

DISCUSSION OF CHANGE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF THEORY OF PRACTICE: A THEORETICAL ESSAY

ABSTRACT

It can be observed that the study of consumer behavior is usually based on theoretical models focusing mainly on the consumer decision process. However, it can be noticed that the Theory of Practice may add an invaluable contribution toward the understanding of the phenomenon of changes on consumer behavior. Therefore, the present study aims at discussing this subject matter in the form of a theoretical essay in order to give a share of contribution towards the broadening of such analysis. The essay has come to a conclusion that even though the literature says that society transfer values and culture references to consumer goods in such a way that they acquire meanings, it is also possible to find opposite situations that will demand the development of new practices by individuals in order to cope with it.

Keywords: Theory of Practice; consumer behavior; symbolic consumption; lifestyles patterns; culture

INTRODUCTION

The study of consumer behavior habit is often based on theoretical models aimed at explaining or bringing light upon the consumer decision process (Assael, 1987). This author also adds that:

“The development of habit is closely related to consumer learning. Implicit in habitual purchasing is the assumption that consumers learn from past experience and that future behavior is conditioned by such learning. In fact, learning can be defined as a change in behavior occurring as a result of past experience”. (Assael, 1987: 63)

Additionally, on this context, it can be noticed that Warde (2005: 131) argues that “there is now a huge corpus of work on consumption, but it still lacks theoretical consolidation”.

It is not the aim of the present study to address such daring questioning, however, it is considered that Warde (2005) work does inspire us to raise a different kind of reasoning regarding the assessment of consumer behavior through the lens of Theory of Practice. Warde (2005) also argues that consumption is generally viewed as a form of communication, even though there are some authors who say that it cannot be seen only on such terms. However, people purchase items from a variety of practices, and “patterns of consumption – of expenditures, possessions, portfolios of cultural activities – can therefore be explained and accounted for partly by volume of practices and commitment to practices” (Warde, 2005: 144).

Having said that, on the case of the present study, we are particularly interested in discussing changes of patterns of consumer behavior influenced by an external variable. For that purpose, the present study has chosen smartphone devices as a support study object for the proposed discussion. The reason behind this choice lays in the fact that, presently, Brazil’s mobile basis is over 256.1 million units (Teleco, 2012) while the country’s population is roughly 190 million inhabitants (IBGE, 2012). On top of all that, according to a recent survey, there are over 27 million smartphones already in operation in the country and the number is growing rapidly (Google, 2012). Some mobile market experts even say that it is not too far away the day that all mobile devices may shift to smartphones.

The regular mobile phones themselves have already caused impacts on people's lives years ago by the time they brought mobility literally on the palm of one's hand and shortened distances between people. The smartphones on their turn may cause bigger impacts due to their multiple technological possibilities (including browsing the web, watching digital TV, instant access to social networks, video calls, conferences, sending and receiving e-mails with attachments, and many other functions, not to mention phone calls).

According to a recent survey conducted in the UK (Ofcom, 2012), there are evidences revealing that 15% of the adolescents population in that country are reading less books than before due to the time they spend connected to their mobile phones.

Similarly, it is also possible to notice that Carr (2010) shows the same situation in the US. Back in 2008 it was conducted a survey in that country with 6,000 young students and they have found out that increasing internet usage by them have affected the way they absorb information. Carr (2010) also says that the youngsters tend to skim over their texts rather than read them thoroughly. The author even mentions a case where a literature teacher complains that he has not been able anymore to get his students to read an entire book. Moreover, based on data collected in Finland and in the USA, Oulasvirta; Rattenbury (2011) have found out that many users have developed what they called as an obsessive "checking habit", what stands for a compulsive behavior of checking the device regularly each 30 seconds.

For while there are no such kind of survey or research in Brazil in order to draw a clear and accurate picture of a situation like that. However, Barifouse (2012) argues that increasing smartphones usage both by adults and youngsters alike are affecting the way people interact among themselves.

This picture is raising some concerns on society because it is said that this behavior learned in such an early age may be carried out through their adulthood. Or in other words, it can be said that it may become a learned practice.

Therefore, as individuals develop new skills in order to handle this kind of device with multiple functions meant at adding usefulness to peoples' lives, it may also change some consumer habits. Given that broad scenario, we believe that the Theory of Practice may add an invaluable perspective on the assessment of the phenomenon of changes of consumer behavior because it may involves some sort of influence on practices.

A CONCISE LITERATURE REVIEW ON THEORY OF PRACTICE

Firstly, it can be seen that, according to *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, the entry “practice” stands for “a repeated exercise in an activity requiring the development of skill”, and from an academic standpoint, the definition does not differ that much from this formal one. Bräucher; Postill (2010) for instance, argue that practices comprise a group of tasks performed by individuals with different levels of skills and commitment. Reckwitz (2002: 250) says that “a practice is a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood”. In other words, what this author means is that practice refers to the mechanisms developed by individuals in order to cope with life’s stimuli in such a way that it makes sense for them. Bräucher; Postill (2010) explain that Pierre Bourdieu, on his turn, has developed part of his work based on what he called as the concept of “*habitus*”, where people tend to develop adaptable ways or means to deal with the social contexts they belong to.

Besides that, they also say that Pierre Bourdieu has introduced other important concepts such as “*hexis*” (a Greek word used to express how individuals behave in social settings); “*field*” in order to define an area of specialization such as photography, history, architecture and sociology for instance, and “*doxa*” what could be considered as a sort of unwritten and respected rules governing a given activity (also known as social convention).

Warde (2005), on his turn, introduces a summary of the Theory of Practice development along time and recalls a group of theorists (such as Andreas Reckwitz; Anthony Giddens; Charles Margrave Taylor; Jean-François Lyotard; Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Schatzki) in order to review their major findings and concepts.

Still in the same study the author says that practice and consumption are intrinsically bonded together, however, they are not alike. He adds that “consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice” (Warde, 2005: 137). As it can be seen, both Reckwitz (2002) and Warde (2005) explanations of practice are not that different and besides that they also say that the process occurs unconsciously.

Nevertheless, Bräucher; Postill (2010) argue that social theorists in general are aware that there is a lack of consensus on what could be a unique or consolidated

Theory of Practice principles. Instead, those authors say that what can be found on the literature is a varying group of studies carried out by some distinguished authors who somehow share some sort of closeness of practice approach.

On this context, Schatzki; Knorr-Certina; von Savigny (2001) presents us four main types of schools of thought regarding Theory of Practice, as shown on Exhibit 01.

Exhibit 01: Types of Practice Theory

Type of Practice Theory	Main Authors	Selected Works (*)
Philosophers	Ludwig Josef Johan Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951)	Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922) Philosophical Investigations (1953) The Blue and Brown Books (1958)
	Dreyfuss	N.A.
	Charles Margrave Taylor (1931 -)	The Explanation of Behavior (1964) Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers (1985) A Secular Age (2007)
Social Theorists	Pierre Bourdieu (1930 - 2002)	Reproduction in education, society and culture (1970) Outline of a theory of practice (1977) In other words: essays toward a reflective sociology (1987) An invitation to reflexive sociology (1992)
	Anthony Giddens (1938 -)	Capitalism and modern social theory (1971) Central problems in social theory (1979) In defense of sociology (1996)
Cultural Theorists	Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984)	The order of things (1966) The archeology of knowledge (1969) Discipline and punish (1970)
	Jean-François Lyotard (1924 - 1998)	Phenomenology (1954) Discourse, Figure (1971) The postmodern explained: correspondence (1986) The inhuman: reflections on time (1988)
Theorists of Science and Technology	Bruno Latour (1947 -)	Laboratory life: the social construction of scientific facts (1979) The pasteurization of France (1988) Where are the missing masses (1992)
	Rouse	N.A.
	Andrew Pickering	The mangle in practice: time, agency and science (1995) The mangle in practice: science, society and becoming (2008) The cybernetic brain: sketches of another future (2010)

(*): The list does not aim at comprising the whole of the authors works. Instead, it only shows a sample of their production.

N.A.: Not Available

Source: The author

Besides the mentioned types of practice theorists, Bräucher; Postill (2010) also argue that it is possible to distinguish what he called as “waves”, or generations, of practice theorists, as shown on Exhibit 02.

Exhibit 02: Theory of Practice Generations

Generation	Main Authors
First	Pierre Bourdieu de Certau Michel Foucault Anthony Giddens
Second	Sherry Ortner Theodor Schatzki Andreas Reckwitz Alan Warde

Source: the author

Still according to Bräucher; Postill (2010), the first generation comprises what is considered as some of the foremost theorists of the 20th century in such a way that their contribution has helped establish the basic pillars of what we now know as Theory of

Practice. The second wave, on its turn, is presently questioning some of the established concepts, broadening their scopes and widening horizons for the theory.

Additionally, it can be seen that Warde (2005) quotes Theodor Schatzki in order to introduce another important concept within Theory of Practice regarding a distinction between what is called dispersed practice and integrative practice.

Dispersed practice comprises the ability of an individual to comprehend a given explanation and know how to perform a certain activity. So that, it can be said that a prerequisite for such kind of practice would be “a shared and collective [previous] practice” (Warde, 2005: 135).

What concerns the integrative practices it is described by the author as the more complex one and also the most common subject of interest to sociology scholars. While dispersed practice regards mainly the learned ability following and explanation, the integrative practice is more an individual’s skill in order to delve into “farming practices, cooking practices and business practices”, for instance. (Warde, 2005: 135).

Therefore, as it can be seen, Theory of Practice does embraces a large array of perspectives and influences depending on the author’s prevalent school of thought.

AN OUTLINE OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH

As the aim of the present study lays in the discussion of changes in consumer behavior, it is considered relevant to review some studies regarding consumption concepts.

On this context, it can be seen that consumption studies belong to the consumer behavior school of thought what, according to Shaw; Jones (2005: 245) the seminal works on this field date back from the late 1940’s up to the early 1970’s and they have addressed research questions such as “*why do customers buy*”; “*how do people think, feel, act*”, and “*how can customers/people be persuaded*”.

Warde (2005: 137) also address consumption concept and he advocates the following:

“I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information

or ambivalence, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion.”

Certainly that the evolution of consumer behavior research over time has increased considerably the scope of questions addressed. However, out from the research questions such as the ones just mentioned, on the present study we would like to establish a connection between an individual consumption habit and his/her social settings. It is possible to notice though that Lawson; Todd (2002: 296) do make this relationship when they argue that regarding consumption process, “group and individual expectation are derived from a broad cultural framework”. They also add that this picture could be “translated into lifestyles patterns which determine purchase decisions and market reactions” (Lawson; Todd, 2002: 296).

Therefore, according to this view, culture does play an important role on an individual consumption pattern and choices made. Consequently, broadening this reasoning, we consider appropriate to quote Toaldo (1997: 89) who says that:

“Consumption is found on human complexity field – it involves his/her values, wishes, habits, tastes and needs. Therefore, it matters ask ourselves: what brings sense to consumption? In what terms do people define it? What trigger them to keep practicing it on and on?”

This line of thought allows us to notice that indeed there is an interaction between an individual consumption pattern and both habit and practice, and that those two factors could come from a person’s social context.

Moreover, Toaldo (1997) also questions what meanings consumers attribute to their consumption, or in other words, what consumers are eventually communicating through the goods or services they purchase. It means though that what people consume transcend the fulfillment of one’s needs or desires and it becomes a subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the situation) message conveyed onto the society group where he/she belongs to.

McCraken (1986: 71) also advocates a similar thought arguing that “consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning”. Additionally, this author also explains that the dynamics of meanings transfer goes from the society fabric surrounding an individual and it is imprinted onto

consumer goods. The first step of the transfer process is made by advertising and fashion system that convey values and culture inherent to a given society context towards the goods. The following step goes from the consumer goods to the individual consumer through four possibilities of rituals: 1) possession; 2) exchange; 3) grooming; 4) divestment (McCracken, 1986).

We believe that this picture allows us to notice that an individual may also make use of a consumer good as an instrument/tool in order to establish his/her positioning within a given society context. Additionally, Toaldo (1997: 96) also says that people seek for, what she calls, a “legitimate” and “safe” place in society. So that they choose between one object or another, between one proposal or another, taking into consideration the positioning that they will be socially “framed”.

Finally, we could not fail to mention that the concept of objectification of a consumer good and its underlying meaning it was well researched by Jean Baudrillard. According to Drigo (2008: 175), Baudrillard’s 1968 book *The System of Objects* addressed “the processes that involve people and objects, as well as the dynamics of behavior and human relations that result from the interplay object/people. Therefore, objects are studied on their double condition: instrument and sign.”

DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study lays in the discussion of changes on consumer behavior through the lens of the Theory of Practice inspired by Warde (2005) work. Taking into account that practice and consumption are intrinsically bonded together, we have made use of findings on some studies (Carr, 2010; Oulasvirta; Rattenbury, 2011; Ofcom, 2012; Barifouse, 2012) that have revealed some interesting and, at the same time, intriguing results signaling changes on some sorts of consumer patterns caused by smartphones usage rate.

The Theory of Practice states that habit is one of its most important components, and as habit can be learned by an individual out from his/her social context, it means that cultural values inherent to a given social setting do play an important role on the process.

From one side we can notice that McCracken (1986) explains that consumer goods acquire meanings and the dynamics around this process starts on society itself through the transfer of values and culture onto consumer goods. On the other hand, consumers possession of goods also represents a form of communication to his/her peers (Toaldo, 1997), be it explicit or implicit.

It has been mentioned on the present study that Warde (2005) understands consumption as a process where an individual makes use of a possession (or consumer goods) as an utilitarian tool but also as a mean to express himself/herself to others.

Therefore, assessing specifically the possession of smartphones by individuals, given their multiple resources, it can be said that it plays an array of utilitarian purposes, such as making phone calls, browsing the web, sending and receiving text messages, amongst many others. Nevertheless, as argued by McCracken (1986) and Toaldo (1997), the possession of a consumer good also acts as a mean of communication of the individual to his/her peers in a way that it helps mark a certain positioning within a given social context.

So that, the interplay between the utilitarian purpose of a consumer good and its symbolic objectification (as discussed by Jean Baudrillard), lead us to the values and culture surrounding it. Additionally, it is also possible to notice the fact that the symbolic meaning of a consumer good is transferred from society towards it, as pointed out by McCracken (1986), and also the fact that practice refers to the mechanisms developed by individuals in order to cope with life's stimuli in such a way that it makes sense for them (Warde, 2005).

Therefore, we consider that the Theory of Practice can help us better understand the changes on consumer behavior caused by smartphones as pointed out by Carr (2010), Oulasvirta; Rattenbury (2011) and Ofcom (2012). As previously mentioned, some of the findings on those researches have revealed, for instance, considerable decrease in book readings by young people and the so called checking habit.

However, if consumer practice is made up of acquired habits, as explained by Bräucher; Postill (2010) we reach a point where not only society transfer meanings to a possession but also where the usage of a consumer good affects the way people interact within the very same society context. Barifouse (2012) for instance argues that increasing smartphones usage both by adults and young people alike are affecting the way people interact among themselves.

It is not the purpose of the present study to argue if an individual certain degree of usage of a smartphone device is right or not, if it is appropriate or not. We are interested solely in the discussion of the interplay between its usage and changes on consumer behavior.

To sum up, we notice that certain consumer goods, such as the smartphones for instance causes impacts on consumer behavior because they demand a new set of practices in order to deal with it and also to make sense out of it on their minds. And if it affects practice and habits, and also that those factors are learned, once the consumer goods become widespread available new habits and practices can be spread within a given social setting. Consequently, along the process, this very same society may imprint new (or renewed) symbols to this consumer good.

We feel we cannot say for sure if some of the consumer behavior changes mentioned on the present study (decrease in book reading; checking habits and personal relationships) may become definite or not. However, we consider that the Theory of Practice does help us understand that individuals may develop new integrative practice in order to cope with this new scenario.

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