computers to construct and reconstruct one's identity, lifestyle or worldview, and one does not just follow the Joneses'. We live in a condition of what Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has called 'mass intellectuality' where, as workers and as consumers our most valued quality is our ability to produce culture (consumer fads, street fashion, corporate culture, cultural capital, etc.) Culture is then no longer only, or even primarily something that people receive, it is something that they produce. Producing culture has become a necessary component of the 'practice of everyday life' (de Certeau, 1984) in post-modern society; a core condition of our very humanity. Indeed, it is only when one can claim a *culture of one's own*, that one can also claim a voice.

This activated, fluid and mobile nature of culture produces a series of problems for social science, above and beyond that of disciplinary authority (which has been more than adequately explored by others). Firstly, that culture is continuously produced on a grass-root level means that it is now a mobile, hybrid, changing, 'essentially inauthentic' thing, if that expression is possible. It is continuously redefined, in movement, betwixt and between. As James Clifford (1988) sustains: in an interconnected world one is always to some extent 'inauthentic'. Culture has become a floating signifier, with no one there to fix it. At the same time, however, the social sciences, particularly after their 'cultural turn', have come to adopt culture, or identity as their perhaps most important and most widely used concept (Wrong, 2000). 'After structure' (or, what amounts to the same thing, after 'Society', cf. Urry, 2000) there are only two ways of explaining social action: rational choice or culture. As a consequence social science dwells on a contradiction between 'a valuing of identity as something so fundamental that it is crucial to personal well-being and collective action, and a theorization of 'identity' that sees it as something constructed, fluid, multiple, impermanent and fragmentary'. The empirical foundations for the concept are simply too fragile to carry the analytical weight attributed to it. Social science here stands before a choice of two equally impossible strategies:



One is to essentialise, to fix the movement of the floating signifier and to ascribe a given referent to a culture. In practice this is hard to avoid, otherwise what would one speak of when one speaks of 'culture'? But it runs against both the threads of empirical reality and the disciplinary ethos of valuing diversity, and easily attracts critique. Another strategy is to 'let the subject speak', to abandon 'modernist' classificatory aims and instead construct the research process as something that aims to 'give voice' to the empirical complexity of actual subjectivity. Here the danger is an opposite one. In a multi-cultural society, culture serves as a semantic tool invoked by subjects in order to motivate or legitimise actions or positions, a particular culture, say 'Latino', has as many meanings as there are situations of invocation (Bennett, 1998). The concept thus risks fragmenting into microscopic, sub-individual parts and the phenomenological reality that it refers to vanishes, evaporating before the eye of the researcher.

These problematic aspects of the concept of culture very much marked our discussion. There was, on the one hand a recognition of the importance of culture as a language of identity: of the passage from a generation for whom identity was primarily a political concern, to one for whom this had become primarily cultural: de-linked from a particular political sphere and coupled to a process of identification that now engulfed most aspects of life, one's very being as a subject. On the other hand there was a recognition of the difficulties in 'fixing the concept', how there are differences within culturally defined groups, and even of the shaky empirical reference of the concept of 'culture' in the first place: 'Is there a president of the Chicanos?' someone asked. Despite this, however one observation was common: cultures remain very real. Everybody has one. When asked about culture, no one responds with complete incomprehension, nobody tells the researcher that 'I don't know what you mean by this.' Maybe this divide between the epistemological problems that social scientists encounter when speaking of culture, and the persistent reality of the concept in the lives of ordinary people opens up a further problematic, one that moves along political rather purely theoretical lines (or, if you will, those of a 'theoretical politics').

It seems clear that in multicultural times the way to acquire agency and voice is to claim a culture. Cultural difference is no longer something that is kept private, but on the contrary, it is in virtue of this difference that one exists as a public persona, that one can claim agency and voice and, increasingly, value on the market. It is no longer through our work that we matter, but through our culture and identity. Hence what we want, what we do and who we are must be phrased in cultural terms. Although 'there are no cultures' they become real through their effects. There are basically two ways to look at this. One is to see it as part and parcel of a process of liberation. In this curiously modernist view- curious since it is adopted by many a self-claimed 'postmodernist' – we have passed from an era of structure where people had to make do with the identities they were supplied with, to one in which identity and subjectivity can be (relatively) freely

articulated as culture. In short culture has emancipated us from structure, from necessity and determination. In this case, there would be nothing suspicious in people claiming to have a culture. That rather is the way in which they exercise their relative freedom. It also seems clear, however, that contemporary capital 'governs through cultural forms' (Jameson, 1991), that through the increasing importance of concepts like corporate culture, community engineering, cultural governance, 'culture' has become part of a series of discourses of control and of what Foucault referred to as governmentality (Dean, 1999). In such a situation, to claim cultural difference becomes, effectively a form of assimilation, a way of fulfilling one's function, of taking up one's place in the order of things. In this respect, becoming cultural today differs little from becoming a citizen in the assimilationist 1950s, now as then it is a matter of taking up, if not a subject position, then a modality of subjectivity provided by the constituted order. So maybe the persistent reality of culture today, like the persistent reality of the nation in times passed is best explained as an effect of the power with which the concept has been invested. This puts social science, or at least a critical social science in a difficult position. Culture emerged as part of a critical semantic: promoting culture against structure was a way to make room for agency and resistance, to let the subject speak. Now, a cultural understanding of things, risks taking part in that 'reduction of complexity' (Luhmann, 1995)- and the complexity is always that of the other - that is a central function to languages of order and control. By looking and writing about people in terms of their culture we give them a position, make them manageable within a new, post-disciplinary discursive order. We risk participating in that great 'ideological fantasy' (Zizek, 1997) by means of which the constituted order materializes itself. Such questions posit a challenge that is very difficult to face, epistemologically as well as in terms of theoretical politics. Is it possible to go beyond the concept of culture without falling into a kind of deconstructive regression in which the empirical world fragments into ever-tinier layers of difference? Or, is it possible (or even desirable) to claim to be a critical social scientist in times when the very semantic of critique that we have grown used to has, if this is indeed the case, been virtually subsumed by the constituted order? This is not the place to take up such a challenge. What our workshop did, however, at least to someone who remained mostly silent and slightly aloof from the some times heated debates, was to posit it.

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## CHAPTER 10

### Dinner speech: "My Car"

*Keynote speaker: Sten Jönsson, Gothenburgh Research Institute, School of Economics and Commercial Law, Göteborg University*

Not so long ago I was asked to say a few words at a dinner with the participants in a multi-disciplinary workshop on consumer research. I knew that these scholars were gathered to discuss new approaches to consumer research and that the theme of the conference was "Elusive Consumption." I was flattered, of course, but probably a bit condescending and said 'I could talk about my car' to the organisers. I did not think much about it until the day of delivery arrived. What can I say about my car? My family says I treat it miserably and when I open the hood I can barely manage to find the oil stick. My relation to my car is, I think, very normal. But then I remember that the car had a window smashed a few months ago and I remembered the feelings I had at the time. Outrage over the vandalism and the expense of time and money it would cause, but also a kind of a pity for the car expressed in a refusal to clear the front seat of the glass splinters to allow my wife, who was with me at the time, to sit up front on our way home. This memory of feelings towards a thing awoken by the attack on it got me started on the speech that is reconstructed here:

"My car is "Turkish Green" (which means that it is really more blue than green)

I did not choose the colour myself. There was only one option if I wanted a V 40, low pressure turbo. You see I bought a test car. We have done research on product development, especially the work in project teams that develop new cars. Talking to one of the team members during a break I said that I was getting so acquainted with the car now that it would be very easy to sell me one. The team member told me that he could fix so that I could buy a test car. My first thought was that test cars are the ones you see crash against barriers of concrete in ads, but I was persuaded that test cars is the best choice because they are always on specification. There is no point in testing a car that deviates from specification, is there? So I was invited to buy a test car that had been driven only a thousand miles or so. It was Turkish Green.

I wanted a low-pressure turbo because I had been present at a test rally where employees of the assembly plant that was going to produce the car had been driving the new model. Queuing up for lunch I had asked one of the participants what he thought and he said that the low-pressure turbo was wonderful. So I went for the low-pressure.

It's a very powerful engine. It can do more than 200 easily. The problem is that there are no roads in Sweden where you can drive more than 110. But once a year I go for a holiday in the Alps. We drive down through Germany and there are free speed stretches on the Autobahn. I love to do the left lane chase. You know, there are these big Mercedes and BMWs coming down the left lane lights blinking and full speed. Once or twice a day I like to participate by taking position behind one of these arrogant big cars and follow close enough to make the driver nervous for a while. But I admit it isn't completely rational to buy a fast car for these short moments of joy.

And the Volvo cars are safe! I had my first collision last October. It wasn't my fault! He was turning left on a main road. I was taken by surprise. He was standing still indicating left turn and suddenly he started to move. I tried to avoid going straight into his side by turning with him, but I hit his front wheel. It looked like this (did a "funny walk" with a "crooked leg" – laughs) afterwards. I had only a cracked headlight. Out comes this young Arab looking guy, black hair, black eyes, black leather jacket. Remember this was a month after the September 11 attack. He was really angry. I was angry, His wife was angry, my wife was angry. He said it was my fault I said it was his fault. It took us a quarter of an hour to calm down enough to agree that we were in disagreement and that we should call a police to sort things out. We called the number and a calm policewoman (she might have experienced this situation once or twice before) helped us realise that this was not a national crisis and we should fill in the forms describing the incident and let the insurance company sort it out. So we draw our sketches and signed each other's accounts like we were supposed to. Do you no what he signed? XXX (a name that related closely to the names mentioned in connection with the September 11 attack)! His name was XXX! I suddenly felt that diplomacy was called for and we parted in a friendly mood.

I did not have the proper forms with me at the time but since then I always do. I also have a "moose tag". Do you know what a moose tag is? Well, the most common cause of traffic accidents in Sweden is collision with wild animals. And you don't want to collide with a moose! Its heavy and you can almost drive under it. You are likely to crash into the legs and a moose will usually get up and flee limping into the woods. Then you must use the "moose tag" to mark the place where it disappeared so that hunter's can put their dogs on the trail. It's a cruel world and you have to have your car equipped for all contingencies.

We often go for long walks in the woods on Saturdays. If you are lucky you will spot a moose or a deer. There are plenty of such walking paths around here with attached parking space. One weekend only a month or so ago we came back to our car after one of these walks and found that one of the windows had been smashed. There was nothing to be grabbed after the smash so we just had this broken window in thousands of pieces on the front seats. That's when I discovered my feelings for the car. Pain! We drove home, cold wind in our hair and a few days later I drove it to the glazier's to have it fixed. I

guess it was the rage over the meaningless vandalism that made me refuse to clean it up before I left it at the glazier's. The bill was 1200 SEK. The new window cost 1000 and the cleaning was 200. Since the deductible was 1000 I guess the fact that the insurance company paid for the cleaning was to soothe my feelings.

I could go on like this about my car for hours. The point is that the customer value of my car is the combination of all the stories I tell about it. There is a unique relation between the car and me! I participate in producing the customer value of my car. My car becomes a narrative (a text) in the context of my family and me. I (we) experience a first-person, individual value-feeling that can only be described in narrative form. And it comes in a mood. How many moods are there? Was my choice of stories to tell you about me and my car coincidental? How does my account of my relation to my car relate to the celebrated "customer value" used by car producers and management textbooks? Well it isn't customer value is it? The customer value is genuinely mine. It is the brand value they talk about."

Commentary to the dinner speech: My car is a Volvo and one can see the brand values of Volvo Car Corporation embedded in the narrative I gave in that speech. "Quality" is referred to as not deviating from specification. "Joy of driving" is illustrated by my story about the "left lane chase," and "Safety" is illustrated in the story about the collision. I guess "Environmental Care" could be symbolised by the "moose tag." The story about the insurance company setting the deductible for glass (1000 SEK) at exactly the material cost for the broken glass illustrates "Ownership experience". Perhaps one should also note that when I talked about my feelings for the car being awoken by vandalism it marks a shift in mood – from happy inclusion of the car in our life of consumption to a focused component in need of repair before we could return to the ordinary.

This is the nature of the stories we tell each other about our experiences. There are breaks in normal routine that cause "trouble" and actions and actors that are involved in the restoration of harmony. Our enjoyment of car consumption will take narrative form when we communicate it. (I couldn't have recited the technical measures of the specification of the car model in that dinner speech, could I? Partly because I don't know or remember them, but chiefly because nobody would have been interested. They are not communicable, except between machines like computers or expert engineers.) My narrative about my relation to my car is paralleled by thousands of other unique stories told by other car owners. There might be some collective narrative that could be attributed to all Volvo owners. Supposedly the owners of a specific car model have chosen that model because they like it. There is mutual selection. If the car producer is lucky that collective story is built around the values the company promotes in their "building of the brand." In such a case, and if the mood of the story is positive, one might talk about a premium product.

The problem for the engineers that develop new car models is to articulate this premium customer value in concepts that are useful for the project in the sense that they can guide the choices of technical solutions to the thousands of design problems that constitute a project. Most cars are developed with a customer in mind. This (collective) customer may be described in some detail in internal documents based in niche strategies and market research. For Volvo, and the car models we have been allowed to follow by direct observation, the customer at one time was "Affluent Progressives." Later, since Ford took over the Volvo Car Corporation, it was "The Modern Family." Such descriptions, and the attached brand values, are supposed to serve as "handrails" for designer choices on their path toward the artefact that will become "my car." They design that artefact to be a suitable prop in the unfolding life story of the typical customer of the strategically selected segment of the market. Does it fit in? Is it a persuasive artefact? These things, our capital consumption goods, do talk to us when we include them in our narratives. The engineers translate the "needs" of the targeted customer group into functional specifications (and the customers buying the car translate those functional specifications into narratives). In doing that the translators need to imagine the stories the car-to-be is going to be included in. The brand value "Joy of Driving" has a completely different meaning for a young bachelor starting a business career as compared to a 60 years old professor. Best to include several options in the product offer. The reader will realise that at the limit – the completely customised car – everything is optional and the car has no profile at all, except, possibly, a brand name. Furthermore the competencies and interests of the engineers participating in the project are as heterogeneous as those of the customer group. The choice of individual engineers to participate in the project might be strategic. Does the engine department put their best turbo expert on the project or just somebody they can spare?

Not so long ago those product development engineers were only charged to design a car according to the specification generated by the concept study – a project of technical realisation of a task. Now, at least in the "upper end" of the market segments, the task, increasingly, is to realise a business development project. Then it might be relevant to consider what noise is generated when the customer shuts the door with a certain force, the breaking feeling, ownership experience, etc. The complexity of the task increases geometrically with the heterogeneity of the groups of judges of the proposed design solutions as well as with the number and contradictions of all "values" that are mobilised in arguments supporting this evaluation or that. Emotional aspects are brought into engineering work from all directions and the engineers have to cope with this new world of premium product development at the same time as all the old constraints of short time schedules and strict target costs are still very much present. How do they do it? What kind of a challenge is this premium product development work?



The problem with answering these questions is how to convey the complexity of the lived experience of designing premium products. If the problem is simplified to fit a short text like a book the problem disappears and the answers appear trivial. My plan is to solve the problem by first demonstrate the complexity of the context in which premium development work takes place, then I will show and analyse scenes from the life of development engineers in this context, and finally I will try to make sense of what has been reported.

The point of this exposition is to demonstrate the specific character of premium product development work. It is different from the standardised procedures of products for mass production and competition by price. It seeks to justify a higher price by the value that is added through the design, quality and functionality is taken for granted. In such a situation the task is to produce a good argument for the product in context.

To keep it all together and sensible I need a theory – all practices have a theory – that I will come back to repeatedly, which needs to be summarised from the start. It should be called Constructive Pragmatism (Nörreklit & Nörreklit, 2003) and goes like this:

Development work (same as life) is done in the world and has to do with transforming possibilities into present facts. (Scholars tend to take a spectator view on the world.) There is a difference between "the world" and "reality." Reality is a relation between actor and selected parts of the world. The world is not a collection of facts as Wittgenstein (1922) once claimed since a fact is a relation that has to be constructed as a selected part of the world which I, as actor, am ready to act upon. Being ready to act also includes a readiness to be responsible for the consequences. A central issue in judging what is to be considered a fact is validity. A valid statement expresses, or corresponds to, reality. When humans successfully construct reality they integrate the four dimensions facts, logic, values, and communication (Nörreklit, 1991).

As mentioned there is no such thing as a fact in itself, before they are recognised by an actor. If facts were just elements of reality validity would be about the recognition of those facts only (positivism) but here the perspective is reversed; without facts no reality. Facts are a necessary but not sufficient condition for reality. Beside facts we need possibilities to construct reality. Possibilities cannot be found through empirical observation like facts, but have to be recognised through reflection. They are constructed and recognised through the constructive use of logic. The link between a set of facts and the presence of a possibility is not necessarily an instance of wishful imagination, but the result of systematic reflection. Some possibilities are more real than others. Facts, which embed possibilities and hence may be relevant for the future, are relevant to reality (compare "theory-loaded facts").

If F is a fact then non-F is a logical possibility, for non-F to be a real possibility a specific way leading from F to non-F has to be imaginable (Nörreklitt, 2003). The logic of the matter of reality is concerned with the analysis of arguments and the methods of developing and defining ideas or concepts.

However the integration of facts and logic is not enough to establish human reality. There will be no reason to act without values. Values enable the actor to choose between possibilities. Values are subjective. If the values of the world do not appeal to a person that person will remain passive. Values interrelate facts, logic and meaning.

Subjective values become inter-subjective through communication. They are objectivised or institutionalised into a socially organised reality that can be used to implement a social logic. The body of accepted perspectives, arguments and concerns which are used to control communication and reasoning of an actor or in a team are called "topoi" (from rhetoric). A topos is the result of the application of a conceptual framework to a historical situation. Topoi organise discourse. They are the basic communicative tool applied to the construction of a social world. If an organisation constructs its topoi with care it can utilise the capacity of its members fully. Members of an organisation who use topoi skilfully gain position and reputation in the social setting where they are valid. Lack of common topoi causes communication problems and stymies collective action. The crucial aspect of this view of problem solving discourse is its definition of validity via a conception of reality. Since a fact is a relation between an actor and reality validity also means relevance given that there is a reasonable agreement on (objectivised) values. A readiness to act on the basis of this information means that it has integrated the four dimensions facts, logic, values and communication.

I have described the constructivist pragmatism view as presented by Nörreklit (1991). I believe it is a useful approach when studying a group of specialists solving a complex design problem together in a complex and contradictory world, like in a project to develop a new car model for a specified segment of the world market. I will come back to whether my belief was justified after it has been applied to the work of two car projects by Volvo Car Corporation during its alliance with Mitsubishi Motor Corporation, intended for production in their joint venture production plant in Holland.

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## CHAPTER 11

### Dinner speech: Similar or different? Alterity/identity interplay in organizational image construction<sup>1</sup>

By Barbara Czarniawska, Gothenburg Research Institute, School of Economics and  
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#### The tyranny of identity

To exist is to differ; difference, in a sense, is the substantial side of things, is what they have only to themselves and what they have most in common. One has to start the explanation from here, including the explanation of identity, taken often, mistakenly, for a starting point. Identity is but a *minimal* difference, and hence a type of difference, and a very rare type at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and circle a peculiar type of ellipse. (Tarde, [1893]1999)

The current public discourse, from which neither social sciences nor management theory deviate, focuses on the phenomenon of *identity construction*.<sup>2</sup> This fashionable focus of attention overshadows the simultaneous and unavoidable process of alterity construction, of constructing oneself as different. Indeed, whereas “identity” entered everyday parlance, “alterity” remains a precious concept limited to the circles of cultural studies. Yet there is no reason to suppose that the question “Who am I like?” is more important than the question “Who am I unlike?” and, even more poignant, “How am I different?” Identity and alterity form the self; it might be speculated that the focus on the one at the expense of the other is only a sign of time or place.

Both identity and alterity appear in social studies, but usually in two versions, which can be situated on two extremes of the exclusion-inclusion dimension. One version is typical for cultural studies and is strongly influenced by Michel Foucault, who claimed, perceptively, that “the forceful exclusion and exorcism of what is Other is an act of identity formation” (Corbey and Leersen, 1991: xii). The other end of the dimension is represented by post-Hegelians who see the interplay between identity and alterity as a dialectical move, resulting in “increasing expansion and incorporation, assimilating or at least harmonizing all otherness in terms of expanding identity” (Corbey and Leersen, 1991: xi). Thus, in the discourse of and on identity, alterity is either *attributed* (“they are different and therefore not us”) or *incorporated* (“they are actually very much like us”). The third possibility, the *affirmation of difference* (“we are different”), is forgotten.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a short depiction of the ideas elaborated in my book *A Tale of Three Cities*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Whetten and Godfrey (1998) and Schultz et al. (2000).

The two first views – exclusion and inclusion – are grounded in anthropological studies of relations between westerners and their Others. The excessive focus on identity, a phenomenon that already worried Tarde, is most likely connected to the rise of nationalism (Anderson, 1983/1991). We are living in an identity age, and it has its consequences. And these are doubtful, to say the least:

Identity is a bloody business. Religion, nationality or race may not be the primary causes of war and mass murder. These are more likely to be tyranny, or the greed for territory, wealth and power. But “identity” is what gets the blood boiling, what makes people do unspeakable things to their neighbors. (Buruma, 2002).

This quote is strong: the situation in organizations might not be that drastic. I nevertheless believe that by admitting alterity into play, we can gain a more balanced view of ourselves and of other people, together with a better understanding of organizing. In order to do that, however, we must be more aware of the ways in which we use the terms.

A semantic slide

Most kindergarten children, at least in Sweden, know what an “identity” is. Yet only some cultural anthropologists use the term “alterity”, and always in relation to other people, not to themselves. And yet “identity” and “alterity” are twin terms, opposites. “Identity” denotes a relation of similarity: in the case of a person, with oneself at another point in time, with something else (for example, identity card), or with some other people. Correspondingly, alterity denotes a relation of difference: from oneself at another point of time, from something else or from somebody else. One term requires the other to be understood; in the today’s parlance, however, the term “alterity” has been forgotten.

What is more, this “identity free of alterity” has suffered (or enjoyed) a significant semantic slide. From denoting a *relationship* (identity, like an alterity, is a judgment concerning a comparison) it has become an *attribute* – something to have or to lack. The constructivist or essentialist stances have nothing to do with that: as I will demonstrate, both perspectives are compatible with my suggestion to study the identity/alterity interplay. In this *relational* view, the next step is to ask what is being compared.

A corporate persona and its image

Although we have been saddled with the notion of “organizations” thanks to the organization theorists’ interest in system theory in the 1960s (Waldo, 1961), most of our reasoning circles, implicitly or not, around the notion of a corporation, that is, a legal person. This reasoning became even more valid in present times, when public administration units are encouraged or forced to assume shapes of “real organizations”: that is to say, corporations.

The history of corporations in the USA is a history of a competition, never concluded, between the school of thought that conceptualizes corporations as *natural persons*, and the one that sees them as *artificial persons* (Lamoreaux, 2003). According to the latter theory, a corporation is a person only to the degree bestowed on it by its legislator. Thus an organization is a Super Person, in the sense of being bigger on certain traits than all the individual people who contribute to its existence, but also a Limited Person. Were Gabriel Tarde an organization theorist, he would say that each person employed in a company is much bigger and much more complex than the company itself, the latter being a collection of a repetition of one or few properties of its employees and machines.

If one adopts a “natural person” perspective, an organization can have a *self*. Within an “artificial person” perspective, to which I subscribe, an organization cannot have a “self”, but can have, to borrow an expression from narratology, a Character (deducible and observable from its deeds and self-presentations). In corporate law, Naomi Lamoreaux tells us, the two theories tend to hybridize rather than go into a clinch. We can follow their example and agree on a common point: what is compared in order to establish an identity or an alterity *relation* is an *organizational image*. Whether this image reflects the essence of an organization or is an on-going social construction may remain a point of discontent and personal belief. The fact remains that organizational images are constantly produced and re-produced by actors and observers within and outside organizations; and are used to control the employees and the investors, to legitimate and to attract attention, etc. etc. The (research) question is, how are they constructed (both in the sense of process and product), and how they are used.

An interplay of identity and alterity

Identity might dominate the present discourse, but practice of organizing reveals the constant co-presence of alterity in image construction. Organizations apply the moves of exclusion and inclusion toward other organizations, but these moves never achieve permanence, either in an expanded, harmonious identity, or in a permanent relegation. The interplay of identity and alterity is continuous; new organizations become objects of desire and old objects of desire serve as negative examples. Also, “the Other” is not passive, but is doing symmetrical work at all times. As I am writing this text, Saab (now a part of General Motors) is reducing its operations in both Germany and Sweden. An image is being constructed with help of identity/alterity relations for two plants, two unions, and the corporation. The workers’ solidarity is the crucial point in the identity/alterity interplay: Should the Swedish workplaces be saved at the expense of the German? Who is “we” and who is “the Other”? How do we differ from them?

I am not claiming that no one before me has ever noticed this complex identity/alterity interplay; I am only suggesting that all this complexity was forced into, or rather onto, one term that, inevitably, went into a glide. We can stop its gliding by adopting a *relational view of identity/alterity interplay in organizational image construction*.

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## CHAPTER 12

### Glimpses from on-going projects at the Center for Consumer Science (CFK)

12:1 Hello Kitty in Singapore: Bidding the human-artifact opposition

*By Helene Brembeck, Center for Consumer Science*

One reason for choosing McDonald's as the subject of my study in the Commercial Cultures project<sup>1</sup> is that it belongs to those phenomena that occupy the position of a meta-symbol. Such meta-symbols are among the most difficult objects of analytical enquiry, Daniel Miller argues in his study of another meta-symbol, that of Coca-Cola (Miller 1998). Part of the challenge of choosing McDonald's as object of study, is to refrain from telling the grand narrative of the company once again, but to regard it as just a special kind of restaurant where people go to eat and meet.

So, a McDonald's restaurant is a highly commercial place, but inside very mundane activities take place; parents and children socializing while having a meal. A lot has been written about the detrimental effect on relations when they are expressed through things and consumption, often in terms of a moral panic about human relations and love being replaced by things following the tradition from the Frankfurt school. At the other extreme is for example the message announced on big signs all over our biggest shopping center in Göteborg last Christmas - "Giving is love" - where artifacts are seen as something completely ethereal turned into emotions, that is, there is no materiality left at all. There are of course many ways of rethinking the relation between human and objects bridging these opposites, one of the most inspiring being the Actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, where artefacts and humans, children as well as adults, are placed on the same level as "actants". And I will tell you a small anecdote on this theme from the scare material I have so far.

It refers to an article by Latour on the Berlin key. It was used for the front door in old bourgeois tenant houses with caretakers and it performed mechanically the same function as electronic door codes today, that is, they only function between certain hours, which are operated by the caretaker, who opens and closes the door at certain hours with his passkey. This key is not a symbol and not an emotion neither a mere intermediary.

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<sup>1</sup> The project "Commercial Cultures in an ethnological and economical perspective" is by now the largest of the various projects at Center for Consumer Science (CFK) in Göteborg. The project consists of 8 subproject, one of them my subproject on parents and children at McDonald's. It has received funding by the Swedish Bank of Tercentenary Foundation for four years, 2001-2004.



Of course this key carries meaning, although the meaning is fabricated somewhere else, but at the same time it changes the meaning, it works on it. The key is not an intermediary, but a mediator, which means that the meaning is no longer simply transported by the key but in part constituted, moved, recreated, modified, in short expressed and betrayed, he argues. From being a simple tool, the steel key assumes all the dignity of a mediator, a social actor, an agent, an active being, he concludes.

And here is my small anecdote. It is from a visit to Singapore this year. My initial interest was the Japanese toy, Hello Kitty, which was the special Happy Meal-toy this period. Kitty is very popular in south-east Asia and I assumed Kitty was the main reason why children wanted to go to McDonald's that she was the main gift from parents to children. But, I soon came to know, it wasn't like that at all. Kitty wasn't a toy at all, but a collector's object for schoolgirls and teenagers. The school-girls collected her as a gadget to decorate the zipper in their rucksacks - maybe as a way to enliven and individualize the rather sturdy school uniforms and rucksacks they were all wearing. Teenage girls collected a larger wedding Kitty that could be obtained buying two McSpicy Double or two Chicken McCrispy; all of them Singapore specialties - and they used them for decorating their room.

So, Kitty was not the reason why small children pestered their parents to go to McDonald's - instead it was the fries. Parents preferred rice and considered rice the basis of a proper meal - McDonald's could no way be a place to have your family Sunday dinner at. But they went there anyway. The reason for this, one manager I interviewed told me, was that at least the upwardly mobile middle class considered the rice based meal traditional and old fashioned, while French fries symbolized modernization, modern lifestyles, college education, high-salary jobs, high standards of living etc.

But, returning to Latour, an artifact could never be modernity or symbolize ambitions about education and a good life, it always continues to be an artifact, in this case a rectangular deep-fried piece of potatoes. However, meanings and ambition could very well be put into the artifact, so to speak, but the potato is no empty vessel conveying the message in full to the recipient, the child. The artifact, the Fresh Fry in its physical shape, always work on the meaning, it becomes "constituted, moved, recreated, modified, in short expressed and betrayed". The meaning, ambitions of success in school, is cast in a special mould - rectangular, deep-fried, salted, and machine-made. And suddenly the machine pops up as a link in the chain. And as the next link the inventor, and his ideas of rationality or what ever. The chain is constantly getting longer and turns into networks of actants. The meaning reaches the child remolded by the French fry and in the shape of a fry, it allows certain activities and not other. For example, it could be eaten with your fingers, which might be a democratic means, small children can eat on much the same conditions as adults, and it also allows the practice, common of older

children going to McDonald's together, of pouring all the fries in a heap at the middle of the tray to enjoy it in common. That the meaning is remolded by the fries also means that consuming French fries not necessarily has the effects the parents hope for. Certainly it might lead to increased individuality and a modern lifestyle. But it does not necessarily imply good grades in school for Singaporean children - although there is nothing to contradict this - looking at all the kids in neat uniforms at McDonald's. But it might also imply obesity and even sickness, to judge from recent research reports. And of course obesity and ill health is an anomaly in modernity, where a slender body and physical well being are honored values. So it would be right to say that the artifact does something with the meaning, remolds it, modify it, and maybe even betrays it.

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12:2 Collections consumed

*By Karin M. Ekström, Center for Consumer Science*

The purpose of my current project, "The meaning of consumption and consumers relations to artifacts", is twofold. First of all, to try to understand the meaning of consumption from an interdisciplinary perspective realizing, however, that this is in fact a life project. Second, to understand collecting as consumption, how collections begin, which motives are behind collecting, how collections develop and change over time. Belk (1995) discusses the need for exploring the relation between collecting and consumption. I am interested in collecting of design items from the 20th century, in particular Swedish glass. This is the focus of my speech today. I have just started my fieldwork and will only give a short overview of my study.

#### Collectors and collections

In studying collectors and their collections, I am inspired by Bruno Latour (1993), who is critical to the separation between humans and nonhumans. He means that people and things should be studied in relations. Hård af Segerstad (1957) expresses: "People without things are helpless, but things without people are meaningless". It also points to relations between people and things. Collections are created in relation to other people and other things. A collector redefines his/her collection continuously by adding new things, moving things around etc. Relations are formed to other people, collectors and non-collectors as well as to other things.

Collecting is a widespread consumption and production phenomena in consumer culture. Collections represent consumption in that collectible items are acquired, displayed and disposed of, also involving different rituals related to acquisition, possession and divestment (e.g., McCracken 1988). A collector produces his/her own collection, often over a number of years. Things are added and things are divested. The ways to display the collection varies and changes. A collector also produces him/herself as a collector and relates him/herself to other collectors and collections.

Collecting represents a highly individualistic activity, but also a collectivist activity in that the collectors often associate themselves to other collectors who they meet at exhibitions, collector's organizations, or on the Internet. The individuality is substantiated by the exposure in relation to other collections as well as in relation to the absence of such collections.

Zygmunt Bauman suggests in a recent paper (2001) and during a lecture at the School of Economics and Commercial Law at Göteborg University this Spring (2002) that commitment seems to be lacking in today's society. Collecting is, however, a consumption activity which illustrates commitment. In a time when society seems to be changing in a faster pace, collecting may symbolize a need for order, security or stability (e.g., Belk 1995). It is possible that collections express values or have a historical association of importance to a collector's identity in society. To lose a collection can mean to lose a part of yourself and your identity. Collections can be seen as extended self (Belk 1988).

There exist different perceptions about collectors. Collectors are sometimes described as materialistic. According to Daniel Miller (1998), people who have many things are not necessarily materialistic. It can instead be people who lack things and spend a lot of time dreaming of having things who can be considered materialistic. Collectors do however usually spend a lot of time dreaming of new things to acquire. Collectors are also sometimes seen as behaving in a non-rational manner. However, if rational is equivalent to goal orientation and structure, this is what many collectors often express. Collectors are also sometimes described as asocial, but this could also be questioned. To search for things to the collection involves often social interaction, for example, meeting other collectors at exhibitions, giving advice to other collectors on the Internet etc. Miller (1998) means that having things involve social interaction. By having things, collectors relate to other people, but also to other things.

#### 20th century design and glass

We are living in a time when design appears to play a more important role in our lives. Design is one way to express identity. Woodham (1997) expresses the aesthetic, social, economic, political, and technological forces behind development of design over time. Such aspects are important to consider when studying collecting of design items from the 20th century.

Glass will be the major focus in this study. Glass is a material that has received international acknowledgement in Swedish 20th century design. It was in particular during the 1950s that Swedish glass became an essential profile for Swedish design internationally (e.g., Huldt 1999). During the 1950s, Sweden had many well-known glass artists, for example, Monica Bratt, Erik Höglund, Nils Landberg, Vicke Lindstrand, Ingeborg Lundin, Sven Palmqvist and Arthur Percy. Swedish glass was exhibited at many exhibitions nationally as well as abroad. The 1950's was also an important time period for building of the Swedish Welfare State (*folkhemmet*). Different taste and consumption norms were advocated uniting beauty and utility, form and function in a moderate fashion or what the Swedes would call "lagom". One famous example is Lena Larsson's books on home interior (e.g., Larsson 1957).

Glass is visible collections, glass is often displayed in collector's homes. Glass has a magical ability to capture and reflect light. The characteristics of glass is paradoxical in that it is both hard and fragile, hot when produced but cold afterwards. Transparency represents being and not being at the same time. Collectors of glass can collect art glass and glass for everyday use. The meaning may change over time in that things intended for everyday life become memorabilia (Löfgren 1992). It might represent a transition from profane to sacred.

#### Multi-sited ethnography

Rather than viewing collecting from a single-site location, it is in this study of interest to view collecting from a multiple sites of observation and participation. Marcus (1995) has described the emergence of multi-sited ethnography in anthropological research and means that it is used in particular in new spheres of interdisciplinary work, for example science and technology studies, various strands of cultural studies. There are different techniques for conducting a multi-sited ethnography such as follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor, etc. In the present study, the focus is on follow the thing, i.e. tracing circulation of collections in different contexts. My study deals with how collections and collecting are perceived by different categories of people such as collectors, mainly private, but also museum collectors, glass designers, glass workers blowing, painting or engraving glass, marketers, retailers, and auctioneers. They are all expected to have their own perceptions about collecting and collectors. Some examples were given in the slide show following this presentation. The results of the study will be published in a book during 2006.

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