Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories
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The author describes and illustrates a hermeneutically grounded interpretive framework for deriving marketing-relevant insights from the "texts" of consumer stories and gives an overview of the philosophical and theoretical foundations of this approach. Next, the author describes a hermeneutic framework for interpreting the stories consumers tell about their experiences of products, services, brand images, and shopping. An illustrative analysis demonstrates how this framework can be applied to generate three levels of interpretation: (1) discerning the key patterns of meanings expressed by a given consumer in the texts of his or her consumption stories, (2) identifying key patterns of meaning that emerge across the consumption stories expressed by different consumers, and (3) deriving broader conceptual and managerial implications from the analysis of consumer narratives. This hermeneutic approach is compared and contrasted to the means–end chains laddering framework, the "voice of the customer" approach to identifying consumer needs, and market-oriented ethnography. The author concludes with a discussion that highlights the types of marketing insights that can result from a hermeneutic interpretation of consumers' consumption stories and then addresses the roles creativity and expertise play in this research orientation.

Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers’ Consumption Stories

In the social sciences, there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself.

—Norman Denzin, "The Art and Politics of Interpretation"

I describe and illustrate a hermeneutically grounded interpretive framework for deriving marketing-relevant insights from the analysis of qualitative (or textual) data. Throughout this article, the meanings that consumers ascribe to their consumer experiences are discussed as texts, stories, and narratives. These metaphors express a worldview characteristic of the "linguistic turn": a multidisciplinary transformation in social science research that focuses on the interpretive activities by which people "make sense" of their lives and the roles that language and narrative form play in shaping these interpreted meanings (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979; Sherry 1991).

In comparison to other social science fields and even the closely related discipline of consumer research, academic marketing research has been a less active participant in this multidisciplinary conversation regarding implications of the linguistic turn (see Brown 1995; Holt 1995). This state of affairs presents a notable irony. As Levy (1959) noted over thirty years ago, transactions between marketers and consumers are, above all else, exchanges of meanings. Interpreted (or perceived) meanings are fundamental to marketing's core interests, such as the study of exchanges (Bagozzi 1975) and the management of customer relationships (Webster 1992). Although some works in the academic marketing literature have argued for the importance of analyzing consumption symbolism (for a review, see Hirschman and Holbrook 1992), the development of interpretive frameworks for deriving marketing insights from the texts of consumer stories has been left largely to marketing and advertising practitioners (e.g., Dichter 1964; Glaser 1985; MacFarquhar 1994; Randazzo 1993).

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When academic marketing researchers have discussed research approaches of which the primary findings are based on iterative interpretations of textual data, the focus has been on methodological issues of data collection techniques, procedures of validation, and, more broadly, the epistemological standing of research claims that do not follow from a hypothetico-deductive logic (for an extensive review, see Sherry 1991). Relatively little attention has been given to the actual process of interpretation that enables strategically useful patterns of meaning to be derived from the plethora of situational details and context-specific idiosyncrasies typical of textual data.1

Here, I address this underdiscussed, critically important, and rather nebulous issue by describing and illustrating a hermeneutic framework for interpreting the stories that consumers tell about their consumption experiences. This approach is based on a specific set of assumptions that follow from a hermeneutic view of human understanding (Ricoeur 1981) and more recent work on the narrative structuring of cognition and understanding (Bruner 1986; Gergen and Gergen 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Ricoeur 1981; Somers and Gibson 1994; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994; Widdershoven 1993). Here, the term hermeneutics refers to a specific philosophical program that has provided a theoretical foundation for many genres of social science research following in the spirit of the linguistic turn (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Geertz 1983; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979; Sherry 1991). The hermeneutic framework described in this article interprets consumption meanings in relation to both a consumer’s sense of personal history and a broader narrative context of historically established cultural meanings.

The marketing relevance of hermeneutic interpretation derives from the straightforward point that “marketers need models to analyze and interpret how consumers perceive products in relation to themselves” (Walker and Olson 1991, p. 111). In a similar spirit, Wells (1993) notes that discovery-oriented research addressing the meaning-based dimensions of consumption behavior can generate insights ideally suited to the contemporary needs of marketing management. From a hermeneutic perspective, the stories consumers tell about their consumption experiences are a prime locus of discovery.

Understanding how consumers interpret their product/service needs and desires in relation to their perceived life circumstances is a pressing strategic issue in the current marketing climate where competitive pressures necessitate more nuanced conceptualizations of market segments (Brown 1995; Day 1990) and lifestyle clusters (Holt 1997). The insights offered by a hermeneutic mode of interpretation can be particularly useful in bridging the strategic gap between consumers’ overt awareness of their life circumstances and the marketing opportunities latent to these perceptions (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Day 1990; Kohli and Jaworski 1990).

A hermeneutic approach can also contribute to “the quality movement,” which seeks to place the “voice of the customer” at the center of an integrated approach (among research and development, marketing, and manufacturing functions) to product development (Griffin and Hauser 1993). Here, customer needs are defined as a “description in the customer’s own words of the benefits to be fulfilled by the product or service” (Griffin and Hauser 1993, p. 4). The hermeneutic caveat is that the voice of a given consumer will often express a nexus of personal meanings that are formed in a complex field of social and historical relationships. As such, a consumer’s consumption needs and even his or her self-perceptions can exhibit a considerable degree of situational variability depending on which personal meanings are salient in a given consumption context (also see Belk 1975; Stayman and Deshpande 1989). Moreover, the heterogeneity among consumers’ personal histories can frame their perceptions of consumer needs in very different meaning systems (Holt 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). Accordingly, marketers must manage the voices of consumers speaking from these distinct cultural positions and who construct different meaning-based relationships (and hence different perceived needs) to a seemingly common product, service, or promotional message/image (Holt 1997; Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, 1990; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). A hermeneutic approach can help marketers manage the complexities (and respond to the opportunities) posed by the plurality of consumers’ meaning-based relationships to products, brands, services, and promotions.

**A HERMENEUTIC MODEL OF CONSUMER MEANING**

Experience does not automatically assume a narrative form. Rather, it is reflecting on experience that we construct stories. The stories we make are accounts, attempts to explain and understand experience.

—John Robinson and Linda Hawpe, “Narrative Thinking as a Heuristic Process”

Hermeneutic scholars emphasize that the process of textual interpretation cannot be reduced to the application of a “method” (Gadamer 1993). Rather, the techniques used to formulate an interpretation are embedded within a framework of core assumptions. For this reason, this article’s workbench agenda of demonstrating a framework for interpreting textual data requires some consideration of its underlying hermeneutic assumptions. This discussion is organized in terms of Morgan’s (1980) three-level definition of a research paradigm as (1) a general worldview, (2) the metaphorically structured theoretical models that derive from the general worldview, and (3) specific procedures for implementing the worldview/theories. My overview will incorporate issues related to this general worldview into a more focused discussion of a particular hermeneutically oriented theory of meaning.

This theory of meaning draws from research on the narrative structuring of identity and the role of stories in constructing self-understandings (see Bruner 1986; Crites 1986; Gergen and Gergen 1986; Hermans 1996; Polkinghorne 1988). Across the diverse fields of linguistics, social psychology, anthropology, and sociology, theorists propose that human understanding is organized in terms of culturally

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1 Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) offer a notable exception to this trend. The differences between their market-oriented ethnographic framework and the present hermeneutic approach is discussed subsequently. Spiggle (1994) also addresses the process of interpreting qualitative data. However, her model is abstracted from a number of different interpretivist approaches used in marketing and consumer research and thereby collapses the differences between sociological and hermeneutic modes of interpretation. Arnould and Wallendorf’s (1994) discussion is grounded in the sociological tradition and provides a more informative comparison point for demonstrating the unique qualities of hermeneutic interpretation.
shared narrative forms, such as stories (Edwards and Potter 1992) and myths (Barthes 1957; Levi-Strauss 1963; Levy 1981). In recent years, this narratological view of meaning has gained considerable theoretical currency both as an alternative to computational models of the mind (Harre and Gillett 1994; Lakoff 1987; Sarbin 1986) and as a more dynamic conceptualization of conventional social psychological constructs such as self-concept (Edwards and Potter 1992; Gergen 1991; Lifton 1993; Markus and Wurf 1986).

Narratological models of meaning provide an important linkage between hermeneutic's abstract philosophical tenets and the actual practice of hermeneutic interpretation. They also ground this particular interpretive framework in a series of issues relevant to the phenomenological aspects of the person/culture relationship (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), that is, the personalized cultural meanings that constitute a person's sense of self-identity and the biographical significance of specific life events and experiences within this unfolding narrative of self (see Romanyshyn 1982).

In Figure 1, I present a hermeneutic/narratological model of understanding. The left-hand side of the figure is based on the paradigmatic metaphor of the person as a text, or more descriptively still, a person's life history as a text. From this perspective, the meaning of particular life events are contextualized within a broader narrative of self-identity. Although these narratological constructions may be marked by internal contradictions and compartmentalized beliefs, they nonetheless enable people to construct a sense of continuity and coherence among the flow of their life experiences (Crites 1986; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Polkinghorne 1988). These narratives of personal identity are themselves contextualized within a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems. This cultural background provides the social categories, common sense beliefs, folk knowledge, and interpretive frames of reference from which personalized meanings and conceptions of self-identity are constructed (Faber and O'Guinn 1988; Holt 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). In this model, a key term is personalized cultural...
**frame of reference.** The relationship between this cultural background and the personal meanings constructed by a consumer can assume many forms. Cultural knowledge is by no means a monolithic and internally consistent system. Rather, it is a heterogeneous network that offers a multitude of interpretive positions and endless opportunities for context-specific combinations, juxtapositions, and personalized transformations of established cultural meanings (Gergen 1991; Somers and Gibson 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Personalized consumption meanings then express a co-constituting (or dialectical) relationship between the social conditions and identity issues salient to a given consumer and a broader legacy of historically available frames of reference, rather than being purely subjective or idiosyncratic constructions.

This model not only conceptualizes consumption meanings as a type of narrative, but it further argues that consumers are “self-narrators” (Crites 1986; Markus and Wurf 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994) whose stories impose a meaningful historical order onto life events and who selectively highlight particular facets of these experienced events in their retrospective narratives. Accordingly, the reciprocal movement in this hermeneutic model occurs when a specific consumer narrative or story is derived from a consumption experience and then is incorporated into the interpreting consumer’s broader life narrative. Thus, personalized meanings emerge through a dialogical relationship in which a consumer’s interpretative predispositions highlight salient aspects of his or her life-world and, reciprocally, these focal experiences can influence his or her interpretive standpoint (Hermans 1996).

**A HERMENEUTIC FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING CONSUMER STORIES**

**The Pragmatics of Interpretation**

If we see this [hermeneutic] circle as a vicious one and look for ways of avoiding it, even if we just sense it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up.

—Martin Heidegger, Being and Time

A typical feature of hermeneutically oriented marketing research is a methodological statement that the interpretation of textual data proceeds through a series of part–to–whole iterations (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Spiggle 1994; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). This iterative procedure actually entails two distinct stages. The first is an intratext cycle in which a text (such as an interview transcript) is read in its entirety to gain a sense of the whole (Giorgi 1989). Further readings then are undertaken to develop an integrated understanding of the consumption meanings conveyed by the text. The second part–to–whole movement is an intertextual one whereby the researcher looks for patterns (and differences) across different interviews. As well, there are interactive movements between the intratextual and intertextual interpretive cycles. For example, a researcher may gain an important insight from an interview text interpreted later in the process and then reconsider previously interpreted texts in light of this newly developed understanding.

A second pragmatic consideration follows from the goal of hermeneutic interpretations to engender a holistic under-
pretivist” approaches) is premised on the metaphor of the researcher-as-instrument (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Sherry 1991). Hence, the quality of the research findings is contingent upon the scope of the background knowledge that the researcher brings to bear and his or her ability to forge insightful linkages between this background knowledge and the texts at hand. The cultivation of a sociohistorical perspective on the research domain coupled with a sensitivity to textual nuances are probably the most critical aspects of hermeneutic interpretation.

For the purpose of this illustration, the domain of interest is the consumer experiences of professional working women of the baby boom generation. The marketing relevance of this consumer group has been widely noted (Bartos 1989). For the present purposes, this consumer market offers an excellent context for illustrating a hermeneutic approach because of the extensive body of historical literature that discusses (1) the evolution of motherhood and feminine identities within American society (e.g., Cowan 1983; Ehrenreich and English 1979; Sparke 1995; Strasser 1982) and (2) the central role that the social construction (and transformations) of women’s identities as mothers and homemakers has played in shaping contemporary consumer culture (e.g., Douglas 1994; Lavin 1995; Matthews 1987).2

As will be shown subsequently in the specific illustrations, the consumption stories expressed by the participants in this study offer experience-based and personalized manifestations of these historical themes. For the moment, I postpone further description of interpretive strategies for explicating such historical relations until the final stages of this hermeneutic process where the most extensive effort is made at integrating historical themes into the analysis. However, a researcher’s developing sense of the historical context is always in play during all stages of the interpretive process.

Generation of Textual Data

Although the focus here is not on data collection techniques, hermeneutic marketing research is based on the “texts” of consumer stories. The type of texts generated by “phenomenological” (Kvale 1983; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) or “long” (McCracken 1988) interviews are particularly well suited to hermeneutic analysis. These interviews typically employ relatively few preplanned questions. Instead, the course of the interview dialogue emerges in relation to the characteristics of the consumption experiences and meanings expressed by the interviewee (or participant).

The illustrative excerpts presented in the following section are taken from verbatim audiotaped transcripts generated through phenomenological interviews, which range in duration from ninety minutes to two and one-half hours. For each participant, two separate interview sessions were held. The first focused on general lifestyle issues and perceptions (including reference to many consumption issues) and the second specifically focused on everyday consumption issues. The interview texts used to illustrate this hermeneutic approach were conducted with seven professional working women who were married, had children, and ranged in age from 32 to 41 years.

In these illustrations, I use the same pseudonyms to refer to participants as Thompson (1996) does. Whereas Thompson (1996) presented a substantive analysis of these data, the present treatment uses these texts as vehicles for demonstrating how to conduct a hermeneutic interpretation. This treatment is consistent with Arnould and Wallendorf’s (1994) demonstration of ethnographic interpretation. To enhance the overall utility of the present demonstration, however, the hermeneutic framework is illustrated using previously unpublished textual data—drawn from interviews with “Susan,” “Betty,” and “Jean”—that highlight a different set of consumption issues than those covered in the published treatment.

Interpreting the Texts of Consumer Interviews as Consumption Stories

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called metaphorical. To go to work or to go home one takes a metaphor—a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: everyday they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.

—Michel de Certeau, The Practices of Everyday Life

By slightly modifying de Certeau’s description of stories as “spatial-temporal” trajectories, an elegant statement of the logic that motivates hermeneutic interpretations is attained. The stories consumers tell about their everyday experiences create temporal trajectories in which a past event is relived in relation to present concerns and projected toward an envisioned future. This temporal ordering creates relationships between a consumer’s contemporary understanding, his or her personal history, and a broader field of historically established meanings. As well, these stories organize the multiple contexts of experiences (i.e., de Certeau’s “places”) into a coherent narrative of self-identity.

There are five key aspects to this hermeneutic view of consumer stories. First, these narratives are structured by plot lines that organize events and characters (i.e., self-conceptions and perceptions of others) in terms of goals, motives, and anticipated futures (Ricoeur 1981). Second, they reflect symbolic parallels among the meanings of different events and actions (Barthes 1974). Third, they present intertextual relationships in which meanings invoked by consumers’ different consumption stories become integrated in their narratives of personal history (Polkinghorne 1988). Fourth, they express existential themes by which conceptions about a person’s self-identity are negotiated through reflections on consumptions experiences, special possessions, and consumer choices (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990). Fifth, they draw from the cultural code of shared sociohistoric meanings and conventionalized viewpoints (see Holt 1997; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994).

Analyzing the Emplotment of Consumer Stories

Hermeneutic researchers have adapted the analytic construct of plot from its core literary field to the task of analyzing the structure of human understanding (Gergen and Gergen 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Ricoeur 1981). In these terms, consumers’ interpretations are acts of emplotment, and conversely, the interpretation of the consumers’
expressed meanings entails an analysis of the plots that structure their consumption stories (Stern 1995). From a hermeneutic perspective, the analysis of consumption stories involves a constant interrogation of plot in order to develop an understanding of the personal significance of the salient experiences, circumstances, and events described in a consumer story.

Plot is commonly defined as a narrative structure that imposes a chronological order upon events and organizes these events into a meaningful whole (Gergen and Gergen 1986). The chronological function of plot is referred to as narrative movement. Movement is what enables a story to convey a sense of “going somewhere” by organizing events and experiences in a temporal order directed toward some destination or goal state (Stern 1995). The holism-creating function of plot is referred to as narrative framing, which selects and highlights certain details out of the field of experience (Polkinghorne 1988). The relevant caveat is that movement and framing are clearly interrelated dimensions of a narrative plot. Hence, in the conduct of an interpretation, the analysis of movement and framing is a mutually informative and intertwined processes. For purposes of demonstrating how to construct a hermeneutic interpretation, however, I find it useful to provide a separate description for each facet.

Analyzing narrative movement. Western narratives tend to move in a linear fashion whereby a fateful action is situated in relation to a “past” of precipitating or enabling events and is projected toward an envisioned future of outcomes and consequences (Gergen and Gergen 1986). Hermeneutical theorists describe this projective feature of understanding as actions that are directed toward an emerging and hence only vaguely recognized life project (Sartre 1956). In the hermeneutic tradition, terms such as historically established understanding or personal history do not just refer to the past but rather to this constellation of past-present-future relations (Gadamer 1993; Heidegger 1960).

Marketing theorists conventionally address this constellation in less philosophically exalted terms such as the pursuit of consumer goals (Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990). However, the hermeneutical account suggests a substantive adaptation to this conventional treatment of goal-directed consumption by proposing that the relationship between a consumer’s goals and specific courses of action is not a direct function of rational calculations regarding the utilities inherent to the choice alternatives. Rather, these relationships are mediated by the narratives that the consumer invokes to interpret his or her consumption situation. Hence, goals, envisioned outcomes, and perceptions of reasonable actions are contingent on consumers’ narrative construction of their relevant past and present circumstances and desired (and often undesired) future states.

A key facet of a hermeneutic analysis of consumers’ consumption stories then is discerning the construction of personal history that underlies a consumer’s consumption goals and his or her interpretations of desirable attributes and outcomes. The text of an interview with Susan illustrates this interpretive logic. In interpreting Susan’s interview, an issue that “stood out” was her awareness of the physical demands posed by her hectic lifestyle. As a means to reduce these demands, Susan made purchase decisions by envisioning what it would be like to use a product and assessing how well it would mesh with her routine activities. As the following passage indicates, these anticipatory considerations could take precedence over not only rational, price-driven considerations, but also the emotional pull toward another brand option:

Susan: I really liked the Ford [minivan] a lot, but it had the back tailgate that lifted up instead of the doors that opened. I suspect that if that had been available we might have gone with the Ford instead because it was real close between the Ford and the GM [General Motors]. The lift gate in the back was the main difference and we went with the General Motors because we liked the doors opening the way they did. I loved the way the Ford was designed on the inside. I loved the way it drove. I loved the way it felt and everything, but you are there manipulating all these kids and groceries and things and you have got to lift this thing, and it was very awkward. It was hard to lift, and if you are holding something you have got to steer all the kids back, or whack them in the head. So that was a big thing. You know it was a lot cheaper than the GM. It was between $1,000 and $2,000 less than General Motors and because money was a factor, we did go ahead and actually at one point talk money with a [Ford] dealer. But we couldn’t get the price difference down to where I was willing to deal with that tailgate is what it comes down to (#1).

In Susan’s story, a design detail emerges as a central figure in a future-directed narrative that portrays an ongoing ordeal of managing children while manipulating grocery bags and coping with a cumbersome lift gate. Despite its many attractive features and a lower price, the Ford minivan’s awkward tailgate invoked a strong aversive feeling that overrode her usual price consciousness and the hedonic pleasures afforded by the kinesthetic and aesthetic qualities of the Ford product. In contrast, the GM’s design became the critical benefit because it could be envisioned as facilitating the conduct of her daily routine. From a hermeneutic standpoint, the key issue is to understand the pattern of meanings that would allow this one feature to assume such a significant role in Susan’s purchase decision. Thus, this specific “story” must be understood in relation to the broader plot line of her interview.

As her interview narrative unfolded, Susan’s story took a regressive turn characteristic of a tragic plot line (Gergen and Gergen 1986; Stern 1995), in which her anticipated future with the GM van gave way to a host of mechanical problems. This unexpected turn served to magnify the significance of her purchase deliberation and ambivalence over the GM product and inspired historically tinged reflections on the meaning of this purchase. In the following passage, the plot of this story culminates in the question of “When will I learn?” which also implies a sense of “I should have known better.” As is typical of Susan’s other consumption stories, she took responsibility for the dissatisfying outcome and interpreted these negative events as something that she could have foreseen and avoided. In this context, an acceptable ending to the story required some action that could provide a symbolic remediation and thereby lessen the tragic and self-impugning dimensions of the story:

Susan: It has got General Motors defects and that is really frustrating. I mean the transmission had to
be rebuilt after about 150 miles. You know, you spend $20,000 on something and it should be right. The transmission had to be rebuilt and then it had this horrible vibration problem and it has been back to the shop five or six times for that. We took a long vacation where you couldn’t go over sixty miles an hour because the thing started shaking so bad.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the problems that you have had with the General Motors?

Susan: I feel mad. I put it in my Christmas letter to 62 people across the country [laughs]. I mean, I told everybody don’t buy one of these things because the transmission is bad. We should have known that too because our Buick—the Buick that is in the shop right now—its transmission lasted about 3000 miles and had to be rebuilt. My husband’s parents are GM people and they have had one go bad. I keep thinking, When I am going to learn? I think that this one has done it. I don’t think I will ever go back to GM after this. I really don’t. It just doesn’t make any sense (#2).

These two passages illustrate the way in which plot movement contextualizes “reasoned” consumer choices and situates these choices in a broader narrative of personal history. One path for pursuing the theoretical significance of Susan’s symbolic resolution to this otherwise dissatisfying outcome is to draw linkages to previous consumer research that suggests that a desire for completeness and closure is a prominent consumer motivation (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990). My logic for this movement is that the act of complaining and spreading negative word of mouth to friends and family (through the symbolically significant texts of Christmas cards) enabled her to metaphorically “write off” her past associations with GM. The narrative linking of these events also created a sense that her negative experiences had been balanced to some extent by potentially costing GM its once loyal customers (on her husband’s side of the family) and protecting others from a similarly problematic consumption experience.

Another structural feature of consumer narratives attained through phenomenological interviews is the movement of the narrative through chains of symbolic associations. A reflection on one event triggers a reflection on another event holding a similar meaning, though the movement would seem to be a non sequitur if a researcher only focused on the factual circumstances being discussed. This associative logic relates to de Certeau’s (1984) commentary about the way stories organize spaces. In consumer stories, these reflections organize different experiential contexts (and times) by unifying meanings. These chains of associations interject an intertextual quality into the consumer texts in which one consumption story may invoke references to previously discussed consumption experiences. Analyzing the symbolic interplay among these intertextual references offers a way to enrich understanding of each story and identify the key thematic meanings that structure a consumer’s outlook.

This intertextual characteristic can also be illustrated through Susan’s interview. About twenty minutes after initially discussing the GM experience, she also expressed disappointment over a recently purchased dining room set. This story inspires a reflection on the previously discussed GM minivan experience in which she further articulates a constellation of meanings underlying her interpretation about making a regrettable purchase:

Susan: I still like it [the dining room set] a whole lot better than what we used to have. But I think if we had taken longer we would have gotten more precisely what we wanted. I mean we got a great deal. You couldn’t get that for that price, so I am still happy with the money part of it, but somedays I wish we had spent more and gotten something a little bit different. And I think that fear was one reason that we [she and her husband] bought the General Motors van because we were afraid that if we bought the Ford... Well, there is a feeling that if something is too much less, then you start asking yourself why is it that much less, and I think that is one of the things we kept thinking about the Ford. We mean we had read the [magazine] articles. We had read how Ford uses more automation in their manufacturing and we knew that it cost them to make a car than GM. So we knew that there was a real reason for why theirs is so much cheaper, but you keep asking yourself, “Am I going to kick myself for this? Am I going to wish that I spent more and gotten the other one?” So this is the case of it happening in reverse (#3).

This passage also illustrates the way that consumption meanings emerge through the intertextual relations among different events. Her narrative centers on the purchase of two different products with distinct purchase rules: going with the best price and compromising on features in the case of the furniture versus paying more to get a salient, desired feature in the case of the GM. In this narrative association, however, these purchases became symbolically related events.

Her interpretation of the furniture purchase provides an implicit frame of reference from which she constructs a future-directed narrative. In this narrative, the Ford option (which cost less and lacked a desired feature) is associated with a dystopian outcome in which she regrets not paying more money to get a desired feature. However, this experience-driven judgment paradoxically leads to a regrettable choice. Hence, the symbolic significance of not being able to “get the price ... down” on the Ford alternative, as she recounts in the first excerpt, emerges in relation to a broader theme expressed throughout her interviews: the importance of being a balanced person.

I drew this linkage by reevaluating her interview texts in a manner sensitized by the question “What are the symbolic meanings that render these two purchases salient in Susan’s narrative of personal history?” This reading revealed an overarching narrative theme of wanting to lead a life that would be free of regret when she looked backed on her personal choices. For Susan, a key personal meaning associated with this future-orientation ideal is that of being a balanced person, which she defines primarily as being both a caring mother and a “professional person” (i.e., an engineer in an architectural design firm). Although she recognizes that undertaking these dual roles necessitates compromises in both the professional and domestic spheres, she has constructed a life story in which these compromised circumstances equate to a balanced life. Hence, the stresses and moments of frustration that arise in her current circumstances are moderated by her sense that her various “compromises” offer the
prospect of a future free from personal regret over choices made in the present.

My interpretation is that this personalized life meaning is symbolically expressed and affirmed in her consumption stories. Both her furniture and minivan choices were constructed as imbalanced ones that respectively placed too much emphasis on price in the case of the furniture purchase and on a more expensive differentiating feature in the case of the minivan. In her interview narrative, these stories about two regrettable purchases provide the setting for a story (which flows immediately from the discourse in Excerpt #3) that affirms her ideal of being a balanced person.

This story concerns the purchase of an expensive Ethan Allen bunkbed. Susan discusses being “torn” between a more expensive option (which had the aesthetics and quality she wanted) and a more affordable one that did not offer these same benefits. In this case, however, she waited until her local Ethan Allen dealer ran a sale on floor displays, which enabled her to buy the bunk beds (with “a few dings and scratches”) at an acceptable price. Hence, her personal satisfaction with the bunkbed purchase is grounded in her broader personal view that balanced solutions offer the path to a regret-free future. This story also expresses another theme that is intertwined with Susan’s conception of balance. For her, being balanced requires a sense of patience and a constant self-affirmation that she does “not have to accomplish everything now,” and that she will have opportunity at a later point in her life to accomplish her “deferred” career goals. The Ethan Allen story provides a symbolic affirmation that a balanced and patient approach to life will result in long-term happiness.

To place this hermeneutic reading in a comparative context, a fairly standard theoretical assessment of the “GM or Ford van” story would be that Susan had mistakenly placed too much reliance on the price-quality heuristic in assessing the relative utilities (or value) offered by these competing alternatives (e.g., Rao and Monroe 1989). While offering a parsimonious explanation, such a reading does not address the symbolic significance of the choice or the meanings that underlie the requisite perceptions of “value.” In contrast, a hermeneutic reading provides insight into the symbolic dynamics underlying her choice of the GM over the Ford and into why her “fear” of the lower-priced product could not be assuaged by her rational understanding of production cost differences. It also shows how three seemingly different purchase situations were symbolically linked within a common narrative of personal identity. Hence, Susan’s interview illustrates that narrative movement functions much like de Certeau’s “metaphorai” by linking a multitude of temporally disparate events in a common life-project trajectory.

Analyzing narrative framing. Framing refers to the meanings through which a given experience is understood and the narrative linkages (such as thematic and symbolic parallels) that a consumer creates among different events discussed in her or his consumption story. The following passage from Betty illustrates the way “dining out” is framed by a constellation of meanings related to her professional job, sense of domestic responsibilities, and personal desires to be cared for, rather than having to care for others:

Betty: I usually do it [eat out for dinner] on days when I’ve just been working so hard and the thought of having to come home and to just work harder still is just more than I can take. I perceive fixing dinner as falling in the category of the straw that breaks the camel’s back. I’ve worked real hard and all I want to do is go out and have someone else do the work. So, I don’t want to have to worry about the cooking and the fixing and the thinking about what to make. I want to go and see a menu and just on the spur of the moment say, “Yeah, that’s what I want” (#4).

Through this narrative frame, Betty creates an association between work days that are particularly demanding and cooking dinner, a domestic activity that is framed as another form of demanding work. In her passage, an implicit “balance” metaphor can be discerned in which having to cook dinner becomes the “straw that breaks the camel’s back”: it tips the balance of responsibilities in an overly stressful and demanding direction. A relevant background consideration is that Betty’s professional responsibilities require her to move between a “systems analyst” role that involves little direct interpersonal involvement and a counseling/problem-solving role that is client-centered and interpersonally engaging. Betty interprets her unusually hard work days as those where she has been heavily immersed in the interpersonal dimensions of her job and has spent the day “responding to other people’s needs and problems,” rather than “getting her own work done.” In this framing, Betty interprets her job in such a way that her “systems analyst” role constitutes its core, whereas the interpersonal activities are rendered as tertiary demands that get her “off schedule.”

To interpret this passage, I first engaged in a thought process known as imaginative variation (Giorgi 1989). Here, the researcher considers alternative ways that a participant could have framed an event. Through this process, a researcher can become sensitized to the specific alignment or pattern of meanings that frame an experience. For example, I noted that Betty could have interpreted her job in a manner whereby involvement in its interpersonal dimensions would have been the “core,” thereby alleviating her frustrations over not getting her work done. My next task was to analyze the pattern of meanings that supported her framing of these interpersonal responsibilities as stress-inducing distractions. In addressing this aspect of her narrative, I became sensitized to a distinction between doing for self and doing for others that emerged in her interviews and framed her interpretation of cooking in Excerpt #4.

On her impersonally focused “hard” work days, cooking dinner for her family is framed as yet another form of “other-directed” work that functions as a regressive element in her story. That is, it promises to accentuate her sense of being fatigued from doing things for others. In contrast, eating out stands out as a progressive element that offers a needed respite from work and, more important, affords an experience in which someone else caters to her needs. For Betty, “cooking at home” is interpreted as the normal routine (e.g., the stability element), which then allows “eating out” to be interpreted as a much coveted experience of being cared for. Thus, eating out is interpreted as a pampering experience that has been earned through hard work and is needed to alleviate stress and rejuvenate Betty for the next day.

An important function of narrative framing is selecting those aspects that will be salient in the narrative from the
welter of details that constitute a consumer experience. In other words, consumer narratives never tell the "whole story" of a situation; rather, they highlight specific characteristics while rendering other characteristics marginal or even invisible to the plot. An awareness of this selectivity function encourages researchers to interrogate the "givens" of a consumption story by asking, "What are the meanings that render this detail or issue salient in the consumer's narrative?" In conducting a hermeneutic interpretation, this question will tend to be answered in terms of the salient event's symbolic function, such as representing broader life issues and concerns (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1996; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). In Betty's two interviews, she continuously circled back to issues related to cooking and eating out. Hence, her narrative revealed cooking to be a focal consumption experience that was related to a personally significant constellation of meanings:

Betty: I learned to cook watching my mother cook for a family, and to me cooking is cooking for someone other than myself. And I get pleasure out of someone externally, responding to what the food is or how it's cooked.

Interviewer: Well, what's it like for you when you're cooking for your family?

Betty: Well, it's a duty; it's something that I do. And this goes a lot deeper, is knowing that when I cook and I cook well, I give pleasure. My husband has finally learned over the years because he's not one of these people to say any way, shape, or form that he really likes anything—is that if he really likes something he better speak up, otherwise I won't make any special effort to fix it again. My daughter, she knows how to say the right things, "Oh, mother, this is the most delicious supper, I love this." I really do want them to get pleasure, and it gives me some satisfaction when they say they really like something I've made. And the cooking is just sort of a prelude to knowing that we'll spend a certain amount of time all together after a day when my husband's been at work and my daughter's been at school and day care, and I've been at work. You know, to come home and all of us be together and sit around the table ... we're all here together.

Interviewer: When you said cooking is kind of a duty could you tell me a little bit about that?

Betty: Well, the sense of duty lies in feeling responsible both to myself and to my family, that we have balanced, nutritious meals, and knowing that the meal we eat at dinner fits into that because I don't always know what they eat during the middle of the day (#5).

This passage illustrates the symbolic relations between a specific framing of an experience or activity (i.e., cooking) and a consumer's narrative of personal history. Betty's interpretation of cooking as a kind of a duty does not convey an entirely negative connotation, as might be inferred if this phrase is not assessed in the context of the interview as a whole. Rather, this "sense of duty" expresses an ambivalent role that cooking holds within her narrative of personal identity. In a positive sense, cooking provides an historical link to memories of her mother and the warm feelings evoked by the idea of home cooking. Betty interprets cooking dinner as an act that interjects a sense of traditional family togetherness into the usual condition of her family being apart all day long. She also views cooking as something that she does well and, as discussed elsewhere in her interviews, as an artistic undertaking through which she can express her creativity. Hence, the personal salience of having her cooking overtly praised coheres with the self-expressive meaning that cooking holds within her narrative of self-identity.

A useful and time-tested means to explicate the structure of narrative framing is to interpret textual data in terms of binary themes ((Levi-Strauss 1963; Levy 1981; Spiggle 1994). A theoretical rationale for this interpretive strategy is offered by a body of psychological research that indicates that binary contrasts provide major organizing principles for human cognition (Gardner 1985; Harre and Gillette 1994) and by literary theory, which argues that binary contrasts are endemic features of Westernized plot lines (Barthes 1957; Derrida 1976). In a pragmatic vein, this interpretive strategy enables marketing researchers to organize systematically the multiplicity of textual details that emerge in consumer stories into a more manageable set of underlying thematic dimensions (Spiggle 1994; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). For example, some of the binary contrasts that structure Betty's narrative include doing for others versus doing for self, being together versus being apart, being appreciated versus not being appreciated, being helped versus being nagged (or dictated to), and finally, giving pleasure versus receiving pleasure.

A particular form of binary relations—based on the gestalt theory of figure/ground perception—can be particularly useful for representing the holistic qualities of narrative framing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989, 1990). This theory holds that the perceived characteristics of a "figure" (i.e., an image that is salient in a person's perceptual field) emerge in a codetermining relationship to a contextual background. This relationship is most clearly demonstrated when a perceptual reversal occurs in a figure/ground diagram, such as the well-known face/ vase image (see Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Here, the perceptual totality is neither one form nor another; rather, it is a dynamic perceptual relationship that presents multiple configurations of part-to-whole relationships (Kohler 1947).

As applied to textual meanings, the figure/ground metaphor conceptualizes a "theme" as a dynamic meaningful relationship constituted by contrasting thematic aspects. In Betty's narrative, the meanings she attributes to cooking and eating can be interpreted as expressing a figure/ground theme of doing for others/doing for self. For Betty, activities that had overt for-self connotations (such as personal time away from her family) presented experiential dilemmas (such as feelings of guilt) that arose from her overt awareness of the limited time that was available to spend with her daughter and husband. This guilt issue was particularly salient in regard to time spent (or not spent) with her daughter. Hence, the dual meanings Betty ascribed to cooking—as an activity that she primarily does for others and a personally rewarding form of creative expression—offer a narrative strategy for balancing the series of trade-offs she sees arising from her lifestyle choices. In lieu of this implicit personal benefit, Betty's narrative would assume a regressive quality in which her sense of self is constantly sacrificed to the needs of others.
This narrative frame selects out details such as the sense of personal reward she gains when her meals bring pleasure to her family and, conversely, a sensitivity when her efforts are not explicitly appreciated. Furthermore, this “for others” interpretation of cooking renders it as an activity that is devoid of self-care. For example, her narrative would not support a construction such as “coming home to prepare a special meal for herself.” However, the symbolic association between care and cooking frames “eating out” as a salient consumption experience in which she does something for herself. This meaning then underlies more pragmatic rationales such as the ease and convenience offered by not having to cook.

Interpreting Consumption Stories as Self-Referential Projections

The symbolizing self centers on its own narrative, a life story that is itself created and constantly recreated.

—Robert Jay Lifton, The Protean Self

The rationale for this stage of the analysis follows from contemporary theories of self-identity (Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Hermans 1996; Markus and Wurf 1986; Polkinghome 1988), which suggest that personal identity is continuously adapted and at times reformulated through a person’s ongoing actions. This project is characterized as one in which people appropriate elements from the multitude of “identity positions” that are culturally available (Kellner 1992) and then incorporate these into a coherent narrative of self (Hermans 1996). Accordingly, the negotiation of self-identity is situated within and, to some extent, constrained by sociocultural influences. From this perspective, people are socialized in specific social and class-based contexts, and their subsequent constructions of identity further commit the person to a relational network of social and institutional relationships, such as social and familial ties, educational capital, career skills and trajectories, and systems of consumer tastes (i.e., preferring various forms of fashion, music, and lifestyle options over others) (also see Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997).

Self-identity is then a process of negotiating a fundamental existential tension between stability (i.e., the historical development of a person’s sense of self-identity) and change (i.e., a person’s ability to redefine his or her history and to incorporate new identity elements into his or her life and self-concept) (Gergen 1991; van den Berg 1970). The interpretation of consumers’ self-referential projections focuses on the meanings that serve to define their current sense of self-identity and the type of envisioned identities that they seek to realize through consumption activities. In these terms, the much discussed “deep meanings” of consumption (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) are grounded in this existential quest to construct self-identity and, relatedly, to manage conflicts and tensions in these constructions of self-identity.

Addressing this self-referential dimension of consumer narratives offers a means to articulate further the constellation of symbolic meanings explicated by a hermeneutic interpretation. This interpretation of self-referential meanings is best undertaken at a later stage in the interpretive cycle when the researcher has analyzed thoroughly the plot structures and symbolic meanings expressed in consumer interviews. When the researcher believes that a holistic understanding of the text has been attained, he or she can reassess the text with an eye for the self-referential qualities of a consumer’s narrative. At this stage, the interpretive question becomes “What meanings and symbolic associations expressed in this specific consumer event/experience is the consumer using to construct his or her sense of identity?” This existential reading enriches understanding of both the symbolic dimensions of the focal consumption event and the ways in which a consumer’s self-concept predisposes him or her toward certain consumption preferences.

This interpretive logic can be illustrated by considering the pattern of relationships that emerged in an interview with “Jean,” a 40-year-old financial executive who is married with three children. An important facet of Jean’s life narrative is that she sees herself as a “recovering supermom” who now looks critically on the once motivating idea of “having (and doing) it all.” As the following example demonstrates, this transformation in her life narrative presents an existential theme that manifests itself through the symbolic meanings she attaches to some routine consumer behaviors:

Jean: Food Lion, it’s a little smaller than the super stores. I don’t think a grocery should try to be everything, and it is almost a physical challenge to get through Kroger because you have to get cosmetics and pharmacy and film development and video rental. I am organized to the point where I have a set number of things I need to get and I want to get in there and out. We don’t buy cigarettes, we don’t buy ice cream or potato chips or cookies. We just buy basics, and Food Lion is the best place for us. They don’t have as grandiose a variety of things but I don’t need that. Another family activity we have is cooking together so we make a lot of things from scratch, so you don’t need a lot of prepared items for that. So we go in there armed with the Joy of Cooking, and we pretty much get the job done at Food Lion (#6).

A conventional level of interpretation would focus on Jean’s practical/rational reasons for preferring Food Lion, such as the shopping ease and time efficiency offered by its smaller stores and the perceived fit between its basic product line and her grocery buying patterns (see Griffin and Hauser 1993). In the context of Jean’s two interviews, it became clear that these valued aspects of Food Lion reflected meanings salient to Jean’s narrative of self-identity.

The personal salience of Food Lion’s “no frills” image is symbolically consistent with changes that Jean desired to make in her lifestyle and self-conception. In her interviews, she described having become “caught up” in a drive for upward mobility, as symbolized by an ongoing cycle of consumer purchases (i.e., better clothes, more expensive automobiles, and eating out regularly). This transformation in Jean’s self-narrative arose in concert with a decided shift in cultural attitudes toward supermom-ism, careerism, and the careerist and materialistic milieu of the 1980s and the emergence of a consumer trend toward voluntary simplicity (Schor 1992). However, recognizing the parallel between these cultural shifts and the viewpoint of a given consumer is not sufficient for hermeneutic interpretation. Rather, the corresponding interpretive goal is to understand how this culturally shared meaning becomes self-relevant and per-
sonalized in ways that resonate with the particularities of a consumer’s sense of personal history.

For Jean, devoting more time to the family activity of cooking was a salient sign of having shifted toward a more basic and less materialistic lifestyle. Jean’s interpretation that Food Lion does not “try to be all things to all people” exhibits a noteworthy symbolic parallel to the following biographical reflection about gradually discovering her “true” self over the course of her life. Jean’s metaphorical conception of this self-discovery process evokes a consumption-orientated theme in which she now interprets her earlier life stages as a process of trying on “different labels” until she came to realize her true, inner-directed identity:

Jean: I wouldn’t go through my 20s again for all the money in the world. You are out of undergraduate school and it’s like, “What’s expected of me?” You still haven’t come to know yourself, and it’s like that there is this gigantic world out there and you must somehow get all the experiences you can under your belt before you can get to know yourself. So you try on a lot of labels and I guess that somehow you think that that assemblage is you, when it isn’t. I think in your 30s you tend to consolidate that and get closer to who you really are (7).

In summary, Jean’s rendering of Food Lion expresses a pattern of self-referential meanings that reflects her sense of evolving self-identity and the personalized cultural ideals that she is attempting to realize in her everyday life. For Jean, her image of having a consolidated identity also entails other associations such as the rejection of a materialistic lifestyle and a back-to-basics orientation that is implemented practically by making cooking a family activity. Again, these personally salient consumption goals and values are linked to a desired identity and reflected in the interpretations that structure her preference for Food Lion, such as its being a focused, no frills, basic grocery store.

This stage of the interpretive process is consistent with theoretical proposals holding that the managerially significant constructs of involvement, motivation, and consumer learning are contingent on the perceived self-relevance of the product or service (Celsi and Olson 1988). In the marketing literature, the predominant approach to analyzing perceived self-relevance (from textual data) is the means–end chain analysis of laddering interviews (Gutman 1991; Walker and Olson 1991). Whereas means–end chain analysis interprets these product–consumer relationships in terms of higher-order “values” that constitute the “core” sense of self (Gutman 1991; Walker and Olson 1991), the present hermeneutic framework interprets consumer self-identities as emerging from a multiplicity of narratives (i.e., identity positions). This hermeneutic approach can generate a more richly textured understanding of the consumption meanings that arise from these constructions of self-identity and the different types of higher-order identity–relevant consumption meanings, benefits, and hence motivations that arise in a consumer’s narrative of personal history. For example, means–end chain analyses tend to culminate in the higher-order (or terminal) value of “enhancing self-esteem.” Rather than treating self-esteem as a self-evident, explanatory construct, a hermeneutic interpretation seeks to understand the pattern of meanings through which consumers construct an enhanced sense of self-esteem (Thompson 1996; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994).

A hermeneutic interpretation then explicates the personalized meanings by which consumers understand the characteristics of their (perceived) actual identities, ideal identities, and undesired identities (Markus and Wurf 1986) and the ways in which these identity perceptions (and their underlying meanings) are manifested in everyday consumption activities. This logic of interpretation coheres with McCracken’s (1988) view that consumption meanings are an important means by which people cope with disjunctures between their perceived actual circumstances and valued ideals. Through consumption meanings, people construct their biographical narratives in terms that align their identities with valued and/or idealized aspects of their lifeworld circumstances while rejecting or devaluing its undesired (or disliked) aspects. Furthermore, these consumption meanings function as symbolic vehicles for pursuing a desired future life or conception of self.

To illustrate this point, the higher-order theme of Thompson’s (1996)—“holding it all together/falling apart”—indicates that the meaning of self-esteem for these participants was steeped in two interrelated identity issues: (1) their sense of being connective forces that hold their families together and (2) their feelings of being organized, productive, and accomplished people. This second identity issue was intimately connected to their engagement in the professional world. This constellation of self-perceptions stood in relation to the undesired image of “falling apart,” which applied to both their families (and households) and their own self-identities. The existential goal of being a “balanced person” reflects the significance that the participants ascribed to both of these identity/esteem issues. Many of their lifestyle choices can be seen as displacing their identity ideals—which are constantly threatened by the necessary concessions to the demands of the schedule—to an idealized past time (i.e., seeking to recreate a traditional family moments) or an envisioned future. Given these self-perceptions, consumption activities that served the goal of being a balanced person enhanced their sense of self-esteem and accordingly rendered “juggling” as their most experientially viable lifestyle alternative.

Constructing an Integrative Interpretation from the Texts of Consumer’s Consumption Stories

All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions and, hence, both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method

The final stage of a hermeneutically based interpretation is deriving a broader understanding of cultural, societal, and/or historical processes from the iterative analysis of the specific (i.e., idiographic) cases (Geertz 1983). At this stage, individual-level experiences and meanings are interpreted as particularistic expressions of a broader cultural system of meaning (Holt 1997; Thompson 1996; Thompson, Pollio,}

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1Holt (1995a, 1997) offers a parallel theoretical critique of traditional conceptions of consumer values that draws from Bourdieu’s work on “local systems of taste.”
and Locander 1994; Willis 1981). This logic of interpretation follows from the hermeneutic view that a culture is a living legacy of historically established meanings that provide the “conditions of intelligibility” (Gadamer 1993) from which people make sense of their lives. This legacy of cultural meanings is itself constituted and conveyed through narratives (Ricoeur 1981). Thus, consumers’ narratives of personal history are situated in a broader cultural system of meanings that have been diffused through advertising, mass media, educational curriculum, and the “collective meanings” used to create a sense of a shared social identity among individuals (Faber and O’Guinn 1988; Holt 1997; Willis 1981).

A sociohistoric perspective is particularly relevant to marketing interests because of the role that mass media, advertising, and public relations (three interrelated forms of marketing communications) have played in shaping public perceptions regarding matters of identity and lifestyle options (Kellner 1992; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997). Product and service promotions have long been situated in ideological representations of various social roles (such as what “good” mothers should do and buy) that diffuse and affirm specific cultural constructions (Douglas 1994). From a hermeneutic perspective, these forms of marketing communication provide more than entertainment or information; they offer culturally salient representations from which consumers can assess their own lives (Kellner 1992; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997).

This stage in the interpretive process draws most explicitly from the researchers’ immersion in a background of historical literature relevant to the research domain. This interpretive movement is neither a case of deriving a theory that is “in” the data waiting to be discovered nor a matter of a researcher “projecting” an a priori framework onto the text. Rather, the process is a dialectical one in which a researcher’s developing knowledge of the cultural and historical background provides an orienting frame of reference from which to interpret the narratives, and conversely, the engagement with the textual data enables these initial concepts to be modified and extended.

This iterative movement or “dialectical tacking” (Geertz 1983) between consumer narratives of identity and a broader system of sociohistoric meanings can draw from two distinct (but not mutually exclusive) forms of historical knowledge. The first arises from a primary analysis of historical texts, such as archival records, consumer diaries, and oral histories, and the second derives from existing historical and sociological analysis relevant to the market segment (i.e., social group) being studied. For purposes of this article, emphasis is placed on the latter form of historical knowledge. (For discussions on the conduct of primary historical analysis in consumer and marketing research contexts, see Belk 1992; Fullerton 1987; Lavin 1995; Lavin and Archdeacon 1989; Smith and Lux 1993).4

4As a practical matter, the time requirements needed to conduct both a hermeneutic interpretation of consumer narratives and a primary historical analysis are likely to be prohibitive for most applied marketing research questions. In academic marketing research, studies of this type are also uncommon. This form of pluralistic research would seem most appropriate when the consumer group in question has specific ties to a relatively circumscribed context. For example, Tambyah (1997) is now using such an approach to investigate how the social history of an ethnic neighborhood shapes the consumption patterns and meanings among immigrants now living there.

Hermeneutic marketing researchers should strive to become familiar with a broad range of interpretive perspectives on the relevant sociohistoric issues. The goal is to develop a sound working knowledge of the major social and historical themes that have been identified as shaping the contemporary cultural situation of the market segment in question. Because of the constraints of time and the extensiveness of the historical literature that could be brought to bear, however, this working knowledge is inevitably bound to be limited and selective. As such, the cultivation of an historical perspective is itself a form of interpretation. The specific mix of historical works (and hence perspectives) that will inform this last stage of the analysis is, therefore, an interpretive choice that must be negotiated in relation to the issues and themes that have emerged through the previous stages of the textual interpretation.

By analyzing an interview text’s salient metaphors, common expressions, and categorical distinctions in light of these historical considerations, insights can be gained into the “cultural myths” that are manifest in consumers’ interpretations of their consumption experiences. In this usage, cultural myths refer to narratives that have become ostensibly detached from their originating social conditions but reflect a collective memory of the historical past (see Barthes 1957). The implication is that many consumer meanings are grounded in a collective cultural memory (Lipsitz 1990) of bygone patterns of social organization and ways of life. Understanding why these cultural meanings have transcended their precipitating societal conditions and how these myths are appropriated by contemporary consumers can offer important insights into the psychosocial dynamics that underlie consumption meanings. As a case in point, marketing practitioners and academics have argued that appeals to mythic themes (i.e., narratives that hold a special significance to members of a culture or subculture) are highly effective for positioning products and creating resonant promotional messages (see Randazzo 1993; Stern 1995).

In these interview texts, for example, the participants’ frequent references to the distinction between working and traditional mothers (and the often contested image of the supermom), images of June Cleaver or “staying at home and wearing an apron,” and even the ubiquitous metaphor of “juggling” all provide entries into the historical conditions that have implicitly or explicitly shaped the viewpoints of the participants. These metaphors express longstanding historical conceptions of gender and motherhood that are particularly salient to this generation of baby boom women and support a number of thematic commonalities among their personalized consumption meanings (Thompson 1996).

I propose that the specific life issues and consumption meanings expressed by these participants are personalized manifestations of a well-documented cultural legacy particularly relevant to lives of middle-class, baby boom-generation women. Through this legacy, the cultural conception of motherhood has become embedded in a societal distinction between the private and public spheres and a related system of moral connotations. For the middle and upper socioeconomic classes, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the transformation of “home” from a site of economic production to a “private” sphere removed from the public world of work (see Cowan 1983; Strasser 1982). The cultural category of motherhood, in turn, became closely aligned with the care of the
home and sustaining the emotional and spiritual needs of the family. Domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, organizing, and decorating the home acquired a cultural significance as maternal duties that fostered a proper “moral setting” for family life and created a domestic haven from the “profane” influences of the public economic realm (see Sparke 1995).

Although dramatic transformations in socioeconomic conditions and gender roles have since transpired, this cultural intertwining of motherhood and sanctified conceptions of home (and care of the domestic realm) remains a prominent feature of contemporary gender ideologies (Hochschild 1989; Jackson 1992). In this sociohistorical matrix, the personal identities of working women are divided between the sanctified (private) and profane (public) spheres. Understanding this underlying mythic distinction helped to explain the salience of the balance metaphor in the participants’ narratives and the difficulties they reported in “compromising” on the domestic activities traditionally associated with motherhood. Such compromises symbolized that larger issues related to the emotional well-being of their families might also be compromised by their professional careers, and a felt moral obligation to their children therefore would be transgressed. These morally and emotionally charged questions of identity posed the crux of the life-world dilemmas that these participants sought to manage through consumption activities.

DISCUSSION

Strategic Implications

In this section, I highlight some of the strategically oriented marketing insights that arise from this hermeneutic interpretation. The consumption stories expressed in these interviews are consistent with previous research, which indicates that feelings of time scarcity pervade the life experiences of this market segment (Crosby 1991; Gerson 1985; Hochschild 1989). In the marketing literature, orientations toward time have been suggested as a powerful theoretical variable for better understanding the nature of consumer preferences and experiences of postpurchase satisfaction (Bergadak 1990; Gross 1987; Hirschman 1987; Hornik 1984; Kaufman, Lane, and Lindquist 1991). A hermeneutic approach can provide insights into the meanings that support and energize these perceptions of time scarcity and underlie the consumption preferences of time-pressed consumers.

In this illustrative analysis, these time-pressed female consumers all describe the personal importance of consumer benefits such as the cooking speed of microwave ovens, the reliability of their cars, the convenience of easy-to-use appliances, and the responsiveness of service providers. The personal resonance of these consumer needs emerged in relation to emotionally charged meanings such as being able to fulfill perceived interpersonal obligations, creating a space for quality time with their children within an activity-dense lifestyle, and finally, compensating for gaps in their social support networks. Hence, their consumer preferences did not reflect the inherent utility provided by the sum of a product’s context-independent attributes. Rather, preferences emerged from the meaningful relations the women experienced between the salient conditions of their lives and products and services. A life issue that arose consistently across their consumption stories regarded their ongoing efforts to balance the often competing demands of their professional careers and family lives. The personally salient meanings and benefits these women attributed to goods and services arose within this narrative theme of being a balanced person.

For these participants, the existential significance of being balanced was grounded in a future-directed identity issue: What kind of memories would their present day actions create for themselves, their spouses, and their children? The personal significance of time-saving products arose from their symbolic relation to their balancing or juggling efforts and the underlying quest to create a desired future. Time-saving products precluded, rather than created, complications and enabled the participants to incorporate some semblance of valued “traditional” family activities into their routines. In this way, participants felt most assured that they would remember this stage in their lives with few regrets and that their children would also have warm and happy memories of this time. The participants further interpreted these products as partially compensating for gaps in the support available from their social network, such as an absence of nearby relatives or a spouse who is unable (or unwilling) to take a proactive role in day-to-day domestic responsibilities. Reducing these sources of interpersonal tension alleviated sources of daily stress and was seen as setting the stage for more pleasant memories to be recalled at some point in the future.

The positive meanings attached to reliable, supportive products also reflected several characteristics of the “caring orientation” that these participants sought to maintain in their daily lives. For example, they interpreted reliable products as embodying an admirable attention to detail on the part of the manufacturer and as reflecting a concern for the plight of customers. In contrast, poor-quality products interjected additional contingencies, complications, and demands into their time-pressed routine. The significance of these impositions was magnified by the participants’ sense that these businesses did not care about the personal inconveniences and stresses created by these unreliable products. A similar set of issues arose in the participants’ assessment of satisfactory and unsatisfactory service experiences. Thus, reciprocal counterparts to these consumers’ life-themes of being balanced people are marketing actions that are seen as responsive to their constantly shifting schedules and feelings of time pressure. In so doing, products and services provide several higher-order benefits: (1) reducing daily stresses of the participants’ juggling lifestyle and the concern that they may be making trade-offs that will lead to a sense of regret in the future; (2) increasing the participants’ sense of control; (3) alleviating participants’ concerns about the negative effects their lifestyle choices may have on their children; and (4) enabling participants to experience greater levels of personal satisfaction from their efforts to lead balanced lives.

Comparison to Market-Oriented Ethnographic Interpretations

The preceding discussion highlights differences among the types of interpretations of consumption behaviors and preferences that follow from the present hermeneutic framework, means–end chains analysis, the “voice of the customer approach,” and rational consumer decision-making frameworks. In this section, I discuss an interpretive frame-
work that bears a closer family resemblance to a hermeneutic orientation: market-oriented ethnography.

Arnould and Wallendorf’s (1994) description of market-oriented ethnographic interpretation is relevant here in three respects. First, their article pursues a similar goal of providing a “workbench” description of an interpretive process for deriving strategically useful marketing insights from qualitative data. Second, market-oriented ethnography and hermeneutic analysis both address the fundamental reciprocity between individual level perceptions and shared social meanings; for both, the meanings that marketing phenomena hold for consumers are seen as emerging through a dialectical relationship between personal viewpoints and common sense belief structures. Third, the authors share a general interest in developing a multilevel, “thick description” of consumption meanings.

Despite these similarities, however, these two interpretive frameworks pursue substantively different types of understanding. Arnould and Wallendorf (1994, p. 484) define market-oriented ethnography as “an ethnographic focus on the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or service” that “aims to explicate patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than cognitive” (p. 485). Their key analytic categories for explicating the cultural logic manifest in these patterns of action—from the texts of verbal reports—are overgeneralization, metaphoric glosses, and claims of idiosyncracy. Although these are narrative-based interpretive constructs, they are designed to reveal the operation of a general system of cultural beliefs rather than the personalized cultural meanings that these consumption experiences hold in the consumer’s narrative of self-identity.

As Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) describe, the analysis of “emic” meanings is ultimately placed in the service of developing an “etic” explanation for the patterns of behavior—or behavioral constellations—that exist within a cultural setting. These etic explanations are steeped in a structuralist logic. The identified patterns of meaning and their ensuing behavioral patterns are interpreted as the means by which a society maintains an integrated equilibrium and manages potential sources of disruption to its social order (see Jenks 1993). In contrast, the present hermeneutic framework focuses on the ways in which people use cultural meanings and consumption practices to manage issues of identity and the multitude of tensions and threats to a coherent sense of self that are posed by the conditions of modern life (e.g., Cushman 1990; Gergen 1991; Lifton 1993).

Thus, hermeneutic interpretations can provide a necessary supplement to this structurally oriented approach by highlighting the symbolic meanings and patterns of personal concerns and life goals that constitute the unique frame of reference from which a person derives a coherent sense of personal history. Although these personal frames of reference are ultimately grounded in a background of pregivn cultural meanings, the hermeneutic project is to explicate the ways that aspects of this cultural background are incorporated into a person’s sense of personal history and adapted to the unique contingencies of life experiences (Ricoeur 1981; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). To adapt the idiom of Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), hermeneutic interpretations seek to explicate consumers’ perspectives of life meaning.

As with any research orientation, hermeneutic interpretations cannot address the full complexity of consumption meanings and practices, and as such, this hermeneutic orientation is more appropriate for some types of marketing research interests than others. The more aggregate, sociologically focused mode of ethnographic analysis is likely to be more attuned to marketing research seeking to document the patterns of social interactions that arise during consumption activities and/or to analyze the social scripting of consumption through rituals and other types of collectively shared practices (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Hill 1991; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), gift-giving (Sherry 1983), participation in holiday festivities (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), and group-oriented consumption phenomena, such as sports spectating (Holt 1995b) or extended service encounters (Arnould and Price 1993).

CONCLUSION

I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his [her] own.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Logical Investigations

The preceding account describes and illustrates a hermeneutic framework that can be used to interpret consumers’ consumption stories in relation to their broader narratives of self-identity and a background of historically established cultural meanings. This framework integrates the tenets of hermeneutic philosophy and contemporary research on the narratological nature of human understanding into a process for interpreting consumer meanings in a holistic manner to generate marketing insights.

The hermeneutical processes through which marketing researchers interpret qualitative data often is characterized as a subjective and largely intuitive experience that bears many similarities to the creation of artistic works (e.g., Holbrook, Bell, and Grayson 1989). Recently, Spiggle (1994, p. 500) described textual interpretation as “playful, creative, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative, and representative.” In this spirit, a popular metaphor for characterizing the process of interpretation is that of an improvisational jazz solo (see Oldfather and West 1994; Sanjek 1990).

Unquestionably, these characterizations highlight some important aspects of the interpretive process. However, when not placed in a comparative context, such aesthetic analogies run the risk of romanticizing (and even worse mystifying) the process of textual interpretation. From a hermeneutic perspective, interpretation is an improvisational process in which the researcher draws from his or her stock of background knowledge and personal experience to derive insights from textual data. However, this intuitive and creative mode of understanding is not the exclusive province of a rarified artistic sensibility. Rather, it is a defining characteristic of a more prosaic phenomenon: expertise.

In everyday life, we quickly recognize the profound difference among those who perform a skill with only technical competence (and a self-conscious awareness of what they need to be doing) and experts who seem to have an intuitive sense for what to do in a given circumstance and who bring a sense of artistry to the task at hand. This everyday perception of what constitutes expertise accords with research on the psychology of expertise, which indicates that experts are more attuned to critical characteristics of a situation and that they can recognize patterns of interrelation-

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ships and similarities among different circumstances more readily than novices. Experts also have a more “automatic” command of their background knowledge, and their modes of reasoning are more adaptable to contextual exigencies (see Winograd and Flores 1987).

In the phenomenon of expertise, we find yet another illustration of the now familiar hermeneutic axiom that all understanding derives from a background of interpretive pre-dispositions. In these terms, the improvisational and creative properties of textual interpretation reflect general characteristics of understanding that is accentuated as a person becomes more expert in his or her knowledge about a given domain (Neisser 1987). Rather than reproducing the age-old distinction between art (i.e., intuitive insight) and science (i.e., methodological rigor), the hermeneutic view is that insightful marketing research emerges when methods and interpretive models are artfully used.

As people develop expertise, they become less explicitly conscious of rules and guidelines and their knowledge becomes more automatic and tacit in application. However, the automaticity of knowledge does not mean that the performance of the expert becomes routinized. On the contrary, the cultivation of expertise facilitates a more playful, autotelic (i.e., intrinsically rewarding), and creative orientation than is characteristic of novices (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). In light of this consideration, Spiggle’s apt description of interpretation as a playful endeavor also warrants some discussion.

As discussed by Gadamer (1993), the Greek and Latin etymological roots of play emphasize a sense of to-and-fro movement within a field or structure. Similarly, the German word for play—spiel—similarly implies a sense of movement, as in a dance (Gadamer 1993). This active sense of the term connotes that the player is not distanced from the game, but rather he or she is immersed in its unfolding structure. To play well, a person cannot do anything he or she wants. Rather, the skilled (or expert) player is highly attuned to the circumstances emerging in the game, and he or she acts in concert with its flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). To the knowledgeable observer, the player’s actions are understandable within the flow of the game, and the exercise of his or her improvisational skills is systematically related to the facilitating context of the game (Huizinga 1950). Thus, the game’s rules and structural dynamics are not impediments to creative play; rather, they are enabling conditions from which these expressions of skill can emerge and be understood by others.

Hermeneutic interpretation exhibits this player-in-a-game quality in four ways. First, it involves a patterned movement that emerges in concert with the structure of the textual data. Second, it is an unfolding process of creative adaptation to the flow of the consumer stories interpreted over the course of the research. Third, it requires the active participation of the interpreter who exercises his or her improvisational, intuitive, and creative capabilities within the field constituted by the iterative movements between the textual data and the interpretive framework that structures and guides the interpretation. Fourth, these interpretive moves should be understandable to all those who are familiar with the nature of the game, as constituted by the logic of the interpretative framework, the research goals being pursued, and the nature of the textual data. Through this play of interpretation, marketing researchers gain insights that can enable them to develop products, brand images, promotional appeals, and service offerings that are attuned to the meanings salient to the lives of consumer segments.

This last point provides a segue for discussing my hermeneutically motivated claim that marketing researchers must become experts about the life-world circumstances of specific consumer segments. The more conventional research paradigm is one in which researchers have extensive knowledge of specific methodologies, brand or product categories, and in the academic context, theoretical models. In this conventional case, marketing researchers are assumed to have a generalized viewpoint from which to evaluate the critical dimensions of the brand/product (or theoretical construct) across a diverse array of social contexts or groups. In applied settings, this orientation can lend itself readily to a research focus on product or service characteristics rather than the circumstances of consumers’ lives and the meanings that define their sense of self-identity (e.g., enable researchers to conduct a survey to measure consumer attitudes about products; enable researchers to conduct focus groups to discover if customers want these products to have this feature or this style or this color). In theoretically driven research, the corresponding risk is that theoretical analyses become overly abstract and removed from the personal and sociocultural circumstances of everyday life (Hirschman 1986; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

The following parable offers some relevant insights into the relationship between marketing researchers, their interpretive orientations, and the texts of consumers consumption stories:

A story is told in a children’s book of the disappointment of a small boy who put on his grandmother’s spectacles and took up her book in the expectation of being able himself to find in it the stories which she used to tell. The tale ends with these words: “Well, what a fraud! Where’s the story? I can see nothing but black and white” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 401).

The hermeneutic reading of this allegorical tale is that the grandmother’s spectacles are not a magical entity that creates a meaningful story. Rather, they are a background factor that facilitates her ability to constitute a meaningful relation to the text. To place undue emphasis on the role of the spectacles in understanding the text, however, is to misconstrue the experience of reading and understanding it. The exciting story that captures the child’s imagination exists in the gestalt relation among the text, the spectacles, and more important, the grandmother, who knows how to bring the text to life. In an analogous fashion, a research method or interpretive framework cannot in and of itself generate marketing insights. To bring these consumption stories to life, marketing researchers must possess the background knowledge needed to recognize the relationships between these narratological structure of consumers’ consumption stories and the rich texture of their self-identities and life-world contexts.

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