

The Object of Research

Considering Material Engagement Theory and Ethnographic Method

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Papers 3 – Vantage Points

The Object of Research: Considering Material Engagement Theory and Ethnographic Method

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The paper outlines a methodological approach for investigating how consumers create brand meaning using the material resources companies provide. The approach draws from Material Engagement Theory—to discuss the role of consumers in creating patterns of meaning by engaging with objects. It also explicates the role of objects in supporting this patterning. We explain how an in-situ diary tool (dscout, in our case) can be useful to support this approach. We demonstrate our methodological approach in the context of the Red Rooster Harlem, a cosmopolitan restaurant in New York, owned by the celebrity Chef Marcus Samuelsson.

INTRODUCTION

This paper develops a methodological approach for using a qualitative online research platform (in our case, dscout was used) to investigate how consumers create brand meaning using the material and spatial resources firms provide. The research helped us understand how people interact with objects and how they ascribe meaning to these objects in the moment of interaction.

Previous research in the field of consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) has shown that brands weave ideological motivations, such as moral and social values, into the retail environment (Borghini et al. 2009), and has demonstrated how branded stores express ideology (Kozinets et al. 2002). Ideology is present even when management may think it is not, as Kinney and Phillips make clear in their ethnography of how negative stereotypes kept a fashion brand from realizing its potential with plus size shoppers (Kinney and Phillips 2016). Brands often contain multiple ideological stories. Although some of these stories may be initially proposed by marketers, they are further developed when customers engage with the material manifestations of a brand (material objects) in retail stores and after purchase. These objects have an important role in supporting the development of brand stories. However, little is known about how interactions with these material objects help customers to understand, engage, and extend brand meanings.

We present a methodological approach to understand how consumers build brand meaning through interactions with objects and spaces. We provide the theoretical background to understand this approach. Explicating the theories that underpin our methods is a worthwhile exercise in questioning the assumptions that guide ethnographic research, bind its findings, and influence its outcomes. Our approach captures moments of

embodied cognition (Hutchins 2005) and the moments in which a consumer uses ideologically-laden objects to create brand meanings (Malafouris 2013).

Our examples draw on an ethnographic study we conducted at celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson's Red Rooster Harlem restaurant. The project was not commissioned by the brand and the chef only participated in it as one of the interviewees. The project was carried as an independent project by one of the researchers, and expanded to include two other researchers. We engaged in it over the course of five years, sometimes more intensely than others. The case provides an example of a retail space that is pervaded with ideological stories, and precisely because the Red Rooster is a space where multiple stories are being told, it is an ideal site to understand how objects help consumers experience and create such stories. The method we reflect on here provides ethnographers with a way of understanding how meaning-making happens in ideologically-laden branded spaces.

THE CASE: MARCUS SAMUELSSON AND THE RED ROOSTER

Award-winning and internationally acclaimed, Marcus Samuelsson is chef, entrepreneur, and brand. Orphaned in Ethiopia, he was adopted by Swedish parents in the early 1970's. As a chef, he worked in Europe and on cruise ships, before settling in New York City in 1994. After winning a Michelin star for the Aquavit, Samuelsson open the Red Rooster Harlem, among other restaurants. He wrote several cookbooks exploring his Swedish, African, and African American heritage (Ahad, 2016; Larsen & Österlund-Pötzsch, 2012; Samulesson, 2003, 2006, 2009). Samuelsson has had endorsements with global and well-known local companies and has a public persona through TV show appearances as a cooking judge and other celebrity engagements, such as cooking for Obama's inauguration dinner. He is a celebrity, a chef, and a philanthropist. He serves on the board of New York's Museum of Modern Art, is a UNICEF Ambassador, and has appeared as speaker at the World Economic Forum. His well-honed story was fixed in his 2012 memoir *Yes, Chef* (Samulesson & Chambers, 2012; Ahad 2016).

The Red Rooster Harlem opened in 2010 and is the subject of Samuelsson's newest cookbook, *The Red Rooster Harlem: The Story of Food and Hustle in Harlem* (2016). Echoing the characteristics of cosmopolitan locales (Bartmaski & Woodward, 2015), the restaurant's location in Harlem signals cosmopolitan values by virtue of its slightly out-of-the-way location and by its name, a reference to a club that operated during the Harlem Renaissance.

From a branding perspective, the Rooster, as Samuelsson refers to it, is notable for its ability to embody multiple ideological narratives. These stories are woven into the fabric of the brand and become real in the interactions with the objects in the restaurant. These objects offer the Red Rooster customers an opportunity to consume and co-produce the ideological stories featured in Samuelsson's and the Rooster's brand. The restaurant works as a cosmopolitan canopy. Cosmopolitan canopies are defined by Anderson (2004;15) as places that allow "people of different backgrounds the chance to slow down and indulge themselves, observing, pondering, and in effect, doing their own folk ethnography, testing or substantiating stereotypes and prejudices or, rarely, acknowledging something fundamentally new about the other". The restaurant is a playground where these multiple stories come alive. These stories are not forced upon the customers by a clever marketer; they emerge from customers whose engagement brings them into being. For example, in a restaurant like the Olive Garden, the meanings of the objects in the decor are established by the designer.

They do not vary much. The purpose is to convey a certain stereotypical image of Italy. There is little room for interpretation and construction of meanings by customers. In contrast, the Red Rooster Harlem provides a visually-rich environment that is populated by objects of various types, origins and meanings. This diversity of objects and the various potential meanings they may enable, provides interpretive flexibility, allowing customers a much bigger role in ascribing meanings to these objects. This is what makes the space so interesting. . But how do these multiple ideological stories emerge? And what is the role of the material objects in this process of emerging meaning? These were some of the questions that guided our study.

MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT THEORY AND THE MEANING OF OBJECTS

Parallel discussions in the fields of applied anthropology and consumer culture theory have brought into focus the limits of the symbolic approach. In consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), brand meaning is typically understood in symbolic terms. Diamond and colleagues define the set of meanings emanating from a brand with multiple facets (such as American Girl) as “the products of the dynamic interactions” between a brand’s constituent actors (2009, p. 121). These constituent parts can be human or non-human (objects). Yet, as evidenced by tutorials such as that run by Hunt and McCulloch at EPIC2016, there remains a bias towards semiotic theories. These theories have much in common with consumer culture theorists like Grant McCracken (1986). They represent a top-down approach toward the construction of meanings. Others have implicitly critiqued the pursuit of meaning, noting that “there is a limit to how many times we can ask our respondents ‘but what do water pumps really mean to you’ and how many word associations we can ask them to draw” (Lieskovsky, Ramsey-Elliot, and Hill 2012).

The marketing field has recently turned to object-oriented ontologies such as actor-network theory to better account for the agency of actors other than the consumer (Bajde 2013). Epp and Price (2008), for example, emphasized the importance of addressing the ways in which object biographies (Kopytoff 1986) interact with complex consumer settings. Within the discourse of applied anthropology, some in the field have used actor-network theory to account for the role of objects in collecting ethnographic data about ineffable topics such as the Danish concept of *hygge* (Bean 2008). However, these studies have not focused on the interaction between a human and a material object.

To address this issue, we used Material Engagement Theory (MET). As articulated by Malafouris (2013), the central contention of MET is that meaning emerges in the moment of interaction between a human and a material object. MET extends previous theories of cognitive blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) and distributed cognition (Hutchins 2005). Hutchins’s work brought to the fore the critical role of material artifacts in the process of thinking, making the powerful point that the cognitive process should not be conceptualized as internal to a single individual, but instead can be better thought of a process that is shared in groups. Malafouris’s contribution is to scale these and other ideas about material agency to the level of culture. If meaning emerges in the moment of interaction, then the objects that surround us can no longer be thought of, as they are in traditional semiotics, as vessels for

pre-existing meaning that can be decoded¹⁴. Instead, in MET, material objects take the central role in the process of cognition. It is through continuous and repeated interactions with and operations on material objects that we make sense of the world¹⁵. For Malafouris, it is from the recursive and culturally shared nature of these interactions and operations that meaning is created and shared.

From a methodological standpoint, MET suggests that the researcher focus on the moment of engagement between research participants and objects. For those of us wading into the depths of material semiotics, Malafouris's work raises the question of whether one could bypass the participant altogether and interview the objects themselves. Interviewing objects is the norm in archaeology, the field from which Malafouris's work emerged. Archeologists do not have a time machine and thus cannot interview the people that used the objects. Following this line of thought, the sociologist of consumption Franck Cochoy has called for "an archaeology of present times" that would focus on the objects constituted by market systems. He suggests that much previous research approaches objects "as some inert substratum which should only be studied through consumers' perception, as if action was only on the latter's side, as if objects could be reduced to what humans think about them or do with them" (2009).

A METHOD FOR STUDYING MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT REMOTELY

The methodological approach we present here arose from our investigation of a cultural scene we observed for five years and where the role of objects in creating and changing meaning was especially apparent. During our research, while many of the objects changed, the many meanings associated with the scene, a busy restaurant, became deeper and more resonant. The space is cluttered with objects, but this has not created chaos, instead, it has created additional value for the brand.

We started with a more traditional market-based ethnographic inquiry—"the deep hanging out" (Sherry 1998)—to sensitize researchers and generate a first understanding of the field. We also analysed the brands' stories in the media, Facebook and Twitter. From this work, we were able to identify the key brand stories. Once we knew the stories, we engaged with an online platform (dscout) as a way of linking real-time experience with the stories we detected. This helped us understand which stories were being told at each encounter between customers and objects.

Though the methodological approach we developed is not platform-specific, we used the dscout online qualitative research platform (Winnick 2012). Other platforms with similar technical capabilities, such as FocusVision's Revelation Global, could be substituted and this method, time and budget permitting, could also be carried out by teams of in-person researchers. The difference is that our approach orients participants in the research to consider and reflect on the moment of engagement and does so through the lens of MET.

¹ An example of traditional semiotic thinking: a car with fins symbolizes the future, therefore if 1960s me interacts with a car with fins, I am accessing futurism.

² In contrast to the example above, in MET, the meaning of a car with fins, for the individual and for the culture, is constructed through interactions with the object, which might include futurism, joy, tragedy, or some entirely quotidian meaning; the meaning is dependent on the situation of the object, the individual, and the cultural context.

Given that the objects in the environment we discuss are visually rich, we asked people to use their mobile phones to register their impressions and reflect on what they have experienced. To do this, participants responded to prompts using the dscout app on their phone while they were at the restaurant. We structured the prompts with the intention to capture moments of meaning-making interaction in different areas in the restaurant and at different times in the customer's visit. What were the key objects and moments of interaction? Which stories were emerging in these moments from the interaction with objects?

Participants were provided with a set of overview instructions as follows:

- To complete this mission, you'll be taking at least 9 photos and one video to tell us about your experience of the Red Rooster.
- After you take each photo or video, we'll follow up with a few questions so that we can better understand your experience.
- Since we can't be there in person, please choose your words carefully to help us understand what you are seeing, thinking, and feeling.
- Here's an overview of the photos and videos you'll take:
 - 1 photo of an object or space that represents your first impression of the restaurant.
 - 3 or more photos of objects in the bar area that help tell the story of the restaurant.
 - 3 or more photos of objects in the dining room that help tell the story of the restaurant.
 - 1 photo of your food order (your main course if you're having multiple courses.)
 - 1 60-second "restroom reflection" video, shot in one of the single-occupancy restrooms upstairs. Here we'd like to act as though you are Skyping with an old friend who's never been to the restaurant and telling them what it's like.
 - 1 photo of your receipt.
 - If there's anything else that would help us better understand your experience, we'd love to see that, too!

Our intention was to capture as best we could the natural arc of engagement that occurs in a restaurant setting (e.g., first impressions, experiences at the bar, experiences in the dining area, including the food, dishes, and bill, the toilet), and at the same time, to turn a participant's attention to the stories emerging in the space. For example, this is reflected in our instruction to take a photo that represents a first impression, and in the language in the second and third bullet points that request that the participant find objects that "help tell the story of the restaurant." These instructions were intended to reduce the temptation for participants to choose the three most obvious or nearby objects. They had to engage in some reflexivity about the stories they thought were being told and the objects that had a role in telling them. While the photo of the food order and receipt were originally included as check measures intended to ensure that participants visited the restaurant and stayed for a full meal, these proved a useful source of data for us in the analysis phase, as we found interesting relationships between food and drink orders and different participant profiles.

The “restroom reflection” video became a valuable source of data not only about stories, but about the participant’s ways of talking and engaging with objects. Originally intended as a workaround so that we could hear the participants—loud background music is a key ingredient in creating the feeling of a high-energy, fun setting—we found that most participants gamely went along with the setup. The responses to this question typically included an unprompted description of the restaurant and helped us get a handle on just how much most of our participants were enjoying the scene.

For each of the photos and videos, the dscout app guided the participants through the following questions:

1. What is the focus of this photograph or video?

Rationale: This question is useful for two reasons. First, a pilot round of research revealed that participants’ photographs and videos often captured multiple possible subjects. Asking the participant to identify the subject of the representation clarifies this confusion and, in the ethnographic spirit focuses the researcher on the emic perspective from the first interaction with the data. When a video was provided instead of a photograph, the participant’s description is especially important to frame analysis.

2. How do you think this object or space is supposed to make you feel? Did it work? If not, how did you feel instead?

Rationale: This question was intended to help elicit the consumer’s reflexive awareness of the marketer’s intention to ascribe a specific meaning to an object or space. Since much of the literature on themed environments frames the experience as fantasy or escape (cf Gottdeiner 2001), we wanted to better understand how the consumer experiences these meanings. Although we asked about feeling rather than meaning, most participants elaborated their response to this question to account for a meaning that triggered a feeling.

3. What in your experience outside of this restaurant does this object or space remind you of? You might think of another space, place, time, or person, for example.

Rationale: Here we were looking for references—metaphorical bookmarks in the consumer’s mind—that were linked to previous experiences or knowledge. We were inspired by Latour’s conceptualization of references that circulate in a chain (Latour 1999; Bean 2008) and Akrich and Latour’s description of shifting in and shifting out as displacements in actor, space, and time. We were curious to identify how the objects associated with the brand constituted meanings through their linkages to other people, places, and histories. For example, one participant associated a decorative Kimono with ideals of diversity and the fact that Marcus Samuelsson is a supporter of arts.

4. Marcus Samuelsson has said that the point of this restaurant is to spark a conversation. Give us an example of a couple of lines of a conversation you think this object or space might spark.

Rationale: This question goes to the heart of MET by asking the participant to give us an example of meaning in action. We wanted to see how participants could engage with the objects in order to co-create meaning. Remember that in MET, meaning emerges in the interaction between objects and participants.

TYPES OF FINDINGS THIS METHOD AFFORDS

Our methodological approach has helped us understand how the objects in the restaurant made it possible for its customers to experience several brand stories. The stories that have emerged from the data analysis talk about the Red Rooster Harlem as a cosmopolitan and vibrant place. In each story the place and the brand can be seen in a different light. It is a place to celebrate cultural diversity; a gathering place for the local upscale Harlem community, a place for status pursuit among local customers; a place to celebrate Sweden, a place to celebrate Ethiopia, and a place to celebrate Southern Comfort food. It's a place that supports the arts in general, but also a place for African-American culture. It is this ability to harbour multiple animated conversations that makes the Red Rooster Harlem so vibrant and alive.

Our method has allowed us to see which objects were engaging in these conversations. Customers do not see material objects in isolation as free-floating signifiers. Customers look for clues from other objects in the same space and other brand touchpoints to understand how to co-create meaning using a given object. We discovered that objects were seen as participating in different conversations depending on the social life of that object (Appadurai 1990).

Recall how we asked participants to take pictures of touchpoints that helped tell the story (or stories) of the brand. A Little Richard print on one of the walls of the Red Rooster shows how this works. A participant (Sandra) picked the Little Richard print as one of the touchpoints that conveys one of the brand stories in the restaurant. She took a photograph of the object, which displayed a close-up of the print, identified it as "a painting of... little richard?" and associated it with the story of Harlem as a center of African-American/black culture. Participant Max also picked the same touchpoint as one of the key touchpoints in the restaurant. He took a picture with his camera displaying Little Richard with other pictures on the wall describing them as belonging to a pattern of "photos of black people in various eras on the wall." Max, similar to Sandra, identified it as enabling two brand stories, "Harlem as a center of black culture," and "The Red Rooster as a community gathering place." He perceived Little Richard as part of an assemblage of photos that were, as a group, evoking the community motif. Participant Jessica, who also selected the Little Richard corner as a key enabling touchpoint, took a picture of the print among other objects on the wall, not only the photos of black people. She described it as an example of "artwork displayed throughout the restaurant," and she described this assemblage of objects accordingly as associated with the stories of Harlem as a center of black culture (like Max and Sandra) and Samuelsson as a supporter of the arts. Participant Dawn framed her photograph differently: she included not only the print of Little Richard, but also the photograph of Lana Turner wearing a red dress. For her, the pattern generated by the two pictures together evoked "the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame where there are pictures of famous artists," and also led her to indicate that these objects communicated the same stories as Jessica identified, plus a third: diversity, most likely referring to the catalog of famous diverse characters represented by the drawings and paintings throughout the space. Participant Terri also photographed the Little Richard print, but she included a recipe reproduced in Swedish on the wallpaper; for her, the

painting and the contrasting wall helped constitute three stories: Harlem as a center of black culture, civil rights, and diversity.

Note that the Little Richard print worked as a resource in the building of many stories, that is, the object's affordances allowed it to be a building block in the construction of several different stories. Each object had the potential to participate in a number of different conversations. However, the actual stories that emerged through the interaction with customers depended on how each customer engaged with the Little Richard print in conversation with other, proximal objects. Each association reinforced a particular aspect of the Little Richard print. So the blackness of the print was activated when seen together with black meanings; the celebrity aspect of it was highlighted by the other celebrity pictures in the room. From our perspective, we began to think of the Little Richard print as especially talkative because it can relate to various objects. Its various aspects (affordances in the language of MET) were activated by the associations consumers saw among objects and between the objects and consumers' own expectations. Note that the restaurant can only suggest possible stories; the actual meaning-making, i.e. creation of situated meaning, depends on the person who interacts with these objects.

As consumers experience new objects, some stories become more apparent. For example, other objects "talk" about blackness and as a result, the overall experience of the restaurant is animated by these personal engagements with blackness. As a result, blackness becomes an important, emergent story in the setting. Inspired by MET, we call the process through which a story - or multiple stories - emerges from customer engagements with multiple objects *patterning*.

We contend that patterning restricts the meanings afforded by an object. For example, the Little Richard print can be used to tell multiple stories, but only the recurrent stories - the ones that emerge from patterning in the interaction with other objects - survive. These stories tend to be a subset of the potential meanings afforded by the object. An object that could hypothetically afford five or six different meanings ends up participating in two or three conversations because only these two or three conversations are underscored by the other objects that, in line with Appadurai's thinking, are part of the social life of a given object.

Some objects were more talkative than others, that is, they were capable of participating or starting multiple conversations. So, the Little Richard print was much more able to relate to other objects—we saw them represented in conversation with other objects—than a decorative white head of a moose hanging on the wall. A few participants chose the moose as a key object in the restaurant, but all saw it in the same way: as part of a conversation about the restaurant's Swedish heritage.

REFLECTIONS ON OBJECT AGENCY AND THE POSITION OF THE CONSUMER IN APPLIED ETHNOGRAPHY

In this paper we have explicated a methodological approach to explore how consumers create brand meaning using the material resources companies provide. To attain this goal, we have delineated the theoretical basis of this approach as it advances a particular understanding of how meanings emerge in the interactions of objects and people; it is an approach that sees objects as possessing the capacity to initiate conversations with people and for meaning to emerge from these conversations. The paper has explained the

ontological underpinnings of MET (Malafouris 2013) and its usefulness for understanding the role of material objects in supporting customers' engagement and creation of meanings. It emphasizes the agency of objects and the role of consumers in creating meaning through engagement with these objects. Whilst MET has provided the theoretical basis for this method, dscout has provided the technological support to the in-situ diary method. One advantage of in-situ diary methods is the ability to capture an evocative set of data, which includes visual evidence such as photographs and videos (Anderson, Levin, Barnett & Bezaitis, 2015). The use of visual evidence and video has meshed well with our intention to explore the meanings gathered through interactions with objects.

The methodological approach presented here provides the theoretical background, rationale, and procedures to use an in-situ diary tool (dscout) to understand how interactions with material objects can create specific brand meanings. Our analysis of the data from dscout has demonstrated how customers interpret and extend the meanings of objects at the actual moment of interaction. We have shown that meanings vary depending on the situated conversations customers see happening among objects and between themselves and objects. This approach can be used for several different ends.

Researchers can use this methodological approach to:

- inventory brand-relevant conversations and map desired brand meanings onto objects (e.g. understand the role one object may take in multiple conversations);
- identify talkative objects (e.g. Little Richard print in this paper) that are good for engaging many customers versus taciturn objects (e.g. the Moose in this paper) that are good at highlighting fewer, but key stories;
- flesh out how objects that help sustain these different conversations (e.g., understanding whether they initiate new conversations, change topics, or simply nod to the existing conversations) ;
- understand how the modification of existing brand-related objects or the introduction of new objects might impact the meanings produced by customer engagement (i.e. explore the new conversations do these object bring to the table).

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