Constructing the Market Through the Colour Spectrum

Pascale Desroches, L’Oreal, France
Jean-Sebastien Marcoux, HEC Montreal, Canada

Drawing upon an ethnography of product development in the haircolor department of L’Oreal, in Paris, this study examines how consumers are described, represented and depicted, by managers throughout the product development process. It unveils the relation between the marketing department and the science laboratory, and the reification of consumers that emerges as a result. The product development process is used as a template for the analysis of the interplay between the social actors and the material culture of knowledge. Drawing on contemporary material culture studies inspired by Latour and Woolgar’s ethnography of the science lab, this paper seeks to examine critically, and reflexively, the making of the consumers in a global corporation.

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SUMMARY

Consumer researchers have advanced our understanding of the ways consumers think about marketing managers’ tactics of persuasion (Friestad and Wright 1995) but much less is known about the techniques, technologies, and ideologies marketing professionals employ to conceptualize and theorize about consumers. Other disciplines have been more reflective about the constructivist nature of “knowing” audiences and the role of research techniques in that construction (Ang 1991; Hall, 1998). But the important cultural and ideological work of marketers in imagining consumers has been studied to a lesser degree (for notable exceptions see Nairn et al. 2003; Lien 1997), which is surprising given the central role of marketing practice in shaping consumer culture.

Our session attempted to bridge that gap by studying the creation of customers in three different contexts: scientific, digital and international. Desroches and Marcoux analyzed how consumers are scientifically constructed and examined in the haircolor department of L’Oreal, in Paris. More specifically their ethnographic study examines how consumers are described, represented and depicted by managers throughout the product development process. Their study unveils the relation between the marketing department and the science laboratory, as well as the reification of consumers that emerges as a result. Desroches and Marcoux’s study uses the product development process as a template for the analysis of the interplay between the social actors and the material culture of knowledge. Drawing on contemporary material culture studies inspired by Latour and Woolgar’s ethnography of the science lab, they seek to examine critically, and reflexively, the making of consumers in a global corporation.

Turning to the digital construction of consumers, Zwick and Denegri-Knott elaborated on the ways database technologies have transformed marketing into an act of production where what is manufactured and sold are customized customers. The authors propose the concept of bioproduction to argue that the commodification of customers increasingly trumps the production of goods and services as mode of value creation in post-Fordism. Hence, database marketing emerges as the latest trend in “marketing” (Moor, 2003), because the electronic surveillance of all of consumption transforms every transaction into an act of co-creation and enables all of life to be mapped as consumer space. By casting the customer database in this light, the concept of bioproduction allows the re-theorization of the popular notion of customer co-creation as the most advanced form of consumer exploitation.

Cayla and Peñalosa focused on the stories marketers develop about consumers in international contexts. Drawing from extended ethnographic fieldwork in the Indian corporate world, their study uncovers elements of the marketing worldview taking consumers as its subject matter as they diffuse through the circulation of marketing practices and discourse. Required to imagine consumers and markets for the development of specific positioning, pricing and targeting strategies, international marketers are shown to mobilize specific assumptions and interpretive frameworks that overlay in complex ways other forms of market research. One of the most prominent and troublesome assumptions is the idea that the third world inevitably follows in the footsteps of the first world. Cayla and Peñalosa examine how the multifaceted interactions between MNCs and their local advertising agencies function as a central site of the diffusion of marketing ideology.

Our discussant, Jonathan Schroeder, ended the session by establishing the similarities between these three studies. He emphasized that they all tried, in different ways to “reclaim the marketing department” by making the practices and discourses their object of study. Through the study of consumer constructions in different professional and cultural contexts, these studies help document what we call the culture of marketing. Put differently, by taking an anthropological approach to the study of marketing, we excavate some of the profession’s manifold ideological and technological workings that combine to make up today’s customers as culturally significant targets for marketing’s strategic interventions. We believe that because the practice of marketing has become a taken-for-granted ideological institution advancing its objectives with what is widely regarded as a universal set of techniques, de-naturalizing its operational logic to permit the recognition of marketers as central agents in the production of markets and constitution of consumers is difficult. Yet, this is precisely what we need to do if we are to understand the larger social and cultural implications of marketing practice in the production of consumer cultures around the globe.

Selected References