

FOREWORD

The 5th Workshop on Interpretive Consumer Research was held at Bocconi University, Milan on 2nd-3rd April 2009.

The central idea of the Workshop was to facilitate a debate on interpretive research from a critical point of view.

In the last twenty years, interpretive research has gained considerable ground in academic debate as an alternative to the dominance of cognitive research based on classical paradigms seeking to understand the purchasing process of a rational individual. Interpretive research has developed with the need to focus on 'real' people rather than consumer stereotypes imagined in methodologies and theoretical approaches that do not seem able to grasp the complexity of consumption behaviour.

Interpretive research concentrates on socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption and generates different, highly fragmented approaches presenting multi-faceted features in continual evolution. (i.e., relativist, post-positivist, poststructuralist, humanistic, naturalistic, postmodern, etc.). More recently, this proliferation has found a home in the now well-known academic brand, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The recognition of belonging to a common field of research has helped to organise the lines of study concerned with a cultural view of consumption (consumer identity projects, the cultures of the marketplace; the social and historical influences on consumption; the ideologies and strategies to interpret consumers in markets influenced by the mass media) around main thematic areas, while also legitimising these various approaches within Consumer Research.

On the other hand, reference to a single brand cannot cover the entire debate on the variety of approaches to interpretive research. Different research traditions that have developed in culturally distant contexts and environments cannot be easily traced back to a single point of departure without risking their potential richness. Moreover, the very nature of interpretive research facilitates a continual enrichment thanks to the different conversations, stemming from different angles of attack (i.e., phenomenology, semiotics, hermeneutics, literary theory, introspection, discourse analysis, etc.). Nothing would be more dangerous for this type of study than an attempt to reduce these approaches to standard, rigid schemes.

For these reasons, the Workshop sought to privilege discussion and dialogue on the different methods used in interpretive research and so realise a number of objectives: to valorise the aspects of diversity and peculiarity in approaches characterised by references to specific cultural contexts; to integrate different methodological approaches; to propose innovation, but also criticism, accompanied by a set of supporting arguments, with regard to some established positions of theory and practice. We feel that debates of this type are essential for the advancement of knowledge, and authors were invited to present papers on ongoing cross-paradigm movements, to analyse current developments and to review the possibilities to integrate and differentiate theoretical assumptions, as well as to identify the limitations of these approaches.

The Workshop offered an extremely rich range of content and stimuli. The questions addressed included the epistemology debate, interpretive methods and their managerial implications, but also brand, ideologies, gender behaviour, consuming expression, and alternative visions on consumption. Here, we are not able to recreate the breadth and depth of the debate and the analyses conducted over the two days of work. Nevertheless, the selected papers provide clear, if not exhaustive, proof of the topics addressed and provide a means to get to know some of the contributions that had a significant impact on the discussions. The bulk of the contributions presented in this Special Issue come from a first choice of the most interesting papers presented at the 5th Workshop on Interpretive Consumer Research made by the Editorial Committee, which were then submitted to a double blind review.

One criticism of the dominant research practices in the tradition that can be traced back to CCT is presented in the paper by Søren Askegaard and Jeppe Trolle Linnet from the University of Southern Denmark,

The authors claim that a highly individualized, experiential focus has dominated most of consumer research, and feel that this individual-centred approach suffers from many limitations. In particular, the authors recognize currents of thinking - inside and outside CCT - which pay attention to the socially and culturally embedded consumer, and hope for the development of research that gives greater weight to the context (social, cultural, political and institutional) in which individuals act. Indeed, the understanding of this broad and multi-layered question must constitute a challenge for interpretive research.

The paper by Georgios Patsiaouras and James A. Fitchett from the University of Leicester, School of Management draws researchers attention again to the work of Veblen, who has been extensively quoted in the literature on marketing and consumer research, above all with reference to the concept of 'conspicuous consumption', while little consideration has been paid to the substance of Veblen's arguments and ideas. With a study based on the use of various methodological approaches, the authors draw broader conclusions about how ostentatious consumption activities and the notion of prestige are perceived nowadays by adult, middle-income British consumers, and also identify how the motivations underlying conspicuous consumption practices substantiate the core of Veblen's observations on consumers' expectations and insecurities.

The question addressed in the paper by Daniele Dalli (University of Pisa), Simona Romani (University of Sassari) and Hamdi Sadeh (Al Quds Open University – Hebron, West Bank) is the difficulty in applying theories developed through Western researchers' contributions in other cultural contexts. The authors present a study on consumer–brand relationships on the West Bank, one of the Palestinian territories. Their main theoretical concern is to consider the reproduction–resistance dimension of West Bank consumption practices and address this topic by examining the relationships (positive and negative) that West Bank consumers develop with consumer goods brands. They adopt the perspective of local subjects and local theories of human and social behaviour, also involving young Palestinian consumers in their analysis.

The question of consumer resistance is the subject of various studies on consumer behaviour. The paper by Lionel Sitz looks in depth at the concept of resistance from the point of view of consumers' everyday life. The study offers extensive and fruitful insights into the layers of mundane resistance, developing their connections to the complexities of representations, elaboration, integration and social embeddedness. The research is based on the examination of consumer discourses, and discusses the fundamental links between sense-making and sense-giving processes in defining relationships with market institutions and devices. Considering resistance and power as experiential concepts, the author examines the discursive construction of their manifestations.

The paper by Kristine de Valck (HEC School of Management, Paris), Joonas Rokka, (Helsinki School of Economics), and Joel Hietanen (Helsinki School of Economics) deals with the methodological challenges in consumer research, considering in detail the question of videography. Consumer researchers are increasingly adopting videography to study consumers and markets. The authors provide a valuable review of the state of the art in terms of the application and potential contribution of videography. The paper also points to the long-running debate on representation that is animating all the disciplines related to qualitative inquiry, analysing not only the practical skills, but also the theoretical implications. The authors discuss how theory and practice in documentary film and visual ethnography may strengthen the use of this method, and test their insights with a videography about the paintball marketplace culture.

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