



Articulating consumers through practices of vernacular creativity

Douglas Brownlie ^{a,*}, Paul Hewer ^{b,*}

^a Professor of Marketing, University of Stirling, School of Management, Cottrell Building, Stirling, FK9 4LA Scotland, UK

^b Senior Lecture in Marketing, University of Strathclyde, Department of Marketing, Stenhouse Building, Cathedral Street, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

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Summary The paper discusses the constitution of the consuming subject in lifestyle practices of belonging and difference, taste and choice in the material circumstances of everyday living. It considers how lived moments of mundane activity can be understood, not simply as sites of social reproduction and unknowing regulation, but as fields of invention, transformation and reflexive struggle. In particular we unpack the contribution to be gleaned from a thoughtful return to *De Certeau et al. (1998)*, a theorist of practice whose lucidly insightful works, we claim, remain largely silenced within contemporary debates over the turn to practice in consumer research (*Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009*). It is argued that current conceptions of practice within management and marketing find themselves corralled by the authoritative legacy of the works of *Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990)* which has the effect of marginalizing other traditions of practice theorising: here consumption practices are formatted into logics of rational calculation. We suggest that the work of *de Certeau* offers an alternative to reductive discursive accountings, revealing the emergent and material character of mundane sense and deed, where the ordinary is figured as the realm par excellence of improvised vernacular consumption practices. In seeking to repair mechanistic underpinnings by linking practices and structure in the everyday lifestyle work of consumers, we hope to turn our gaze towards the moral and political character of that which practice theory calls forth. Born of necessity such practice laughs in the face of *Bourdieu's* dismissal of the 'choice of necessity'.

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Introduction

"[h]uman reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be" (*Sartre, 2003: 498*)

Sartre seems to be saying that practice articulates and invigorates our social worlds. Taking this at face value, we

could say that lifestyle practices, those of belonging, difference, taste and choice articulate and energize consumer capitalism. We might then add that principles of agency and autonomy situate the consuming subject within circuits of practice which unfold in the struggles of everyday living. With such ideas the paper seeks to articulate the prominence of practice as the dynamic of meaningful action within lifestyle architectures constitutive of consumer culture. It does so in the context of a diverse multiplicity of grammars of consumer identity that, while materializing in the regularities of practice as consuming agents represent themselves to themselves, are seen to subvert binary relations and the effects of their regulative force. Substantive models of the

* Corresponding authors.
E-mail addresses: douglas.brownlie@stir.ac.uk (D. Brownlie),
paul.hewer@strath.ac.uk (P. Hewer).

consuming subject are shown to locate the productive and transformative possibilities of agency in the doing of practical action and practical sense. They enlist the work of various practice theorists to frame lived moments of identity work as expressed in the artful, often subversive, bricolage of the ordinary, the mundane and the everyday.

Seeking to negotiate space for the creative agency of consuming subjects within 'practice theory' (Schatzki, 2001: 3), the paper claims ontological priority for *culture as praxis* (Bauman, 1999), for cultural materials as they call themselves into being in lived moments of the everyday. This it sees as a pre-reflexive matrix of conditions of intelligibility which shapes social practice and is shaped by it. Indeed Gherardi (2000) observes that "*practice is both our production of the world and the result of this process*" (Gherardi, 2000: 215). In the sense that practices are culturally embedded entanglements they can be said to be "*carriers of understanding and intelligibility*" (Schatzki, 1996: 12).

Yet, in holding that the work of identity is constituted within practice, the paper sets out to reveal how the status of consumers as adaptive and inventive actors is bound to identity work performed within generative social practice (Schatzki, 1996: 11). Specifically it discusses the treatment of the construct 'resistance', tracing circulating subject positions implicated in the shaping of concept, context and collective. To say that such subject positions are recursively organized and always in process is to invoke 'structuration' (Giddens, 1984) in that the identity work of 'resistance' is understood as an 'ordering effect' (Law, 1994) of various cultural materials as they "*perform themselves through agents, through interaction between agents and through devices, texts and architectures*" (Law, 1994: 24). And importantly, as Law goes on to argue, "*representations shape, influence and participate in ordering practices [...] ordering is not possible without representation*" (Law, 1994: 25). The recursion at work in the context of consumer lifestyle practice reveals the operations of an economy of representation (interested containment and concealment) in which discursive arrangements forge identity concepts. And although the truth of some institutions is indeed that as they materialize the logic of collective practice, they also generate strategic representations that carry forward and perform strategically managed views of that practice, as Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007) confirm.

The value of the turn to practice is not to be found in a rediscovery of functionalism and institutions as strategically interested idioms or progenitors of discourse. This insight is common parlance and always already in the mix of the lived everyday. Strategic discursive practices not only call forth identity concepts, they distribute them and set relational frames in play among a local production cohort where "*everyone is in some sense aware of the reflexive constitution of modern social activity and the implications it has for her or his life*" (Giddens, 1991: 14). Importantly, those preconditions of intelligibility and related discursive operations are made visible when, as Gherardi (2000) trenchantly observes, "*the breaching of rules [of invisibility of concealment] exposes the rule-based operations that produce a 'normal' situation*" (Gherardi, 2000: 215). Those breaches and subversions are revealed in the activities whereby consumers produce and manage natural settings of order producing organization. As a result, we suggest that discourse-

driven accountings overlook the invention of actors in settings of complex intermediated networks of practice, where practices are in process and constantly assembling new meanings; and are far removed from being determined by extant institutions and their strategically interested representations. Indeed it occurs to the authors that the task of 'marketing as practice' approaches is not to take the activity, say of authoring marketing strategy, as the 'primary strip' (Goffman, 1986: 21), but to construct points of perspective at least once removed from such baseline representation. In problematizing practices of strategically attending to the production of a sequence of methods witnessable as, say, share-of-voice targets, the focal phenomenon becomes not simply process or management calculation, or first order representation, but the local methods of 'cultural calculation' (Barry & Slater, 2002), of producing "*some organizational event as the situated, local accomplishment of its production cohort in producing that event as just the event it accountably is*" (Livingston, 1987: 8). Consequently, if, as Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003 trenchantly observe, "*we are to aid management and the managing of organizations we need to achieve a higher degree of reflexivity among [those] actors about what they are doing*" (Johnson et al., 2003: 5).

Research as pedagogy

Recent years have seen a turn towards 'practice' as an analytic object in organization studies. Informed by the wider turn towards practice in contemporary social theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996; Swidler, 2001; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001) sympathies have also grown towards research designs that offer richer and more penetrative treatments of process as context. There has been growing scholarly investment in practice-related research programmes, especially in strategy (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Gherardi, 2000; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2008; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Whittington, 2004, 2006, 2007) where there has been a move from process as the voice of implementation towards activity-based views of "*the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-today activities of organizational life*" (Johnson et al., 2003: 3). Similar investment has been made in accounting (Ahrens & Chapman, 2007), management studies (Fox, 2000; Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998) and marketing management (Araujo, 2007; Brownlie, 1991; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Brownlie, Hewer, & Ferguson, 2007; Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2007; Kjellberg, 2008). This flurry of publications has occurred at a time when representations of the interests of the audience for management research play strongly to the hardy perennial of 'relevance' and what is to be done for it to become less removed from the needs of managerial actors through focusing on the micro activities of managers who otherwise are left "*bereft of insights, let alone guidelines for action*" (Johnson et al., 2003: 5).

In the context of the appeals to knowledge it seeks to promote, this special issue spins 'practice theory' as a shorthand for a style of investigative reportage that generates intimate close-ups of action as it unfolds in the lived reality of

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