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Qualitative Research in Marketing: Exploring Habituated Reality

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Abstract

Focusing on the narrative of ideas informing qualitative marketing theory, the paper discusses the extended contribution of philosophical hermeneutics to generating a research method. While this philosophy has been widely influential (through the writing of Craig Thompson), its appropriation in consumer research has eliminated its initiating thesis - that people's fundamental understanding of the material world involves practical interaction or 'understanding how', habituated hence tacit, embodied, equipped. Consumers reflecting in focus groups are secondary to understanding-in-use - evident in routine little considered practices such as finding their way around familiar malls. Unlike marketing scholarship, management studies have retained the initial Heideggerian insight. A distinction introduced in the latter discipline between reflection in/ on 'ready-to-hand' (Heidegger) or habituated behaviour is in the paper appropriated to explore marketing theory's epistemological gap. So considering distinct modes of consumer reflection, we engage in a hermeneutic analysis of visitor cellphone photography celebrating their immersion in a massive Malaysian mall. Hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur) - subsequently shaping reception and practices theory (e.g. Jauss, Reckwitz) - can offer significant service to the marketing academy. This paper presumes to fulfill and further qualitative research theory by (re)turning to its philosophical core, enhancing consumer studies for publication.

Keywords: qualitative marketing research, hermeneutic and practices theory

*How does consumer research accommodate accumulated mundane meaning -
the 'always-already givenness of the world at hand'*

(Seamon, 2013: p. 144)?

1. INTRODUCTION

Research claiming to be anchored methodologically and theoretically by 'hermeneutics' is found within marketing studies (Thompson, 1991, 1997, 1998; Thompson et al., 1994; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995, 1998; Wilson 2011, 2012) as well as in thinking about media (Wilson, 1993, 2004, 2009). Arnold and Fischer (1994) provide a helpful discussion in their Journal of Consumer Research contribution, 'Hermeneutics and Consumer Research'. Hermeneutic analyses of equipped and habituated (hence tacit) practices where people project and produce participatory narrative has been pursued in analyses of media users (Couldry, 2004, 2012; Moores, 2015; Wilson, 2015).

Yet while recognizing its critique of dualism - Descartes' separation of our mind and body - marketing theory has been marred (e.g. in Thompson's work) by reducing hermeneutic perspectives to pluralism. Consideration of mental processing has failed to embed its analyses in tacit consumer habituated use of equipment, a hermeneutic sine qua non originating from its Heideggerian account of understanding-in-practices preceding understanding-in-propositions. Our understanding how to engage in familiar activity without reflective monitoring is more fundamental than and distinct from our considering that we do - the focus, perhaps, of subsequent reflection in focus groups. My typing this paper without considering the process is my understanding how to engage with equipment, the keyboard: my attention is directed towards the page/ product, not my fingers. But should the wrong

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key be pressed, my focus turns to their activity, reflecting then that I have made a mistake. What are the implications of these primary and secondary modes of knowing or understanding for marketing and its qualitative theorising in advancing advertising's address to consumers?.

2. REFLECTION IN/ON CONSUMER PRACTICES

Habitual, minimally self-monitored activity is 'primordial' (Heidegger, 1962) in our human practices. Purvis and Purvis write - in an exception to its absent analysis in marketing's thoughts on consumption - that 'for Heidegger, readiness-to-hand comes first and is primary; presence-at-hand understanding (objective knowledge) comes later' (2012: 1630). Compensating for earlier neglect, Arnould has recently signaled emergence of a philosophically more inclusive hermeneutic practices perspective in marketing theory when he writes definitionally: 'rudiments' of a practice 'consist of discursive knowledge and tacit knowledge sometimes grouped together as competences, materials and affective engagements' (2014: 129). Our understanding how is ingrained in practices.

A comparison of business school disciplines reveals mobilisation of a cogent hermeneutic or Heideggerian practices perspective in management and organization study, notably by Yanow and Tsoukas (2009) and Nicolini (2012). In their conceptual discussion, the former present an important distinction between 'reflection-on-action' (such as when participants talk in research focus groups) and 'reflection-in-action' - a celebratory or critical reflecting 'in the midst of' habitual behaviour. Analysing the latter assumes an adequate account of routine activity. Aligning with a hermeneutic perspective on habitual practices as socially embedded, embodied and equipped, the authors present their thesis that a 'phenomenological view of reflection-in-action, such as the one we propose here, emphasizes its embedded (social), engaged (practice), and embodied (material) aspects' (1342).

Distinguishing between these modes of reflecting in/ on action, then, is underwritten by the profoundly practices concept of 'embodied' or habituated understanding. As the authors argue, their presentation of 'reflection-in-action' points to momentary challenging of 'ready-to hand' (Heidegger, 1962) accustomed activity, in a 'further theorizing of the character of surprise' (1339). Yanow and Tsoukas approach management study from a hermeneutic perspective incorporating understanding-in-practice. Likewise, Lai et al. (2007) are 'challenging the dominant dualist influence of Cartesian philosophy in marketing' from a 'hermeneutic perspective' incorporating the 'embodied self'.

We suggest that where marketing research draws upon merely a pluralist reductionist version of hermeneutics, a view which was principally initiated by Thompson's writing (referenced above), it cannot accommodate a tacit 'ready-to-hand' understanding incorporated in habitual behaviour and hence consumer reflection-in-practices - these celebratory or critical moments transforming habitual practices. Showing such inclusion to be of significance in marketing, we turn empirically to outline current Malaysian media and mall research on visitor behaviour. In doing so, we further studies of multi-cultural motivation in mall consuming (Farrag et al., 2010).

Hermeneutics argues for human 'understanding' as being primarily how (in action): first and foremost it is tacitly incorporated in behaviour, achieving meaning. Consumer practice is said to be 'primordially' (Heidegger, 1962) unreflective: only secondarily and subsequently is it considered in propositional statements of understanding that. In organizations, how is a reflectively examined life underwritten by 'texts' (Ricoeur, 1981a) members compose through their tacit habituated implicit understanding-in-practice? What is the relationship of our embodied understanding incorporated in practices to celebratory or critical moments and the contributions to focus groups and interviews to which Thompson and others frequently and prescriptively refer in consumer marketing research? Exploring modes of pre-reflective and reflective consumption in situ and subsequently, the paper extends work on mall aesthetics and 'embodied experiences' (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012), the 'embodied practices' of visitors immersed in 'designed urban environments' (Degen et al., 2010).

From a hermeneutic practices perspective, this research reveals horizons of generic understanding implicit in habituated action from which people project and produce participatory modes of 'being- with-others'. The work of analysis is to conceptually explore, exhibiting these horizons explicitly.

'A central core, moreover, of practice theorists conceives of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.'
(Schatzki, 2001: 11)

Habituated routine 'practices consist of both doings and sayings' writes Warde (2005: 134) succinctly in which an understanding is developed and deployed. As authors elsewhere claim, a practice's 'specific elements' are

'procedures, understandings, and engagements' (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011: 352, following the work of Schau et al., 2009: 31): so it involves 'implicit or tacit knowledge' shaping 'specific forms of practical judgements' (Echeverri et al., 2012: 429). Or as reiterated in scholarly contributions to this post-Heideggerian definitional story, spanning from consumer to organization studies and social theorising - a practice's 'constitutive elements' are 'meanings, competences, materials' (Shove, 2012: 5). Connecting such a 'central core (...) of practice theorists' with their Heideggerian hermeneutic history, we summarize: tacitly engaging from habituated horizons of generic understanding entities (apples, narrative, tools) around us as equipment, we presume/ project and produce participatory narrative - our practices.

3. UNDERSTANDING AS THE TACIT ACTIONING OF EQUIPMENT

From the perspective of hermeneutic practices analyses and theory, our fundamental mode of understanding 'entities' (Heidegger) is as equipment, as enabling and hence incorporated in our activity. 'Knowing how', we have noted, precedes reflective 'knowing that'. Understanding is first and foremost instantiated in using (Heidegger, we know, illustrated this epistemological assertion for the priority of practical knowing with a hammer). From what wider horizon of assumptions - research can inquire - does a person's behaviour issue, whether during focus group, interview or beyond? How is understanding-in-practice (walking in a shopping mall or writing on social media) projecting meaning, producing a public narrative assembled in participatory activity?

A hermeneutics of human behaviour discloses for discussion tacit (little reflected on) routine phenomena of understanding-in-practice(s) - shaping spaces (and times) of anticipated and attained intelligibility. Manifested from apple choosing to watching television, understanding is a 'ready-to-hand' (Heidegger, 1962) equipped embodied practice of 'projecting' (ibid.) meaning, our exercising intelligibility from 'horizons of expectation' (Jauss, 1982) a 'form(ing) of life' (Wittgenstein, 1991). Choosing an apple requires little reflection on the process - yet it exhibits practical understanding. Such understanding is 'naturalized out of everyday awareness' (Coudry and McCarthy, 2004: 5).

The idea of 'practices' is 'foundational' across interdisciplinary analyses: 'they are meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities', as Nicolini summarizes succinctly (2011: 602) in organization theory. Thus, for instance, a consumer's 'horizon of intelligibility' implicit in understanding the mundane practice of going to the shopping mall as revisiting her 'second home' rather than as adventure 'implies a certain way of understanding oneself, others, and the events that occur as part of the practice' (2012: 5). Earlier, writing in Organization Studies, he foregrounds the 'unspoken' or tacit aspect of cultural and material assumptions incorporated in habituated practices:

'As authors such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein made clear, practice constitutes the unspoken and scarcely notable background of everyday life. Practices therefore always need to be drawn to the fore' (emphasis added)

(Nicolini, 2009: p. 1392)

4. AN ABSENT PRE-REFLECTIVE GRASP OF EQUIPMENT IN MARKETING THEORY

In marketing theory, Thompson's work is most often cited in respect of hermeneutic inquiry. Writing a year after Wilson's (1993) contribution to media studies on 'hermeneutics, reception and popular culture', Thompson et al.'s paper (1994) references Heidegger's Being and Time (1962) to posit this philosophy's fundamental claim: 'interpretation is taken to be a necessary and inevitable aspect of scientific understanding', 'preconceptions provide a necessary frame of reference rather than act as distorting "biases" that hinder understanding' (433). Here, the consumer's 'horizons of understanding' (Heidegger) from which practices theory asserts meaning is projected receive first recognition as a topological metaphor for exploring the construction of our intelligible experience. Nonetheless, no mention is made of Heideggerian phenomenology's equally fundamental claim in dismissing Cartesian dualism, that humanity primordially understands entities as equipment (Zeug). 'Zeug basically means "things" or "stuff", and in Heidegger's use more specifically "something for such-and-such an activity or use".' (Parkes, 1992: 112) Our core awareness is tacit and teleological.

Given marketing's main orientation to addressing the consumer as user, this is an important omission. A paper by Thompson and Hirschman the following year (1995) on the 'socialized body' ironically discusses the 'several multi-billion-dollar industries that have an explicit body focus, such as diet programs, fitness equipment and

services' (139) (emphasis added). A further work (1997) by Thompson defining a 'Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories' refers to the hermeneutic circle (441): nonetheless the centrifugal idea that consumer understanding is grounded in pre-reflective embodied practices is absent. Indeed the 'stability' provided by habit is defined in terms of a person's 'historical development' (447).

A frequently floated criticism of hermeneutic phenomenology is that it is too individualistic, referring little in its analyses to the social and political context of understanding. Phenomenological approaches, wrote Askegaard and Linnert (2011), must go beyond the 'overly individualist focus of some consumption research relying mainly on psychological or mental context' (390). However, as they concede, this is not necessarily phenomenology's 'direction' (391). Hermeneutics is absolved:

'Within the hermeneutic endeavor of interpretation, they are more attentive than other phenomenological approaches to the (...) detailed description of experience, but also refer to extra-experiential contexts on theoretical and methodological grounds.' (394)

In attending to the tacit - unreflected upon - behavioural consumer construction of meaning, this paper expressly avoids a focus on 'psychological or mental context' (ibid). Moreover, arguing that activity is always already shaped by consumers' shared (and often ideologically inflected) horizons of understanding their circumstances, hermeneutics embraces a political and social context. Here, Ricoeur argues for a critical or 'depth' hermeneutics engaged in 'distanciation' (1981b).

5. RIEF REFLECTION ON METHOD FOR A PILOT PROJECT

In Practice Theory, Work, and Organization Nicolini remarks on phenomenology's practices perspective (following Heidegger's analysis of understanding and interpretation in Being and Time): 'for reflexive, investigative, theoretical knowledge to come into play, something previously usable must become unusable' (2012: 34). But functional entities can also enable enlightening (Lichtung), offering liminal possibility (Turner, 1967) beyond both practical and propositional understanding of 'identity exploration, self-focus, instability' (Marchant and O'Donohue, 2014).

Everyday activity is immersively goal-directed, not least in producing intelligible meaning: 'humans are always operating within an horizon of projection and concerns (Besorgen); that is, they are absorbed and caught up with things to do and achieve' (Nicolini, 2012: 36). We can pass beyond unreflectively employing entities merely as functional equipment to momentarily regarding them as supporting celebration. In this complex behavioural play of switching meaning - crossing borders - the liminal (Kupers, 2011) is foregrounded, the 'edges' of transitory modes of consumer experience. Seeking to evaluate this hermeneutic practices perspective on empirical research data, a pilot project exploring the liminal interface - or interweaving - of consumer ready-to-hand and reflected-upon experience was arranged in a local mall. Rather than walking along with visitors (Lowrey et al., 2005), a booth was established with the kind permission of its management where people were invited to share mall photographs and so participate in this project of consumer research. Potential contributors were invited to talk about the photos which they had previously taken, and in so doing respond to the topic, 'what does the mall mean to you?', integrating verbal and visual discourse.

Photography of this massive mall celebrating multi-cultural festive occasions is widespread, a habituated practice evident on social media sites. From a hermeneutic perspective, what meanings are constructed for the mall - projected and produced in participatory photography - by this activity? Mobile phones have been earlier recommended as an 'emergent technology' for marketing research among lively consumers (e.g. Hein et al., 2011 - see also 'participant-led photography', Penaloza, 1998: Vince and Warren, 2012: Warren, 2002). We sought answers from consumer cellphones.

In a focus group organized about a month later, six participants took part in 'face-to-face' discussion with one of the paper's authors, followed by nine online in Facebook and WhatsApp 'chat' arranged with a research assistant. These exchanges were then fully transcribed for analysis. While delay - unavoidable - in establishing this data is unfortunate, the vivid participant narratives are a testimony to the personal importance attached to the photographs taken by these mall visitors.

Talking here provided accounts of habituated consumer visits to the mall, or in hermeneutic terms enabled narrative 'presencing' pre-reflective or 'ready-to hand' (Heidegger, 1962) behaviour. But reference was also made to concurrent reflection, an enlightened moment, a 'clearing' (ibid.) or *Lichtung* in mall consumers' everyday awareness. Distributed across genres or modes of immersion in the mall (such as 'enjoying the crowd', the 'health option', or taking pictures), such a concurrent reflection-in-practices occurred spontaneously. Nonetheless reflection on (annual) practices could be constituted by remembering in subsequent discussion, prompted by the mall's being 'lighted up', celebrating the nation's diverse multi-cultural festivals - 'spectacle' (Sherry et al., 2001). Here, the mall's spatial design and themes (Firat et al., 2011; Van Marrewijka and Broosa, 2012) prevailed:

At 'Chinese New Year, the lights ... erm now look at this (photograph) is just that, I think it just, just brightens the day with the lights and ... with the lanterns, so it is like more of a ... like leading the path kind of stuff, showing the way because it's lighted up', an older male Indian responds (in Heideggerian mode) to the mall's decorating.

Captured visually, consumer understanding of generic cellphone photographic practice is discussed. 'I love candid shots. It seems to capture a moment in time, a real moment :)' (male, Chinese visitor) Or as female Chinese mall visitors enthused, a 'precious moment', a 'remarkable moment'. Here, a habituated use of equipment appears particularly to underwrite celebratory reflection-in-practice.

6. REFLECTION-IN-PRACTICES: A CLEARING IN CONSUMER AWARENESS

'I came back to the homeland, feeling so warm and so comfortable and glad to be back to the surroundings where I was grown up.' (female, Chinese mall visitor)

Participants presented their narratives of why they visited the mall, constructing its vast space as a place familiar from frequent visiting. The mall was viewed from articulately mapped horizons of understanding this 'habitat' (Bloch et al. 1994), projected as being equipped to enable these consumers to produce multiple modes of generic being (such as 'bonding' / 'hanging out'), participatory in 'being-with-others' (Heidegger, 1962), close friends or companions.

During an interview, one participant talks of her photograph taken after meeting a friend, 'when we meet, that time you know, it was like, like after letting out everything':

"the photograph 'was a closing of our meeting'. 'It was a happy... happiness but is something more because I remember at this moment when we took the picture it was something that you want it to last ...'" (female, Malay)

Surprised by 'something more' than simply 'happiness', in this brief introspective narrative (Caru and Cova, 2008) she switches for a 'moment' from habituated ready-to-hand experience of mall visiting to reflecting within the practice, regretting its transitory quality, wanting 'it to last'. In this temporary but transformative longing, she crosses the liminal borders between tacit immersion and thoughtful if passing inspection. From a hermeneutic perspective both modes of mall awareness involve projecting and producing participatory intelligibility, immersively integrating an existential narrative (Gaviria and Bluemelhuber, 2010). The mall is thus momentarily experienced differently, 'reframed' (Schon, 1983) from briefly changing horizons of understanding, regarded not as a place of passing resumption but of more prolonged pleasure - through using this 'singularized object', a cellphone camera (Epp and Price, 2009). In taking a photograph, tacit pre-reflective consumption (i) has been transformed by a moment of reflection-in-practice (ii). She presents a renewed sense of her own identity or 'self-understanding' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994: 55).

Here we have closely observed memory, a presencing in/of habitual behaviour ('ok, why not we just take one of those pictures?') by a consumer who considers this mall as enabling a 'bonding session'. Her narrative vividly evokes concurrent celebration: 'it was something that you want it to last'. The pictures record that 'something' - images of their 'place ballet' (Seamon, 1979). At this 'moment' (hermeneutic as well as human) of reunion, rekindling and relief, one photograph shows behind the close friends a women's lingerie shop, a mall mise-en-scene which serves to confirm its 'sense-content' (Ricoeur, 1981a) - comfort, intimacy, warmth, and solidarity in bonding. 'Bonding' is an 'affective engagement' (Arnould, 2014: 129), a mode of 'attunement' (Heidegger, 1962).

Participating in the mall from a shared horizon of understanding it as a 'superb hanging out place' (female, Chinese), this Malay woman produces (behaviorally or implicitly in her action, and explicitly in later talk) an account integrating expectation with later event. A celebratory moment is marked by closing equilibrium: it was 'a relief after finishing', in their re-affirming close friendship. Here, indeed, 'materiality and human relationships are inextricably intertwined' (Price, 2013: 304).

Celebratory reflecting-in-practices can be a momentary enlightening amidst a forest of habit. But it may also be behaviourally evident as in a visitor taking photographs. The mall's aquatic and historical displays offered empowerment and peace to an older male Indian: 'the water, to a large extent has a kind of soothing effect on the soul'. He reflects in taking his distinctive photograph on the detailed decoration ['the stuff that (they) put there'] as equipping 'different' activity. His action belongs to the genre of evaluative comment rather than photography epitomizing representation:

A display 'has quite lot of history background to the early days when they use the sail boats and the journeys that the Chinese did during that era. (...) I think it, it kind of challenge(s) us to do something different other than just the norm.' (male, Indian)

7. CONCLUSION: MARKETING REFLECTIONS: CELEBRATING 'KNOW-HOW KNOWN' (CHIA AND HOLT, 2006: 642)

'You mean this sort of thing goes on all the time?' (Question @ recent Business School Conference)

This paper has reflected on a pilot project considering cellphone photography in a suburban mall as equipped, embodied mobility, habituated, hence tacit practices - entered from pre-reflective horizons of understanding - yielding to self monitoring moments of celebration and criticism. In our interviewing mall visitors, this primarily conceptual paper has sought to illustrate this hermeneutic thesis by arguing with reference to their contributions in discussion:

- (i) 'dwelling' or immersed in a familiar mall, consumers' ready-to-hand understanding (unreflected on/ incorporated in practices) is of entities as 'equipment' (Zeug) rather than objects simpliciter:
- (ii) celebratory or critical consumer reflecting within practices (Lichtung or a momentary clearing in the mundane) may be enabled by displays or be spontaneous, a transforming self awareness:
- (iii) creating this momentary clearing in otherwise unreflective everyday awareness is manifested in participatory 'place ballet' (Seamon), captured in consumers' cellphone photography:
- (iv) rather than seamless narratives of self-reporting by our participants in research categorized as being 'hermeneutic', contributors should be encouraged to present celebratory and critical moments within habituated practices. 'I remember at this moment when we took the picture it was something that you want it to last.' For these can constitute remarkable images in marketing consumption.

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