

Studying Marketplace Cultures and Communities using Practice Theories: Methodological Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This methodological article discusses practice theories as potential interpretive frameworks to study one of the key areas of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which is marketplace cultures and communities. There are already some insightful contributions using practice theories within this area, but there is also a lot more potential to develop theory. The paper summarizes these key contributions, integrates previous research on practice theories and presents some key challenges to these approaches related to their multifaceted, routine, contextualized, dynamic and relational, anti-individualist and material nature. By identifying some of the key methodological challenges unique to practice theories, the paper suggests possible solutions for consumer researchers who wish to expand theory on marketplace cultures and communities.

INTRODUCTION

Practice theories have become popular in consumer research during the past decade (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Schau, Muñoz and Arnould, 2009; Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Many have adopted a practice theoretical framework to analyze consumption as consisting of practical doings and sayings in everyday life. Indeed, practices, instead of individual needs or intentions or the impact of social structures, have been conceptualized as the key drivers of consumption choices and preferences (Warde, 2005). In his recent review, Warde identifies three topics of consumer research where practice theories have so far made an impact. They are sustainability, eating, and recreational enthusiast groups. The third topic is analogous to what Arnould and Thompson (2005, 874) define as one of the key areas of Consumer Culture Theory: the marketplace cultures stream. It studies how consumers engage in creating "distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests".

Studies within this area have been fruitfully analyzing the different types of communities including brand communities, consumption tribes, and subcultures. The studies have shifted the focus away from the individual consumer toward the consumer as part of a collective, paying more attention to the social context of consumption. It is a timely move since the field of consumer research has traditionally been preoccupied with individuals. However, consumption is a social activity that is often practiced together with other people in any given sociocultural context. Insightful contributions already exist using practice theories specifically to study consumption community practices and dynamics. This indicates that the match of practice theories and the study of marketplace cultures and communities is a growing field of study with much potential for development.

The aim of this paper is to provide an integrative perspective of practice theories in studying marketplace cultures and communities and to identify and discuss some of the related methodological challenges. The paper is intended to help researchers, particularly those interested in marketplace cultures and communities but also in other topics, tackle the complexity of practice theories and apply them for their use. The literature on practice theories has a multitude of perspectives and there are accomplished review articles (e.g. Warde, 2014; Halkier et al., 2011). However, this paper identifies and discusses some of the key challenges in using practice theories for analyzing a specific area of research which is consumption communities and marketplace cultures. The focus is on what is different in practice theories and how these differences create certain methodological challenges and issues that need to be taken into account.

The paper is structured as follows: I start with a brief introduction to practice theories and their background. Next, I provide a literature review of studies on marketplace cultures and communities which use a practice theoretical framework. I discuss *how* different authors have used practice theories in their research¹. The final part of the article focuses on developing methodological insights for researchers using practice theories.

WHAT ARE PRACTICE THEORIES?

The term “practice theory/theories” itself may be confusing because it is not always clear whether practice theory is used as a theory or a methodology. On the one hand, practice theories are a set of theories that offer an account of the social world. On the other hand, they also suggest specific ways for handling data and giving it meaning. Hence, practice theories are best viewed as “instruments of selective attention” (Warde, 2014: 2) or interpretive frameworks (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006) that is a “set of assumptions, ideas, and principles that define a particular, theoretically in-

¹ The articles that have specifically used practice theories in connection with a subculture, consumption community, consumption tribe or brand community are included, while acknowledging that practice theoretical insights may have also appeared in other studies more implicitly (cf. Schau et al. 2009).

formed perspective and a set of appropriate practices for the process of interpretation" (*ibid.* 103).

The roots of practice theories are found in sociology and particularly in social theories that focus on symbolic structures of shared knowledge, i.e. meanings (Reckwitz, 2002). It is set apart from other such theories by focusing on social practices instead of social or cultural structures, discourses or individual meaning-making. The practice itself is often the unit of analysis, even though the ontological status of practices is debatable (Warde, 2014). A social practice can be defined as "routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). However, different understandings of practices have emerged, ranging from specific localized actions to long-term patterns of activity (Rouse, 2007).

USE OF PRACTICE THEORIES TO STUDY MARKETPLACE CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES

Drawing on Holt's (1995) study of consumption practices at a baseball game, Schau et al. (2009) utilized a practice theoretical framework to study brand community practices. The authors conducted empirical research in several different brand communities and a meta-analytic review of previous literature in order to identify a common set of practices and to dissect and dimensionalize these practices. Using a framework of understandings, procedures and emotional engagements (Warde, 2005), they identified altogether twelve practices and grouped them into four categories of social networking, impression management, brand use and community engagement. The study showed that participating in the practices socializes members and creates value for them as well as helping to sustain the community. The taxonomy of practices contributed to the literature by allowing for theoretical generalization across communities and shifting the focus from individual and collective identity projects toward shared activities that constitute a brand community. Both Holt's (1995) and Schau et al.'s (2009) taxonomies of consumption practices can be argued to focus on dispersed practices that can be transferred to other contexts (Arsel and Bean, 2013).

Rokka (2010) used practice theoretical insights in studying translocal marketplace cultures in his doctoral thesis and related articles (Rokka, Hietanen and DeValck, 2010). His focus was on practices enacted in translocal communities where the members come from diverse cultural, social and national backgrounds. He analyzed the web of interconnected translocal spaces that organize and maintain translocal practices of a community. He viewed contemporary marketplace cultures increasingly as rootless and deterritorialized entities that are held together by translocal practices. Studying the empirical contexts of paintball and global travelers, Rokka used especially Schatzki's (1996; 2002) notion of the "site of the social" consisting of a constantly evolving nexus of social and material practices to analyze and understand translocal marketplace cultures. Rokka's study showed that marketplace cultures are not static but constantly subject to re-organizing

and re-arrangement. The changing mediascape and new forms of cultural production were also highlighted. Rokka also made a methodological contribution to the literature by employing the audiovisual method of videography.

Woermann (2012) analyzed the subculture of freeskiing using practice theoretical insights. He focused on how social media converts offline practices into mediatized and globally embedded practices. He argued that the development of mediatization causes changes in the practices of the subculture where it may now be as important to represent, create and consume freeskiing through videos as it is to do the sport in person. Drawing data from visual ethnography, his findings showed that social media is not to be considered as merely one form of communication, but more as a site for new practices and experiences to emerge (Schatzki, 1996, 2002). Woermann's study highlighted the interplay of different kinds of online and offline consumption practices within a subculture.

Goulding, Shankar and Canniford (2013) used the "community of practice" concept by Wenger in their analysis of how consumers learn to be members of a consumption community. They viewed the clubbing tribe as a realm for learning where members engage in ongoing social actions where meanings are negotiated. Consistent with the tribe concept, they conceptualized this learning process as a fluid and continuously changing dynamic. They also argued that to fuse the heterogeneous members into the tribe requires continuous alignment and mutual engagement. Goulding et al.'s (2013) study hence used another form of practice theory to view learning in consumption communities not from a cognitive or individualist perspective but as a situated social practice.

Boulaire and Cova (2013) utilized practice theoretical insights to analyze the community of geocaching and the dynamics and trajectory of creative consumption practices. Their data-driven analysis highlighted that creative practices are intertwined and entangled with communication and structuring practices and contribute to the evolution of the community. Furthermore, these practices are transformed in processes of multiplication, fragmentation and hybridization which cause changes in the gaming community. The analysis hence focused more on the integrative practice of the geocaching game and how it was intertwined with other consumption practices. From a methodological point of view, they argued that to achieve an understanding of the practices, immersion in the site of the consumer collective is necessary in order to capture the micro level of practices and their path developments. Hence, the authors conducted long-term explorative observation online and detailed the micro practices, organizing them into meaningful blocks. The longer time-frame of the study enabled the authors to focus on evolution and change.

Arsel and Bean (2013) used practice theories in their analysis of taste regimes within aesthetically oriented cultures of consumption, using data from a home design blog community. They adopted the formation of taste as their focal concept rather than theorizing consumption practices per se. As their conceptual apparatus, they used Magaudda's (2011) terminology of objects, doings and meanings. However, rather than analyzing practices,

Arsel and Bean focused more on the background normative systems that orchestrate the practices within a marketplace culture. Hence, they viewed the taste regime as the “teleoaffective structure” (Schatzki 1996, 2002) underlying the enactment of practices. As a result, they were able to differentiate between the roles of dispersed and integrative practices as well as show the interaction of these in forming consumption patterns. Arsel and Bean’s study was conducted with a multi-method approach containing qualitative and quantitative parts.

Markuksela (2013) developed a practice theoretical understanding of the marketplace culture of troll fishing in his doctoral thesis. He utilized practice theories to conceptualize particularly the corporeal and sensory collaboration that forms a hobbyist community. In his analysis, non-human forces (such as weather, water and fish) gain an important status as integral elements of practices. His research brought embodied action to the forefront of how consumption communities and marketplace cultures are constructed. He used the methodology of sensory ethnography which enabled him to reflect tellingly upon the sensory and corporeal aspects of practices.

Närvänen (2013) analyzed the phenomenon of brand revitalization in her doctoral thesis, using a practice theoretical framework. Conceptualizing the revitalization process as accomplished in practice by the members of consumption communities, her research highlights how changes in brand meaning are linked inherently with changes in consumption practices and particularly the elements (meanings, competences and materials as suggested by Shove et al., 2012) that are interlinked in the activities of consumption communities.

As a conclusion, it can be argued that there are already several different ways of using practice theories to study consumption communities and marketplace cultures. The existing studies have shown the flexibility and adaptability of practice theories as frameworks to understand varied phenomena. They have moved away from individualist biases towards collective units of analysis and have also utilized research methods that pay attention to materiality, interplay of different elements and dynamics of communities. As a result, there is much more interest directed toward the interaction of consumption communities with the “outside world” and consumption being viewed more as processes and activities rather than as relatively stable membership characteristics. However, there are also challenges in using the flexible but multifaceted approach, which will be discussed next.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRACTICE THEORETICAL APPROACH

The first challenge that can be identified is *taking into account multiple levels of analysis* such as focusing both on mental and bodily activities as well as the underlying engagements and motivations or the teleoaffective structure (Schatzki 1996, 2002). Various types of data that offer insights about both the mental and the bodily, reflected and routine action are recommended. The typical choice has been ethnography, which focuses on shared patterns of action (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) rather than individual experiences and is therefore more in line with practice theories. Ethnography

enables researchers to both observe the doings and sayings of a practice as they unfold and also interview consumers to find out the underlying emotions and motivations. Many previous studies have used multiple forms of data including interviews, observations, blog posts, videos and photos, because they provide the richest and fullest portrait of all the elements of a practice. Specific types of ethnography that allow for more focus on the material rather than the discursive are encouraged, including visual ethnography (Woermann, 2012), videography (Rokka, 2010; DeValck et al., 2009) and sensory ethnography (Markuksela 2013). The use of quantitative methods has not been explored to a very great extent yet, but they could also be useful, for instance, in combination with content analysis of vast amounts of data (cf. Arsel and Bean, 2013).

According to practice theories, arrangements of different elements are configured into practices in specific socio-material and historical circumstances (Magaudda, 2011). Thus, practices have a history and a trajectory of development. From this viewpoint, practice theories still have much to offer in the study of how marketplace cultures and communities evolve and transform over time. Here, longitudinal data such as archives and documents can be helpful instead of, or in addition to, ethnographic data. In analyzing and interpreting the data, the key issue is whether to adopt practice or something else like the elements of practice or bundles of practices as the unit of analysis. There are already some insightful and relatively straightforward frameworks (e.g. Shove et al., 2012; Magaudda, 2011) that can be used for initial analysis. However, in order to really build theory, it could be useful to combine these with more data-driven themes or theoretical insights from outside the practice theoretical literature.

Another key challenge of the practice approach is *identifying and interpreting routine patterns*. Practice theories focus on routine behavior, which is often observable but largely not deliberated (Reckwitz, 2002). Tackling this challenge means differentiating between the routine and the exceptional as well as getting people to reflect upon their own practices verbally. To avoid prioritizing discursive consciousness, deliberation and decision-making, practice theorists should focus instead on the repetitive, automatic and habituated actions of everyday life (Warde, 2014: 14). It could be argued that for these reasons, observational data generation methods are needed in order to conduct practice theoretical inquiry. According to a social constructionist epistemology, there are no pure observations but all types of data are always already interpreted (Halkier and Jensen, 2011). People are also able to reflect upon their practices (Hitchings 2011). Methodologies that help people become more aware of their routine practices have been developed to facilitate data generation and analysis. One possible method of tracing consumer practices in marketplace cultures and communities would be a photographic or videographic diary where consumers could record the details of their everyday practices. Showing interviewees photos or video clips of their practices to elicitate discussion may facilitate the reflection. It could be claimed that the literature on marketplace cultures and communities has been paying more attention to the meanings accomplished through doings and use of objects rather than action itself. Another way would be to use data that is somehow automatically generated such as using technology to track movement paths or the use of objects. Tracing practices this way

would result in different types of data than that which is consciously produced by individuals. However, to be able to see changes in marketplace cultures and communities as individual carriers of practice make adjustments and modifications, it is also recommended to pay attention to unconventional and innovative action (Shove et al., 2012; Boulaire and Cova, 2013).

The third challenge in using practice theoretical perspectives is *drawing lines between phenomena and their context and deciding the appropriate contexts*. This challenge can be viewed from different perspectives. Firstly, because practices are intertwined, it may be difficult to distinguish the boundaries of a single practice; i.e. how to tell which activities form a practice that is transferable across situations and consumers. As Warde (2014: 12) argues, researchers disagree on whether a practice can even be perceived as an entity that has an ontological status of its own. Possible solutions to detecting integrative practices include asking whether the participants are able to say that they are engaging in a certain practice, whether they can allocate time to this specific practice and whether specialized equipment exists for enacting the practices (Warde, 2014: 13). One option for a researcher of marketplace cultures consumption communities would be to map a bundle of practices that seem to go together rather than attempting to isolate the practices from their contexts. Contextualization is thus a balancing act between staying close to practices and analyzing them on a broader level. Secondly, there is a general call for more contextualized research in CCT (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). For researchers using practice theories to study marketplace cultures and communities, more contextualization beyond the "community" level to the level of culture, society, and history is encouraged (cf. Martin et al.'s (2006) feminist re-inquiry on the HD subculture and Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's (2007) study on community-supported agriculture). More research is needed on how marketplace cultures and communities interact with the broader cultural frames within which they are positioned. This requires data generation beyond what the informants say and do. Secondary data in the form of documents, artefacts, archives, records or accounts of cultural history may be used to provide a broader context for the marketplace culture or community. They also help to provide a longitudinal perspective.

The fourth key challenge in using practice theories to study consumption communities and marketplace cultures comes from the relational nature of the approach. Relationality is accepted as part of the social world; phenomena co-constitute each other. This also means that social regularities such as institutions are always in the making through social action (Giddens 1984). The challenge associated with this is *finding a starting point and choosing perspective*. The obvious starting point for generating data has been to focus on community members and their use of objects, meanings and doings to accomplish practices. Like practices, the consumption community can be viewed as a meso-level construct. It consists of those who at any given moment are engaging in practices to constitute a sense of "we" and the boundaries of that "we" are unstable and shifting (Schatzki, 1996,:117). However, one could also move to a more macro-level and generate data on time use or the social network ties of members, for instance. Warde (2014) argues that the challenge in using practice theories in empiri-

cal research comes partly from the division between the so-called first generation practice theorists who were engaged with questions of structure and agency and a macro-sociological perspective, and the second generation practice theorists, such as Schatzki (2002) and others, who were much more interested in concrete action. The marketplace cultures and communities studies have so far been mostly positioned within the latter because of the useful frameworks offered by Warde (2005) and Reckwitz (2002). However, using a more macro-perspective, the focus could be more on how communities change and evolve as the result of changing practices or even on how the community practices are intertwined with other practices, mechanisms or institutional structures (Arsel and Bean, 2013).

The fifth key challenge is *moving away from individuals as units of analysis*. In consumer research, there has been a strong tradition of viewing consumers as active, expressive, choosing, intentional and conscious agents (Warde 2014: 5). Hence, even in the literature of marketplace cultures and consumption communities, individual and communal identity projects and individual members' meaning-making processes have been focalized (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Practice theories instead encourage researchers to move from individual members of marketplace cultures and communities and their associated identity projects toward collective units of analysis in relation to a wider context. In the practice theoretical view, a person acts as a carrier of many practices which may or may not be related to one another (Reckwitz, 2002). Mental activities such as motivations and emotions, or what Schatzki (2001, 60) calls the teleoaffective structure, are analyzed as elements of practice instead of properties of the individual. Participating in the practice makes people experience certain mental and affective states the nature of which is, however, open-ended (Schatzki, 2001: 83). This is a radical ontological departure from approaches that start from the assumption that understandings, purposes and goals belong to the individual or are personal attributes (Shove et al., 2012: 7). Since individualism has a long tradition within the discipline, it is a challenge to completely abandon the consumers and concentrate instead on something else. A practice theoretic inquiry would not be interested in relating individuals' experiences to their life contexts but rather to the trajectories of practice that they are following. Furthermore, anti-individualism might also mean moving away from prioritizing human actors and focusing more on the environment and surroundings, such as weather conditions and inanimate objects or the body in the practice (Rantala, Valtonen and Markuksela, 2011; Markuksela, 2013). This also has consequences for data generation and analysis methods as well as the ways in which research is reported. Many commonly used methods (such as participant observation and interviewing) prioritize human informants which may make it difficult to escape the individualist orientation.

The sixth associated challenge is *choosing relevant methodologies to capture materiality*. Most forms of practice theories acknowledge materiality and "things and their use" are given a more important ontological status. They are central elements in the performance of a practice and have an important role in holding the practice together (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al., 2012; Markuksela, 2013). In addition, Warde (2014) argues that the body has not been acknowledged sufficiently in practice theories. While many practices are bodily enactments that are routinized and uncon-

scious, the particular implications have not been theorized. In the literature on marketplace cultures and communities, things have mostly been considered merely as equipment or props and not as something that has the ability to act autonomously. However, by taking materiality seriously, researchers may develop important theoretical insights in the future (Magaudda, 2011; Markuksela, 2013). Furthermore, practice theories view action as embodied, which makes the role of the body (and not merely the mind) appear central. Enacting routines, for instance, is often mindless, default behaviour where bodies are moved without conscious reflection. Starting from consumption objects themselves rather than the communities formed around them could be a useful strategy. For instance, do certain properties of objects influence the types of communities that are created? What kind of agency does the object have in the community? Methodologically, this means that researchers could use forms of data and methods of analysis that focus more on the material rather than the discursive. For instance, methods that enable researchers to analyze sensory aspects of practices such as smells, tastes and sounds may be insightful (Markuksela, 2013). In writing field notes and interviewing informants, researchers can pay special attention to how things feel, smell, sound or taste. The research report itself may include photos or video that are better able to document the material aspects of the community or marketplace culture.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the use of practice theories in studying marketplace cultures and communities. It has also identified six associated methodological challenges and discussed their implications for researchers interested in the approach. It has also reflected upon the possibilities and theoretical allowances that may result from applying practice theory to the study of marketplace cultures and communities. In so doing, the paper has the potential to encourage researchers to apply practice theories in novel ways while also taking into account the challenges and requirements. Suggestions based on the six key characteristics have been compiled in Table 1.

Table 1: Suggestions for researchers using practice theory

-Insert table 1 here -

The advantages of practice theories are arguably their ability to describe, interpret, and explain social processes and behaviour from a new perspective (Warde 2014). However, there has also been criticism of their descriptive nature and inability to provide direct implications for policy makers or businesses. Hence, it may be good to view practice theories as useful tools in a researchers' toolbox of methodological approaches and try to combine them with data-driven or theoretically inspiring analysis in order to build theory and practical implications for companies and society.

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Table 1: Suggestions for researchers using practice theory

Challenges of practice theory	Implications	Suggestions
Multiple levels of analysis	Which aspects of practices should be taken into account – doings, sayings, emotions and motivations, or the context of activity?	Link methods with research questions; choose methods that best capture the chosen levels of analysis; experiment with quantitative methods and multiple forms of data; use longitudinal data
Identifying and interpreting routine patterns	How to encourage informant reflexivity about their routine practices? How to capture automatic and habituated actions?	Use informant diaries and elicitation techniques, use automatically generated data to “track” practices, pay attention to innovative action as well
Determining the appropriate contexts	How to draw lines between phenomena and their context and decide the appropriate contexts?	Use data such as documents, artefacts, archives, records or accounts of cultural history to go beyond what informants say; analyze bundles of practices
Finding a starting point and choosing perspective	How to approach something that is “constantly in the making”?	Choose perspective based on the unit of analysis – meso- or macro-perspective?
Moving away from individuals as units of analysis	What should be the unit of analysis?	Analyze collective units and relate them to the wider context; take into account the surroundings and material aspects of the practice; avoid prioritizing individuals
Choosing relevant methodologies to capture materiality	How to analyze the material?	Take into account sensory experiences and analyze the features of material objects; pay attention to the body, include photos or video in the research report