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Word of mouth: products, conversations and consumption

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While there is a rich collection of studies of consumption and identity, the role of buying practices in ordinary conversations has been largely neglected. Minor items and major purchases regularly play a key role in furnishing our talk with topics, news, jokes and formulations of what kind of people we are. This paper unpacks the idea of post-purchase conversations contained within the common phrase “word of mouth.” What happens when products are examined in ordinary talk is pursued through the close analysis of a series of conversations around a significant purchase (a mountain bike). Drawing on the work of Harvey Sacks, and conversation analysis more broadly, this paper documents how products as a topic provide not only resources for small talk, but also an opportunity to consider our identity and its transformation. In conclusion, this paper argues that the knowledge and experience that circulate outside of the actual marketplace or point of purchase are part of a domain of economics as ordinary practice.

Keywords: conversation analysis; ethnography; word of mouth; post purchase; product talk; shopping

Introduction

The communication of information and recommendations has been, and continues to be, a longstanding focus of marketing and related literatures. “Word of mouth” has been characterised as part of the generic processes of the recommendation and communication of information that occur between consumers (Bergmann 1983; Noon and Delbridge 1993). This everyday concept based on consumer–consumer communication, offers a way of engaging with the social relationships around purchasing, thereby providing an alternative to concentrating on the producer–consumer relationship (Arndt 1967; Cova 1997; Mazzarol, Sweeney, and Soutar 2007).

Everyday conversation is peppered with discussions of what to buy, where and when and comments on adverts, reviews and so on. Within the literature, “word of mouth” is defined in terms of the communication of positive or negative evaluations of products, passing on news or information about products between consumers (Mazzarol, Sweeney, and Soutar 2007). Interest in these consumer–consumer communications has grown alongside the growth in online resources around consumption – online forums, customer recommendations, social networking sites and amateur reviews. Some recent examples have been Kozinets et al.’s (2010) examination of how bloggers talk about products, Schau et al.’s (2009) discussions of the creation of brand communities in online forums and Chevalier and Mayzlin’s (2006)

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examination of the effects of online reviews on book sales. Each of these authors has studied, in different ways, communication between consumers around purchases and products. Preceding these more recent developments through the internet, consumer products have since the dawn of the marketplace contributed to social interaction by furnishing our talk with topics, news and displays of taste and knowledge (Bourdieu 1984; Sacks 1995).

In turning towards talk and interaction, we are not turning away from economic activity. As Heath and Luff (2007) argue by ignoring “the interactional, we ignore the very socially organised competencies and skills, the practices and reasoning, the orders of action, that serve to accomplish and sustain many forms of market activity” (see also Bartlett 2005; Clark, Drew, and Pinch 2003; Clark and Pinch 1995). While a number of authors have been concerned with the role and influence of such talk on purchasing during the transaction itself, by extending market activity away from that brief encounter, we begin to describe how purchases are made sense of in one of a number of conversations after the event and how they shape future transactions. In widening out the study of purchasing interactions, we then also delineate how they are connected to the social distribution of product epistemics, life projects and post-purchase experiences of products.

Word of mouth

Deliberations about what to buy, justifications about what we have bought and the ongoing management of our expanding library of things furnish our conversations with a range of “rich topics” (Edwards 2005; Sacks 1995, 601). This is a two-way relationship – for as much as they provide things for us to discuss, purchases are also regulated by the ramifications of talking them through with friends, family and acquaintances. Some purchases pass by the eyes of others unquestioned and some purchases need careful accounting for. When we are unable to justify the goods we have bought, it can easily lead into either trouble for the buyers in terms of their character in the eyes of others (what is also known in conversation analysis (CA) as “subject-side problems”) or, alternatively, trouble for the goods, which leads to their return to the seller (then on the basis of what conversation analysts would call “object-side” problems).

An extensive literature has examined what “word of mouth” might be (Belk 1995a; de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan 2007; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Kozinets et al. 2010; de Matos and Rossi 2008; Ringberg and Reihlen 2008; Schau et al. 2009). In a meta-study, de Matos and Rossi (2008) dissected at length the antecedents that produce “word of mouth,” examining the factors that lead to conversation around different products. By contrast, Ringberg and Reihlen (2008) took a socio-cognitive approach to understanding the role of communication in product talk. The advent of online communities (and online product communities) has also provided a powerful resource for analysing word of mouth. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) commented that with word of mouth because “the information is exchanged in private conversations, direct observation traditionally has been difficult” (p. 545) and went on to use the availability of online conversations to analyse reactions to new television shows (see also Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Kozinets et al. 2010; Schau et al. 2009).

This work is powerful in outlining the causes and consequences of word of mouth, yet there are few examples of word of mouth in the interaction being examined (in Boden’s (1995) terms) “as it happens” (Bone 1995; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). That is to say, word of mouth is examined in so much as it effects

purchasing behaviour or how it is inspired by a particular incident or event. Closest to our interests here is where it has been treated as the communication of information and evaluation about products or retailers, but again there is little examination of its conversational organisation and form beyond this.

Studies of interactions around consumption have instead focused on interactions between strangers at the point of purchase (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Harris and Baron 2004; McGrath 1989; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993; Murphy 2000; Ritson and Elliott 1999) or specifically during the consumption of a service or experience, such as part of a vacation (McCabe and Stokoe 2004). Within the customer-relationship marketing literature “customer-to-customer interaction” has gained some interest – for example, Harris and Baron (2004) investigated conversation among rail passengers purchasing tickets. This work highlights the opportunity for analysing the role of purchases in conversation – but leaves open the opportunity to analyse product talk after the point of purchase. For example, Ritson and Elliott (1999) explored how television advertisements have a rich life in social situations, furnishing topics not only for conversation but also as platforms for demonstrating insider knowledge and differentiating between generations.

Part of the challenge of studying word of mouth beyond these sites has been getting access to good data. When introducing the opportunities for the use of video in marketing, “observational data have been to a large extent ‘left on the table’ because there have been no convenient, reliable, and cost-effective ways to capture and analyse them” (Belk and Kozinets 2005, 128). As pointed out, technological advances in cameras open many new opportunities for the collection of naturalistic data around consumption (Clark, Drew, and Pinch 2003).

Consumption

In consumption studies, there have been ongoing ethnographic investigations of shopping practices in various settings such as supermarkets, shops, auctions and open markets. Shopping is, of course, central in the transfer of goods from the domain of commerce and bringing them home to find a place for them in our lives. Studying shopping has re-situated consumption within our everyday engagements with goods. Exemplary here are two studies by Miller, first, his (1998) study of supermarket shopping, which examines how purchasing is part of caring in social relationships, and, second, his later examinations of how products can take on a patchwork of complex cultural forms (Miller 2009). As Miller most recently put it, “Empathy is expressed through ethnography. One understands these abstract principles, but you want to see and respect how they are realised in everyday practice” (Miller, quoted in Borgerson 2009).

In turn, consumer culture theory (Belk 1995a; Brace-Govan and de Burgh-Woodman 2008) has explored how products interact with subcultures and identity, in products as diverse as Apple branded computers (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005), Harley Davidson bikes (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), organic foods (Thompson and Hirschman 1995) or baseball (Holt 1995). Social interaction around brands (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Sherry 1995) has been one point of focus of this literature, in particular, how brands can come to be intimately related to the social production of particular communities and subcultures.

In parallel, an array of approaches centred on the work of Callon (1998) have reconnected the world of calculation to the low-level (and often low-tech) socio-technical

imbroglios that make it possible. The Callonian approach brings out the ubiquitous and overlooked calculation that is done constantly to underpin what appear usually to be over-arching economic determinants. This actor–network approach used for calculation has been drawn into studies of routine consumption. In Cochoy’s theory of shopping (Cochoy 2008; Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy 2005) as “calquation,” he brought together consumers doing calculation with prices to the qualities of need, love and enjoyment brought to light by Miller. Several years of covert observation of discussion over shopping trolleys between “clusters” (e.g. families and friends shopping together) in supermarkets reveal the importance of “cross-deliberations,” “tacit adjustments and sharing out of places, roles, gestures and behaviours between the cluster’s members.”

This term designates the building of a shared project, but also the activation of a collective rationality, which functions less as a distributed cognition or as an average rationality than as a “doubled” or “adjusting” rationality. Calquating means anticipating, measuring, testing, influencing and correcting the discrepancies between one’s position and that of one’s partner, and the other way around. In other words, Calquation is more related to the verb “calquer” (i.e. the effort to adjust one’s action to a given model) than to the noun “calque” (i.e. the result of such an action when it is one way and successful, thus producing a faith-ful copy). (Cochoy 2008, 30)

Conversation analysis (CA)

CA is related to recent debates around the methods used to investigate consumption. Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto (2009) argued that the focus on using interviews as a method has led to a first-person and individualistic view on culture. They argued for a shift from “tapping into people’s mind in order to collect information about their views and facts about marketplace phenomena, to the socially instituted discursive practices or cultural practices through which people produce meaning, make sense of their everyday life and achieve social order” (p. 3). Conversation analysts have long argued for naturally occurring materials and against data produced artificially from interview situations (Potter and Hepburn 2007; Sacks 1972). CA catches the social distribution of knowledge in flight among members of society (e.g. as grandparents (Raymond and Heritage 2006) or in a workplace (Heritage and Maynard 2006) or trainee scientists (Goodwin 2003)).

CA, starting with the work of Harvey Sacks (Sacks 1967, 1972, 1995; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) and Emanuel Schegloff (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1972), has grown into a research field that takes as its object of study the orderly nature of conversation – focusing on how activities are accomplished in and through talk. CA has explored a range of different activities which are pertinent to “word of mouth” such as assessments (Pomerantz 1984), complaints (Edwards 2005) and recommendations (Maynard and Hudak 2008). While there is little work on CA related to post-purchase product talk *per se*, again the “point of purchase” or, as it is usually known in this field, “the service encounter” has attracted attention (Bowers and Martin 2000; Clark, Drew, and Pinch 2003; Kitazawa 1992; Lee and Watson 1993; Moore 2008; Randall and Hughes 1995; Traverso 2001).

In Randall and Hughes’ (1995) studies of banking, it was shown how staff manage their interactions with customers and “keep the queue moving” by changing the pace at which they work with customers to minimise long waiting times. Staff used delays in the interface of their computer system to converse with the customer, managing the

conversation to take advantage of these pauses. In Lee and Watson's (1993) work on open markets, the pedestrian practices (such as slowing down, turning toward and pausing) that potential customers use to differentiate themselves from those who are merely browsing have been described. Clark and Pinch's (1995) remarkable study of market traders also demonstrates the crucial importance of interactional features such as crowd management and eye contact in producing not just orderly, but successful, selling (see also Dausendschon-Gay and Krafft 2009). Similarly, Llewellyn and Burrow (2008) showed how Big Issue Sellers generate sales and equally the artful ways in which they handle being declined. More recently, Heath and Luff (2007) have documented the interactions which make successful auctions possible and have studied turn-taking in market places, contrasting this work with the recent developments of economics and culture that we noted earlier (Callon 1998, 2005).

The conversations

The empirical material of this paper is an analysis of a number of conversations in a series (Button 1991), over 5 days, about the purchase of a mountain bike and the experiences that follow. This conversation is drawn from a corpus of 160 hours of video data of car journeys (Laurier, Lorimer, and Brown 2007). The data were gathered as part of a project which studied how social groups such as families, colleagues and friends travel together through informal car-sharing and car-pooling schemes. A researcher spent a week travelling in each car as a "passenger-seat ethnographer" and then handed camcorders over to the travellers to film themselves without a researcher present. Each of the 18 car-sharing groups that recorded the travels was asked to video roughly a week's worth of journeys. Earlier publications using video analysis of in-car interaction have focused on the transportational aspects of our data: cognition and driving (Laurier and Lorimer, forthcoming), passenger–driver interaction (Laurier 2004) and wayfinding (Brown and Laurier 2005). In those publications, speakers' roles as passenger and driver have been examined in terms of monitoring events on the road ahead, the special nature of car-based relationships and navigation through familiar environments (Laurier et al. 2008).

Of relevance to this paper is the fact that the corpus also provided a window into the other social activities that happen during car journeys, such as mothers planning a family's week ahead, runners assessing their performance in a race, children singing songs, colleagues recounting how their holidays went and, here, discussions after the purchasing of a new bike. In what follows, we focus on how the purchase and the events following the purchase come to be described in the car. While the visual nature of the video material played a significant role in these conversations, here we only use the audio because the visual aspects of the interaction were of only limited relevance to their discussions of the product. Ford and Greg, the conversants in question, have commuted together to their different workplaces for approximately 8 years. Their commute from their satellite town into the city lasts around an hour and a quarter, giving them about two and a half hours together a day. Even though the passenger is usually napping on the way into work, this still means that they spend a substantial amount of time passing the time in conversation. Focusing on one series of conversations among the same two commuters, to some readers, might seem an unusual method. Indeed, we make no special claim for the representativeness of these conversations but they offer a first step in uncovering shared logics that could be tracked over larger collections of talk, before and after purchasing.

Conversation 1: buying the product

We joined our protagonists on one of their lengthy daily commutes. In our first extract, they are discussing the recent purchase of a new mountain bike by Greg and, in particular, the process by which Greg came to decide upon the model he purchased and its specification. While this extract is lengthy, it provides a good background to the purchase that we are analysing and covers many of the different aspects of word of mouth that we want to introduce – in particular, *entitlement, identity and life projects*, and *the social distribution of product knowledge*:

Extract 1: buying the bike

Greg (passenger) and Ford (driver) discussing mountain bike suspension

1. G: Back is for the real flash boys. Plus it's, to get, to get a good rear suspension on the frame you've got to spend [five hundred] quid on a frame alone
2. +
3. F: [nine hundred plus]
4. F: Yep yep I know that. Otherwise it's kind of kid on stuff
5. G: Yeah
6. F: Yep (1.0)
7. G: And you only really need it if you're doing downhill extreme
8. F: Absolutely
9. G: So Ken[ny's]
10. +
11. F: [Which obviously] you'll be doing in no time at all
12. G: Kenny's advice was you're a fat bastard (0.5) You're going to be putting a lot of pressure on the components ((laughing)) so
13. F: Therefore get something[that]
14. +
15. G: [What you need] is a good solid frame (0.5) You probably need. You're better having the front suspension but you need it with at least a 100 mils of whatever it is. Apparently that's how far
16. B: Yep
17. G: up and down I think. Ehm, so you need a good solid front suspension. Magnesium forks (0.5)
18. G: Oh right, aye, magic
19. G: (0.5) And
20. F: Sounds like a bloody colour chart thing from Dulux (don't it)
21. G: Aye. So get disk brakes cos your a fat bastard and if you're going at any speed you'll never stop unless you. So, aye, fine. (1.0) Then if you can get hydraulic disk brakes but if you can't it doesnae matter, just means you've got to tighten the cable up every sort o' couple of months or something.
22. G: (2.0) And get eh: if you can get trigger shift gears rather than something ((looks obliquely)) stick something. Because it means you can change your gears and still have a really tight grip
23. F: ((Nods))
24. G: (4.0) So I was able to get all of that (and) bought a bike from Halfords

25. F: Good stuff (3.0)
 26. F: I'll look at it at some point because as I say I've got that scheme (1.0) see how you get on first see, if you manage to stick at it and if that makes any difference then I'll decide if I might take it up myself ((laughing))
 27. G: My thinking is if I try that many things I'm bound to find one then (3.0)
 28. G: But it's two reasons. It's that and I want to get the kids
 29. F: No I agree
 30. G: =out and about with the kids
 31. F: =with that

To provide some ethnographic context for our analysis, our driver and passenger are two middle-aged Scottish men, and as such their conversations regularly maintain something of an ironic frame. Ford's remark "[Which obviously] you'll be doing in no time at all" is not an honest remark upon the athletic achievement of Greg, but a tease through a misidentification of Greg. This sort of feature conversation is hardly rare – one of the first conversations Sacks discussed in his lectures on conversation features a similar misidentification (Sacks 1995, 420):

Roger: Ken, Face it. You're a poor little rich kid.
 Ken: Yes, Mommy

whereas we have

32. F: [Which obviously] you'll be doing in no time at all
 33. G: Kenny's advice was you're a fat bastard (0.5) You're going to be putting a lot of pressure on the components ((laughing)) so

In Sack's example, Ken uses *Mommy* as a play on *kid* – where *mommy* and *kid* are both family categories. Here, Greg's *fat bastard* contrasts with [*Which obviously*] *you'll be doing in no time at all*. "[Which Obviously] you'll be doing in no time at all" here provides an example of an "extreme case formulation" to make an ironic point about Greg (Clift 1999; Edwards 2000), to which Greg agrees to with his self-description as a "fat bastard" – *athletic* is contrasted with *fat bastard*.

While the humour here is about Greg, it is the bike that provides this avenue for conversation and different features of the bike actually provide conversation for Greg and Ford in how they can be turned to humour. We can begin to see here why word of mouth might be more than the "transmission of information or recommendation." A discussion of a product might take place not because of the value of the information, as such, but simply because it fulfils a humorous role in conversation (as another example, Ritson and Elliott (1999) discussed the humour in ritualistic repetitions of adverts in talk).

Conversational warranty

A second feature of this conversation is the work that Greg does to *warrant* his purchase. Purchases, and the practical reasoning they display, shape our reputations in the eyes and words of others. If we spend our money carelessly, then that will be noticed. Alternatively, being excessively careful has its own associated attributions. Purchases thus have a reputational element that can lead to judgements by others of our character as wise, foolish thrifty, generous, careless and so on. There is no

guarantee of a reputation that could be placed alongside our statutory purchasing guarantees. “Big ticket” purchases, in particular, like that of mountain bikes, ought to be carefully contemplated since they are the most likely purchases that we are expected to provide an account for.

In the above extract, a story is told of how “the bike” was purchased, which involved consideration of its features. We can see that in doing so, Greg is working out through self-reference how he might be entitled to have bought a mountain bike (even though, as we noted earlier, neither he nor Ford have owned a bike since they were kids). He works up a description of himself as a “fat bastard,” and not wanting to be seen to be “flash,” indeed contrasting himself with that after being prompted by Ford’s teasing (Lerner and Kitzinger 2007; Schegloff 2007). Ford’s jokes about advanced downhill cycling also mark out the expectations that go with owning a high-performance mountain bike with “proper” rear-wheel suspension. Throughout this extract, there are a number of product specifications paired with characterisations (line 1 – “back suspension – flash,” line 3 “nine hundred plus” + “kid on stuff,” line 7 “it” + “downhill extreme” lines 12 “fat bastard” + “good solid frame,” line 15 “front suspension” “100 mils” and “magnesium forks,” line 21 “disk brakes” + “fat bastard”). While each specification could provide an opportunity for further teasing, Greg uses Kenny’s reported speech to both justify these characteristics through Kenny’s epistemic authority as a serious cyclist and provide himself with an indirect relationship to the selection procedures.

Greg’s practical reasoning around the purchase is displayed – with “who you should talk to,” advice that you should take, who should be consulted and so on. Greg even builds his entitlement to buy a bike at all (to go cycling “with the kids”) alongside the specific appropriateness of the particular bike that he has bought. If Greg justifies his purchase successfully, the bike will not be seen as impetuous or foolish by his long-term and level-headed travelling companion, Ford. His decision is reportable as rational and reasonable – not extravagant nor purchasing “cheap crap.”

It is worth noting that although the retailer is named, the bike itself is not formulated in terms of its *brand* but in terms of its specifications. While branding might act as a shortcut to marking certain levels of quality and cost, Greg’s bike itself does not carry a well-known brand and he cannot resort to this shorthand. Instead, when the bike is formulated, it is through being listed as a collection of components. Indeed, the use of a brand here would require some familiarity with bikes and their manufacturers that the two conversationalists might not have. This list of components also provides a set of resources for future conversations since all the different components can be talked about individually or brought together in different ways. Without a simple brand as label, then, Greg and Ford instead discuss the particular components and what they do and only then can they begin to do what Cochoy’s (2008) calls “calqualifications” of what a bike is worth. The description of the bike purchase is fashioned so as to display due process, according to the significance of the purchase, but also with a clear justification of why certain things have been bought, what components have been bought and how they build and fit to the identity of the buyer. The process and the product are evaluated and assessed as the story is told.

Identity in conversation

This extract is not only a description of a hypothesised perfect bike but also a description of *the bike that Greg bought*. While he might appear to be talking

merely about the characteristics of the object, the characteristics that he chooses also begin to characterise the character of the person who would buy this kind of bike (as we noted earlier subject-side issues: Edwards 2005). The criteria that Greg's provides as to what is the best bike to buy are those for what is the best bike *for someone like him* which involves formulating what Greg is like in relation to the use of a mountain bike.

A standard concept in the literature on consumption is that of identity – following Bourdieu's (Belk 1995b; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Bourdieu 1984; de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan 2007; Hirsch 1976; Watson and Shove 2005) theory that the products we buy are not so much about what we can do with them, but rather they are for establishing our social distinction from others. Bourdieu's theory of distinction has contributed greatly to the development of consumer culture theory. A similar concept in economics is the notion of *positional goods* – where a purchase is used to locate ourselves in relation to others. However, there are dangers in over-emphasising the “identity work” in the above extract. Purchasing the bike did not allow Greg to immediately lever himself into a different social category, nor is he now, through the act of purchase, distinct from his peers. Rather, the bike provides the *potential* for transformation of his relationship with other social identities. Like DIY tools, the bike purchase is better understood as part of a project than as a lone item. Unlike the simplicity of the act of buying a bike with these specs at a good price, its value within a project means that it can still fail and the bike will be left to gather dust in his garage. As a product project, it carries many more criteria for its success as a purchase for Greg. He is, after all, now expected to learn riding an unfamiliar style of bicycle, adapt his daily routine to find the time to go cycling and find a new way around the town where he lives that he can use it on. The bike itself does not become irrelevant because getting a bike with inappropriate features for the project could lead at the very least to more physical suffering than other forms of getting fit and worse to the collapse of the whole project.

In fact as the conversation continues, Greg and Ford expand the projectness of the bike by discussing the “life project”, which buying a bicycle is part of, and thus further establishing it as not a spur-of-the-moment decision:

34. G: My thinking is if I try that many things I'm bound to find one then (3.0)
 35. G: But it's two reasons. It's that and I want to get the kids
 36. F: No I agree
 37. G: =out and about with the kids
 38. F: =with that

In this project, Greg will get fitter, lose some weight and spend some more time with his kids. The latter element then is a further and equally significant project of doing more with his children. His identity as a father who wants to spend time with his children is thus also being made relevant to and securing the purchase. Moreover, to buy this bike is also to make a first move towards a new identity as a cyclist and thus also to becoming a member of a new social group (e.g. cyclists). Becoming healthy, a better dad and a cyclist are only *projects* at this stage, and thus until pursued successfully, his purchase carries the risk of becoming a member of the larger group of purchasers of bicycles: “bike-in-garage-gathering-dust.” In informing Ford of the deal he made with his new bike, Greg is in turn also talking about tentative and as yet unproven membership of fit dads, dads who cycle and dads who cycle with their kids, ever

aware of the dangerous implications of failing in the project and losing the memberships that could go with this purchase.

What we are coming upon here is not just the purchase as identity work, but more broadly the extended process of buying things and making a home for them in our lives (Dant 1999). The identities that are dealt with in this extract are of course relevant for the story being told. Yet moving beyond the purchase and engaging with broader questions of how a bike might change who you are, it is not an automatic result of the purchase. While the bike can potentially change Greg's identity, it will not do it for him. From the conversation, we can begin to see that the aspect of their identities that is being made relevant is not so much "bike owners," but their co-occupancy as competent buyers of mechanically complex products such as mountain bikes who know to whom they have to turn to for information. While the identity that goes with the product (e.g. cyclist) is relevant in this conversation, it is not something that is immediately transformed through the purchase.

The social distribution of knowledge

So far, we have dealt with a number of other things that are happening during a "word-of-mouth" episode that have been broadly missed in the current literature. Here, we re-examine the traditional definition of word of mouth that we outlined in the introduction: as a way of transmitting information.

1. G: Back is for the real flash boys. Plus it's, to get, to get a good rear suspension on the frame you've got to spend [five hundred] quid on a frame alone
2. +
3. F: [nine
hundred plus]
4. F: Yep yep I know that. Otherwise it's kind of kid-on stuff

At the outset of the fragment when Greg is passing on his new found knowledge about mountain bikes (see above), Ford displays price awareness overlapping with that of Greg. Yet their prices are divergent by almost double. This gap (while potentially an upgraded agreeing assessment of its value (Pomerantz 1984)) marks a potential problem – either a lack of knowledge for one of them or a potential disagreement over the value of rear suspension bikes. Greg's addition of "on a frame alone" repairs the mismatch smoothly. Since Greg's discussion so far has failed to make any reference to Ford possessing any pre-existing epistemic authority, Ford is able to elaborate upon price versus suspension in a way that starts to establish his own knowledge on this terrain. In response to Ford's knowledge displays, Greg reshapes how he delivers his description of the bike and its purchase. It is no longer from one neophyte to another, Ford has some knowledge here, and to maintain their affiliation, this needs to be taken into account.

The role of the social distribution of knowledge here then is not merely one of transmission, but of establishing *who knows what*. It also shows that if one does not have the knowledge, one can go ahead with the purchase if one turns to someone who is expected to own that knowledge before making a substantive purchase. Big ticket purchases often involve a search for local experts before they go ahead. Here, on discovering that Greg has turned to someone else, Ford might have intervened – "you could have asked me." In entering any new arena of consumption, we are thus also entering a new distribution of knowledge that has consequences in terms of who

should or could be consulted. While Greg did not consult with Ford, he does mark out that he did turn to an appropriate and accepted authority – the office mountain biker – before making the purchase.

Following his concern with the existing distributions of knowledge, Sacks (1992, vol. 2: 459–94) investigated the *transmission* of information through conversational objects. By exploring a dirty joke being told by teenage boys, he revealed how all manner of information is parcelled up in the telling of the joke by boys of this age, for example, information such as that about sexual relations themselves that boys of this age ought not to know this much about (but do) and that girls of a younger age (e.g. the sister of one of the boy who told the joke to her girlfriends) do not have that knowledge and so cannot understand the dirty joke even if they are telling it to one another. Sacks noted that the dirty joke is thus serving a number of purposes, transmitting the knowledge, checking on its acquisition and monitoring the knowledge of others.

One of the key features of “word of mouth” that we need to take note of is that while it is not nearly so tightly packaged or self-contained as a dirty joke, it is nevertheless parcelled up for potential further transmission. As a conversational object, its “delivery” is different in a number of aspects: there is no necessity to suspend disbelief or to deliver a recognisable punch line. Yet delivery still has to be done in ways that are artful and indeed analyse the interests and knowledge of both who is delivering it and whom he or she is delivering it to. Distributing knowledge here then is not merely transmitting it, it requires, as we noted above, establishing *who knows what* – but also potentially who you *ought* to go to before making a substantive purchase.

Returning to the transcript, what we have here is product knowledge being transmitted, but in ways where it encounters a pre-existing landscape of ignorance and expertise about products. Were Greg to be passing knowledge onto Ford as someone else who knew as little as he did, then it would have been closer to a simple idea of transmission of information about mountain bikes. Instead, we see the complexities of what he has learnt being open to correction, amendment, repair and a different form of assessment. That his assessment of bikes, and of the qualities of this particular bike, had some success comes from Ford’s compliment at the end of our extract:

5. F: I'll look at it at some point because as I say I've got that scheme (1.0) see how you get on first see, if you manage to stick at it and if that makes any difference then I'll decide if I might take it up myself ((laughing))

Ford goes as far as to suggest that he himself might take up biking, but only if Greg does “manage to stick at it.” The social transmission of knowledge here then is not just the features of the bike, but that (potentially) biking is something that will work for men like Ford and Greg.

Experiencing the product

In our second conversation, one day after the first, we hit on something that is again an unproblematic example of “word of mouth”: we have a description of some features of a purchased bike, a positive evaluation of the price and even an affirmation. Although (as we will see in the following extracts) this experience eventually turns sour, at this stage we have still *positive* recommendation. Indeed, now that this is based on experience, it perhaps gains its greatest power in terms of the idea of “word of mouth.”

components that can be discussed in ways in that their specifications are foregrounded in their evaluation – cars, bikes, cameras and computers. Moreover, the specifications become (as in extract one) a forum for joking and teasing: Ford undermining Greg’s bike’s purchase in line 14 – “So effectively it’s a nine gear bike then ((laughing)).” Perhaps surprisingly, the joke, once made, becomes a platform for Ford to offer a more valuable compliment. Having set up a local context of derision and scepticism, the payoff is that Ford ultimately can pay a firmer compliment because Greg has convinced him, as a sceptical party, of the bike’s worth (see “safe compliments” in Sacks 1992). This is obviously a more valuable compliment than it would be from one who had already convinced of the value of the “nine gear bike.” It is an artful switch by both parties from Ford ribbing Greg in that, once again Greg formulates, not only who he is, but also the group that both he and Ford belong to (i.e. sceptical, hard-headed buyers of consumer goods).

Moreover, in the second half of the conversation, “when we were kids” aligns their identities and shared experience through having grown up in a period when kids did not ride mountain bikes (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), and this then also provides them with an initial absence of experience of this type of bike and an initial sense of shared perspective on it. At this point (lines 18–19), Greg gets an agreement “yup” from Ford, after which he adds a further negative assessment of older bikes (not knowing what gear you were in), which is solved by the new mountain bike’s gear system (it displays what gear you are in). These improvements in gear design can then be appreciated by Ford. His compliment is delivered in two parts. In the first part, the pronoun term “all that” brings together all the components listed by Greg while at the same time emphasising them as an abundant collection of parts, which is then attached to the price. Greg can then confirm that yes indeed all those remarkable new components were included for that figure, after which Ford delivers the second part of his compliment, which marks out again his minimal capacity to assess what riding the bike is like (line 24). The specifications are not simply a way of filling up the conversation, but are ways of folding teases into compliments and compliments into a shared reminiscence – among two men who did not know each other when they were young.

One broad point here then is how technical features are *conversational* features. Drawing on the work of Sacks again, certain features of products provide a range of conversation topics that can be ultra-rich. The example that Sacks used is cars, where a car can have a finite set of components, and so one can talk about all those components. Yet, if it is also possible to replace any of those parts, then one can rightfully talk (at least among car enthusiasts) about those potential replacements. That those potential replacements may imply that other parts of the car need to be also replaced again provides topics anew. Then, those replacements can be compared with other potential replacements, actual, planned or imagined:

What you have, then is a situation where the community is the set of possibilities [...] in this chapter of Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer*, he points out that the Nuer never talk of “a cow.” They talk about a “good cow”, they talk in terms of its color, its histories, its type who owns it, etc. They don’t talk about “a cow.” And again cattle are perhaps in some way parallel objects for the Nuer to cars for teenage boys. (Sacks 1995, 604)

In terms of *products*, it can be easy to dismiss the value of lists of specifications in marketing products. Yet what it does provide is (for certain communities) a plentiful set of topics for conversation. It might not be that these conversations are particularly

insightful, but they are ultra-rich and provide conversation resources that can fill even the long tiring morning commute.

That such seeming trivia can create a *community* might seem an exaggeration. Sacks' point is not only that such knowledge can act as a symbol of membership in a community or that membership is regulated by being able to "pass" through the requisite knowledge. Sacks is specifically pointing out that conversations of these sorts are what the members of a community *do*. Here, we have our two friends entering the community of mountain bikers by way of them being purchasers. Talk about specifications already gives the friends topics to speak to each other about. If they both took up mountain biking, it would provide a structuring to a new set of activities together beyond car-sharing, providing potential tasks, problems, debates, issues and the like.

Thus, the relevance of dry lists of specifications for word of mouth again goes beyond the transmission of information – the product being discussed here provides conversation and the possibility of bringing a new connection in their relationship as commuters. Arnould and Thompson (2005) described community formation around products as a process whereby "consumers forge more ephemeral collective identifications and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and leisure avocations" (p. 873). Our point here is more specific than Arnould and Thompson's: communities talk about the products and one of the ways they do it is through specifications.

Experiences

In our third conversation, our travellers return to talking about the bike, but in this extract it is not the components as such that are the foci of their discussion but rather Greg's enthusiasm at his experience on the bike. With this part of the conversation, we move firmly into that important element of word of mouth: experience of the product.

During this conversation, Ford's footing shifts further from his initial stance – there is no mocking now about the number of gears, or the specifications of the bike, but now he now marks the bike out as something he has not tried but imagines what it must be like in positive terms ("new, smooth"). With this shift in Ford's stance, Greg can then provide a high-grade assessment based on experience (e.g. line 2 "it's superb") that agrees and confirms how Ford has imagined it must be. There is a structuring asymmetry in this conversation in that Greg has ridden the bike and Ford has not – Greg has the rights to talk about riding the bike because he has had a certain sort of experience – whereby certain experiences give one the right to talk about certain things (Sacks 1992, 424), in this case, Greg's first-hand experience of riding a modern bike – "joom."

Following Greg's account, Ford gives a particular indication of how impressed he is with Greg's purchase in line 12: "I maybe will see what they've got." That someone we know well and have much in common with likes a particular thing he or she has bought leads us to consider whether we might buy one too, be it an album, a novel or a timeshare. Ford's line cannot be entirely disentangled from the supportive work he is doing to shore up Greg's purchase, yet he is displaying the consequences of Greg's enjoyable experiences with the bike and indeed picking up where he left off in his very first response to the purchase (i.e. that he would wait and see whether Greg stuck with it, etc.)

Extract three: "it's just joom"

1. F: I would like to try cycling on something that, which's got loads of gears and you just, it's new, smooth, know what I mean ((looks across at Greg))
2. G: Ah, it's superb and ((puts up thumb for button)) the wee flick thingy is. It's literally a little click and it's just joom
3. F: Yeah. Away you go you just keep pedalling[same]
4. +
5. G: [Yeah]
6. F: as you were[before]
7. +
8. G: [you don't] even feel it
9. F: Yeah
10. G: You don't even feel the chain moving[in]
11. +
12. F: [Well] that's nothing like what i was on. That old one I've got. I maybe will see what they've got

Returning the product

For reasons of brevity, we have skipped three conversations on the topic of mountain bike on days in between fragment three and our final fragment. In these conversations, there had been a discussion of the developing problem that Greg had been having with repeated punctures on his bike. Initially, the punctures were put down to thorns or glass on a bicycle path. When they continued, Greg had established it was likely that they were caused by the poor construction of the bike's wheels. He had been back to see the retailer with the bike to discuss what could be done about the fault in the wheels. In this fragment, we will see that the attitude to the bike has declined dramatically from the first three discussions.

Extract four: taking it back to the shop

1. G: Out on my, my bike last night. Another puncture
2. F: Same tyre
3. G: Nah (0.5) Front this time
4. F: =You'll need to get the same done as the front then ((laughing))
5. G: ((in low voice)) Nahh. So I'm taking it back tonight and just giving it over
6. F: A bit of feedback
7. G: (a whole load) yeah (1.00) Aye a whole pile of feedback
8. F: Yeah?
9. G: ((quietly)) Yeah
10. F: Didn't spend 350 quid for bla bla bla bla bla
11. G: Your stuff's shit. Better fucking correct it. And your customer service is pish as well
12. F: (3.0) As with the vast majority of (2.0) retailers in Britain I'm afraid
13. G: (6.0) Tsk yeah I was most unhappy.

Returning products

Through repeated punctures, the mountain bike has switched from being a bargain to a lemon. In the next conversation in the long series, the daily diagnosis of the cause of the bike's punctures is abandoned in favour of a new course of action. Greg informs Ford of his plans to take the bike back to the retailer from whom he bought it. Our word of mouth has changed then from recommendation to rejection – from positive word of mouth to negative one.

When the puncture is announced, Ford sees this as another opportunity for a humorous teasing session over the troubles which are besetting Greg. In response, Greg might well then have laughed at his own misfortune and planned how to fix the next puncture. Such a response to object-side troubles with a product would give us a sense of how their responses build reputations for members along an array of subject-side problems or positives as indecisive, unprepared, feeble, resilient, gutsy and so on. Greg does not laugh off his problem but instead has changed his stance on the nature of the problem and escalated his action in response to it. It begins with a dispreferred “nah” to Ford's humorous proposal and then moves on to the upshot of not fixing the puncture, which is that the whole bike is being returned. Ford switches to align himself with Greg and expands upon the action of taking it back as also potentially involving a “bit of feedback.” In doing so, his minimal term (e.g. “bit”) offers Greg the space to upgrade, which he indeed does “a whole pile of feedback.” Greg rehearses the complaints that he will make, when taking the bike back, with Ford. Greg's low voice displays his anger over the bike. While our fourth extract is a form of negative word of mouth, there is still Greg's concern for what the events might say about him. The relationship with the bike as the topic of concern shifts to the retailer.

After his minimal agreement without expansion as to quite what the feedback will be, Ford provides a first formulation, interestingly for us, in terms of the now completely alternative meaning of 350 quids from “all that for 350 quid” to “didn't pay 350 quid for.” The price as a mark stays fixed while the product is reconfigured dramatically. This conversation now expresses an assessment of the mountain bike that is very different from that in our first two. The word-of-mouth approval has been dramatically transformed into the kind of negative evaluation of sales experiences that retailers try to guard against where possible. Greg provides his rehearsal of the blunt confrontational complaint he will make to the retailer. In doing this rehearsal, we have again the subject-side work of showing his character to be anything but meek. The resolution of this problem goes beyond the bike, or the bike's purchase, but is about Greg himself.

Conclusions

As we outlined in the introduction, our goals here have been to examine word of mouth “as it happens.” In doing so, we examined a number of ways in which post-purchase talk does more than simply transmit information and recommendations. First, we documented the “entitlement to,” “justifications for” and the due process that the buyers deal with when relating their purchase of a particular “big ticket” item. Second, we charted the participants' moment-by-moment orientation to identities and how these were bound up with talking through entitlement to own and what the constituent elements of the product were. What made this all the more interesting is that the purchase was justified as a project that could create an incipient identity (and indeed community)

as a mountain biker and project to which the recipient of the “word of mouth” could also subscribe. Third, we re-visited transmission through a detailed description of its lived work of analysing who knows what, who told who what and how they know what (and more) – or, in other words, a local inquiry into the social distribution of knowledge about an unfamiliar new product. Fourth, in the second extract, we drew on Sacks’ (1992) comments concerning ultra-rich topics to explore how product specifications provide a long series of things to talk about for people in a relationship. Fifth, we examined the resources that product specifications provide to pull off humour, make comparisons and indeed continuously produce the masculinity of conversationalists.

In the final extract, we saw how Greg planned to deal with the sorry ending to his bike purchase, in effect turning full circle as the word of mouth travelled from being a recommendation to buy to a recommendation to avoid. In tracing through that very journey, we made apparent the complex and evolving set of practices that are hidden beneath the commonplace term “word of mouth.” Our analysis has sought to draw on existing discussions of culture and consumption to reframe these specifically in terms of jointly appreciating and making sense of purchases and products. As we have touched on in the introduction, the ways in which consumption and culture constitute one another has been of longstanding theoretical interest (Bocock 1993; Miller 1998; Shove and Warde 2000). The tendency in empirical studies of shopping has been to investigate the moment of purchase of goods while the planning, evaluation, calculation, pleasures and disappointments – both before and after – have been left out of many studies (Cook 2004; Shove and Warde 2000). As we have seen, looking elsewhere in people’s everyday lives for talk about purchases can offer insights into the nature of consumption. There, we find the circulation of product knowledge and the vernacular analysis of the value of products and relationships with these products.

More broadly, we see in the analysis of post- and pre-purchase talk, new opportunities for studying and understanding practices of consumption. While market transactions are one part of the activity of shopping, they have a second life in our retelling and discussion with others about those purchases. This is the place of the product in conversation – “word of mouth” in action.

On the basis of this preliminary study of talk between consumers about their purchases, we can suggest that it opens up a number of possibilities for studying consumption and markets. Throughout we have seen that matters worked out in dialogue rather than as possessed by the individual. Conversations between consumers trying to make sense of a relatively new product are but one tiny part of the many consumer–consumer conversations that build up our sense of what to buy and how what we buy can maintain or transform our location within society. Though what we can get a sense of from just one instance, and this was a central insight of Harvey Sacks’ work, were widespread logics and conversational machineries that are used by speakers in entirely different settings (e.g. children comparing toys, chefs on ingredients, companies on management software, holidaymakers on hotels, etc.), our hope is thus that others might already be seeing what we have missed in this brief study and what more might be studied from this approach.

For the idea of “word of mouth,” we begin to provide a survey of it as a practice in its details, rather than assuming it as a practice and charting its persuasive and economic power. “Word of mouth” does not simply get transmitted as an always stable entity but rather as a conversational object it is retailed each time it is handed

over. This is not to say that it is like a game of “Chinese whispers” where by the end the words have no relation to how they began because the point with word of mouth is that while it varies it remains tied always to the product it is recommending others to either buy or avoid. What we also come upon through is how it can evolve because it is also open to repair, revision and indeed reversal as we have seen earlier.

We conclude on a broader point concerning the utility of CA to consumption, markets and culture. The detailed analysis of conversation provides a new forum to study how decisions are made, shared and debated in public. Through its close attention to naturally occurring data, it provides one route to deal with the inevitable limitations of interview data, and while it hardly escapes problems itself, it at least suggests new directions for understanding the role of consumption and culture. As we have demonstrated in this paper, ordinary product talk can provide a rich resource for understanding ordinary consumption.

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