Developing Managerial Contributions from Consumer Culture Theory Research

JULIEN CAYLA
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
Giana Eckhardt
University of London

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Developing Managerial Contributions from Consumer Culture Theory Research

Session Chairs:

Julien Cayla, Associate Professor of Marketing, Nanyang Business School*

Giana M. Eckhardt, Professor of Marketing, Royal Holloway University of London

*Submitting Session Chair

Crafting Customer Experience in Contexts of Logic Multiplicity: Lessons from the Field of Luxury

Jean-Baptiste Welté, University of Paris and Director at Méthos

Julien Cayla, Nanyang Business School*

Eileen Fischer, Schulich School of Business, York University*

Utopian Consumption: New Perspectives and Managerial Implications for Marketing

Aleksandrina Atanasova, Royal Holloway, University of London*

Giana M. Eckhardt, Royal Holloway, University of London*

Katharina C. Husemann, Royal Holloway, University of London*

Employer Brands as Status Shields: Protecting Professional Identities from Social Stigma

Kushagra Bhatnagar, Aalto University School of Business*

Julien Cayla, Nanyang Business School*

Eric Arnould, Aalto University School of Business

Discussant:

Kapil Tuli, Singapore Management University*

*Will be participating in the session

Declaration:
Each presenter has agreed to register for the conference and to present the paper, if the proposal is accepted; none of the papers has been submitted to other conference tracks, and none have previously been presented at EMAC.

Abstract

Interpretive consumer research has had significant impact on the development of consumer research scholarship. As evidence of this impact, three of the most cited articles in the *Journal of Consumer Research* stem from interpretive research (Belk ,1988; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Fournier, 1998).

Leading marketing journals, on the lookout for strong connections between research and practice have committed to opening up to ‘all topics, methods and levels of analyses’ (Moorman et al 2019, p. 6). There have also been several calls from industry to complement sophisticated quantitative techniques that work with ever larger data sets, with an attention to sensemaking (Madjsberg, 2017). Sensemaking, defined as “wisdom grounded in the humanities” and “the exact opposite of algorithmic thinking” (p. 6), is argued to be a necessary complement to the proliferation of big data. Interpretive marketing researchers, given their focus on *in situ,* fine-grained studies of market actors’ practices, are ideally placed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and contextualize consumer and marketplace actions (e.g. Workman, 1993; Gebhardt, Carpenter & Sherry, 2006).

Yet, even as interpretive research is well represented in academic consumer research, its impact in marketing scholarship and practice remains more circumscribed (i.e. seventeen interpretive papers in JCR vs. two papers in JM in the past two years). Deriving managerially-relevant insight and recommendations from interpretive research, in a way that top-tier marketing journals such as *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research* expect, has been rather rare (notable exceptions, among others, are Cayla & Arnould, 2013; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). The goal of this special session is to showcase how interpretive research can uncover much-needed managerially-relevant insight in compelling ways.

Three interpretive studies, targeted to or under review at marketing journals, shed light on the process of framing sharp research questions and building on existing theory to analyze empirical material – all to develop managerially-relevant insights and recommendations. With these interpretive research strategies, we hope to provide the larger marketing scholarly community with a glimpse into the potential for managerial insight present within interpretive research. As a corollary, we also hope for significant change in the norms and practices of non-academic marketing research.

The first paper in this session, Crafting Customer Experience in Contexts of Logic Multiplicity: Lessons from the Field of Luxury, addresses two research questions: Can a single logic be effectively enforced in a field like luxury retailing while facilitating favorable customer experiences? And can multiple logics be leveraged to enhance customer experience? Based on an analysis of extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in luxury stores, and on interviews with managers of luxury venues, the authors find that attempts to enforce a single logic could elicit unfavorable emotional reactions from consumers who are influenced by multiple logics. Further, they find that multiple logics can be leveraged through strategies of spatial and relational hybridization. The authors offer managers practical insights on how to instantiate this hybridity by designing hybrid spaces and adapting interactional patterns between salespeople and customers. The second paper, Utopian Consumption: New Perspectives and Managerial Implications for Marketing, suggests that the nature of contemporary modernity challenges established norms of utopian thinking, and new utopian blueprints are now shaping consumers desires in new ways. Today, consumers' utopian visions are: immediate (not postponed to the future), hyper-individualized (not collective), endless (defined by insatiable pursuit for betterment), and are focused on an escape from something critiqued, rather a run toward something desired. We illustrate how re-conceptualizing utopian desire through a liquid lens allows marketers to decode consumers' contemporary utopian propensities with an improved analytical focus and to build liquid utopian visions that are in sync with the unique characteristics of the present. The final paper, Employer Brands as Status Shields: Protecting Professional Identities from Social Stigma, highlights the importance of understanding the employee-brand relationship as a two-way interaction. Where previous research and practice sees the frontline employee as an embodiment of the organizational brand, especially in service firms, this study finds that frontline employees exploit their employer's consumer-facing brand work to shield their imperilled professional identities. Workers' identities are under twin threats, from culturally specific social stigmas associated with hotel work, and from the deskilling and routinization of scripted interactive service work. The authors offer managerially relevant recommendations to codify the employer brand so as to make it a more powerful identity-shield for newer employees.

To further elucidate how managerial insights can be derived from interpretive marketing research, Kapil Tuli from Singapore Management University will comment on the potential for interpretive marketing research to contribute to marketing practice. Professor Tuli received the Long Term Impact Award for his 2007 article published in the *Journal of Marketing* on customer solutions. This work mobilized qualitative research, including interviews and discussions with managers, to develop new ways of thinking about customer solutions. He is thus well positioned to comment on the merits of our strategies and share his perspective on how to successfully translate interpretive research into practitioner-relevant insights.

Crafting Customer Experience in Contexts of Logic Multiplicity: Lessons from the Field of Luxury

Jean-Baptiste Welté, University of Paris and Director at Méthos
Julien Cayla, Nanyang Business School
Eileen Fischer, Schulich School of Business, York University

Trying to craft customer experiences effectively is a growing concern for marketers in many industries (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). What has yet to be considered, however, are the challenges that may be posed for those attempting to manage customer experiences in industries or fields characterized by multiple "institutional logics." The term institutional logics refers to "socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Fields that feature logic multiplicity are influenced not by one pervasive logic but rather by multiple logics that become diffused and institutionalized (Besharov & Smith, 2014) and research suggests that multiple, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary logics are pervasive in many fields (e.g Dunn & Jones, 2010; Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). In such fields, stakeholders of various kinds - including owners, investors, marketing managers, service providers and customers -- could be influenced by more than a single logic. And there is evidence that the broadly defined field of retailing, where crafting customer experiences is increasingly regarded as critical, multiple logics are to be expected. For example, in the fashion subfield, retailers must reckon with both artistic and commercial logics (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Further, retailers in the subfield of yoga services must navigate medical, spiritual, fitness and commercial logics (Ertimur & Coskuner-Bali, 2015).

This paper explores the management of customer experience in a major retail subfield, that of luxury. This field is of particular interest both because of its economic significance and because, on a theoretical level, it constitutes a field where managers have long been advised to concentrate on enforcing a single logic: the logic of distinction. For example, recent research has encouraged managers of contemporary luxury servicescapes to use them as “class brokers” (Dion & Borraz, 2017), excluding those less desirable, lower status consumers who are encouraged to feel they do not belong, while acknowledging the status of more desirable consumers through specific “gestures, vocabulary, knowledge and practices” (p. 80). Arguing in a similar spirit, (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009) advocate applying strict rules and codes to luxury interactions that will preserve its association with the upper end of a status hierarchy.

Given that luxury retailing represents a domain where managers have been advised to persevere in upholding a logic of distinction and to police the incursion of actors and actions that might violate this logic, our investigation of this domain affords us the opportunity to answer three related research questions. First, can a single logic be maintained in a subfield like luxury retailing? Second, if other logics have gained a foothold in the field, through what practices can negative impacts on customer experience be diluted when logics conflict? And third, can logic multiplicity be leveraged to enhance customer experience?

To answer these questions, we conducted several months of ethnographic fieldwork in luxury stores, including 51 days of observation in 28 stores; 112 interviews with luxury consumers; and 14 interviews with managers of luxury brands. We analyzed this data using an iterative, abductive approach.

In answering our initial research question, we find that while the logic of distinction does deeply influence stakeholders in the field of luxury retailing, two other logics, both common in other subfields of retailing, are also influential. These are the logics of hedonism and of pragmatism. In answering our second question, we find two approaches to diluting the impact of conflicting logics. The first is Selection, i.e. Selectively recruiting customers aligned with one logic. The second is Sequestration, i.e. using spaces to cater to one logic versus others, whether this be different physical spaces in the same store, or different stores, or online and offline. In answering our third research question, we find two ways in which logic multiplicity can be leveraged to enhance customer experience. The first is sequencing: first offer customers what one logic dictates (e.g. hedonic experience or pragmatic experience), then invite them to experiences commensurate with additional logics. The second is Synergizing: offering customers experiences that simultaneously blend logics.

Our approach to generating managerial insights is first to generate a more comprehensive and detailed account of what happens in the realm of luxury retailing. By attending to the way managers think about and implement retail strategies, but also by observing what happens in luxury spaces in situ, we seek to transform the unfamiliar context of luxury retail into a more familiar one. This follows earlier attempts to make managerial actions and ways of organizing more explicit and intelligible (Cayla & Arnould, 2013; Zwick & Cayla, 2011). At the same time, in the spirit of discovery-oriented research (Wells, 1993), we attend to parts of our data that help disrupt prevailing conceptions of luxury. Our approach to developing managerial insights is abductive in emphasizing the importance of being sensitive to surprise and anomalies (Chauviré, 2005; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). The surprises come from the moments of friction between managerial logics and consumer logics, for instance in the way pragmatic consumers may resist the logic of distinction. These gaps and surprises and the interplay between observation and ideas are critical to developing both managerial as well as theoretical insights.

Utopian Consumption: New Perspectives and Managerial Implications for Marketing

Aleksandrina Atanasova, Royal Holloway, University of London
Giana M. Eckhardt, Royal Holloway, University of London
Katharina C. Husemann, Royal Holloway, University of London

Within the very essence of what it is to be human is our propensity to "measure the life 'as it is' by a life as it should be" (Bauman, 2003). For centuries, this human quest for better life has been converging within the notion of utopia—a construct broadly understood to mean an impossibility, a fantasy, a place that does not exist, or collectively pursued vision for a better world or a perfect society. At the heart of the utopian imagination is our timeless aspiration toward fulfilling needs that are currently unmet in life as-is—that is, our desire to bridge the implicit "scarcity gap" between needs and satisfactions (Levitas, 1990). This is a quintessentially consumerist orientation with apparent contextual implications for consumers' worldviews and behaviors, which if applied robustly and analytically (rather than descriptively) can enable marketers to draw rich theoretical and practical insights from contemporary consumption phenomena.

As a heuristic tool, the concept of utopia has thus far been mostly used to unravel consumption in "emblematic marketing institutions" with "essentially Utopian or quasi-utopian function" such as immersive consumption-scapes or collective movements (Brown, Maclaran & Stevens, 1996, p.676). This theorization has allowed for a plethora of consumption contexts and performances to be studied from a utopian (or heterotopian) lens—from festivals (Kozinets, 2001; 2002), neighborhoods (Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Bradshaw, 2012), shopping malls (Maclaran & Brown, 2005; Murtola, 2010), cruise ships (Kollberg, 2016) and political-consumerist movements (Bossy, 2014), to tattoo parlors (Roux, 2014) and social media platforms (Kozinets, 2019). This analytical perspective has been largely grounded in utopian visions for a better life that are collective, holistic, forward-looking, rooted in hope, with an end point in sight.

Our present context of individualization, liquidity, fragmentation, focus on the present (not the future) and dissolution of traditional societal structures (c.f. Bauman, 2007), however, challenges these established norms and guides a substantially different orientation toward desired future and present; how we imagine the life that "should be" and how we materialize this vision today, bears little resemblance to the utopian visions of the past. This shift is of particular importance to practitioners because traditional utopian logics have long been guiding marketers in pursuing perfectly satisfied consumers via "creation, stimulation and exploitation of our Utopian appetites" (Brown et al. 1996, p.676). Yet, our knowledge of consumers' utopian urges today and how they influence individuals' wants and needs is limited. In this paper, we set out to revisit utopian desire in the context of contemporary modernity, to define the new logics of contemporary utopian praxis and to re-contextualize the concept of utopia as an analytical lens that is uniquely positioned to reveal novel managerial insights, pertinent to the nuances of contemporary modernity.

Utopian desires vary markedly in content, expression and form across places and time; as a result, utopias are always embedded in their context and continuously re-emerge from the aspirations germane to the present moment. In consequence, following Bauman (2003; 2013), we suggest that utopian visions today have turned their gaze away from collectivist, future-oriented escapes, toward liquid, fragmented and individualized expressions of desire, materialized here and now, without delay. Our contemporaneous circumstances of economic volatility, acceleration, environmental decline and extreme political polarization have radically reframed our utopian urges and have fueled a sense of urgency, pessimism and acute need for living to the fullest and in the moment, propelled by the instant gratification mentality that has infused our every-day. In turn, unlike solid utopias where the envisioned "upgrade" is nested in a conditionally distant future, the liquid utopias of our contemporary context are short-lived and immediate, enabling instantenous transformation of the present. Resembling "hunts" for betterment and satisfaction, liquid utopias are rooted not in hope but in wants and materialized daily by the insatiable *homo consumens* (Bauman 2007)—a "sensation seeker" constantly searching for something desired to be consumed, without a saturation point in sight.

We have already begun to see the implications of the emergent influence of liquid utopian perspectives in shaping global trends. For instance, digital nomadism—a lifestyle migration phenomenon uniquely characteristic for our contemporary liquid times—is transforming the nature of the global workforce and socio-economic landscapes (Pofeldt, 2018). Powered by globalization and technological acceleration, digital nomadism has emerged as a global counter-movement where large cohorts of demographically diverse consumers choose to let go of most of their possessions and serially relocate, working off of their laptops and building lifestyles outside of the margins of traditional societal structures of 9-5 work life, homeownership and predictable career trajectories (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). The liquid utopian theorization suggested here allows us to see that digital nomads engage in hyper-individualized pursuits of utopian desire toward a better way of being and living in the world, where the "hunt" for the next best place and experience is insatiable, and where their critique of rigid, solid, structures propels an urge for a perpetual escape from the constraints of societal expectations. Vividly capturing the nuances of these consumers' behaviors, a liquid utopian lens allows marketers to better understand their motivations—geared toward experiences (not possessions), immediacy (not long-term benefit), short-lived indulgence, and extreme personalization and individualization—and to create appealing offerings in turn.

Our theorization specifically offers marketers insight on how to leverage the conditions that frame the new logics of the liquid utopian mindset. We suggest that consumption practices that align with consumers' new utopian visions would be immediate, "lived, rather than being lived towards" (Bauman in Jacobsen & Tester, 2007); hyper-individualized, instead of collective; endless, resembling a perpetual hunt for the next best thing; manifesting as a series of "happy moments succeeding each other," not a uniform pursuit of a single vision (Bauman, 2002, p. 240); and emerging as an escape from something critiqued, rather a run toward something desired. With this work we contribute to understanding utopian desire from a contemporary vantage point with direct relevance for marketers catering to consumers' implicit and explicit desires.

Employer Brands as Status Shields: Protecting Professional Identities from Social Stigma

Kushagra Bhatnagar, Aalto University School of Business*

Julien Cayla, Nanyang Business School*

Eric Arnould, Aalto University School of Business

Interactive service workers are amongst the most underpaid and overworked professionals in the world. What makes matters worse is that they also find themselves at the lower end of professional prestige and status. In occupations such as waiters, concierges, front office workers, they also have to contend with customers who feel entitled to workers' emotional labor, deference and servility. This lack of status and prestige becomes even more acute where work is tainted by associations of low morality, marked by high levels of perceived sexualization and is seen by many as lacking professionalism and expertise (Otis, 2011). In addition, some cultures have a history of looking down upon and demeaning interactive service work as dirty or undignified work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Ray & Qayum, 2009). All these aspects of hospitality work threaten employees' professional identities and can lead to low self-esteem.

Hotel workers, as a collective, can often have high entitativity, the feeling of belonging to a distinct subgroup that has clear boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Hamilton, Sherman & Rodgers, 2007). Clear boundaries between in and out-group members also means that workers have recourse to a shared occupational ideology that they can exploit when they want to protect their professional identities and status (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). For instance, fishermen can claim to be macho and masculine, nurses can draw on discourses of motherly care, and nuclear scientists can speak of the neutrality and progressive principles of the scientific method (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014).

Yet, even in geographies such as Indian and China where hotel work has a history of being socially stigmatized, burgeoning tourism has escalated demand for service workers

(Nandwani, 2019). To make themselves more attractive to potential recruits, most service firms develop some sort of employer branding and in-house nomenclature. On the one hand research shows that service firms look to produce the perfect organizational agent, a fully branded service worker who brings the organizational brand to life (Ogbonna & Harris, 2002; Sirianni et al., 2013). Firms try to equip workers with appropriate training and socialization so that the customer gets consistent and differentiated service experience. On the other hand, critical organizational research points to the disciplinary and control aspects of organizational branding - how the employer can co-opt the meaning-making that is part of everyday interactive service work.

In this study, we draw on cultural branding and stigma-management literature to understand how the organizational brand can be an emancipatory resource, a sort of status shield for interactive service workers. through an ethnography of hotel work in an Indian metropolis, formal interviews with 29 staff members, more than 50 informal interviews and almost 800 hours of participant observation. The hotel is part of a large Indian conglomerate with a diversified portfolio of organizations in different business sectors.

We contribute to the stream of research on professional stigma management and organizational branding by identifying three novel ways in which workers protect their social and professional esteem by exploiting their employer's branding work. Past research finds workers attempt to legitimize the necessity or criticality of their occupations, doubling-down on their in-group membership. In contrast, we find that workers draw on the organizational master-brand to to break out of hotel work's entitativity and distance themselves from the stigmatized in-group. Secondly, workers also draw on brand activation such as employee recognition events to bridge the social and power distance between customers and workers, another way in which workers are able to protect their status. Thirdly, workers draw on the codification of the employer brand essence to reframe customer interactions from scripted and routinized exchange to embedded people-work.

Our study offers two managerially relevant insights, especially powerful in cultural or occupational contexts where service workers find themselves stigmatized or marginalized. First, managers should find and leverage new source myths for their brands that take a clear ethical or moral stance. Producing interactive services is a socio-cultural accomplishment in addition to dyadic exchange, and morally strong myths can enable service interactions to be less prone to stigma and delegitimization. Second, managers should try to get their "employer brand" and their customer-facing brand as close to and consistent with each other as possible.

The threat to interactive service workers' professional identity and thus to their satisfactions and well-being comes not just from immediate customers but also from other social relations, who will largely see the customer-facing side of the brand.

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