EDITORIAL

Consumers and consumption: from individual, to collective, and beyond

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Consumer research has always been halfway between individual and aggregate approaches. Put roughly, psychologists and economists follow methodological individualism, while anthropologists and sociologists follow different forms of methodological pluralism. This means that the inherent social dimension of consumption has been approached from different perspectives: in individually oriented studies, cultural and societal issues are mediated by individual perceptions and motivations, while in pluralist studies they are the focus of analysis, although observed at different levels of aggregation (group, class, culture, and the society at large).

Since the mid 90s, marketing and consumer researchers began to focus their attention toward social relationships and their impact on consumption. Individual consumers were then observed "as if" they were part of more complex networks whose specific characteristics were not (only) the traditional social ones (culture, religion, class, etc.), but also intrinsic to the consumption dimension. That means that consumption collectives were defined as forms of social aggregations that depend on the consumerist nature of the undergoing practices and relationships. In this editorial I refer to these collectives as *communities of consumption* (CC).

The first and most cited CC theorizations where sub-cultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumer tribes (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2001), and brand communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). These collectives are specific to consumption because they provide their members with consumption related resources (practices, goods, brands, knowledge, etc.) that deliver "linking value" (Cova, 1997). Linking value does not derive from the utility or intrinsic value of these resources, while it comes from the social bonds that are activated by these resources. A brand carries linking value as it is enables consumers to feel connected to other like-minded ones.

These very first examples were theoretically and empirically grounded on the assumption that CCs were made of (a) individuals and (b) relationships between these individuals, no matter for them being actually and physically close to each

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other. Many CCs develop globally and their members feel like being part of them even if they do not know each other.

Other authors further developed the notion and phenomenological scope of CCs, pushing the boundaries of their empirical analysis from mainstream markets and marketing (McAlexander et al., 2002) to alternative, anti-market phenomena (Kozinets, 2002a) as even anti-market or anti-consumption activities give rise to consumption collectives (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Moreover, owing to Kozinets' (2002b) studies, also the digital side of consumption collectives began to emerge.

Still, ordinary, physical and actual social processes (e.g. Leigh et al., 2006) were the most diffused contexts in which marketing and consumer research addressed their attention as their primary aim was to provide companies with managerial implications as for how these social aggregates can improve their value creation processes (Schau et al., 2009). These studies still rely upon the (often implicit) assumption that a CC is made of individuals interacting with each other. As a corollary, even if temporarily or part time, these collectives are defined as groups of people.

Owing to Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) and more in general to the acknowledgment of substantive changes taking place in the social media context, a different approach emerged: CCs can also be something in between collectives and people. Brand publics are "not" made of individuals, but can be described as flows of affect that take the form of posts, likes, etc., that detach from the people that originated the social media traces that constitute them.

Parallel to this, other authors developed a more market-oriented conceptualization of CC: consumer-constructed organizations are hybrid organizations (Mamali et al., 2018) or forms of unconventional entrepreneurship (Guercini & Cova, 2018) which witness the ability of consumers (as collectives) to directly enter the competitive arena as alternatives to traditional companies. Consumer-constructed organizations are formally and substantially defined as institutional forms, made of actual people, that cross the boundary of the market from the demand side toward the supply side, challenging the role traditionally played by private companies.

Further, thanks to actor-network and assemblage theories, the research stream on CCs is living a new and thought-provoking phase: from this perspective, not only CCs cannot be defined if not given a specific context, time-period and constellation of individuals and processes, but also other animated and unanimated components have to be taken into account in order to effectively describe how these collectives actually come to exist and operate (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Diaz Ruiz et al., 2020). Accordingly, CCs can now be framed as temporary, contingent, and flexible constellations of individuals, institutions, and objects.

This brief reconstruction, though limited in scope and detail, paves the way for a hopefully lively discussion about the future developments of CC research.

In particular, the following questions seem to be particularly urgent in the light of recent developments of the literature, and of substantial changes taking place in the society and the market:

- Context-dependence, ephemerality and multiplicity: how do consumers cope with the ephemeral nature of some forms (and related conceptualizations) of communities? How do they participate in ephemeral social practices and how

this affects the market process? How do they deal with the simultaneous, even temporary, participation to multiple communities?

- People and objects: how consumers interact with objects that mediate between them and the communal resources they are interested in? How do "objects" participate in CCs? Are there any systemic properties of CCs that depend on the role of modern, IOT types of objects and resources? Who drives whom in human vs. machine communal interactions? What about the role of platforms in shaping communal relationships?

- Ontology and epistemology: do consumers live CCs as if they actually exist in ontological terms? How can we, as scholars, define CCs in theoretical terms and provide the necessary analytical tools for their empirical analysis? Finally, as suggested by Zwick and Bradshaw (2016), when dealing with CCs, are we reifying our objects of study? Is "community" still acceptable to theoretically identify emerging forms of CCs in which individuals and human relations matter less and less, while technology, physical and digital devices, software, AI, and the like assume a prominent if not a driving role?

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