

Macromarketing and the Crisis of the Social Imagination
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Speak to the Leg: A post-Paralympic analysis and re-theorization of consumer-object relations

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This paper reviews and re-theorizes objects in consumer research with specific focus on consumer-object relations. Following Bettany and Kerrane's (2011) argument of an ontological shift towards objects as fluid, morphing and mutable, this research adopts a posthuman analysis of consumer-object relations. The posthuman concept of human-machine hybrid also raises fundamental physiological, technical and philosophical questions about what it means to be human (Braidotti 2006; Haraway 1991). Empirical data is gathered through phenomenological interviews, diaries and autodiving with amputees with prosthetic legs. A posthuman route to analysis creates a space and language for hybrid and companion-based consumer-object relationships to emerge. Themes reveal descriptions of leg favouritism and coupling, normality and identity struggles, relationship fluidity and enabling and disabling technology. This paper provides a novel approach to investigating consumer-object relations with consequences for how objects are viewed in consumer research.

Theoretical Background

Celebrating the coupling of biology and technology, the London Paralympics saw more worldwide media reporting and visual images of prosthetics than ever before (Douglas 2012), and presented human-machine dyads into an everyday, non-science fiction context. The recent extensive exposure of the Oscar Pistorius (also known as the *Blade Runner*) court case transmitted live from the court room in Pretoria, South Africa, further etches prosthetics in the deeper global psyche, consciousness and popular culture (Orford 2014). Prosthetic legs have emerged as a crucial actor in the retelling of the events at the center of the court case. The proliferation of and accessibility to prosthetic body parts (e.g. prosthetic limbs, organs and skin) problematizes traditional ideas of human identity and inanimate objects as reflected in Haraway's cyborg (1991) and companion species figurations (2003).

Presenting the findings of fieldwork from an ongoing study of individuals with prosthetic limbs, this paper seeks to discuss consumer-object relationships in consumer research building on papers that have examined individuals' relationships with technology, objects and animals. The study explores a position from where the consumer is decentered and problematizes the view that objects are stable, passive and subordinated to the consumer. In consumer research, the consumer is typically portrayed as an all-deciding, autonomous and rational actor who uses and has ownership of objects (Simon 2003). Recent research illuminates that objects, in interactions with other entities, can be ontologically mutable, epistemic and singularized (Epp and Price 2010; Zwick and Dholakia 2006). Whilst these authors critique traditional views of the consumer subject and material object, they still maintain the distinctions between who/what is the subject and object.

However, Bettany and Kerrane (2011) emphasise that consumer research is seeing the beginning of an ontological shift from objects and consumer identities as socially constructed to a consideration of objects as fluid, morphing and mutable. This paper follows the authors'

argument that to progress our understanding of the relationships consumers form and enact with objects an approach is needed, which subdues traditional classifications of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’. Posthumanism is used in this paper to help bring a new perspective on consumer-object relations as it allows for a collapse of the subject/object divide and an emergence of hybrid, co-emergent and impure beings (Haraway 1991; Campbell 2013). Hence, neither the subject nor the object is dominant (Bettany 2007). The few existing consumer research studies that adopt a posthuman perspective to illuminate humans’ relationships with nonhumans describe hybrid beings through a terminology of liminality (Campbell et al. 2006), figurations (Bettany and Daly 2008), co-emergence (Bettany 2007) and co-actualisation of practices (Bettany and Kerrane 2011). The posthuman perspective offers an alternative approach to actor network theory in illuminating the *patterned relations* between people, objects and meaning. From a posthumanist perspective there are no pre-constituted subjects, objects, kinds, races and species as these are the product of their relating (Haraway 1991). Human and nonhuman actors partake in activities that co-create the nature of the individual entity and contribute to the creation of new hybrids (Haraway, 2003). Consequently, ‘beings’ are outcomes of ‘relational becoming’ with human subjectivity extendable to other nonhuman actors.

Empirical Research Design

This paper presents initial findings from a qualitative study using phenomenological interviews, audio diaries and autodiving methods with a sample of 7 participants recruited via purposeful sampling. Participants were selected on the basis of being 18 years or older and having lived with a prosthetic limb for at least 5 years. Participants took part in two interviews, completed a diary and took photographs of their everyday life with a prosthetic for 2 weeks. These methods are chosen to capture participants’ reflective descriptions, and feelings, as well as the more immediate, incidental and mundane experiences participants’ have with their prosthetic limb. Prosthetic limb users are chosen as the sampling context as the human body is seen as a place for material interaction between the human subject and material object (Dant 2006; Lai and Dermody 2009). The proliferation of and accessibility to prosthetic body parts (e.g. prosthetic limbs, organs and skin) problematizes traditional ideas of human identity and inanimate objects as reflected in Haraway’s cyborg and companion species figurations (1991; 2003). There is also an increasing presence of handcrafted, designer and branded prosthetics further bringing this entity into the consumption space.

Initial Findings

This analysis of consumer-object relationships considers the experiences of the human *and* the prosthetic object. Situations described by participants are then also interrogated from the object’s perspective to illuminate how objects emerge, evolve and mutate in their interrelations with other actors, including the human. This route to analysis creates a space and language for hybrid and companion-based consumer-object relationships to emerge. Initial findings have revealed themes of leg favouritism and coupling, normality and identity struggles, relationship fluidity and enabling and disabling technology. Single-leg amputees who have more than one prosthetic leg develop leg favouritism and consequently different couplings with each of their prosthetic legs. This can create a good leg/bad leg distinction, as explained by Kevin below:

“...the one [the good leg] that I wear mostly which is the one I’ve got now, is the one that’s closer to me (...) it fits more snugly and it’s more part of me (...) you don’t want to wear something that’s not comfortable.”

The good leg is “closer to me”, “a part of me” as it “fits more snugly”. This reflects technology as transparent-in-use inseparable from our bodies (Buchanan-Oliver and Cruz 2011).

Contrarily, the bad leg is used “for all the murky jobs [around the house], things might rip, split, whatever”. The leg unable to obtain a relationship based on trust and confidence in each other, who is unable to co-create ‘normality’, is discarded, rejected and ultimately objectified. Hence, the prosthetic is not simply a passive object used as a replacement body part. When a good relationship has been built it becomes a friend, a partner and an enabler; although at times it can be a disappointment and even an enemy.

The status of good leg/bad leg is fluid and unstable and gained through internal competition between the prosthetic legs. Some prosthetic legs have undergone humanizing change (e.g. hand drawn tattoos) in an attempt to be reclaimed as a physiological body part, whereas others resist the attempted adaptation that would shift it from what it is, into a human sphere of skin, hair and muscles:

“I always try and get some decent calves on it but it’s hard the way the metal comes down, it’s very difficult on the ankle, it’s very difficult to make any shape around the ankle because of all the working parts.”

Implications

The implications of this research are twofold. First, the research contributes to consumer theory by problematizing the locus of agency. The prosthetic limb becomes an actor as it interacts with the user, deferring subjectivity and action from the user to the prosthetic. Hence, this research describes the ongoing negotiation of ‘being’ towards the formation of a human-material hybrid. A posthuman approach to consumer behaviour, may require scholars to consider the ontology of objects, review the nature of relationships between objects and consumers and develop new methods and theories to illuminate and articulate the intertwined nature of humans and nonhumans. Secondly, this paper provides a review of the methods used in particular focusing on ethical considerations associated with this non-trivial sample; the use of language and terminology when interacting with this set of participants, drawing on different models of disability; and the position of the researcher in this particular life-world.

This review of methods-in-use for exploring the lived experiences of individuals with a replacement body part is of relevance to the wider consumer research community as a growing field of studies look to theorize the body, embodiment and forms of human-material interactions (Lai 2013; Buchanan-Oliver et al. 2010; Holliday and Cairnie 2007). The study demonstrates how the individual and the consumer are over emphasised in consumer research (Moisander et al. 2009). Badje (2013) used actor network theory and here posthumanism offers an alternative approach to show the *patterned relations* between people, objects and meaning. This study also aligns with the ideas from the posthumanist literature about augmentation of the human through the scientific application and interaction with potentially liberatory (and not-so-liberatory) technologies (Buchanan-Oliver et al. 2010; Campbell et al. 2006; Giesler and Venkatesh 2005).

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