halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

The coming out of the "new consumer": Towards the theorisation of the concept in consumer research

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Research background and objectives

In order to go beyond the dominant utilitarian logic so far utilized in consumer behaviour research, the Consumer Culture Theory CCT established by Arnould and Thompson since 2005 is presented as a new revolution in the studies focusing on the consumer behaviour and the consumption field. The CCT states that the individual behaves and consumes in an autotelic and a symbolic way (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005) within a temporal frame, living his action as a personal experience or as a shared game (Holt, 1995). Consequently, the consumer behaviour can't be understood without taking into account all the dimensions of his consumption such as: ideological, social, cultural, symbolic and experiential consumption in its context (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). From a theoretical perspective, new marketing concepts have emerged with the changing of the consumer status from passive to active in the postmodern context that highlights the shift of power from sellers to buyers and the coming out of the "new consumer". This article reviews the extensive, multidisciplinary body of literature relating to consumer behaviour studies. It draws upon this diversity of research to show the scope of this fascinating area and to identify areas of commonality within and between different research studies. This paper attempts to follow the evolution of the consumer representations in the marketing literature and the emerging paradigm of the "new consumer".

The evolution of the consumer representations in the marketing literature: the paradigm of the "new consumer"?

In the marketing literature, the CCT researchers highlighted the concept of active and subjective consumer. Besides this idea, the concept of the "new consumer" is now considered as a topic of research in marketing to better understand the consumer behaviour, the characteristics of his consumption and the meanings of his consumption experiences. Through a review of marketing literature, we have been able to identify five dimensions that allow us to clarify this new concept related to CCT philosophy. The main features of the "new consumer" behaviour might be classified according to the following aspects: experiential and hedonistic, responsible and ethical, postmodern and paradoxical, appropriation and re-appropriation, resistance and empowerment, co-production and participation.

A "new consumer": experiential and hedonistic

Since the 1960s, the consumption field has gradually disengaged from an utilitarian vision, based on the value usage. Baudrillard (1970) highlighted the fact that consumption has become, in the 70s, an activity of production of meanings and a field of symbolic exchanges: consumers do not consume the products, but rather, the meaning of these products and the image they convey. According to Baudrillard, "consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of abundance, it is not defined by the food we digest, or by the clothes one puts on, but by organizing the whole elements within a meaningful substance" (1970, p. 32). The 1980s saw the aestheticism of everyday life and its corollary, hedonism, infiltrates the field of consumer research in marketing (Lipovetsky, 2003). The consumer is then gradually seen as an emotional individual seeking sensitive experiences (Maffesoli, 1990) provided by his interaction with products and services of the consumption system. There is thus incorporation of meanings under the form of experiences. In this sense, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) theorized the consumer experience as a subjective and personal experience, often emotionally charged. Furthermore, the notion of experience constitutes a kind of

halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

cornerstone of the Consumer Culture Theory of Arnould and Thompson (2005). Indeed, emotion and subjectivity can be found at the heart of the differentiation of consumption experiences lived by the consumer. Therefore, the experiential dimension might supplement or exceed the traditional analytical framework, which suggests the rationality of the individual and his consumption. This led researchers in the consumer behaviour field (Bourgeon and Filser, 1995) to replace the functional and the utilitarian view of consumption by the so-called experiential view that gives a huge place to hedonistic values and subjectivity. Thus, in a large number of the activities he pursues, the "new consumer" seeks less to maximize profit and claims more hedonistic gratification in a social context. It is no longer just "shopping" but "experiencing" and usually experiences called "embedded" because they appeal to every sense of the individual (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). Authors have emphasized the increasing quest for experiences where the consumer can immerse him/herself and explore a multiplicity of new meanings to his/her life (Firat and Dholakia, 1998). It is the full immersion in an original experience that provides a unique and unforgettable pleasure to the consumer (Carù and Cova, 2006). In the experiential perspective the consumer is not a passive actor who responds to stimuli, but an active actor and a producer of his own consumption experiences.

A new consumer responsible and ethic: the value system at the heart of the consumption experience

The *new consumer* expresses a responsible behaviour and engages himself within his consumption practices. The consumer behaviour researchers who apply the CCT paradigm have studied his ideology and criticism of marketing. In their works, Remy (2004) and Özçaglar-Toulouse (2005) highlighted the multiplicity of the representations related to the responsible consumption while exploring the meaning that the consumer gives to this kind of consumption. The responsible consumption that gives an ethic meaning and a social utility to the act of purchase, allows the consumer to develop a thoughtful approach to his consumption. In the marketing literature, a number of concepts such as *green consumer* and *prosumer* (Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2005) derived from the CCT paradigm have been used by researchers to point out the responsible and the eco-friendly behaviour of today's consumers. This kind of responsible consumption reflects the fact that the consumer who becomes aware of his economic power, decides to behave according to his own value system. His main ideology is to consume and purchase consumption items only if it is really necessary. Thus, a number of movements based on the CCT philosophy have been developed around the concept of the responsible consumer. In the research focusing on the consumer responsibility towards the environment, marketing researchers talk about the "eco-consumer" who thinks in term of the social and the environmental consequences of his act of consumption. In order to behave responsibly, this consumer incorporates fair-trade goods within his consumption. The reasons that justify the motivation of the consumer to be responsible might be: "product safety, environmental impact, employees welfare…etc" (Crane, 2001, p.361). These reasons are all conscious or unconscious ways to reveal the face of political goods (Chessel and Cochoy, 2004) and build an ethic of consumption (Smith, 1990). The responsible consumption can't be addressed through a traditional approach of marketing; it is indeed a complex phenomenon (Shaw and Clarke, 1999) characterized by a large divergence in consumer practices (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook, 1993). The incorporation by professionals of values such as responsibility and ethic that claims the *new consumer* has initiated a change in the way of production and commerce (charters prohibit child labour, decent working conditions, respect of the environment, etc…).

halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

The postmodern paradigm: a theoretical Framework to understand the paradoxical behaviour of the new consumer

In marketing, authors have criticized the foundations of modernism in the field of consumption and pointed out the idea that consumption and production are not just economic acts but also cultural processes. Indeed, the modernism has transformed the individual into a hesitant actor within a rational economic system that provides less emotions, symbolism and spirit (Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2005). The criticism of the modern consumer society has given rise to new forms of consumption underling the transition phase of the modern era to the postmodern era. Thus, postmodernity refers to a structural change in the individual and the society related to the end of the industrial era and the advent of the information and communication era that we know today (Decrop, 2008). The theoretical foundation of postmodernism defined by Lyotard (1979) focuses on the following philosophical principles: (1) the subject is fragmented: the influence of the unconscious and socio-cultural structures versus the idea of a reasonable and autonomous individual; (2) the truth does not exist: the criticism of science, reason and progress; and (3) the distinctions disappear: juxtaposition.

Authors in marketing have been largely influenced by the works of sociologists such as those of Lyotard to offer an adequate definition to study the paradoxical behaviour of the *new consumer*. A recent article of Decrop (2008) highlights some postmodern paradoxes of the consumer behaviour according to six characteristics: the desire to be alone and together, masculine and feminine, nomadic and sedentary, real and virtual, Kairos and Kronos, and finally a quest for old and new. The first characteristic of the paradoxical behaviour of the new consumer is closely related to the Information and Communication era where Internet and mobile phones are an integral part of the consumer daily life. These tools enable the consumer to stay permanently connected with friends and colleagues, and at the same time increase his isolation and the dehumanization of human relations. Therefore, other forms of socialization have emerged thanks to the use of Information and Communication Technologies ICTs. Among these forms, authors in marketing talk about "tribes" of consumers (Cova, 1995; 2003), which might be real or virtual. These consumer tribes get to gather individuals who share the same interests and have common passions for activities (role-playing games, food, etc.) or brands (Apple, Microsoft, Nike, etc.). Here, there is a willingness of the individual to reconstruct a family elsewhere with the logic of "me first, but not alone" (Sansaloni, 2006). This explains the popularity of virtual social networks (Facebook, Myspace, etc.) in the postmodern consumer society. The second characteristic shows that the erosion of boundaries between masculine values (bravery, power, etc.) and feminine values (peace, kindness, etc.) enhances the paradoxical behaviour of the postmodern individual. Therefore, more and more women become independent and adopt masculine behaviours; men in turn are feminized (androgynous, metrosexual[1]) adopting feminine values conveyed by advertising (Jean-Paul Gaultier's collection with the Male, the market of cosmetics for men, etc.). The third characteristic of the paradoxical behaviour reflects the need to be nomadic and sedentary at the same time. Nomadism as defined by the sociologist Maffesoli (2006) is a direct consequence of postmodernism, which liberates the individual from his traditional ties by expanding his anchor points. The postmodern consumer is then facing a paradox: he wants to move and to stay, seeking for somewhere else but like at home. The kairos and kronos paradox as defined by Sansaloni (2006), reflects our relationship to time. In his book the "non-consumer", Sansaloni distinguishes between the two concepts. Kairos means the real time "the instant transformed into action" while Kronos refers to "the

[1] A metrosexual is a heterosexual urban man who enjoys shopping, fashion, and similar interests traditionally associated with women or homosexual men (Oxford Dictionary)

measurable time flowing linearly " (Sansaloni, 2006, p. 157). From the marketing side, we can notice the example of the Italian trend of "slow food" by opposition to the American concept of "fast food". Another paradox "real and virtual" is based on the idea of "hyper-reality" in the postmodern society, which refers to the attrition of boundaries between the real and the virtual world. Video games, dating websites such as *Meetic* and realistic games such as *Second Life* are indeed behind the emergence of this new paradox. Finally, the last paradox "old and new" reflects the fact that the *new consumer* requires the "old" and the nostalgic objects, which have to be updated by including the new technology.

A new consumer competent and empowered

The postmodern consumer is perceived as competent because he disposes of different kinds of knowledge. This supposes that the new consumer knows how to select, organize, combine and integrate this set of knowledge within an environment of constraints and resources. Competence is then defined as a contextualized know-how. Therefore, it requires a validation of the environment as well as the recognition by others, particularly by members of the tribe. Thus, since the consolidation of the CCT in 2005, researchers in marketing (Batat, 2006; Batat, 2008; Bonnemaizon and Batat, 2010a, 2010b) started to study the concept of competence. These works propose to establish a conceptual and semantic transfer, which marks the transition from the consumer expertise (the cognitive dimension defined in the traditional approach of marketing) to the consumer competence (a multidisciplinary concept related to the CCT paradigm). Following the CCT paradigm, the competence refers to the implementation of different types of knowledge, behaviours, experiences, and problem-solving process. Differentiated from the expertise, the competence can be created and used in different contexts. In this sense, the competent consumer is the one who, having acquired knowledge through his own experiences in a specific area, will be able to use it in other situations of consumption to satisfy his symbolic and tangible needs. The consumer thus combines knowledge, know-how and social skills, which are essential to make his choice and value judgment. In the CCT philosophy, authors such as Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) utilize the concept of the consumer empowerment to underline the consumer ability to control his choices and get more control on the relationship with the companies. Other authors talk about the consumer agency (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), which points out the fact that value creation is closely linked to the consumer performance, which requires competencies and ability to create a sense of his consumption activity and generate a creative knowledge. This creative learning through the diversion offers a source of innovation and sustainable competitive advantage for the company.

A new consumer co-producer: putting consumer to work

In the postmodern society, the product usage requires a dual decision: purchasing the product and using it. In all cases, the consumer attempts to identify three elements involved in the decision and the usage process. The first one is the project. It's the anticipation of what he is going to do with the product. It is more or less a clear anticipation, more or less assumed, which often changes with use. The second one is the tangible product itself, and finally the third one is the function assigned to the product. This usage shows that the new consumers are very active in creating their own culture. They invent their own culture with its codes, practices and languages. Companies thus face the development of a re-appropriation process of the consumer who attempts to escape the consumer experience imposed by producers. The consumer becomes a producer (Cova, 2008) able to create a new meaning of the company's offer (Certeau, 1990) to fit with his needs. The joint production of goods and services between the company and the customer is not a new idea; for example fast food or supermarkets have gained some of their success through the customer participation in order to

halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

reduce production costs. Historically, consumer participation in service production was first studied as a strategy to improve productivity by using the client as a free labour, thereby achieving a lower price (Fitzsimmons, 1985; Mills and Morris, 1986). In the CCT perspective, a number of works proposes to expand the consumer participation to the experiential domain, because it helps to guide the consumer towards an ordinary consumption experience, which brings him satisfaction (Ladwein, 2004). Dujarier (2008) shows in her book "the consumer work" that the co-producer status of the consumer is a direct consequence of the consumer empowerment thanks to the use of digital equipments as well as ICTs and Internet as a source of information. Indeed, with the democratization of the use of digital technologies and multimedia products, new behaviours in terms of creation and sharing information on consumption have emerged through online communities. These consumers who are co-producers of content have become more influential and are often seen as a serious source of information. This participation in terms of production and dissemination of information is becoming essential for media groups and the audiovisual sector who attempt to implement a policy to enhance the collaboration with the consumer who is able to produce, disseminate and influence through his online social network.

Conclusion

This literature review highlighted the specific features and main characteristics (hedonic and experiential, ethical, responsible and paradoxical, appropriation and re-appropriation, resistance and empowerment, participation and co-production) of the new consumer explained through the consumer culture theory CCT, which allows us to understand the paradigm related to the postmodern era in marketing and consumer behaviour research (Cova and Cova, 2009; Thompson, 2000; Thompson and Troester, 2002). These characteristics reflect four principle dimensions: the digital and the interactive context of the new consumer, the importance of meaning creation within consumption experiences in a social context, the competence and the resistance of the new consumer and finally the participation and the co-creation of offers and value with suppliers. These characteristics are enhanced by the fact that the new communication modalities from blogs to YouTube videos to wikis to podcasts and Really Simple Syndication, to message boards and advances in technologies have enabled new types of experiences and enhanced consumer collaboration and participation within his experiences by acquiring new and digital competencies. As a result, the new consumer becomes an economic market actor able to co-create value with suppliers. Thus, there is an ongoing structural shift in the why, who, what, where and how of value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Research on how customers engage in the co-creation processes as envisaged by the Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic paradigm (Vargo and Lusch, 2008) is an emerging topic, and scant research has been published on frameworks for organizations to manage the co-creation process. The coming out of the new consumer who is viewed as co-creator of value has opened up discussion and stimulated new ways of thinking around a number of theoretical aspects and related managerial implications. Therefore, the idea of putting the new consumer to work is at the heart of the company's policy and strategy. The companies and marketers should focus more on the symbolic and the experiential behaviours of the new consumer by adapting their offers as well as co-creating and sharing value with him. In this sense, authors such as Vargo and Lusch have pointed out through their concept of Service-Dominant Logic "S-D logic", the need for companies to get closer with their clients, recognize their abilities and get involved in the co-creation process of value with the new consumer who is empowered, well informed, competent and responsible.

halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

halshs-00597650, version 1 - 3 Jun 2011

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