



The material-semiotics of fatherhood: The co-emergence of technology and contemporary fatherhood



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ABSTRACT

Using actor–network theory (ANT), this paper examines the role of caring technologies in the complex transition to new fatherhood. The study explores the ambivalent role these objects play in the family setting to co-enable different forms of fathering and masculinity. The paper explores the processes through which these objects, together with emerging fatherhood, enact a material-semiotic struggle over identity, processes, and action. In doing so, the paper derives insights of potential value to marketers, technological innovators, and policy makers alike.

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1. Introduction: contextualizing new fatherhood

The family is *the* most important site of consumption (Commuri & Gentry, 2000). Families house complex bundles of identities at the collective and individual levels, as family members use consumption in pursuit of identity goals (Epp & Price, 2008). Within the family context, the transition to new fatherhood represents a life-changing process. Research is required to understand how consumption supports and enables this period of change in men's lives, and the relationship between this period and consumption. Researchers associate transitional periods with various changes, such as stress and role readjustment (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Verplanken & Wood, 2006), the intensification of consumption activity, and increased sensitivity towards marketing messages (Hadjimarcou, 2012; Mergenhausen, 1995). Therefore, studies that examine transitions in more detail have the potential to make a powerful contribution to the managerial and academic understanding of consumer activities and practices.

Consumer research offers extensive studies of motherhood, including the experiences of empty-nest women (Hogg, Curasi, & Maclaran, 2004), maternal empowerment (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2006; Commuri & Gentry, 2000), provision of childcare (Dinnin Huff & Cotte, 2013), and the transition to motherhood (Banister, Hogg, & Dixon, 2009; Hogg & Banister, 2011). However, issues surrounding fatherhood remain under-researched (VOICE Group, 2009). Men facing fatherhood

encounter a well-documented male identity crisis (Pleck, 1981) with an unprecedented number of pressures (social, economic, historical, and political) as they strive towards meeting “the many conflicting and contradictory demands made of them due to their male sex role” (Gentry & Harrison, 2010, p.77). Commensurately, the relationship between men and fatherhood is less clear than that between women and motherhood (Miller, 2011a).

While recent research highlights the changing nature of fatherhood (Miller, 2011b), the father-as-breadwinner idea is still powerful (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Many men define themselves as a man by their ability to support their family financially (Henwood & Procter, 2003). Men face pressure to conform to orthodox gender norms about economic fatherhood and being a man (Connell, 1987), which potentially inhibits a care-giving and nurturing role in family life (Russell, 1986; Williams, 2008).

Despite the increasing challenge to take more active roles in the upbringing of their children, fathers still expect to have less involvement than mothers (Henwood & Procter, 2003). While government policies try to facilitate the increased involvement of fathers, for example through paternity leave and flexible working policies (Miller, 2011a), fathers often do not take advantage of these opportunities (Featherstone, 2009). Fathers face role conflicts between masculinity and fatherhood, which create confusion about gender identity (Gentry & Harrison, 2010) and feelings of detachment from this woman-centered process (Locock & Alexander, 2006). Consumption can emerge as a way to cope. This paper presents research that examines the contemporary transition to fatherhood and offers an account of the role that consumption of technological artifacts plays in the construction of the father

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identity. The paper uses actor–network theory to present a dynamic account of the co-emergence of fatherhood and technology during this transition. In doing so, this paper offers insights of value to marketers and policy makers alike.

2. Fatherhood and technology

The home is a site of rapidly increasing technologization (Silva, 2010). Turkle (2012) argues that caring technologies, that is, technologies that assist with the mundane caring tasks of the very young, old, or infirm, are one of the fastest growing areas for technological innovation. However, studies of technology and the home focus predominantly on information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Wajcman, 2007), for example their role in managing the boundaries between work and family life (Chesley, 2005; Golden, 2013) and technologies such as smart and green homes (De Silva, Morikawa, & Petra, 2012). Studies of more mundane technologies, as in the extensive literature on household technology (Silva, 2010), focus predominantly on the experiences of female consumers (Cockburn, 1985; Gershuny, 2000), for instance the gendered design and use of the microwave oven and the washing machine (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993).

Consumer research examining the relationship between consumers and technology mainly focuses on the ideologies around technology (Kozinets, 2008; Thompson, 2004) and the underlying discourses surrounding technology (Buchanan-Oliver, Cruz, & Schroeder, 2010). The broader disciplinary context mirrors this notion, examining various aspects of consumer use of ICTs, for example mobile phones (Kalakota & Robinson, 2002; Sullivan Mort & Drennan, 2002), computers (Dickerson & Gentry, 1983), and the Internet (Dickson, 2000).

Consumer research calls for studies that examine the consumer–technology relationship through the lens of identity and gendered issues (Kozinets, 2008). This notion is particularly important in relation to constructions of masculinity, as studies show that masculinity and technology in Western cultures are inextricably linked (Cockburn, 1985; Dempsey, 2012; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Lohan & Faulkner, 2004). This paper offers a greater understanding of the role of consumption in the important life transition into fatherhood and, using actor–network theory, also offers a detailed examination of the consumer–technology relation *vis-à-vis* the role that mundane, caring technological objects play in constructions of masculinity during this period of discontinuous change.

3. Theoretical underpinnings: actor–network theory and ambivalence

In employing actor–network theory, this paper contributes at both the theoretical and empirical levels to consumer research. Studies of the consumer–technology relation in consumer research highlight the ambivalence consumers feel towards technology (Buchanan-Oliver et al., 2010; Kozinets, 2008; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Thompson, 2004), particularly the love–hate relationship often felt towards technology represented by the technophobia/technophilia binary. Research shows that consumers rarely fall neatly into one side or the other of this binary opposition. Consumers tend to experience tensions between both the love and the hatred of the technology in their lives and thus experience an ongoing ambivalent state in their relationships with technological objects. Actor–network theory (ANT) from the science, technology, and society disciplines offers a route to examine the construct of ambivalence in order to offer valuable theoretical insights.

ANT has a long history in sociology, beginning with studies of laboratories (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1980) and extending to research that examines socio-technological networks in a wide variety of contexts (Bajde, 2013; Bijker & Law, 1992). The ontological basis of ANT is that culture is material-semiotic (Haraway, 1991) which implies that researchers should treat all human and non-human participants in an analysis as equal, active participants. Latour (2000, p. 192) argues that

“purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are also not properties of human either. They are properties of collectives of human and non-humans”. Latour argues that a relationship exists between agency and the emergence of the meaning and materiality of objects, bodies, and other entities. Agency is not something that human actors have (and apply) to the material world around them. The material object emerges as an effect of the surrounding relations. That is, meaning and materiality, subject and object, co-emerge and are co-constituted. Meaning and materiality are part of the complex socio-material assemblages of people, things, and ideas (Canniford & Shankar, 2013). ANT seeks to understand how these assemblages become stable or fail to achieve stability (Latour, 2005).

ANT theorists argue that a need exists for research that will add to theories of identity projects by further exploring “the potential of ANT to make sense of the role of technology in the reassembly of how people construct themselves and their actions” (Lagesen, 2012, p. 442). Sociological research (Dant, 1999; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; D. Miller, 2010) reports that objects within the home have an important role to play in identity projects and family relationships because when consumers interact with objects, social relations become embedded and reproduce societal norms, including gender and identity norms. ANT theorists similarly focus on the analysis of objects as a way to unpick complex social milieu. ANT theorists use the idea of material delegation (Akrich & Latour, 1992; Singleton & Mulkay, 1993), that is, the roles, tasks, and relationships delegated in social contexts to material objects, whereby social relationships become fixed and enduring in particular ways.

In consumer research, qualitative analyses tend to privilege human meaning and action (Bajde, 2013; Bettany, 2007). However, ANT has emerged within consumer research fairly recently and uses a material-semiotic approach to provide innovative analyses of consumption contexts. Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013), in their study of long-distance runners, use ANT to examine how heterogeneous communities align their interests and achieve cohesion through resource dependence. Bettany and Kerrane (2011) use ANT to examine how mass-produced chicken coops become important actors in the formation and maintenance of a voluntary simplified lifestyle identity, and Giesler (2012)

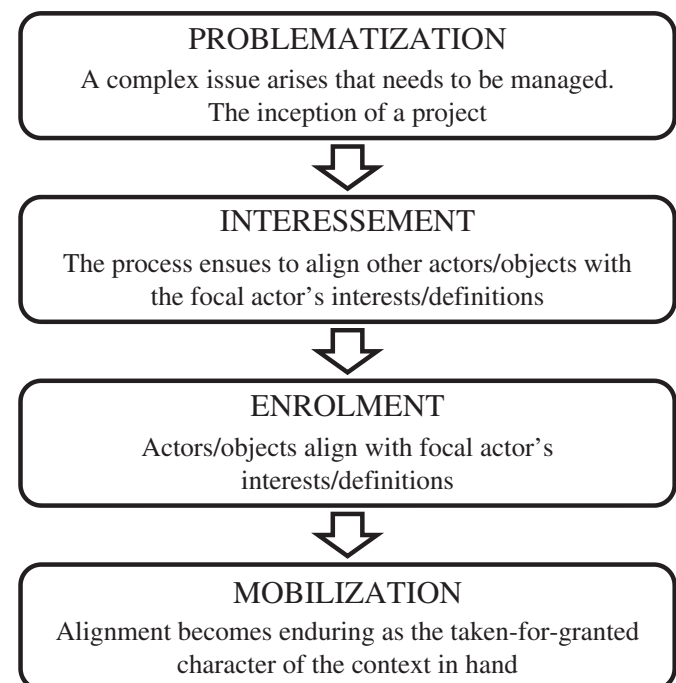


Fig. 1. The classic actor–network theory process model (adapted from Callon, 1986).

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