
THE INTERPRETIVE APPROACH IN CONSUMER RESEARCH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The last twenty years has generated a surge of interpretive consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005). But what exactly is *interpretive consumer research*? In the discussion that follows, we attempt to answer this question and discuss the advantages of the postmodern perspective as an alternative and more suitable framework to study interpretive consumer research. We also discuss some of the gains and drawbacks generated from this research tradition in various areas: philosophical assumption, consumption studies, cross-cultural consumption studies, embodiment studies, and gender studies. Finally, the discussion ends by looking at the gains and drawbacks from using different methodology common in interpretive consumer research.

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INTERPRETIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH: WHAT IS IT?

What is Interpretive Consumer Research (ICR)? In a broad sense, interpretive consumer research is a branch of marketing and more especially, consumer behavior that deals with consumption issues from a qualitative perspective. That is, it focuses on the phenomenological and experiential aspect of consumption. Arnould and Thompson (2005) describe it more specifically, as an area that focuses on “illuminating symbolic, embodied and experiential aspects of acquisition behavior and on the sociocultural complexities of exchange behaviors” (p. 871). It also explores “how consumers actively relook, transform symbolic meaning encoded in advertisement, brands retail selling, material goods, as well as on consumption and possession practices that focus on the hedonic, aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions” (p.871). Others, like Calder and Tybout (1987) describe ICR as an area of research that focuses on epistemological issues. ICR “uses a system of idea developed by a particular group to analyse consumer behavior. It provides an understanding of human behavior in terms of this system of idea and from its own frame of reference.” (Calder and Tybout 1987 p. 136). For Calder and Tybout (1987), ICR should not be confused with everyday knowledge, nor should it be considered the antithesis of empirical knowledge. Instead, ICR should be viewed as knowledge that provides additional insight.

Overall, ICR has focused much of its effort such areas: consumer identity, marketplace culture, the sociological patterning of consumption and the ideologies as well as consumer interpretive strategy associated with the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 1995). However, the traditional approach used to study consumption – the positivistic/modernistic perspective - is not well equipped both theoretically and methodologically to tackle these issues. Therefore, given the limitation of the positivistic framework to cover wide range of topics related to ICR, researchers needed an alternative theoretical framework to study ICR. That framework is Postmodernism. In this next section, we describe postmodernism, the conditions that led to the postmodernistic way of thinking and discuss the reasons the postmodernistic framework is better suited to study ICR than is the positivistic perspective.

AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH: POSTMODERNISM

3.1 What is Postmodernism?

But what exactly is Postmodernism? The question has been the subject of much debate and many have written about it (Feathertone 2001). According to Feathertone (2001), for some it means nothing at all while for others, postmodernism can mean a stretch of time (i.e., postmodernity), an ideology (i.e., postmodernization) and/or the cultural associations it has to postmodernism (i.e., postmodernism).

A Period of Time (PostModernity). First, postmodernity can be considered a period time in history. According to Baudrillard (1983) technology is a central characteristic in the shift between modernity and postmodernity because of the computer generated simulation and models that became more prevalent and significant in constituting the world. During this period, individuals are more open and as a result, have a better state of mind. Lyotard (1984) refers to it as the computerization of society. Nevertheless, Jameson (1984) has reservation about describing it as an “epochal shift”. Instead, Jameson describes it as “the cultural dominant or cultural logic of the third great stage of capitalism, late capitalism, which originated in the post WWI era” (p.4). Therefore, when we think of postmodernity, we can think of a time where a significant technological factor - the introduction of computers and consequently, the availability of a plethora of information - broadened the consciousness of the people.

An Ideology (Postmodernization). Second, postmodernization can also be viewed as “an ideology and set of practice with spatial effects, which have been notable in the British economy since 1976” (Feathertone 2001 p. 6). Cooke, however, is reluctant to call this a *new* stage of society. Instead, he favours Lyotard (1984); who views postmodernization as an ideology, which, happens within the sphere of capitalism. Thus, postmodernization is not an ideology that lives independently of capitalism and modern ideology, but one that lives side by side with it.

Its cultural Associations (Postmodernism). Third, postmodernism can also be defined in-term its cultural associations. Postmodernistic tendencies emerged in different fields and disciplines at different points in time (Venkatesh 1999). For instance, in architecture, postmodernism is a backlash against modern definitions of architecture, which include universalism, functionalism and rationalism. For the postmodernistic architects, the modernistic approach was too rigid and aimed for “more fluidity of design, mixing of styles and local variability” (Venkatesh 1999, p. 2). In literature, postmodernism was a reaction against the “Western” Canon. In politics postmodern fostered debate on gender and ethnic issues. In philosophy, postmodernism was a refutation of Cartesian duality of mind and matter. Therefore, it is apparent that what led to this shift was very rooted in its cultural associations, which had become very dissatisfied with the restrictive status quo of the modernistic/positivistic ideology.

3.2 The Postmodernistic Way of Thinking

According to Venkatesh (1999) five conditions can account for this postmodern way of thinking in marketing: sign systems, hyperreality, particularism, fragmentation, and symbolic behavior. The first condition is that human beings use signs and symbols that provide meaning when communicating. A postmodern framework enables the study of communication through signs and symbols. Second, is the condition of hyperrality. In this case, humans construct their own realities and these realities are the product “of their imagination, ingenuities, fantasies and pragramatic needs” (Venkatesh 1999, p. 4). Baudrillard (1981) refers to this process as simulation or simulacra. Third, particularism relates to the idea that social and contextual construction influences an individual’s outcome. Fourth, is this idea that individuals’ self-identities are fragmented and are in a constant state of formulation, reformulation and direction. Lastly, individuals negotiate consumption and communicate through meaning and signs (Venkatesh 1999). In essence, these five conditions which help account for the postmodernistic way of thinking provides researchers with a greater arsenal of philosophical tools to understand consumption.

3.3 Why Postmodernism?

Why use a postmodernism framework to study ICR? First, the methodology used in positivistic research is not well suited for ICR. That is, the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption are not plainly accessible through experimentation, surveys or database modeling. These aspects of consumption behavior are better addressed with other methodological tools such as ethnography, hermeneutics and semiotics. Therefore, the postmodernistic framework is better suited to address these issues because of the methodological tools that it has at its disposal.

Second, postmodernism provides a frame that enables the study of consumption from a wider theoretical perspective (Sherry 1991). That is, it provides a theoretical framework that can account for the *wider* realm of what constitute consumption “by encouraging sensitivity to differences and tolerance of the incommensable” (Lyotard 1984, 1979 in Sherry 1995, p. 551). In fact, Belk (1984) is also against this modernistic perspective of consumption and also favour a wider theoretical spectrum for consumption. Belk argues that consumption studies have been reduced to buying behavior and that it should not be the case. Furthermore, Belk (1984) argues that consumption has been around since the beginning of man and is a much wider phenomenon compared to buying behavior, which is a relatively new phenomenon that represents a particular dimension of consumption. Therefore, the postmodern perspective is better equipped, theoretically speaking, because it enables the study of consumer behavior not only from a wider spectrum of perspectives but also, from different points in times and in different spaces.

Third, according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), the modernistic perspective of the world is reduced into simple dichotomous categories (i.e., subject/object, male/female, producer/consumer). Each pair characterizes a difference and usually, the first term is given a superior status over the second term. According to the postmodern perspective, the dichotomies are the result of political and societal efforts to lawfully justify partial truths. This being said, according to Firat and Venkatesh, postmodern is a more appropriate framework to study ICR not only because of its more liberal and progressive theoretical parameters but also because of its goal to promote discourse that permits the *continuous* re-creation and re-formulation of philosophy that represents a more contemporary ideology.

Fourth, the postmodernistic perspective liberates individuals from the restrictive parameters of the modern ideology. That is, according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), man in a ‘modern world’ is guided by science, rationalism and technology. Aesthetic, language, discourse and practices take a back burner and are not viewed as contributing to society and the human experience in the same way. As a result, science and technology is privileged and is seen as making a much greater contribution. For postmodernists, this view is too dogmatic, too narrow, too unidimensional. It is “is unable to tap into the richness of human experience” (Firat and Venkatesh (1995), p. 240). Hence, the postmodernistic perspective is a much more encompassing ideology because it recognizes the contribution of factors other than rationalization in the human experience.

Fifth, the postmodernism perspective does not view consumption as a simple bi-product of human economic rationalization. According to the modern, positivistic and economic perspective, individuals are rational consumers and makes consumption related decision in a rational manner, much like if consumers were wired like information processors. Belk (1987) vehemently opposes this analogy. For Belk the idea that human beings operate like information processors is grossly inaccurate. Consumers are not wired like computers nor do they act like them. Belk further adds that information processors are simplistic compared to human behavior, which, is much more complex. Therefore, the foundation of consumer acts should not be compared to such an analogy and, ultimately, a model that does not adequately or accurately represent the complexities of consumer behavior. Also, according to the postmodern perspective, emotional, symbolic and spiritual dimensions also influence consumer’s decisions. Furthermore, Thompson (2004) postmodernism can include such important contributors (i.e., God, nature, magic and the supernatural) into its conceptual framework unlike the modernistic perspective. Therefore, according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), postmodernism is a more appropriate framework to study ICR because it liberates consumers from this repressive rational/technical scheme and re-enchants human life through the acceptance of a multitude of categories.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND DRAWBACKS OF AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

4.1. Philosophical Assumptions

Hudson and Ozanne (1988) argue that ICR differs from positivistic research from various philosophical fronts.

Nature of Reality. First, according to Hudson and Ozanne in the nature of reality, the traditional positivistic approach argues that there is only way of knowing whereas the ICR argues against this idea that one real world exists. The ICR perspective argues in favour of “multiple realities” existing simultaneously because reality is essentially “perceived and holistic” (p.509). Therefore, for ICR, reality is how one perceives it. The advantage of this is that researchers get a greater sense and understanding of reality but unfortunately, without parameters it is difficult to exist and develop a society with unlimited perceptual and social parameters.

Nature of Human Behavior. A second important difference between ICR and positivist research is on the nature of human behavior. Positivists argue that human behavior is determined whereas ICR argue in favour of freewill. Therefore, for positivists, human behavior is determined, by the exogenous variables reminiscent of the behavioural school of thought. Essentially, individuals are at the mercy of external factors. Conversely, ICR believe that humans, beings have freewill and “actively create and interact to shape their environment” (p. 510).

The debate about whether human beings truly have freewill or are the product of environmental factors has been around for a long time. However, the problem lies in this notion of “either/or”. That is, social scientists, scientists, philosophers, economists and psychologists alike believe that human behavior is either the product of external factors (deterministic, modernistic perspective), or that humans have the power to choose their own destiny (postmodernistic, interpretive perspective, free will ideology). It is my contention that this is not an optimal way of looking at the nature of human behavior. Instead, we should be looking at these factors as both being able to exist side-by-side but that differ in magnitude at different points in time. This is very much in line with Lyotard’s (1984) position, which argues that, postmodernism occurs within the sphere of capitalism and, essentially, modernism. Therefore, both are needed to make sense of the world. For example, an individual is shaped by his/her environment (Venkatesh, 1999). These factors increase the probability of a particular outcome. This clearly adheres to a deterministic ideology. Nevertheless, does that mean that the individual does not have the ability to change? No. Individuals can change. The challenge lies in however, that more effort is required to change the outcome. In this case, the individual adheres to a freewill ideology. Therefore, environmental factors help push behavior in a certain direction, but human beings ultimately, the control the directional reins of their behavior.

Furthermore, if we believe that individuals are at the mercy of environmental factors and powerless against their impact, then we are also taking away accountability from individuals. Individuals need to be accountable for what they do. Therefore, in society, both are needed to make it work. Unfortunately, much of the research that exists has either a positivistic agenda or an interpretive approach one. An important and challenging feat for the future will be the merging of these two different theoretical approaches. ICR might be a more suitable framework given the fact that it can incorporate the positivistic ideology, whereas the positivistic cannot.

Epistemological Assumptions. A third important difference between positivism and ICR relates to their epistemological assumptions. Positivists take a generalized approach to research, whereas ICR focus on historical aspects and study a particular phenomenon at a particular time and place. The goal of positivists is to extract laws that can be applied to a wide range of phenomena. For ICR, however, the goal is to understand the subjective experience related to motives, meaning and reasons. For ICR, phenomena are context-specific that occurs at a specific time and place. Clearly, the advantages that could

be gained from ICR is that it enables researchers to explicate in more intricate details and the richness of the human experience. In essence, ICR contributes to a greater depth of knowledge (Calder and Tybout 1987).

The truth of the matter however is that too much details lead to confusion, and it becomes difficult to truly identify the dimensions and the key information that describes a particular phenomena. Consequently, it becomes difficult to make decisions. Also, some type of blueprint is needed because society cannot function without parameters.

Axiological Assumptions and Causality. A fourth and fifth important difference between positivism and ICR relates to their view on axiological assumptions and causality. Positivists explain things according to universal laws with the goal of predicting behavior. Conversely, ICR focuses on understanding and not necessarily explaining or predicting behavior (Rubinstein 1981). Also, positivists view causality as a precursor to prediction. Conversely, ICR argues that it is impossible to view things as cause-and-effect because the world is complex. The more favoured approach for ICR is a more holistic one. Causality is nevertheless important in the world. Understanding the relationship between things and having universal laws is necessary in society. Without them, society as we know it, would not be able to sustain itself. However, understanding the experiential aspect or holistic aspect of a phenomenon is also important and necessary. Both need to be included in the research process, but at different points in time. That is, when attempting to understand a phenomenon, a more liberatory approach is needed. A holistic or phenomenological approach is thus a viable option because it enables the understanding of themes underlying a particular phenomenon. But it should not stop there. Researchers should focus on deriving universal laws and assessing causality of these underlying themes. It is not to say that causality, and consequently, prediction, will be always be accurate. Instead, what it does indicates, is that when certain factors come together, they lead to a specific outcome.

4.2 In Market and Consumption Studies

The interpretive approach has contributed theoretically to the discipline of consumer research and more especially, to the discipline of market, culture and consumption by illuminating on the associated ideology, infrastructure, symbolism, meanings, ritual, process and stories associated with the market.

The Infrastructure and Ideology of the Market. For instance, Carrier (1997) focuses on the infrastructure and ideology of the market by describing it from an economical and political perspective. According to Carrier, actors make decisions not based on the choices they want, but based on the choice they have available. For Carrier, the market needs an infrastructure to support it. Alone, it cannot sustain itself.

The Mobility Quality of Symbols and Meanings Associated to the Market. McCracken (1988) focuses on symbolism and meanings associated with the market. According to McCracken, there is a mobility quality of meaning between culture, good, and the consumer in the market. For instance, meaning is transferred from the world to the good via certain meaning structure such as advertising and the fashion system. According to McCracken, these meaning systems serve as a kind of conduit through which meaning is constantly being poured in its movement from the constituted world to consumer goods. They transfer, invent (via opinion leaders), and reform meaning. Meaning is also transferred from the good to the consumer from various rituals (i.e., exchange ritual, possession ritual, grooming ritual and divestment rituals).

The Production Process of the Market. Penolozza (2001) looked at the cultural production of the market through processes such as consumer behavior, situational challenges, subculture interaction and market interaction. More specifically, Penelozza look at how a market is established by investigating it at the micro level (i.e. rodeo show).

The Relationship Between the People and the Market. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) on the other hand looked at the members of the market considered to be in economically good standing via the study of brand communities. Members of these brand communities do not wish to emancipate themselves from the market. Instead, members embrace it. They like to belong to the community because it makes them

feel like they belong. Conversely, Kozinet (2002) investigates whether the consumer can really live independently and peacefully away from the realm and demands of the market, in the context of the burning man event. That is, the goal of Kozinet is to discover the type of social practices individuals use to emancipate themselves from the market and its demands via ethnography. Muniz and Shau (2005) take it one step further and look at the rejected and the obsolete within a brand community. Those who are “rejected” from mainstream society because of their use of obsolete products. Muniz and Shaw find that the rebels are fighting the system (i.e., the market, the powers that be). These brand members are fighting to keep their communities and product attached to the market or else to live independently.

ICR on market and consumption makes a very nice theoretical contribution not only by bringing into focus key factors of the market such as symbols, meaning, the production process, and the relationship that different types of individuals have with the market, but also by demonstrating these factors are ever changing.

Nevertheless, ICR, and more especially culture theory and research, does not come without its shortcomings. Arnould and Thompson (2005) remind researchers that ICR related to the market and more specifically, consumer culture theory (CCT) “is not a unified, grand theory, nor does it aspire to such claims. Rather, it’s a family of theoretical perspective that addresses the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings” (p. 868). Essentially, ICR or CCT focuses on “the cultural complexity and the plethora of meaning and the juxtaposing cultural grouping within a sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism”.

4.3 In Cross Cultural Consumption Studies

A third area that has gained theoretically from the interpretive consumer approach has been in the area of cross-cultural consumption. Cross-cultural theory builds on culture and consumption by demonstrating for instance that relationships people have fall along a continuum and that there is a multitude of consumption categories for individuals in the market.

The Social Relation Continuum of Consumption. More specifically, research on cross-cultural consumption has shown that relationship helps direct consumption. For instance, the ICR approach has unravelled that rituals such as gift giving have different meanings in different cultures (i.e., the West versus China) (Joy 2001). For instance, Joy found that the social relationship to the giver has with the donor to be an important factor. Joy speaks of a continuum that determines the type of gift one gives. For the people of Hong Kong, this type of social relation continuum is also a way to maintain social order. Gift giving can be an act of generosity or an act of enslavement. That is, the person receiving the gift is now indebted to the person who has given the gift.

The Multitude of Culture Consumption Categories. Research has also shown that unlike the more modern positivistic perspective, categories outside the West recognize the existence of a multitude of cultural categories in consumption. Applbaum and Jordt (1996) looked at the cultural categories associated with consumption in Japan in a dating service context by looking at the process of dating, and ultimately, marriage. Applbaum and Jordt found that consumers should be considered “cultural beings” as opposed to just buyers that are embedded in particular sociocultural circumstances (p.216). According to Applbaum and Jordt (1996) accepting the consumer in a broader range of categories leads to the “inclusion of a wider possible range of motivations, persuasions and constraints” (p.216) This is a sharp contrast to the positivist research that is based on the Cartesian, dualistic ideology. That is, non-western consumption do not limited themselves to the dualistic assumptions.

These findings demonstrate that the postmodernistic perspective looks at consumption from a broader sense than the positivistic perspective especially in matter that relate to cross-cultural consumption. It would be difficult for positivistic studies to tackle issues such as: the relationship the consumer has with the market, the process of making the market, the production of the market, the mobility quality of meaning, as well as the investigation of cultural categorization and the social relations that individuals have with other people. Interpretivist research allows and aims for the authentic and full expression of those experiences and relationships. However, the positivistic does not. The positivistic

perspective focuses on parsimony, and thus prescribes to a context that provides the minimal amount of information required to explain the experience and this, in a statistical context. It restricts the researcher into a very strict framework that takes away from the phenomenon studied. Therefore, the readers never truly get a authentic sense of the experience just fragmented pieces of information. The reader is left with a partial and limited view of the phenomenon.

Conversely, the interpretive approach does not aim to predict, but simply to explicate. However, individuals have a difficult time holding to information that they cannot use, particularly with respect to the market. Individuals like information that will help them explain and help them make good consumption decisions. Therefore, if the information is always context-specific, then individuals might not incorporate the information into their consumption perceptions, decisions and behavior because they will not think it relates to them. Essentially, it is difficult for individual to have information without incorporating it into a wider mental framework.

4.4 In Embodiment Studies

A fifth area that has gained theoretically from the interpretive consumer approach has been in the area of the body and embodiment. The interpretive consumer approach has made a significant contribution as to how humans use their bodies and their embodiment experience to make sense of the world and communicate to other about consumption.

The Role of the Senses. For instance, David (2003) brings forth this idea that the sensory modality itself influences the way researchers, and individuals in general, perceive and interpret the embodied experience. For David, the body and mind are united and indivisible. A notion that is strictly against the dualist notion of the mind and the body. For David, the senses will help guide the type of information that we will be acquire and communicate in a consumption context and experience.

Understanding and Communicating the Embodiment Experience Through Metaphors. Another important contribution made by the interpretive consumer research made in the study of the embodiment experience comes from the work of Sherry and Joy (2003). Sherry and Joy demonstrate that the embodiment experience is not a phenomenon that can easily be described. As a result, individuals use metaphors to understand sensory information emerging from the embodiment experience.

The Medium of Communication. Yet another contribution comes from Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin makes a link between the embodiment experience and the medium of communication. According to the historical approach, events are often described in a coherent and chronological fashion, often omitting the embodiment experience of the people that lived during the time. Conversely, the novel is a better medium of communication of the embodiment experience because it serves as script that provides the reader with information to imagine not only what happened during that time, but also what was felt by the people, said, seen, heard, smelled, touched and tasted. The novel arouses the senses of the reader that enable the imagination to create scenarios of what happened in a more experience and embodied fashion.

The Role of Exogenous Factors in the Embodiment Experience. Foucault's work on institutional control also brings forth the knowledge that outside factors such as monastery, penal or academic institutions are often designed with the intention to shape, and ultimately, control the embodiment experience. This leads its members to meet the demands and objectives of the institution. Foucault's work is important in that it brings light that control of the embodiment experience is done with incremental changes of the embodiment experience.

The Role of Endogenous Factors in the Embodiment Experience. However, in Thomson and Hirshman (1995) look at what happens to individuals who lose control over their embodied experiences. It is clear that this phenomenon is mediated by the context in which it is experienced. In a context where the requirements are strict and difficult to attain, the embodiment experience might suffer and consequently, individuals might not feel part of with the standard. Conversely, when the context allows for a wider range of variability in its standard, embodiment becomes a much more agreeable and "liveable" experience. Thompson and Hirshman demonstrate that the self-concept is a key endogenous factor that dictates the "liveability" of the embodied experience.

Positivist research also recognizes the role of the self-concept and in particular the ideal. According to the positivistic perspective, the individual has an image of their self-concept that is ideal or aspirational. That is, positivistic research has readily shown that outside factors influence the consumer self-concept, which consequently influence consumer behavior. However, the positivist research is limited in that it simply states that the self-concept influences consumer behavior. But interpretivist research takes it one step further. The interpretive approach reveals that not reaching this aspirational level can be detrimental to individual mental well being and that can lead individuals to have unbearable embodiment experiences.

Despite the major contribution made by the interpretive approach in the area of embodiment experience, they have yet to look how individual's memories of past embodiment experiences and imagination of future embodiment experiences shape consumption. This is a topic that has also not yet been investigated in positivistic research.

4.5 Methodology

A fifth area that has gained theoretically from the interpretive consumer approach has been the data collection tools used to study interpretive consumer topics such as: market-oriented ethnography, and netnography, and hermeneutics.

Market Oriented Ethnography. A first methodological used by ICR is market-oriented ethnography. The market-oriented ethnography approach focuses on "the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or dimensions" (Arnould and Wallendorf 2004, p.484). Not only does this method focus on data collection, but also, it focuses on clarifying how different microculture are constructed and how they formulate people's behaviors and experience. This type of ethnography differs from the more traditional marketing ethnography whose focus is to study people in organization carrying out activities of marketing management, product development and strategy executions. Essentially, market oriented ethnography aims to unravel how the market influence human behavior and experience.

The role of the researcher with respect to the subject is an important factor in market-oriented ethnography. Researchers often (but not necessarily) are active participants in the context investigated. This practice however is clearly against the position of positivists who adhere to the scientific protocol and view the researcher-subject relationship as separate. However, for ethnographers this should not necessary be the case. For ethnographers, it is sometimes necessary to immerse themselves in the culture and be active participants, if they are to truly understand the phenomenon at hand.

Netnography. The second and more recent tool for ICR is netnography. Netnography is similar to market oriented ethnography in that it too also focuses on the influence culture has on the consumer's behavior and experiences. However, unlike market oriented ethnography, netnography is more economical, faster, unobtrusive and not artificially induced. Nevertheless, netnography has two important limitations that deal with ethical issues. One deals with the question of whether online communities are private or public and the other deals with informed consent. If the sites are public, informed consent is not necessary, since members are voluntarily putting their information on cyberspace. In this case, the researcher really has no ethical obligation to let participants know how they are going to use their information. However, if these sites are considered private, then netnographers must get informed consent from participants. However, morally speaking should this really be the case? That is, even if the site is considered public and informed consent is not legally required, morally it should be. No matter what information is used, researchers have the moral obligation to inform participants how they are going to use their information and in what light they are going to present them. The researcher might present the participant in a light that does not favour the participant or present information that can hurt the participants. This should be avoidable at all cost. However, the researchers might be faced with the dilemma of not being able to find participants they use in the study given the anonymous nature of the Internet.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics on the other hand, focuses on the meanings that consumers ascribe to their own consumer experiences and focus on the text, stories and narratives they use to do so. It looks

at a person's life history as a text and uses the narrative of personal identity as a source of information. Thompson (1997) further adds that ICR often uses hermeneutics "to interpret consumer consumption in relation to their broader narrative of self-identity" (p. 451). Simply put, hermeneutics focuses on the stories consumer tell about their consumption experiences related to their self-identity.

Overall, according to Hudson and Ozanne (1988), there are three important advantages to using ICR methodology over positivistic methodology. However, for the positivists these can be considered clear disadvantages. In positivist research, the researcher orientation is known. The researcher reviews the literature, adopts a model, formulates hypotheses and often uses experimentation to test these hypotheses. That is, the positivist researcher approaches a particular issue with a-priori expectations. There is also a structure to writing positivist research. This is contrary to ICR where orientation is not necessarily known and whose main approach to collecting information and understand a particular phenomena is the use descriptive analysis, historical documents, and ethnography. For ICR, the focus is on exploring and description a particular phenomenon, not predicting it. This is contrary to the positivist approach whose focus is to acquisition of information that is not only generalizable, but also, predictive.

Another important criticism that interpretive consumer researchers often hear is that they study different context that might not have any external validity given their specific nature. However, according to Geertz (1973) ICR and consumer culture, do not study consumption context, they study *in* consumption contexts to generate new construct and theoretical insight and to extent existing theoretical formulation (p.869). Therefore, they study a context that best represents a particular phenomena. This approach is no different than the life sciences using of animals to understand the internal functioning of the anatomy. They do so because it provides a model that allows them to understand the internal functioning of human anatomy without having to using human directly, particularly given their invasive and illegal nature. However, the dominance of the modern perspective in Western culture, the use of animal to study anatomy might be more acceptable than the studying a particular consumption context.

A last criticism of these all these methodology is its subjectivity. Qualitative methodology often uses a relatively small sample to study a particular area because of the mental and time effort required to interview transcribe and make sense of such information. Nevertheless, it is difficult to get a comprehensive understanding of a particular area with a small sample. Therefore, given the mental and time demands needed for "doing" interpretive consumer research, a small sample is advisable to complete such projects.

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