

The Consumer Evaporates: Insights from Practice Theory

Abstract

This paper argues that practice theory illuminates marketing theory, moving beyond what has been dubbed ‘Kotlerian’ marketing towards an understanding of marketing that avoids the dualism inherent in consumer and product terminology. The paper outlines a practice theory approach in which marketing is understood from a practice rather than a transactional perspective, challenging the concept of the consumer as an independent persisting agent with endogenous needs and wants – the ‘consumer’ evaporates. This practice-based approach contributes to marketing theory, meeting some of the objections levelled at Kotlerian marketing, and providing insights that can usefully be applied by marketing practitioners.

Keywords

Practice theory, consumption, critical marketing

Track

Marketing theory

1. Introduction

This paper argues that practice theory illuminates marketing theory, enabling us to move beyond what has been dubbed 'Kotlerian' marketing towards an understanding of marketing which avoids the dualism inherent in consumer and product terminology. Although Kotler remains the best selling marketing text book, many authors have been critical of Kotlerian marketing, perhaps most notably Stephen Brown's in his famous paper 'Kotler is Dead', written under the alias Smithee, (1997). In addition to criticisms from post-modern and critical marketing perspectives, various alternative forms of marketing have been advanced (Badot & Cova, 2008; Palmer & Ponsonby, 2002; Hackley, 2001), for instance, highlighting interaction as in *relationship marketing* (Grönroos, 1994) or highlighting some aspect of context, for example in *internet marketing*. This paper builds on these approaches, and outlines a practice theory approach in which 1) marketing is understood from a practice perspective rather than from a transactional perspective as 'an exchange of values between two parties' (Kotler, 1972, p. 48), 2) consumers and products or services are not treated as independent entities but as interconnected elements embedded within normative practices and 3) consumer wants are seen as arising from social practices rather than driving them. The paper argues that this practice-based approach contributes to marketing theory, meeting some of the objections that have been levelled at Kotlerian marketing, and moreover, providing insights that can usefully be applied by market researchers and practitioners.

2. Kotlerian marketing theory

The 'Managerial School of Marketing' (Sheth, 1988), epitomized by the texts of Kotler, is still widely taught and forms the basis of most marketing text books. In this approach marketing is conceptualized as an exchange between two independent parties, the consumer and the producer. Kotlerian marketing focuses on two elements of the transaction, the consumer, and what is produced, the product/service, and is characterized by 'the marketing concept', 'segmentation, targeting and positioning' and the 'marketing mix' (Kotler 1967; Sheth et al. 1988). The managerial school of marketing has been extensively criticized but nevertheless retains its central role within marketing education (Brown, 1999; Hackley, 2001) and, arguably, within marketing practice (Zineldin & Philipson, 2007).

3. Critical marketing

Traditional marketing theory has been challenged from postmodernist and critical theory perspectives. While some authors conflate the two approaches, Hetrick and Lozardo (1999, p. 162) categorize critical marketing as anti-marketing theory and postmodernism as marketing anti-theory. Saren (1999) notes that a postmodern marketing theory could be regarded as an oxymoron, because postmodernism critiques theory per se, but this does not preclude a postmodernist stance towards marketing theory as exemplified by Stephen Brown (1995).

Critical theory derives from the Frankfurt school, which has developed to embrace elements from Marxism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, feminism, etc. The term refers to a range of perspectives which variously critique society, ideologies, positivism, the achievement of objectivity, the boundary between consumer and producer, and the role of representation, and which advocate alternative interpretivist approaches that acknowledge inherent subjectivity, cultural relativity, social construction, cultural symbolism, relations of power and authority, and/or the constitutive role of discourse

(Brownlie, 2006; Burton, 2001; Hackley, 2001, 2003; Morgan 1992). Critical marketing extends critical theory to marketing. There is no generally accepted definition of critical marketing, and indeed a definition would constrain the ethos of the approach, (see Brownlie et al. (1999) for an extended discussion of the remit of critical marketing). Alvesson and Willmott (1996) argue that marketing should be a particularly fertile area for the application of critical theory. They point out that critical theory has had little influence on the discipline but claim that it has the potential to provide fresh insights and a wider appreciation of ethical and social factors. Burton (2001) claims that adopting critical theory in marketing would have practical implications in three areas, market research, publishing and marketing education.

This paper adopts a critical marketing approach, inspired by sociological practice theory.

4. Criticism of managerial marketing

Despite the ubiquity of the managerial school of thought (Sheth, 1988) in marketing texts and marketing education curricula, the approach has been subject to considerable criticism, both from critical theory perspectives and from advocates of alternative approaches to marketing. Sheth et al. distinguish twelve different schools of marketing with relationship marketing (the Nordic school) as one of the most popular alternatives to the managerial school. Badot and Cova (2008) argue that there has been an ‘inflation of marketing panaceas’ over the last 20 years, producing in evidence an alphabetical array of over 70 forms of marketing from ambush marketing to yield marketing. While some alternative theories merely tinker with the details, adding or changing elements in the marketing mix or emphasising a particular sector, product type, promotional vehicle, others are more radical, challenging the basic concepts.

The marketing concept, a key concept in the managerial school of marketing, is criticized by Brown (1995, p. 42), who claims that the concept is ‘deeply, perhaps irredeemably flawed, that its seemingly solid foundations are by no means secure and that the specialism is teetering on the brink of serious intellectual crisis’. The marketing concept emphasizes consumer orientation: marketing strives to satisfy consumer ‘needs and wants’. Needs are basic, but wants are socially shaped: ‘An American needs food but wants a hamburger, French fries, and a soft drink. A person in Mauritius needs food but wants a mango, rice, lentils, and beans.’ (Kotler, 2007, p. 24). Thus social factors are acknowledged, but as a characteristic of consumers, rather than on a holistic, interactional level. As Alvesson and Willmott (1996) note, this is very broad and imprecise. Consumer needs and wants are treated as given and there is scant discussion of the role of marketing and or other forces in shaping these needs and wants. Meamber and Ventakesh (1995) suggest that an impetus for this approach is avoidance of the ethical implications that marketing creates artificial needs, rather than merely satisfying needs and wants that already exist.

Segmentation, targeting and position is the process by which consumers are divided into more or less homogenous groups, the most attractive groups are selected as the target for marketing activities, and the product is positioned to meet the needs and wants of the targeted groups. The concept of segmentation has been criticized as lacking empirical evidence, as involving arbitrary decisions and as assuming consistent differences between consumers (Ehrenberg, 1988; Wensley 1995; Wright, 1996). Adopting a social construction stance, Hines and Quinn (2005) note that consumers play multiple roles (Goffman, 1967) and argue that segmentation needs to accommodate multiple and dynamic consumer realities.

The third element of the managerial approach, the marketing mix, or '4P's', has also been extensively criticized. Kotler (2002, p. 9) defines the marketing mix as 'the set of marketing tools that the firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives in the target market'. Following McCarthy (1964) the marketing mix tools are classified under the '4 P's' for product, price, place and promotion. Criticism is typically of two types. Firstly, it is argued that the list of Ps is incomplete and should be supplemented by other factors. For instance, Booms and Bitner, (1981) adapt the marketing mix for services, adding 'participants', 'processes' and 'physical evidence'. Alternatively, and more fundamentally, it is claimed that the conception of the marketing mix and of a list of specific factors, which marketers should consider and optimize, is incorrect. Thus the relationship marketing school argue that marketing should focus on relationships, (Gronroos, 1994). Similarly, Easton (1993; 1995) argues for a focus on network relationships, broadening the marketing perspective to include non-exchange relationships, and the rejection of a 'focal actor' view of markets. See Constantinides (2006) for a review of the marketing mix literature.

More broadly, Vargo and Lusch (2004; Lusch & Vargo, 2006) criticize the dominant logic of the 'marketing management school', which they claim is the prevailing perspective of marketing, as one in which marketers embed utility in things, which they exchange with consumers, who are the targets of marketing activities such as promotion. Vargo and Lusch argue for an alternative service-dominant logic that treats goods as intermediate objects that are used by consumers in service provision; the consumer is no longer passive but acts as co-creator of value. The focus moves from transaction to relationship, and from goods to competencies, skills and knowledge. Although the service-dominant logic approach challenges the boundary between consumer and producer, it maintains an exchange perspective and neglects the mutual social shaping inherent in adoption and usage of marketed products/services. In retaining an exchange perspective, it retains a focus on the consumer and on the item exchanged, and overlooks their ongoing social construction within a sociotechnical context.

5. Practice theory

This paper introduces a practice-based perspective of marketing, which addresses some of the criticisms levelled at managerial marketing, while retaining a practical focus and relevance for marketers. Practice theory recognizes the complex and routinized web of relationships between people and things, encompassing meanings, norms and engagements, within specific forms of social activity. Practice approaches include the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953), and sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984) and Garfinkel (1967). More recently, practice theory has been developed in relation to scientific practice (e.g. Pickering, 1995; Lynch 1994). Given its diverse origins, it is unsurprising that there is no unified practice theory and many differences between authors. This paper broadly follows the practice theory outlined by Schatzki (1996; 2001; 2002), Reckwitz (1995) and Warde (2005). Schatzki (2001, p. 2-3) claims that most practice theorists conceive of practices as arrays of embodied activity, mediated by things, and dependent on shared understandings. In social practice theory, practices rather than individuals or societies are the primary form of analysis; individuals are constituted within practices, and social order arises not from individual choices or from the structure of society, but from the field of human practice.

Schatzki (1996) distinguishes between two concepts of practice: practice as a network of interlinked doings and sayings and practice as performance. The performance of a practice

enacts and reproduces it; 'A performance presupposes a practice' (Warde, 2005, p. 134). Collective performance and routinized behaviour creates inertia in practices, but practices evolve over time and are the source of behaviour change (Warde, 2005). Schatzki (1996, 2002) distinguishes three major linkages in practices: understandings, rules and 'teleoaffective structures', the latter are normativized ends and emotions associated with a practice. Schatzki (1996) contrasts dispersed and integrative practices, the former appear in many different areas of social life, examples include explaining, reporting and greeting; the latter are more complex and specific to particular areas of social life, examples include cooking practices, recreational and driving practices. Dispersed practices occur within integrative practices, which may be transformed by this incorporation.

Warde (2005) applies practice theory to consumption and notes that most practices involve consumption, although consumption is not an integrative practice but rather 'a moment in almost every practice' (p. 137). For Warde 'consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices' (p. 131). Individuals will acquire items which are relevant to different practices, and at any time an individual might be engaged in several practices, for instance, working practices might overlap eating practices (with consequent mutual shaping). 'The practice is the conduit and *raison d'être* for the gratifications which arise from its component moments of consumption' (p.142). Practices, rather than individuals, generate wants (p. 137). The consumer is not independent of the practice; in fact 'the concept of 'the consumer', a figure who has bewitched political and social scientists as well as economists, evaporates.' (p. 146). Thus practice theory challenges the concept of the consumer as an independent agent with endogenous needs and wants.

6. A practice-based approach to marketing

A practice-based approach to marketing follows this approach to consumption and takes practices as the basic unit of analysis rather than products and consumers. Rather than an individualist approach that focuses on the item marketed and on the targeted recipient, practice-based marketing focuses on understanding the practice in which consumption occurs in a holistic way. Instead of starting with product affordances and consumer needs and wants, a practice-based approach starts with the linkages in the relevant practice, that is, with the activities, understandings, norms and conventions, engagements, people, and things that are linked in the nexus of the practice. Instead of considering how to augment the product to satisfy the needs and wants of the consumer, this approach considers: how will the item fit into or challenge the meanings enshrined in existing practices, how will existing linkages in the practice support or inhibit adoption of the item, how will these linkages shape and change the item as it is incorporated into the practice, how can the item be designed to fit in with these linkages, how can marketing communicate the relevance of the item within the practice? For example, under the managerial school of marketing approach, launching a new yogurt product would start with the core product, yogurt, and consumer needs and wants, e.g. for a healthy enjoyable convenient product. The core product, yogurt, is given additional features such as packaging, a brand, flavour variants, customer service, retailer discounts, etc; these are designed to meet the identified needs of the targeted group, or to signal to this group that the product meets these needs. Taking a practice-based approach would start with research on eating practices that could include people, things (food, cutlery, crockery etc.), meanings (nutrition, fattening, healthy etc.), norms (three meals a day, foods suitable for different meals, etc.), social contexts (eating together, celebrations, convenience, etc.), physical and technological environment (kitchens, restaurants, etc.). A practice-based approach would

explore the linkages in these practices and the ways in which they could potentially adapt to include a new yogurt product, and the ways in which the product can be adapted to fit in with these linkages.

7. Discussion

Paying insufficient attention to the understandings, normative conventions and emotional engagements of practices helps to explain some new product failures, for example, a yogurt aimed at breakfast consumption might fail because it is too sweet or too big to be incorporated into breakfast-eating practices in the relevant culture. A practice approach also helps to explain why products are shaped by social factors, thus an ambient yogurt might have to be merchandized in a chilled cabinet to fulfil normative expectations of freshness pertinent to eating practices. Practice linkages may be intuitively identified by good market researchers and practitioners, but if conceptualized as aspects of the consumer or the product, there is a risk of misunderstanding or missing essential aspects of the practice. Focus on the consumer may capture some aspects of the practice, but others may be overlooked, for instance, symbolic meaning (Baudrillard, 1970) or artefacts and things that mediate the practice. Thus the appearance of yogurt in a school lunch box may signal the caring parent, and the size of a school lunch boxes may constrain the size of the yogurt pot. Focusing on consumer wants also potentially overlooks the habitual, social and normative aspects of consumption; consumers are relatively unaware of these aspects and therefore they may not emerge in conventional market research. Practice theory construes the individual as constituted by the practice; thus researching an individual outside the relevant practice, for instance, within a focus group in a viewing facility, renders practice know-how less accessible to the individual and to the research. A practice-based approach to market research would attempt to interview research participants within relevant naturalistic settings, and would supplement interview-based methods with observation and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) in order to reveal the taken-for-granted routinized and habitual aspects of practices, and the mediating effect of artefacts, things and sociotechnical systems. Recognition that wants are *derived* from practices highlights the importance of research on the adoption of practices, an area of particular relevance to new technologies and services. However, research is not a panacea; the inherent, collective structure of practices resists marketing efforts to enrol new products or mould practices (Warde, 2005).

The managerial school of marketing depicts the consumer as a predictable, rational, autonomous agent with consumption the outcome of conscious choice. The product (or service) is likewise understood as predictable, its features determined by marketing choices and impervious to the shaping forces of its sociotechnical environment. This deterministic approach facilitates a simple exchange-based marketing theory in which managers can predict and optimize outcomes. This paper argues that this approach overlooks the way in which both consumers and products are shaped by the evolving practices in which they are embedded. Practice theory challenges the notion of the consumer whose fixed needs and wants can be satisfied to achieve competitive marketing advantage. The consumer evaporates because consumption is embedded in practices, and consequently is not related in any straightforward, calculable way to a 'consumer'. Consumers emerge from practices; this undermines the logic of taking consumers out of the context of their practices, so that they can be segmented and targeted. In line with managerial marketing, the argument here is framed in terms of products rather than brands, but the understandings, norms and engagements of practices are of particular importance to brands, shaping and embedding brand connotations. A practice approach contributes to rethinking marketing as embedded in a societal context (Cova, 1999).

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