

Working with two theoretical perspectives from consumer studies to research product service system consumption

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Keywords

Consumer Culture Theory; Pluralism; Practice Theory; Product Service Systems

Introduction

Considerable research has focused on circular business models (cf. Boons and Lüdeke-Freund) such as Product Service Systems (PSS), systems of products, services, supporting networks and infrastructure designed to be resources efficient (Mont, 2002). Despite potential benefits, PSS implementation rates are poor (Vezzoli et al., 2015), especially in consumer markets (Rexfelt and Hiort af Ornäs, 2009). Surprisingly, there is paucity of research on the relationship of consumers with PSS (Catulli, 2012), from consumer studies perspectives in particular (Mylan, 2015; Catulli et al., 2017).

To address this gap in knowledge, Catulli et al. (2017) and Catulli et al. (Unpublished) explored consumers' relationship with PSS using respectively Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Practice Theory (PT). The two sets of findings generated by these approaches offer useful insights. For example, the CCT study revealed that PSS has limited ability to create the symbolic value consumers require and the PT study revealed that links of current consumption practices with every day social practices creates inertia to change and thus inhibits PSS diffusion. In conclusion, both studies suggest that further research is required drawing on consumer studies to help address problems with PSS consumption.

In our study, CCT and PT were used to analyse a single case of Use Orientated PSS consumption. The case was a rental scheme of infant equipment such as pushchairs aimed at parents. CCT and PT were used in pluralistic fashion to analyse the case as they problematize PSS diffusion differently; CCT as the role of PSS in consumer identity construction and PT as PSS as a support to performing practices which are fundamental to society. Yet, comparison between the two sets of findings from PT and CCT informed methods could reveal further rich insights on PSS consumption. If dialogue between perspectives can be promoted, this could, perhaps, yield better understanding of this phenomenon, provided the potential incommensurability of the two perspectives is respected. Thus there is a need to explore how a dialogue

between the two perspectives of PT and CCT might be possible and initiated and to identify the possible benefits and pitfalls of such endeavours.

Relationships between different perspectives

In order to explore the relationship between the PT and CCT perspectives, the authors draw on literature concerned with interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity is defined as "communication and collaboration between academic disciplines" (Jacobs and Frickel, 2009:44). For simplicity in this section we adopt the term "dialogue" to signify this communication and collaboration.

Some studies concerned with strategies to achieve sustainability suggest that these are hampered by the fragmentation of analytical approaches (Turnheim et al., 2015; Barry et al., 2008). Seen in this way, each analytical approach can be thought of as a lens that generates partial understandings of pathways to sustainability (Turnheim et al., 2015; Geels et al., 2016). However, Shove (2011) warns that differences in how different research approaches frame problems (e.g. sustainability) prevent integration of different theoretical perspectives (cf. Blaikie, 1991; Stirling, 2011; Hammersley, 2008; Turnheim et al., 2015). Barriers include incompatible styles of thought, research traditions, techniques and languages (Jacobs and Frickel, 2009). Seen in this way, integration of perspectives is not possible because of differing epistemological positions (Shove, 2011; Blaikie, 1991) as they focus on different units of analysis. Indeed, attempting unification and integration of perspectives and reducing diversity may lead to reductionism (Stirling, 2011). Although Practice Theory (PT) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) are closely related consumer studies perspectives, they still might have to be used in parallel. Whilst PT frames diffusion of PSS consumption as one of establishment of new social practices perhaps leading to multiplication and diversification of products used, CCT focuses on how consumers may construct their identities by adopting PSS. Moreover, they have different units of analysis, as one focuses on the individual consumers and the other on practices. With these differences, dialogue may be the only

possible way to compare findings, this is called “dialogical strategy” (Hammersley, 2008:9). The next section explores how insights from the interdisciplinarity literature can suggest how these two supposedly incommensurable perspectives may be used.

Types of interdisciplinary studies

Literature suggests that there are different levels of “dialogue” between perspectives and disciplines, ranging from “light” dialogue with “one off” iterations to full integration based on iterative interaction and collaborative linkages (Turnheim et al., 2015). There are different types of interdisciplinarity ranging from (Jacobs and Frickel, 2009):

- *Cross-disciplinarity*, or *multi-disciplinarity*, i.e. a contribution from two or more fields to a research problem
- *Interdisciplinarity* or *pluri-disciplinarity*, integration of knowledge originating in two or more fields
- *Trans-disciplinarity*, where knowledge is produced jointly by disciplinary experts and social practitioners

In cross or multi-disciplinary research, team members from different disciplines work in isolated self-contained manner, in parallel or sequentially (Wall and Shankar, 2008).

Reasons to call on diverse perspectives

There has to be a rationale to employ different *methods* (even in parallel) (Fielding, 2012). This rationale may be linked with the objectives of the dialogue between approaches. These objectives should be criteria for the measurement of success and failure of that dialogue (Graff, 2016). The objectives of the dialogue may include:

1. *Corroboration* (Hammersley, 2008) or *Convergent validation* (Fielding, 2012), convergence to confirm the findings of a method with the other, or validation (cf. Rossman and Wilson, 1994). This is the most controversial objective as it is akin to triangulation, which Blaikie (1991) and Rossman and Wilson (1994) question, as findings from different perspectives are said to be incompatible (Blaikie, 1991).
2. *Elaboration* (Rossman and Wilson, 1994) or indefinite triangulation, comparing different narratives of the same event and search for complementary information or enrichment (Hammersley, 2008), or illustration and analytic density or “richness” (Fielding, 2012).
3. *Development* (Rossman and Wilson, 1994), to shape a perspective’s method from the findings of another) and
4. *Initiation* (Rossman and Wilson, 1994), when results from one method foster new lines of thinking.

If, following Blaikie (1991), the combination of perspectives and the methods they underpin was not legitimate, the only possible mediation between such perspectives would be epistemological dialogue or juxtaposition, which aims at enriching knowledge (cf.

Fielding, 2012) *without* combining perspectives and methods (Hammersley, 2008). By this route, researchers can enhance and deepen their understanding by adopting different perspectives in a pluralistic fashion, then comparing notes with other researchers and seeing different approaches to a problem (Stirling, 2011).

The authors suggest that the usefulness of a dialogical strategy to approach different sets of findings generated by methods informed by the PT and CCT perspectives should be explored, and the next section outlines possible approaches to this.

Conclusions and directions for discussion

A discussion between academics is recommended to suggest possible directions to develop bridging strategies for PT and CCT. How could these two perspectives be used to enrich the understanding of the relationship of consumers with PSS, and possibly other business models?

Three possible positions might be explored:

1. To use the two perspectives (and other perspectives) in a pluralistic fashion, i.e. without any attempt at integration
2. To integrate the two perspectives, which call for an approach to operationalize this integration
3. A middle position, where some sort of connection is made between the two perspectives

This might be positioned as a proposal to address the problem of fragmentation of research approaches raised by Turnheim et al. (2015) which is said to affect research on sustainability.

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