

# Studying Market Place Cultures

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## FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

The majority of the content of the present issue of *Kulutustutkimus.Nyt* originates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nordic Conference on Consumer Research organized at Vaasa University in May 2014. The speeches and papers presented at the conference highlighted the richness of nordic consumer and consumption research. The diversity in theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches created an intriguing agenda for the three day meeting. The topics, theories and methodologies applied in the presented studies reflect our up to date connectedness to schools of thought and developments in global consumption research. We stay well attuned to all the recent trends.

The first two papers selected from the conference for this journal issue highlight the challenges and developments for research using practice theories. As practice theoretical approaches have made a powerful entry into interpretive consumption studies during the past twenty years, the time is right for critical evaluation of the state of the art in this research. This is welcomed, especially since there is no one single theory of practice but rather a set of theories of practice, and also since these can be viewed both as theory and as methodology.

In the first article *Elina Närvänen* focuses on previous studies analyzing consumption communities and marketplace cultures within the practice theories framework. She reveals the flexibility and adaptability and also the manifold nature of practice theories as interpretive frameworks to understand marketplace cultures. Moreover, through critical analysis she manages to reveal and discuss the methodological challenges that a practice researcher faces, especially when focusing on consumption communities and marketplace cultures. These challenges include the multiple levels of analysis, the identification and interpretation of routine patterns, the determination of the appropriate contexts, the finding the starting point and choosing the perspective, and the departure from individuals as the unit of analysis. The choice of relevant methodologies to capture materiality are also discussed and suggestions for handling these challenges are considered. Some of these challenges are also discussed in the second article written by Lotta Alhonnoro.

*Lotta Alhonnoro* in particular grapples with the challenge of capturing materiality within practice. She judges and discusses the possibilities offered by

the material-semiotic approach of actor-network theory (ANT) to enrich the scope of practice research. She points out that by adopting the ANT tenet, which gives agency even to material elements, it is possible to reach epistemological openness and add to understanding of materiality in our lives. Moreover, she emphasizes the potential of the network view of ANT to reveal the interconnectedness of practices across the micro and macro levels. With the help of ANT, consumption practices can be connected to wider societal and material contexts. However, as pointed out by the author, the intertwining of ANT with practice based research would lead to a structured description of the field of interest, rather than an interpretation of it.

In the third paper, written by *Jenna Koskela*, the agency is moved to advertising. The focus is on analyzing the discourses through which advertising for weight control products and services reinforce and maintain cultural ideals. Four types of discourses underlying advertisement appeals were revealed: appearance appeals link weight control to cultural beauty ideals; utility appeals connect these products to mental and physical health ideals; self-management appeals associate weight control with the postmodern consumer's responsibility for him/herself; and finally, assistance appeals reflect a striving for hedonistic pleasure. Moreover, the study indicates that advertising not only constructs reality but also has a dialogue with the consumer. Advertisements are seen to take the role of a personal trainer who speaks directly to their customers, who are viewed as vulnerable and need help and encouragement.

In the fourth paper a more empowered view of consumers is emphasized as the focus is put on the overlapping roles of consumers and marketers created especially by the social media. Because of the increased commercialization in blogs, these cannot be viewed merely as electronic word-of-mouth. The bloggers are also prosumers acting between professional marketers and consumers. *Tiia Puska* analyzes the dualistic role of bloggers theoretically within the marketing communication framework and empirically through discourse analysis based on narrative discussions with fashion bloggers completed with analysis of their writings. Different role positions for bloggers are discussed both theoretically and empirically, and at the cutting points of these two analyses five role positions were identified. These were "hired employee", "store cashier", "the shopkeeper him/herself on fresh-produce encounter", "business associate" and "equal to the reader". As emphasized by the author, these simplified role positions reflect versatile reality where bloggers can smoothly move from one role position to another depending on the context.

The last paper in this issue is *Olga Gurova's* book review on *Finnish Consumption – An Emerging Consumer Society between East and West* edited by Visa Heinonen and Matti Peltonen. Through its articles the book provides portrayals of the development of consumer society in Finland in the second half of the XX century from different theoretical viewpoints and analytical interpretations. Moreover, as the articles view the rise of the consumer society from the viewpoint of Finland's position between both Western and Eastern influences, the developments are put into the broader context of world processes. As pointed out by the reviewer, the attempts to analyze

Nordic consumption in a global context should be encouraged and continued.

Indeed, the need to understand the contexts of consumption can be seen as crucial. Consumption cannot be understood, interpreted or explained without broadening the view from individual behaviors, acts, practices, discourses into their interconnected and embedded nature. As the Nordic countries share many cultural and institutional similarities, one could expect lively co-operation among researchers and shared research interests. However, no single northern way of approaching consumption could be identified based on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nordic Conference on Consumer Research, but it can be concluded that a development towards the globalization of scientific research and the family of researchers is evident. It remains to be seen whether there is any space for glocal and local trends in the future.