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What can phenomenology offer the consumer?

Marketing research as philosophical, method conceptual

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Abstract

Purpose – Consumer discourse is a narrative of generically (in)formed, goal-directed activity. If research interprets such practice, it is often deemed to draw upon phenomenology. Returning to the philosophers (Gadamer, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur) who shaped phenomenology, the purpose of this paper is to argue that consumer studies should further cultivate their important insight – that action (particularly perceiving) is structured temporally as always already realising our pre-given meaning. Entities are *prima facie* experienced as “ready-to-hand” “equipment” enabling “potentiality-for-being”. Hermeneutic phenomenology is thus a philosophical resource offering appropriate spatio-temporal images for people responding to media marketing’s branded life-styles.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing upon authoritative academic resources, the paper proceeds from philosophical definition to resulting analytical methods in marketing research, using a brief Malaysian case study as an example. Philosophically, phenomenology’s core perception is of persons as located in a life-world of socially shared concepts whose employment/ emplotment is said to “fore-structure” (Heidegger) their understanding, shaping their “projections” (Gadamer) or expectation of events. Phenomenology posits one engages in a “hermeneutic circle of understanding” – aiming at resolving contradiction between such “fore-sight” and our subsequent perceptions of events. Consumers thematise “pre-understood” experience in articulating their storied accounts.

Findings – Drawing on phenomenology’s account of perceiving, the paper suggests qualitative marketing research unpacks consumers’ generic expectation of branding narrative as equipment enabling potentiality-for-being, regarding narrative as addressing assumed audience expectation.

Originality/value – The paper provides a conceptual route through phenomenology’s application to marketing communication research practice.

Keywords Consumer perception, Hermeneutics, Malaysia, Media, Phenomenology, Marketing communications

Paper type Conceptual paper

Marketing theory makes much use of a research perspective it perceives as *phenomenology*. Writing phenomenology is held there to imply a focus (first if not finally) on consumers articulating their experience as “fore-structured” (Heidegger, 1962/1927) through narratives. So, empowered conceptual research is...
integrated within interpretive studies (Cova and Elliott, 2008; Shankar and Golding, 2001) as spatially delineating horizons of understanding marketing. Consumers can be considered to “immerse” in brandscapes, thereby integrating “fusions of horizons” (familiar albeit not frequently focussed upon conceptual perspectives), “project” meaning in/ on a marketing text, and to pursue a “circle of understanding” content. We “align” with, or “distance” from, advertising.

Incorporating guiding ideas in one’s research from this long standing European school of philosophy is understanding consumer consciousness as inalienably temporal – as being a multi-dimensional process (in)formed by a shared past of public concepts shaping our future anticipation. Thus, categorizing phenomena as constituting a form of life is intrinsically related to its subsequent practice. Anticipating experience (or our “fore-conception” of following events) is immanent (or implicit) within the terms of our narratives. Our attention is thus called by phenomenology to a necessary or non-contingent aspect (“moment”) of consumer understanding – their “fore-sight”. While being aware is analyzed as essentially structured by time passing, metaphorical images for this process in phenomenology are spatial: we “project” meaning from “horizons of understanding”.

“In advance of any interpretation, the interpreter belongs to the world and, as a consequence, has inherited (pre-)understanding mediated by language” (58) wrote Arnold and Fischer in 1994. They authored an early exposition of phenomenology’s conceptual method as “Hermeneutics and Consumer Research” for the Journal of Consumer Research. Hermeneutics reflects on consumer fore-sight both constrained and cultivated by commercial and popular culture (Wilson, 1993, 2011).

Setting out a brief phenomenology of embodied perception as a process, we consider below its evolving presence in the perceptions of phenomenology for which there is evidence in marketing articles. Illustrating this interpretive account of embodied consciousness as fore-structured, this paper briefly thinks through one episode of the author’s micro-cultural research on media branding audiences (Pace, 2008). Seeing is represented as a sequence of socially secured sense-making.

**Hermeneutic phenomenology: “nebulous” (Thompson, 1997) knowing?**

Research structured by the insights of phenomenology is a significant venture for marketing theory and practice. For instance, when writing this article, the author’s online search for the term “phenomenology” produced 19 results (or “hits”) in the journal of *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 50 in the *European Journal of Marketing*, and 22 results in *Marketing Theory, Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* contained over 30.

The present paper explores implications for the discipline derived from core concepts in phenomenology, particularly the work of Martin Heidegger for whom our perceptions are structured in advance by potential practice – our perceiving “entities” as “ready-to-hand” “equipment”. This is a worthy endeavor. Reporting on consumer research, Goulding (1999) refers to phenomenology as a “chimera” (867) with Heidegger’s main project Being and Time, an “impenetrable treatise” (864).

Perhaps this alleged incomprehensibility is why Hackley and Tiwsakul (2006), later writing on experiential consumption, assert that “phenomenological philosophy sought to apprehend direct experience unmediated by intellectual structures” (69). The opposite is the case. As noted above, Heidegger (1962/1927) presents people
as always already understanding (“fore-understanding”) entities as related to purpose. Experience is constituted by such a “seeing of the ready-to-hand” (189/149) for achieving our “towards-which” (90/70) or our “own potentiality-for-being” (184/144). Hence the analytical perspective of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology addresses consumption.

Criticizing Consumer Culture Theory as emphasizing consumer “agency” and marginalizing social “structure. Askegaard and Linnet (2011) assert that they do “not imply that psychologizing is an inherent weakness of phenomenological analysis”: rather “this is how phenomenology has been operationalized in consumption research” (394). Phenomenology has never been a psychology. From Husserl onwards it has asserted itself as philosophy: that is, the discipline is concerned to unpack conceptually our ideas (e.g. of “perception”) rather than focussing on empirical discovery. For Gadamer, hermeneutic phenomenology locates understanding historically, not psychologically.

In marketing theory, Craig Thompson's work is usually cited in respect of phenomenology, in particular the paper co-authored with Locander and Pollio, “Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: the Philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology” (1989). But here, Heidegger's contribution is reduced to a passing reference, a miniature account which is more appropriate to ethnomethodology than phenomenology: they write, “(his) study is of the totality of human-being-in-the-world” (135). Elsewhere (1997) in Thompson's extensive publications, he is to be found discussing the “rather nebulous issue” of “hermeneutic framework(s)” (439), not least the interpretive “fusion of horizons” which “may seem nebulous” (441). He likens the latter to a “similar dynamic” in “schema theory” (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011): yet the latter evokes a thesis in psychology, not the historical placing of epistemology which is to be found throughout Gadamer's (1975) hermeneutics. Thompson's psychologizing of philosophy may be a source of Askegaard and Linnet's complaint.

Marketing, it is difficult to deny, is intricately connected with media practice: thus consumer response is frequently audience reaction, increasingly taking shape in authoring social media. But because marketing theory has not “worked up” phenomenology, the former discipline seems not to have been able to integrate itself with valuable work in media theory from such a philosophical perspective. Silverstone's (1999) *Why Study the Media?* should be a valued tool in marketing research.

While earlier advertising theory (such as Scott's (1994a, b) scholarship) drew attention to the mediating role of screen narratives, current marketing theory marginalizes the study of their operation in advertising's addressing audiences. Yet understanding consumer assumptions (explicit or implicit) about advertising as expectations of “equipment” can, in turn, allow the storied operations of screen marketing to be thought about as addressing such implied and informed “active audiences” with their gendered, generic “horizons of expectation” (Jauss, 1982).

**Research question**

*A phenomenology of consumer experience: how would it appear?*

Phenomenology is a philosophical account of people-in-society. The early Husserl pursued a story of solipsistic selves as solitary individuals somehow sighting
a meaningful world. Here, a path of intellectual reduction attained the essence of phenomena (Lobler, 2011, p. 61; Tadajewski, 2008, p. 467). But his later writing presumes persons to be always already social, located in life-worlds.

Hence Husserl’s student Heidegger provides an account of perception as a process in which people see their surroundings not as primordially unique but as *prima facie* recognizable instances of types (as automobiles, dogs, shopping malls) on which there is consensus as to their character. Such socially held “fore-conceptions” (Heidegger, 1962/1927) form for our life-world a “horizon of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 217), “fore-structuring” (Heidegger, 1962/1927) subsequent seeing – sighting a dog, we expect a characteristically canine rather than human reaction to danger. Where we discover a discrepancy in the flow between expectation and perceived eventuality, we follow a “hermeneutic circle of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 167) in returning to reconsider the former. Thus, we pursue teleologically – or aim at – a more coherent account of our experience. Embodied perception “must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not so much copied as composed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 9).

Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time* (1962) of the essentially interpretative dimension of perception (188-195) – so that all seeing is “seeing-as” – is a profound criticism of positivism. For the latter maintains a dualistic separation of perceiving subject and phenomena perceived, in which the latter is the same for all (often said to be “sense-data”) irrespective of cultural history or habitat. We need in the following pages to consider cognitive activity conceptually and experientially.

Prior to interpretation – our “fore-having” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 191) the unknown in front of us – we are in a pre-predicative or pre-conceptual phase. Arriving from separate or shared cultural backgrounds “in advance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) of understanding we have not yet identified the “entity which is understood”. But we bear shaping frameworks of knowledge – our looking is from horizons of understanding – enabling us to recognize or identify phenomena as instantiating types. Thus, people may perceive or constitute content alike, or in alternative ways, from the first moment of their interpretative seeing.

Perceiving phenomena, then, is continually catching sight of known genera whether chairs, computers, or other constituents of our everyday life-world. Enabled thereby to explicitly/implicitly anticipate appropriate events to come (chairs being occupied, computers being accessed), awareness of the world is continually future oriented: it has a temporal “fore-structure” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 192). Seeing, we noted, is a process of reconciling anticipation with (perceived) actuality: it is never instantaneous.

As Heidegger informs us, projection (“fore-sight”) of possibility is fleshed out through our measuring these “fore-conceptions” against content (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 191). “This fore-sight ‘takes the first cut’ out of what has been taken into our fore-having, and it does so with a view to a definite way in which this can be interpreted” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) – establishing a “definite” character for perceptions to confirm:

Anything understood which is held in our fore-having and towards which we set our sights “foresightedly”, becomes conceptualizable through the interpretation. […] The interpretation has already decided for a definite way of conceiving it, either with finality or with reservations; it is grounded in something we grasp in advance – in a fore-conception. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) (emphasis in the original).
We see the world from a historically shaped cultural horizon of fore-conceptions, always and everywhere pre-understanding experience or thematizing perceptual phenomena as instantiating a type of event, object or person. We aim therein at a consistent account of events – or we critically distance ourselves from our view of experience (e.g. if research respondents see events differently):

(Pre-)understanding or prejudice is continually being realized and worked out. In the trial-and-error, dialectic nature of inquiry, (pre-)understanding’s adequacy to encompass the subject matter is continually tested. When things, events, objects, words, or actions seem alien, puzzling or contradictory (pre-)understanding is challenged to change (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p. 57).

Phenomenology presents perception as a process of embodied, essentially interpretive, looking. Perceptual themes can recur, thereby forming a pattern across an individual’s or group’s experience. Thus, “phenomenologically, our research forms a part of our extended selves” (Belk, 1989, p. 129).

When Thompson brings phenomenology’s socio-historical narrative of positioned perception to interpreting consumer vision, he retains the usefully metaphorical idea that there is a “horizon” of understanding for spatial modeling of our culturally accrued conceptual awareness. “Hermeneutic research emphasizes that an understanding of a text always reflects a fusion of horizons between the interpreter’s frame of reference and the texts being interpreted” (1997, p. 441) (emphasis in original).

As noted, Thompson claims a “similar dynamic” between this “hermeneutic/narratological model of understanding” and “schema theory” wherein “perceptual information is assimilated to preexisting schematic knowledge” (Belk, 1989). But should people not be conscious of schema enabling cognitive processing, such frameworks could not form our “horizons of expectation” (Jauss, 1982).

Providing this technical analogy from cognitive psychology for the experiential infusion of “historically established cultural meanings” (Thompson, 1997, p. 439) seems to be at odds with this author’s privileging participant point-of-view. Consistent with phenomenology’s emphasis on fore-structured consumer embodiment of expectation, he argues “understanding is attained by describing lived experiences and the meanings that emerge from them” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 139). Hearing how a consumer thematizes her/his experience defines a horizon of subsequent salient concepts – allowing investigators to anticipate descriptions deemed by research participants as appropriate.

Summarizing his work with a group of female consumers, Thompson (1997, p. 450) asserts, for instance, that the “personally salient meanings and benefits these women attributed to goods and services arose within (their) narrative theme of being a balanced person”. In a fore-structuring internal ideational relationship between “being a balanced person” and pursuit of “salient meanings and benefits, one can indeed anticipate one woman defending her decision to dine out by asserting, “I’ve worked real hard and all I want to do is go out and have someone else do the work.”

In their article on “Understanding the socialized body”, Thompson and Hirschman (1995) prioritize a “legacy of socio-historical influences that structure consumers’ perceptions” (149). They follow an a priori or conceptual method, tracing “taken-for-granted cultural assumptions that were implicit to (sic) the participants’ viewpoints” (141) (emphasis added). The process through which such
“socio-historical influence” structures consumers’ evolving “fore-sight” can be discerned – written into their narratives shaping thematic conceptual understanding of subsequent activities. Seeing is an always already informed sequence of anticipatory attention and articulating meaning. Presenting marketing research, phenomenology reveals “implicit” meanings in consumer discourse:

Thus, “a major theme of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy is that a person’s understanding of his/her life experiences always reflects broader cultural viewpoints that are implicitly conveyed through language. […] Hermeneutic research seeks to highlight this often unspoken” background of socially shared meanings by which a person interprets his/her experiences (Thompson et al., 1994, p. 432) (emphasis added).

Phenomenology focuses on aspects or moments in our perceiving as a goal shaped process aiming at a consistent narrative of seeing. Looking in our life-world (Schembri and Sandberg, 2011, p. 168) is informed by “fore-concepts” mapping out social-historical horizons of understanding: “a pre-understanding is applied to apprehend a worldly phenomenon” (Thompson, 1991).

Following Merleau-Ponty in outing the “dichotomy” of subject-object dualism (Barnham, 2010), it is significant to note that even our bodily “multisensory” perceiving of spatio-temporal arrangements can be said to form a dispositional horizon of awareness (Dion et al., 2011). While often ill-focussed, such “solidified” intentionality nonetheless shapes activity, enabling our habitual experience to reach its goal (as when we “touch type”). Phenomenology can display its “analytical potential” by exploring contextually our wide pre-understanding – informing, if not also ideological, horizons of consumer consciousness (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 392; Moisander et al., 2009).

Media marketing and its perception as a patterned fore-structured process
We see intentional objects – objects of consciousness – as recognizable phenomena (events, objects, places or persons) of which we aim to make sense through the hermeneutic circle of our understanding. Perception is thereby a fore-structured process of anticipating how an instance will behave on the basis of our knowledge about its type. Such inference depends on our construction of its character. Avoiding contradictory accounts, we reconcile expectation with emerging appearance.

In the researcher’s gaze at consumer perception, “the goal of interpretive phenomenology is to present a theoretical mosaic that calls for enough structure without sacrificing the informational richness of the data” (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008, p. 67). Awareness is both “retentive” (backward-looking) and “protensive” (future-directed). Belonging to researcher as well as researched subject, the emerging narratives and themes are appropriated or addressed in criticism (Wilson et al., 2006).

Shaped by phenomenology, the “theoretical mosaic” briefly assembled here is structured to accommodate the “informational richness” (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008, p. 67) evident in research subject responses to both certainty and indeterminate data characterizing narrative media branding.

A phenomenology of seven “moments” in consumers perceiving screen “equipment”. A discursive philosophy of consumer responses to media marketing needs to incorporate a patterned account of that process, a universal narrative which can be derived not from a structuralist determinism (with its construction of readers or viewers as mere “effect” of the text) but rather from a phenomenology of creative perception, where audiences project and (de)posit meaning on screen. Hence the
proposed narrative of seven stages in consumers engaging with media product branding equally registers a negotiation, emphasizing an audience’s interactive immersion on screen which is simultaneously their informed inferring or generic anticipation of culturally subtle future content.

Likewise, rather than structuralism’s focus on the contradictory text (not only signaling but suppressing social dysfunction), phenomenology presents/presences brand consumers articulating consistency, aiming at narrative meaning via the ludic hermeneutic circle of their understanding. Instead of viewers positioned by a powerful screen, phenomenology asserts their actively aligning with narrative agents: and finally, informing a critical marketing agenda, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics sees producer audiences as discovering critical distance, consumers engaged in alienated analysis.

From the analytical perspective of phenomenology’s media marketing reception theory, consumers (who from time to time become a critical citizenry) construct or interpret advertising narratives drawing on their wider cultural awareness. Consenting audiences enter often branded space and time. The complex process of consumer cognitive response whether reading or writing marketing meaning (e.g. in sometimes anti-branding social media) can be analytically unpacked and discussed as seven “moments” (phenomenology’s term), aspects, or stages of attending to text.

Importantly, these moments in audience interpretative awareness need not be consecutive. For instance, a consumer’s fore-structured anticipating of narrative is a simultaneous conjoining of her or his classifying text and informed inferring of likely content. Media branding which culturally “connects” (a spatial metaphor used by the author’s interviewees) to intended audiences’ enables the latter’s recognition and hence concurrent engaging in establishing expectations of events on screen. Actively engaging with text through anticipating narrative is to be passively absorbed by/in content.

The process of participatory media consumption is initiated by our anticipatory absorption, our generic concern with narrative as ready-to-hand equipment enabling potentiality-for-being:

- absorption or immersion in narrative – the perceptually productive consumer is momentarily passive, displaying a “deliberate letting go in the face of (recognized) desired experiences, which require(s) passivity” (Barker, 2006, p. 125): immersion is thereby intentional, initiating understanding;
- anticipation or inference – initiating insight into content from their horizon of understanding, informed immersing consumers implicitly infer its probable development as generic instance (perceiving is culturally fore-structured and future-oriented: there are no independent “sense-data”);
- articulation or integration – completing projections in a hermeneutic circle of understanding, audiences sustain the core “pre-structure of understanding as temporal, as an event” (Gadamer and Grondin, 2006, p. 89): here phenomenology focusses on audiences securing coherence;
- alignment or identification – enabled by perceived cultural proximity, consumers align with a branding scenario’s narrative agents or personae embodying persuasion (Hung et al., 2007): here research refers to screen support for audience identification (e.g. point-of-view camera sequences);
- appropriation or inflection – in aligning, consumers appropriate (Gadamer, 1975) branding to inform conceptions of their identity: inflecting marketing narrative
towards our stories takes an opposite direction to identification with screen personae: appropriation is culturally shaped;

- alienation – in displaying an alternative response to alignment, which may signal ideological insight, consumers can distance themselves from perceived content interpreting this reaction as active “alienation” mobilizes phenomenology’s rather than structuralism’s reading of the concept; and

- finally, alienation is mapped out by consumer analysis (the audience’s pursuit of critical insight) focussed on media form (e.g. editing) as well as content, in a “moment” of reflection separating self from screen, defined by phenomenology as “depth hermeneutics” (Ricoeur, 1981).

In audience readings, media marketing is articulated and appropriated – or equally found to be alienating – from a cultural fore-structuring of its interpretation familiar to consumers. Here, an audience’s developing an identity in viewing can be seen as an “interpretive task, whereby the self is constructed […] by the complementary processes of distanciation and appropriation” (Bradbury and Miller, 2010, p. 688). Western telecommunications brand marketing was found “a bit offensive, it breaks the (Chinese) tradition” asserted a self-defining respondent in the author’s earlier research.

The meaning of media consumption is, then, negotiated, actively formed from the horizon of its understanding rather than passively resulting from events on screen. Consumers are not caused to concur with marketing’s powerful prescribed purchasing. *Pace* structuralism! Instead, industry branding marshals narrative indeterminacy. Consumers may be “invited to complete the product (meaning) themselves” (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 29) in terms of their prior access to already familiar frameworks of available interpretation, such as genre (Scott, 1994b, p. 464). Branding’s textual enigmas imply authoring audiences active in achieving a coherent narrative on screen.

*Unpacking researcher-participant fore-conceptions: a triple hermeneutic*

Phenomenology’s method is conceptual, delivering a logical geography of both researcher and research participant horizons of understanding. In marketing’s study of our responses to media branding, philosophical analysis can establish fore-conceptions in focus group or interview: it can thus identify where fore-understanding of narrative shaped actualising a story or articulation of its prescriptive meaning, prior to the latter’s appropriation or subject to alienated criticism. In our listening across focus group discussion or interview, distinct or shared narrative themes can be seen.

A phenomenology of media consumer reception investigates a *triple hermeneutic* process wherein researchers’ fore-structured attention is focussed on making sense¹ of participant accounts, each of which is constructed in a circle of understanding² from a horizon of expecting events on screen. This complex process is initiated by narrative agents equally aiming at coherent stories³.

Investigator assumptions are shaped by this reiterated triple hermeneutic of making sense. In a phenomenological interview (or small focus group) on consumer perceptions of media marketing narrative, the attention of researchers is fore-structured by their assumption that participant seeing is itself “projecting” events on screen from a horizon of generic expectation. Such an assumption is (in Kantian terms) *synthetic a priori*: that is, while its subject matter is experience, this belief is brought to (or prior to) investigative experience as phenomenology’s concept
of our perceiving everywhere. Hence its rejection would require to be philosophically rather than empirically argued.

**Phenomenology’s a priori focus and discursive findings.** This short section will provide a (hopefully) illuminating example of phenomenology’s a priori focus and discursive findings, enabled by exploring fore-structured consumer responses to mediated product branding (in this case, of a nation). Interviewing and focus groups provided data.

Conducted in Malaysia, a small cross-cultural reception study of political communication considered responses to a National Day television advertisement sponsored by the Malaysian oil company Petronas “selling” the necessity of inter-ethnic harmony. “The Bush” (44 s) shows a hedge being trimmed and the audience hears an Indian Tamil song: the gardener is hidden, for at first we see only the top of the cutting shears. As the male singer rises from behind the “bush” his identity is revealed to be Chinese. To this visual surprise the final shot adds a question and attributes corporate ownership: “Don’t you just love this country?” Selamat Hari Kebangsaan (Have a Nice National Day) Petronas.” The video was screened to student focus groups and older interviewees.

After watching the narrative marketing of his nation, a middle-aged Chinese male responded to a question about its content: “I don’t know the language. […] I have no idea.” Instead, he offered a thematizing interpretation of the story in visual terms as comment on the Malaysian life-world:

What I see is that it’s about the Malaysian simple life”. Here, “you have time to cut your own bush and sing at the same time. That’s the idea behind the advertisement, lah.

His seeing the event as narrative is coherent, emerging from relating the story’s elements of “cutting” to “singing” in a hermeneutic circle of understanding. But this older viewer’s account is a restricted reading elided by a linguistically limited horizon of understanding, that is, by his culturally acquired fore-conceptions which do not enable recognizing the Tamil language. He acknowledges (regretfully?) his truncated vision: “Maybe (it) has other extra meanings, but I couldn’t get it.”

Phenomenology emphasizes perceiving as a process. A female student Chinese contributor to this National Day marketing consumer reception research tells her focus group that: “I took time over understanding” the story. Taking time in the discussion, this respondent reflexively thematizes the very activity of interpreting narrative, delineating her altering horizon of understanding events.

She indicates that her early projection of the advertisement’s (“first”) meaning was revised given subsequent seeing: “you think it’s an Indian guy singing, then you see a Chinese man”. Her fore-structured understanding of content was not confirmed by the text. With the singer visible on screen and no longer considered to be Indian, aspects of the story require to be reread, reconciled in a hermeneutic circle of “to and fro” understanding, in her re-presenting the whole narrative afresh as consistent: “so I guess it makes sense, lah.” “I took time over understanding it”:

At first, before they showed the visual of the Chinese guy cutting, before he came up, at first I thought it was maybe a hidden guy standing up. So in that way it made sense, in that part, but when he came upright, at first I said ‘is it?’ You know, ‘what is it?’ (intense indecipherable speech and group laughter).
I thought ‘Oh. OK.’ But I think normal, lah […] but not many Chinese can sing (Tamil) so fluently […]. So I guess it makes sense, lah. OK. And I took time over understanding it. (speaker’s own emphasis).

Engrossed in the hermeneutic circle of understanding this initially indeterminate story, our contributor does not engage in its thematic interpretation. But others in her student group “voice out”: it is “not really a surprise because Malaysia is a multi-cultural country” (female, Chinese).

In this political marketing of the nation, the narrative theme becomes the focus for a studied question to the intended audience on the next screen: “Don’t you just love this country?” In this moment for patriotic aligning, viewers may agree or assert their distance. “Actually it’s good because, that guy, I think he’s a Chinese and then he’s singing a Tamil song […] so it’s across the race, the language. It’s good because Malaysia (has) got different races, cultures” (female, Chinese).

As noted, the Petronas “Bush” narrative was shown to older interviewees (institutionally chaperoned mental hospital patients). Creatively aligned and appropriating its prescriptive vision to augment his national and self-identity, perhaps because a Caucasian visitor was taking part in this discussion, the male Chinese contributor from whom we have heard presented an environmentally sound reading of tuneful hedge trimming: “they want to beautify our environment”, thus to “induce (in) us and our youngsters a sense of belonging […] to this nation we love. And we want to live in peace and harmony”. But a female Chinese patient was clearly analytically alienated, and distanced herself ideologically from this prompting to commitment (“Don’t you just love this country?”) “In this country […] everything is for the Bumiputra (Malay) people. Not fair!” (she laughs).

Challenges and conclusions for fore-sighted research
Phenomenology has in recent years been criticized in marketing theory for an allegedly over individualizing focus on consumers, separating interviewees from contexts of cultural or political constraint. In a limited exercise of theory and example, this paper has sought to show otherwise.

Phenomenology focuses on the construction of meaning, showing it to be encompassed by horizons of understanding. Mapping the latter’s economic and social genesis is another’s activity. Phenomenology’s research route is that of exploring fore-structured communication across cultures.

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