

The influence of occupational communities on buying behavior

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Abstract

In this paper, we proposed a broader conceptualization of buyer behavior that takes into consideration the role occupational communities and cultures play in the interpretation of industrial marketers' communications and in the formation of opinions about products, suppliers and solutions. From a theoretical point of view, our paper is grounded in the literature on occupational communities – which is an influential research stream within social sciences, organization studies and industrial relations – and in consumer culture theory – which has highlighted the relevance for marketing theory and practice of variously defined communities of consumers. Methodologically, this paper proposes the adoption of interpretive methods that require researcher field-work and socialization into the occupational community to be investigated. On the managerial side, we show that key marketing decisions, including segmentation, positioning and targeting, may be improved when adopting an occupational community theoretical perspective.

Keywords: occupational communities, buyer behavior, the buying center, interpretive methods

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Networks and relationships are central constructs within the IMP research tradition. However, most IMP studies investigate networks and relationships *among organizations*. In this paper, we focus on different kinds of networks and relationships: those that occur *among individuals* who share the same occupational culture. In other words, we complement current IMP scholarship by adopting a different unit of analysis, that is, workers instead of organizations. Our approach is theoretically sustained by scholarship on occupational communities, which has gained significant ground in sociology, organization studies and industrial relations. Within an occupational community shared worldviews are co-constructed through mutual engagement in common activities (Wenger, 1998). A common culture thus arises and influences individual and collective behaviors. Scholars in the IMP research tradition have studied for a long time culture and its impacts on relationships and networks among firms. While such scholarship contributes to our understanding of the pervasive role of cultural phenomena in industrial markets, previous literature lacks a deep investigation of the *occupational cultures* of the individuals who work in the context of industrial marketing and purchasing. In this paper we argue that occupational cultures interact with national and organizational cultures in influencing a series of outcomes of interest for the IMP research community, including relationship building and networking.

In “mainstream” marketing and in the study of consumers, the concept of community is enjoying greater prominence. Starting from the 1980s, scholars have highlighted the fact that consumer goods and brands are employed by variously defined aggregation of consumers as identity repositories and as markers of belonging to a given community. Brands themselves may form the basis for the establishment of communities: Harley Davidson and Apple are among the most prominent examples of this phenomenon. Could the same hold true among industrial buyers and users? In this paper, we suggest that the answer is likely to be positive. Despite the fact that, in postmodern societies, consumption is an increasingly relevant locus of identity formation, work has always been one a central aspect of people’s life and an important source of meaning – a fact at the core of early sociological thought from Marx onwards. Human beings have a social nature. They form social bonds with whatever material and symbolic resources are available, while they work and while they consume. Firms operating in industrial markets are thus likely to benefit from acknowledging and sustaining communities of workers, as companies operating in consumer markets have learned to do.

The goal of this paper is to show that communities of workers and their cultures are relevant phenomena for the theory and practice of business-to-business marketing. With this intention in mind, in the sections that follow we track the development of the concept of community in social sciences, from early thinkers to the more relevant literature on occupational communities. Afterwards, we highlight the increasing diffusion of communitarian thinking in “mainstream” marketing and consumer behavior, where consumer culture theorists are illuminating the relevance for marketers of variously termed social aggregations of consumers such as brand communities, subcultures of consumption and consumer tribes. We go on by noting the dearth of

research on this topic in business-to-business marketing scholarship and by proposing some of the implications of the literature on occupational communities and communities of consumers for business-to-business marketers. To strengthen our claims, we also report original empirical data from previous studies developed by the present authors (Borghini, Golfetto and Rinallo, 2006; Rinallo and Golfetto, 2006). After a short account on the methods most suited to study occupational communities, we conclude by highlighting the contributions of the paper and directions for future research.

At the origin of the concept of community

Community is polysemic concept that has been at the center of several theoretical perspectives in sociology, anthropology and political science starting from the end of the XIX century (Fistetti, 2003; Vitale, 2007), when observers started commenting – arguably with a certain nostalgia towards the past – on the changes brought forth by the emergence of Nation-States and capitalistic modes of production (Tilman, 2004). The first organic treatment of the concept was Ferdinand Tönnies' ([1887] 1957) distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*). According to the German sociologist, in societies – exemplified by the city or the State – relationships among individuals are cold and governed by instrumentality. Relationships in communities – exemplified by the rural village crowded out by modernization processes – are instead close-knit, intense and intimate, thus providing individuals with a clear sense of identity. Tönnies identifies different typologies of communities, such as the family, based on kinship, and rural neighborhoods, based on communality of place. A third kind of community is based on friendship and “spiritual” links among individuals; unlike families and neighborhoods, these communities are not intrinsically necessary as they are founded on free choice and common knowledge and activities. Examples of these elective communities are those based on a religion or, more interestingly for the purpose of the present paper, crafts (such as the medieval corporations).

Tönnies can thus be thought as one of the early thinkers on occupational communities, which in his view are based on the common knowledge collectively developed, exchanged and employed in the conduct of work. The dichotomy between community and society was subsequently re-examined by Max Weber in his *Economy and Society* ([1922] 1968). For Weber, a social relation can be thought of as community if the individuals participating to it share a subjectively felt common belonging, as in the case of traditional or affective relations. Conversely, social relations constitute society when they are based upon a rationally motivated common interest, both in the case of material advantages or ideal values. In his attempt to explain social cohesion, Weber highlighted the fact that with the dissolution of the traditional natural community new forms of communities emerged. Among these “new” communities, Weber highlighted the professional community exemplified – again – by medieval corporations, where craftsmen shared work, tools and the physical space of the workshop. In Weber's thought, then, in capitalistic societies work can produce social relationships characterized by community, where the heart and the mind, so to speak, can co-exist to different degrees.

Community studies in the first half of the XX century employed the concept of community to refer to different forms of geographically bounded social aggregations, including small American urban communities, ethnic neighborhood in large American cities, European rural communities. Studies in this perspective tended to conceive these geographical communities as homogeneous and autonomous units threatened by the changes put forth by Fordism (Vitale, 2007). Theoretical understanding of community in this phase was influenced not only by early sociological work, but also by anthropological studies on the desegregating ethnic groups in “underdeveloped” societies; unsurprisingly, many empirical studies were based on the same methods favored by anthropologists, that is, extensive field studies by researchers. Starting from the 1960s, however, scholars have expressed dissatisfaction towards the use of the concept of community to refer to such heterogeneous phenomena (Stacey, 1969; Bell and Newby, 1971; Hillery, 1968).

Conceptualization of community were also influenced in this phase, particularly in United States, by social conflict as movements of women, homosexuals, Afro-Americans, students and workers reclaimed for themselves the appellation of community, to refer to the social construction of solidarity ties and a collective identity of a different nature from those identified by theorists of community of the period. In later years, geographically bound social aggregation started being qualified as *local* communities (e.g., Long, 1958; Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974), paving the way for theoretical discussion of elective forms of community based on other factors (i.e., ethnic origin, religion, identity and – more importantly for the purpose of the present review – occupation). In anthropology, Cohen (1985) explored community as a cultural phenomenon: “[p]eople construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (p. 118). Significantly, in this conceptualization, boundaries are actively enacted, as they exist “in the minds of the beholder” (p. 12), rather than in some external structure. This newly acquired independence from the requirement of a physical place made the concept suitable to be applied to virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993) and the other social aggregations originated with the Internet revolution. These developments, as we will see, influenced both scholarship on occupation communities and the use of the concept in “mainstream” marketing and consumer behavior literature.

Communities of workers

The concept of community has influenced theoretical understanding of the relationships individuals develop in workplace environments in sociology, organization studies and industrial relations scholarship. Community has been proposed as a metaphor of desirable values and behaviors in a variety of working and learning contexts, including the promotion of communities of practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002), the building of learning organizations (Senge, 1990) and the design of management education (Reynolds, 2000). In this section, however, we focus on research on occupational communities, which is one of the longest-standing frameworks for understanding relationships among co-workers. The origin of this scholarship dates back to Lipset, Trow and Coleman’s (1956) study of printer unions. Originally situated in a structural functionalist paradigm, this literature has undergone in more recent years

an “interpretive turn” (Marschall, 2004) that shares some similarities to what happened in consumer research.

In Lipset, Trow and Coleman’s (1956) seminal study, the concept of occupational community refers to the inclination of typography workers to interact among themselves outside the workplace, typically in the context of social clubs where they could form social bonds and engage in activities that fostered group solidarity. In the years that followed, other scholars identified occupational communities in different empirical contexts including miners (Schwieder, 1983), loggers (Carroll and Lee, 1990), shipbuilders (Brown and Brennan 1970; Roberts 1993), construction workers (Applebaum 1999), physicians (Freidson 1970), architects (Salaman, 1974), police officers (Manning 1977; Manning and Van Maanen, 1978), entertainment industry workers (Bryant, 1972). Marschall (2004) points out that these studies share a positivistic methodological approach, based on the observation from the part of a researchers of a set of variously identified attributes or traits from which it can be inferred whether or not the group of workers investigated constitute an occupational community (Trice, 1993). For example, for Goode (1975) and Applebaum (1999), the eight characteristics of occupational communities are: sense of group identity, lifelong commitment, common values, common definition, common language, community power, social boundaries and control over recruitment.

At times, this epistemological approach put researchers – armed with their data and superior expertise – in the position to deny community status to groups of workers claiming it. For example, Goode (1957) proposed that unlike physicians, engineers are not an occupational community as they cannot exert a great deal of control over the conduct of their work. This approach to the study of occupational communities was criticized by Van Maanen and Barley (1984). According to these scholars, in previous studies researchers tended to adopt the point of views of subjects other than the workers themselves, such as employers or managers. The alternative paradigm proposed by Van Maanen and Barley (1984) is to adopt an insider viewpoint and to focus on the cultural meaning(s) attached to work by individuals in the context of social relationships socially constructed with others sharing similar work experiences. Boundaries cannot thus be defined by external observers, but only by members of the community themselves. In their definition, an occupation community is:

“a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; who identify (more or less positively) with their work; who share a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond, work related matters; and whose social relationships meld the realms of work and leisure” (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 295).

In the context of the present paper, some characteristics of occupational communities according to this conceptualization are worth being highlighted. The work culture of occupational communities reproduces itself through rituals, success stories, criteria to evaluate the quality of work, logics and symbols that reinforce the sense of a distinct identity. Members thus develop a specialized knowledge and language, for example adopting a jargon full of technicalities not easily understandable to outsiders. Idiosyncratic patterns of work-related and non work-related consumptions may also be detected, for example dress codes to signal identity or preferences for brands of cars.

The discourse of the community also constructs a set of subject positions (e.g., client, competitor, apprentice) and role expectations, based on interactions among members among themselves and with interdependent outsiders – within and outside the employer organization. As occupational communities span across organizations, members owe dual allegiances to their employer and their community – a situation that can create role conflicts when organizational culture is at odd with the occupational culture. Van Maanen and Barley (1984) suggest that often members of occupational communities identify with a “culture of achievement” – based on acquiring greater expertise in order to improve their reputation within the community – rather than a “culture of advancement” – aimed at moving up in the organizational hierarchy. This point is vividly expressed by Orr (1996) in his ethnography of Xerox copying machine maintenance technicians:

“[The technicians] are focused on the work, not the organization, and the only valued status is that of full member of the community, that is, being considered a competent technician. In pursuit of this goal, they share information, assist in each other’s diagnoses, and compete in terms of their relative expertise. Promotion out of the community is thought not to be worthwhile. The occupational community shares few cultural values with the corporation; technicians from all over the country are much more alike than a technician and a salesperson from the same district” (Orr, 1996: 76).

Another key feature of occupational communities is their tendency towards occupational self-control (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Lawrence, 1998), that is, independence from control of others, particularly the employer organization. Not all occupations are in the position to defend their autonomy in the conduct of work (e.g., Zabusky, 1997). As sociologists of professions have highlighted, however, some expert occupations have been quite successful in claiming “control of [their] work in the workplace, before the public, and within the state” (Abbott, 2001). While early theoretical accounts of occupational community stressed group solidarity and communitarian values, more recent accounts have also highlighted the presence of what may be termed, following Bourdieu’s (1989) ideas on different forms of capitals, symbolic competition within the community. At stake is reputation that is a scarce and unequally distributed resource within the community (Lawrence, 1998). Rinallo (2005), on the basis of a review of research regarding occupations as varied as journalists, doctors, arts and literary critics and security analysts, suggests that occupations are socially stratified in terms of members’ reputation. A visual metaphor would be that of a pyramid, with a few influential top members, knew at least by name by most members of the community, whose opinions tend to disproportionately influence others. A situation that most members of academic communities would find hardly unfamiliar.

Communities of consumers

In business-to-consumer marketing, consumer culture theorists (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) have long highlighted the social dimension of consumption and the existence of relevant aggregations of consumers variously labeled consumer tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007), subcultures of consumption (Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001), brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and

interpretive communities (Kates, 2001). The relevance of communitarian elements in consumption is such that for some scholars brands are more valued for their ability to link together consumers rather than for their functional value (Cova and Cova, 2002). According to this emergent paradigmatic perspective, consumers' practices and related meanings should be interpreted through the lens of shared and communal experiences around products and services, brands, physical places and other types of consumption activities and material culture. Scholars in this perspective thus tried to unpack the structures and dynamics of consumer communities within the marketplace. Besides the common roots, however, significant differences exist among these different conceptualizations.

In sociological thinking, a subculture is an identifiable group within a larger society, distinguishable in shape and structure to its parent culture, focused around certain attributes, values and material artifacts and with its own territorial spaces (Hebdige, 1979). The creation of a subculture arises when a group wishes to break away from the dominant culture. Translated to the marketplace dimension, a subculture can create, maintain or transform its situated identity through its consumption activities. Considering the main role played by consumption in this process of identity creation, the construct of subculture of consumption has become a central tenet within consumer research. A *subculture of consumption* can be defined as “a distinctive group of society that self-selects based on a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Within each subculture of consumption, specific products or brands can thus become powerful ideologies of consumption (Hebdige 1979, Schouten and Alexander 1995). Several characteristics can identify a subculture: an identifiable group within the wider culture, a hierarchical social culture, a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Different features of subcultures of consumption have been investigated by consumer researchers, including their structure (Schouten and McAlexander 1995); their shared cognitive rules related to consumption (Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen, 1996); consumers' processes of acculturation within the subculture (Celsi et al., 1993). Concerning their structure, for instance, subcultures of consumption tend to display complex, hierarchical, ethos-driven social structures (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), which reflect status differences among individual members. In-group status can depend on the level of commitment of an individual to the group's ideology of consumption. Across-group status is a function of judgments, made by other group, of the authenticity of an individual as representative of the subculture. The most committed members of a subculture act as arbiters of meanings and opinion leaders. Less committed members can play the role of supporters and adulators of core members. Neophytes and aspirants are typically more numerous than core members, and thus represent the most relevant target group for marketers. The subculture's ethos – that is, a set of shared and strong values – finds a tangible expression in specific products and the way they are used. Products and the process of enthusiastic communal consumption can thus become a way of socialization among consumers that allows the transformation of related meanings and the cultivation of commitment to certain brands.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001:412) have coined the term *brand community* to define "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression. Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy." In their conception, Muniz and O'Guin (2001) consider brand communities as explicitly commercial, liberated from geography and informed by a mass-mediated sensibility. Brand communities can be thought as an extreme case of subcultures that center on specific brands. Clearly, not all brands lend themselves to the constitution of brand communities, even though many brands could develop special meanings for specific subcultures.

The idea of *consumer tribes* was introduced by Cova and Cova (2002) on the basis of the work of Maffesoli (1996) on postmodern tribes. According to the French sociologists, individualism has not triumphed in our increasingly fragmented societies. On the contrary, new forms of ephemeral and elective social aggregations have emerged as individuals strive to create new social bonds that may be more meaningful for the individuals partaking to them than traditional social structure. According to Cova and Cova (2002), despite the fact that members of consumer tribes are unbound to physical co-presence, they exhibit "a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism" (p. 300). Similarly to brand communities and subcultures of consumption, these neo-tribes are held together by consumption practices.

A different construct of community found in consumer behavior is the interpretive community. The concept stems from literary criticism and refers to the communitarian aspects of reader response to cultural texts. According to this perspective, the way a text is interpreted is based on broad cultural assumptions that reflect readers' experiences within one or more communities (Fish, 1980). When referred to consumers, the concept of interpretive communities is employed to refer to the fact that members of various audiences have significant connections to their social locations and positions and use a broadly similar repertoire of interpretive strategies, and these similarities result in similar interpretations of brands (Kates, 2001). In other words, the concept of interpretive communities specifically refers to socio-cultural responses to marketing communications practices, rather than the use of brands to create links among consumers.

To conclude, it must be noted that over the last decades the role and pervasiveness of communities of consumers has increased through the diffusion of virtual communities. The web and its technologies have allowed consumers to interact and build their situated identities around consumption activities or certain brands overcoming any physical or geographical barrier. The rapid growth of these multiple forms of communication and sharing among consumers has speeded up interactions and increased the level of customer empowerment, allowing several forms of reactions to company decisions (e.g., Cova and Pace, 2006; Muniz and Shau, 2005). New virtual environments such as those enabled by Second Life and similar companies only add to

the possibility consumers have to interact among themselves and with marketers in contexts removed from the physical realm.

Taken together, the scholarship reviewed in this section rejects the notion that consumers are individualistic in their consumption choices. The point here is not that consumption is at the center of consumers' life. However, consumption activities facilitate meaningful social relationships among consumers (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007) and can thus support the creation of communities. We have also suggested that work, too, can create powerful communal bonds. We propose that time has come for business-to-business marketing researchers to investigate occupational cultures and their impact on the purchasing and use of industrial goods and services.

Exploring the role of occupational communities in b2b marketing

Consumer culture and occupational theorists have illuminated how communities are produced and reproduced in the context of both work- and consumption-related activities. From the outside, one would imagine such scholarship to have impacted business-to-business marketing scholarship. This is however far from true – a notable exception being a study of web-based communities of professionals (Houman Anderson, 2005). In this section, we propose that similarly to what happened in “mainstream” marketing, business-to-business marketing scholarship may benefit from giving the concept of community a more prominent role. Cultural studies of occupations can contribute to shed light on how particular occupational cultures are constituted, sustained, transformed by broader socio-historical forces and specific marketplace systems. The presence of occupational cultures is pervasive in organizations and may influence issue of interest to industrial marketers such as, say, cooperation between the sales and marketing functions, the effective provision of post-sales service by technical staff, and new product development activities. While these would be promising directions for research in business-to-business marketing, in this paper we focus on the role occupational cultures and communities play in the *purchasing* of industrial goods by customer organization. More precisely, we explore two areas of immediate managerial interest: (i) the co-presence and possible conflicts among the different occupational cultures of members of the buying center; (ii) the relevance of opinion leadership phenomena within occupational communities.

While influenced by literature on occupational and consumer communities, the concepts and ideas proposed in the following subsections do not descend immediately upon these streams of research, and are proposed in this paper as an original contribution. To strengthen our claims, we also present empirical material coming from two studies of trade shows as inter-organizational rituals that provide members of the buying center with the opportunity to interact, form community bonds and make sense of the world (Borghini, Golfetto and Rinallo, 2006; Rinallo and Golfetto, 2006); nevertheless, only original (i.e., not previously published) empirical data are reported in this paper. These studies employed ethnographic methods (e.g., Arnould and Thompson, 1994) in the context of eleven European trade shows dedicated to different phases of the textile-apparel (yarns, fabrics, textile technology; accessories, apparel) and wood–furniture (semifinished products and accessories; wood-working technology; furniture) industries. The research team – composed of the three authors and three

research assistants – conducted extensive participant observation of each of the trade shows in the sample in the period 2002-2006, visiting some of these events for several consecutive editions. Field activities included non-invasive observation of visitor and exhibitor behavior at the trade shows, casual interaction with informants and structured interviews both during and after the trade shows. The fieldwork resulted in more than 80 researcher-days of field-experience, over 180 interviews of various length with visitors and exhibitors, more than 20 hours of video shooting and several hundred pictures. This work gave rise to more than 800 pages of field notes and interview transcriptions. However, in the context of the present paper we do not report the full interpretations of our ethnographic dataset, which can be found elsewhere (Borghini, Golfetto and Rinaldo, 2006; Rinaldo and Golfetto, 2006). On the contrary, we report selectively verbatim transcription for illustrative purposes. We acknowledge that such a strategy is unconventional in the context of business-to-business studies. However, precedents of our approach can be found in organization studies (e.g., in one of the seminal studies on communities of practice, Brown & Duguid, 1991) and in consumer culture theory (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Moreover, while we do not lay claim to a ‘grounded theory’ status for our propositions, we do believe that the inclusion of resonant empirical material based on the real life experiences of industrial buyers would help clarifying our points.

The buying center seen from an occupational community perspective

Early studies on industrial buying behavior highlighted the fact that industrial purchasing decisions are influenced by several organizational members, referred to as the buying center. This research stream employed quantitative methods to illuminate the center’s composition and the relative degree of influence of certain positions or departments across product and decision types (e.g. Johnston and Bonoma, 1981; Jackson, Keith and Burdick, 1984; Lilien and Wong, 1984; Kohli, 1989). More recent research has focused on improved methods for measuring preferences and influences of members of the buying center (e.g., Brinkmann and Voeth, forthcoming). While these studies are of unquestionable value for industrial marketing and communication activities, we contend that current research has not so far highlighted the fact that members of the buying center belong to different occupational communities with distinct (even though inter-related) work-related cultural identities.

Put differently, we propose that by investigating members of the buying center as holders of different culturally constituted identities would improve our understanding of how they make sense of industrial marketers’ activities and formulate critical responses to them. Similarly to consumers (Mick and Buhl 1992; McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 1999; Scott 1994), members of the buying center are conceivable as interpretive agents who process marketing stimuli for meaning as well as for information. Meanings, we argue, emerge in the context of the interaction between marketing communications and the bodies of knowledge shared by recipients (Eco, 1972; Scott, 1994), which is strongly influenced by their occupational culture. Occupational community literature has not explored buying behavior, being more focused on work and thus on the use of industrial products only after they are purchased by a customer organizations. We argue that business-to-business marketing scholars are in a better

position to investigate occupational communities' heterogeneous interpretive strategies of industrial brands and marketers' activities.

Each occupational community can have different "ethos" and commitment towards a specific brand, technology or supplier. Where a community considers itself devoted to a product class or to a brand, another can feel a cultural distance or adopt a different approach during a decision process. In evaluating those products or brands, each occupational culture tends to apply its own heuristics based on established and shared mental models and tacit skills and competencies developed over the years. When evaluating a product or interpreting suppliers' communication an individual member of a certain community will thus use a limited range of interpretations, bounded within the confines of the ideological structure constructed by the community (Kates, 2001). Practically, these interpretive strategies prescribe beliefs, actions, and reactions which show a high level of regularities that can be easily mapped through the identification of common mental models and heuristics. These similarities within communities and discrepancies across communities do not only depend on the evidence that different members of buying centers can have different objectives and decision criteria; it is the co-existence of intrinsic and specific sets of values and practices developed around the different functional or professional roles that leads to such complexity. Take for example the following verbatim:

"When salesmen arrive, sometimes they highlight features and benefits that are irrelevant to me. Take for example the color range: last time a salesman spent 10 minutes showing me the color range. It's not what I want to know. Well, perhaps designers want to know about colors, but I don't really care. I want to know when it will be delivered, how reliable deliveries are, what the discount for a big order is... Please, don't tell me about the colors..." (Buyer, furniture maker)

According to this informant, color range is not useful information. He refers to his occupation-specific cultural codes to criticize as irrelevant some of the information salesmen tend to provide him with, noting at the same time the dearth of information that he should be interested in. However, he acknowledges that some other members of the buying center (that is, product designers) would be interested in colors. Underlying these judgments, it is easy to see occupational cultural codes in action. Designers, who are "so creative", would love to learn about trendy colors. Buyers, more practical, are interested in "hard fact": prices, discounts, delivery times, and other practical aspects. What we see here is the reproduction of the symbolic boundaries between two occupations through the deployment of specific preferences for information in the evaluation of purchase alternatives. Is our informant's interpretation idiosyncratic? In our view, it is not. While we are not claiming any kind of statistical significance, we believe that another buyer from another company would probably react in the same way when facing supplier information regarding color range.

As cultural conflicts often emerge among different occupations involved in the same task (Bechky, 2003), the adoption of an occupational community perspective could shed light on the conflicts that frequently occur among the different positions and departments involved in purchasing processes (Anderson and Chambers, 1985; Barclay, 1991). The existence of cultural differences among occupational communities is necessary in order to legitimate each community. As "bounded work cultures" (Van

Maanen and Barley, 1984: 303), occupational cultures constitute their own interpretive strategies and use a shared repertoire of interpretation routines, and meaning construction patterns. They define their own rules to assess members' actions, including those pertaining to organizational buying behavior. Misunderstanding and tensions between, say, an industrial buyer and a product designer belonging to the same company may thus be linked to differences in language, conceptualization of the buying process and the culturally defined criteria to evaluate relationships with suppliers or the relevance of different criteria to evaluate product performance. In our fieldwork, we have identified several times these discrepancies among members of different occupations belonging to the same organization.

From a managerial point of view, underestimating or neglecting cultural differences among occupational communities could reduce the effectiveness of communication strategies. To make a well-known example, the so-called software wars among advocates of operating systems (i.e., Windows vs. Apple) or browsers (i.e., Netscape vs. Explorer), although often discussed by consumer culture theorists (Belk & Tumbat, 2005), started being fought within organizations by members of different occupational communities (e.g., software engineers with a technical background vs. the more aesthetics-prone graphic designers). In-depth knowledge of occupational cultural differences would thus prove invaluable to help marketers to sustain industrial brands and design effective communication activities. To make these claims more concrete, consider the case of *TechnoFashion Ltd*, an industrial marketer we met during our ethnographic fieldwork (Authors, 2006).

“Our machines are based on a new technology, and nobody knows anything about it. So, when we approach a new customer, we need to speak to different people, and to each of them we say different things. To engineers, we speak of technical details that nobody else is able to understand, we show them the machines in function, and – believe it or not – they may even get aroused! When we speak to fashion designers, we don't even show them the machines, it would be pointless. We show them beautiful fabrics, we speak of aesthetics. Eventually, engineers and designers will both recommend the purchase of our machine to their boss, and there, we'll have to speak of returns on investments, of prices, of discounts... To sell our machines, we must be polyglots!” (Marketing manager, textile machinery firm)

According to this marketing manager, each of the occupations mentioned has very distinct ways of seeing the worlds, to the extent that what would “arouse” an engineer would leave a product designer or an entrepreneur completely cold. The metaphor employed by this manager to make sense of the difficulties inherent in communicating effectively with different occupations within the same customer company is that of *polyglot marketer*, that is, a marketer able to speak different languages and able to adapt the information it is conveying to communicate appropriately to the different occupational communities within the same customer organization. A polyglot marketer should thus own *communicative competence*. The term was originally proposed by scholars at the intersection between anthropology and linguistics in what is now called the ethnography of communication approach (e.g., Hymes, 1971). Communicative competence includes the ability to use the communicative codes most appropriate for a different context. In marketing, communicative competence would refer to the ability of salespersons and other

members of the supplier organization to ‘change code’ and employ different occupational languages fluently in order to be perceived as insiders by members of different occupational communities. Polyglot marketers should thus be able to accommodate, reinforce, and create different cultural meanings among different occupational communities, by leveraging appropriately marketing communication activities. The challenge for industrial marketers is to find a system of meanings that would lead to easily predictable interpretive responses within each occupational community, in order to effectively persuade. The fact that these communities are not geographically distant, but co-exist and interact within the same organization only adds to the complexity of this endeavor.

This view of occupational communities as communities of interpretation has clear implications for two fundamental marketing communications decisions: targeting and positioning. Knowledge on the functioning of occupational communities provides a theoretical basis for finer-grained industrial market targeting and paves the way for the development of segmentation methods that take into account differences in responses to product offerings *within* members of the buying center in the same customer organization and the similarities in responses *across* customer organizations but within members of the same occupational community. The presence of multiple occupational communities within the buying center also challenges the assumption proposed by most marketing communications handbooks that brand positioning must be univocal, i.e. it must consist of a constant, simple and clear message about a key feature, benefit or image that encapsulates a brand meaning and distinguishes it from competitors (e.g., Shimp, 2007). In industrial markets, companies like Techno Textile thrive by infusing their products with shifting meanings that, although not univocal, resonate with buyers and influencers from different occupational backgrounds.

Opinion leadership phenomena across organizations but within occupation

Literature on the information sources employed by industrial buyers has already prominently featured the relevance of informal sources of information, words-of-mouth referral behavior and opinion leadership phenomena (Webster, 1970; Moriarty and Spekman, 1984; Money, Gilly and Graham, 1998; Schiffman and Guccione, 1974). We contend however that previous studies have not highlighted the fact that these flows of communication occur within members of the same occupational community across organizations. In surveys, when a member of an industrial buyer suggests that he was influenced by a friend or colleague, what does this mean? Take for example the verbatim that follows, again taken from our field-work.

“The web, advertising, trade shows... They are not worth much. Even salesmen are not useful to evaluate new suppliers: they only tell a part of the story. When I need reliable information regarding new suppliers, I just call my colleagues working for other companies, and ask them if the supplier’s goods are high quality, if they respect deadlines, etc. Yes, I know, we work for competing companies, but we all know each other and do the same job...” (Buyer of an apparel firm)

In part, these data are hardly surprising. From a social psychological perspective (e.g., Kellman, 1961), the most credible and persuasive sources of information are those ranking high on both expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953;

Hass, 1981; McGuire, 1969; Sternthal, Philips and Dholakia, 1978). Trustworthiness refers to the honesty of the source (McGinnies and Ward, 1980), that is to the perception by the audience that the source consider valid his/her own assertions (Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953). Expertise refer instead to the extent to which a source is perceived to be capable of making correct assertions (Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953), that is, to know the correct stand on the issue (McGuire, 1969). Unlike salespersons or other marketing communication sources, whose messages can perceived as partial and self-interested, fellow members of the same occupation can usually be counted on for providing neutral and unbiased information on a given supplier or product alternative. Members of the same occupational community exchange information among themselves on how to solve problems (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 1991) – including buying problems.

The implications for industrial marketers are thus clear: by identifying opinion leaders, marketing communications effectiveness would be amplified. In this sense, industrial markets are not radically different from consumer goods markets. However, opinion leaders are notoriously difficult and costly to identify (e.g., Mancuso, 1969), and the increasingly sophisticated methods reported in the marketing literature (Reingen and Kernan, 1986) often remain an academic exercise, unsuitable for the practicing marketer. In this sense, the adoption of an occupational community perspective to this problem is from a certain point of view of little utility: even after knowing that referral behavior occurs within the boundaries of occupational communities, marketers would require the same costly and hard to implement referral network analyses.

However, one key feature of occupational communities may be employed to implement easy and cost-effective methods to manage multi-step flows of communications. Occupational communities are socially stratified in terms of their members' reputation for expertise (Maanen and Barley, 1984; Orr, 1996; Lawrence, 1998; Rinallo, 2005). In most contexts, a few highly reputed members will be considered as the experts in a certain knowledge domain. Even neophytes within the occupation would be aware of the identity of these members, as their success stories would be discovered in the course of the socialization into the occupation. Besides being well-known, these members are disproportionately more influential than their peers, as shown by a variety of empirical studies in settings where availability of data permits the quantification of such influence.

For example, empirical research on security analysts suggests that high ranking analysts significantly influence the recommendations of lower status counterparts (Rao et al., 2001). Similarly, Leonard-Barton (1985) found that expert members of a profession influence the rate and extent of acceptance of controversial technological innovations. The empirical context where such patterns of influence have been more thoroughly studied is the medical profession, where recent research identified the presence, for every medical specialty or clinical problem, of a limited number of “expert opinion leaders” whose advice is sought by more numerous and less easy to identify “peer opinion leaders” (Locock et al., 2001; Collins, Hawks and Davies, 2000). Taken together, this evidence suggests that, similarly to what happens within subcultures of consumption (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), also occupational communities are characterized by hierarchical social structures. “Top” members are both easy to

identify without the need to rely on expensive and hard-to-administer procedure and highly influential within the community. A lucky circumstance that industrial marketers should exploit.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a broader conceptualization of buyer behavior that takes into consideration the role occupational communities and cultures play in the interpretation of industrial marketers' communications and in the formation of opinions about products, suppliers and solutions. From a theoretical point of view, our paper is grounded in the literature on occupational communities – which is an influential research stream within social sciences, organization studies and industrial relations – and in consumer culture theory – which has highlighted the relevance for marketing theory and practice of variously defined communities of consumers. On the managerial side, we showed that key marketing decisions, including segmentation, positioning and targeting, may be improved when adopting an occupational community theoretical perspective. We conclude by highlighting theoretical contributions and methodological implications.

Theoretical contributions

Our paper contributes to theory on industrial buying behavior by proposing a broader conceptualization of the system of social influences that affects selection and evaluation of new products, suppliers and solutions. Current research has already illuminated those of intra-organizational nature, deriving from the different members of the buying center at different levels of the organizational hierarchy. Among the inter-organizational influences, extant research has also shed light on the vertical relationships between marketers and purchasers. In this paper, we add complexity to the picture by putting in the limelight *inter-organizational horizontal relationships* among members of the same occupational community. We thus paved the way for a deeper understanding of buyer center dynamics and conflict and, more in general, for the comprehension of the role played by occupational cultures and communities in many areas of interest for marketers, including for example the relationships between the sales and the marketing functions, post-sales service by technical staff, and interaction among members of different occupations in the context of new product development activities. In this paper, we can only hint at the pervasive effect of occupational cultures in so different areas of organizational life. There is much to be discovered left to future research.

Our paper also contributes to IMP literature, which has long studied culture and its impacts on relationships and networks. As globalization increases, many studies have focused on relationships among companies from different countries (e.g., Browne, Freeman and Vaaland; 2002; Fletcher, 2003; Kriz and Fang, 2000; Naudé et al., 2005; Wilson and Brennan, 2001), often building on Geert Hofstede's (1980) model of national cultures. Other studies have analyzed organizational culture as a determinant of the willingness to build relationships in business-to-business settings (e.g., Gemünden, Ryssel and Ritter, 2000). Another stream of literature has instead investigated intra-organizational differences between functional cultures (i.e., marketing vs. sales, or

marketing vs. production), mainly as possible obstacles to marketing initiatives (e.g., Massey and Dawes, 2001) or as factors that can have an impact on networking (e.g., Naude et al., 2004). However, IMP scholarship has so far neglected occupational cultures and communities. A partial explanation for this dearth of research may be found in the fact that ideas of inutility of “mainstream” marketing to make sense of industrial marketing and purchasing has been reproduced over the years as one of the symbolic markers of the IMP research community (Cova and Salle, 2003; 2006; forthcoming). As a consequence, IMP scholarship has evolved separately, without being exposed to more recent developments that, as we suggest in the previous section, feature prominently ideas of community as viable explanations of consumer behavior. In this paper, we show that relationships and networks, as they are normally understood, can be considered just the tip of the iceberg. We use this expression as a tribute to a well-known paper on inter-organizational collaboration:

“When the first author presented the chief executive officer (CEO) of Centocor with a list of his firm's formal agreements, he observed that it was “the tip of the iceberg - it excludes dozens of handshake deals and informal collaborations, as well as probably hundreds of collaborations by our company's scientists with colleagues elsewhere.” Beneath most formal ties, then, lies a sea of informal relations” (Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr, 1996: p. 117).

Similarly to what happens in the empirical context studied by Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr (1996), we argue that “a sea of informal relations” and networks is the norm for individual working in organizations, no matter what their occupation is. Also industrial buyers, technicians, engineers, product designers have their informal networks within occupational communities that span across different organizations. By including this micro level of analysis, our understanding of networks and relationships can also improve.

Methodological implications

In this paper, we have argued that the study of occupational communities is a worthy endeavor for business-to-business marketing scholarship. Our claim would not be complete without a discussion of the most appropriate methods to study such communities and their cultures. In our view, studies of occupational communities in industrial marketing and purchasing cannot be but interpretive. As previously anticipated, literature on occupational communities underwent in the 1980s an “interpretive turn”. Van Maanen and Barley (1984: 348) criticized previous positivistic studies of occupational communities, based on the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships between independent and dependent variables, and proposed interpretive methods as the most viable alternative: “[a] fruitful and ongoing research task, then, is to add to the ethnographic record of occupational communities, particularly those that appear to be located in organizational contexts”. Before applying their theoretical lenses to the community investigated, researchers require prolonged periods of participant observation and intense interaction, aimed to see the world through their informants’ eyes. Recent studies of occupational communities (e.g., Orr, 1996; Barley and Bechky, 1994; Bechky, 2003; Bonazzi, 1998; Darr, 2002; Henning, 1998) employ ethnographic research designs or, less frequently, long interviews (Lawrence, 1998). Through these

methods, researchers become able to situate an occupation in the historical, social and institutional context in which it emerges and matures (Marschall, 2004).

A similar turn towards interpretive methods occurred also in the study of communities of consumers. In the 1980s, the discipline of consumer behavior was dominated by cognitive and social psychological perspectives, which favored experimental research designed and tended to consider any kind of “qualitative” research as preliminary phase before more robust “quantitative” hypotheses testing. The injection within the discipline of research methods and areas of enquiry typical of anthropology and sociology cause a period of paradigmatic wars which caused serious reflections among consumer researchers on what constitute “good” method. Several contributions addressing issues of methods appeared in later years in the leading journals of the discipline, including the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Marketing Research*. The methodological “toolbox” of researchers who want to investigate communities of consumers includes market-based ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994); phenomenological interviews (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994); netnography (Kozinets, 2002); videography (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). As the “legitimacy” of these methods is now affirmed, studies contributing to consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) typically employ interpretive methods. Such techniques can also be employed simultaneously, in order to enrich the researcher’s experience in the field and reach a better comprehension through triangulation of data and methods. This is not to say that quantitative studies should be denied in principle: quite the contrary is true. However, such studies should occur only after an in-depth knowledge of the community investigated has been obtained by researchers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Arnould & Price, 1993).

In business-to-business marketing scholarship, interpretive methods are still unconventional. However, some scholars are starting advocating the use of interpretive methods in the field (Gummesson 2003; Cova and Salle, 2003; Borghini, Golfetto and Rinallo, 2004). We concur with these scholars in suggesting that interpretive methods are particularly suited to investigate occupational cultures and business-to-business brand communities. We do not see any relevant obstacle to the adoption in these setting of the same methods successfully employed by researchers in related disciplines. However, we do not want to imply that interpretation is an easy task: quite the contrary is true. In a context when “the researcher is the research instrument” (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994), researchers’ expertise plays a relevant role in obtaining the profound interpretations that deserve to be considered “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973). Expertise of this kind regards not only familiarity with the specific method employed, but also with the situated viewpoints of specific communities of workers.

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