What makes a good paper? Analytic and Continental ideals in Consumer Culture Theory

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Analytic and Continental ideals in Consumer Culture Theory

Abstract

Purpose – This article illuminates the characteristics of Analytic and Continental scholarship to generate a deeper appreciation for both writing styles in the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) community.

Design/methodology/approach – Two CCT researchers debate the merits of Analytic and Continental scholarship in an accessible dialogical format.

Findings – Analytic ideals of scholarship, espoused by elite academic journals, include conceptual rigor, logical propositions, theoretical coherence, researcher agnosticism, and broad generalizability. Continental ideals of scholarship, more likely to be espoused by niche and/or critical journals, include creative writing, holistic interpretation, intellectual imagination, political provocation, and deep contextualization.

Originality/value – This dialogue may keep differently oriented CCT reviewers from too hastily dismissing Analytic work as mechanistic, overgeneralized, or stifling and Continental work as esoteric, sloppy, or unscientific.

Keywords: Analytic Philosophy, Continental Philosophy, Consumer Culture Theory, Interpretive Consumer Research, Philosophy of Science
As a multidisciplinary field of research, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has a long tradition of epistemological debates (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013; Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013). CCT scholars have vigorously debated the merits of different research paradigms (e.g., Brown 2001; Hudson and Ozanne 1988), data collection methods (e.g., Belk 2006; Goulding 2005), and interpretive orientations (e.g., Arnold and Fischer 1994; Spiggle 1994). However, until recently, too little attention has been paid to the articulation or writing of CCT knowledge (Brown 2004), especially in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles (Figueiredo, Gopaldas, and Fischer 2017; Fischer, Gopaldas, and Scaraboto 2017; Gopaldas 2016; Hogg and Maclaran 2008).

In the following dialogue, two CCT researchers discuss a crude but enduring distinction between Analytic and Continental styles of knowledge articulation from early 20th century debates in the discipline of philosophy (Blattner 2017; Brogaard and Leiter 2011; Gutting 2012; Jones 2009; Levy 2003; see table 1). The Analytic-Continental distinction serves as a useful device for understanding epistemological tensions in the CCT community’s approaches to crafting manuscripts. Analytic ideals of scholarship, espoused by elite academic journals, include conceptual rigor, logical propositions, theoretical coherence, researcher agnosticism, and broad generalizability. Continental ideals of scholarship, more likely to be espoused by niche and/or critical journals, include creative writing, holistic interpretation, intellectual imagination, political provocation, and deep contextualization.

This dialogue emerged from a qualitative research workshop hosted by Pilar Rojas Gaviria and Daiane Scaraboto at the School of Administration at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in Santiago in early 2017. Domen Bajde is Associate Professor of Consumption, Culture, and Commerce in the Department of Marketing and Management at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. Ahir Gopaldas is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Gabelli School of Business at Fordham University in New York City.

Domen Bajde: Hi Ahir, I’ve recently read your tutorials on how to craft manuscripts for publication (Figueiredo et al. 2017; Fischer et al. 2017; Gopaldas 2016). While I find them quite helpful for publishing in top American journals, I’m also somewhat troubled by them.

Ahir Gopaldas: Thanks, Domen. What’s troubling you?

Bajde: Well, they all seem very analytic.

Gopaldas: Hmm, why is that a problem?

Bajde: It is not necessarily a problem, but I feel that you are advancing a very particular style of scholarship, without being attentive to alternative possibilities.

Gopaldas: What alternatives do you have in mind?

Bajde: When I said analytic, I was referring to the classic distinction in philosophy between Analytic and Continental ideals. My colleague, Søren Askegaard, and I believe that this historic philosophical distinction could serve as a good framework for distinguishing between styles of interpretive consumer research as well.
**Gopaldas**: Analytic with a capital A, I’m with you now.

**Bajde**: Yes. The Analytic tradition is famous for its devotion to building a coherent set of concepts, or building a conceptual lingua franca, so to speak. In essence, the Analytic tradition is all about analyzing concepts.

**Gopaldas**: Right, and the Continental tradition has a more literary, holistic, and often metaphorical way of discussing things. Continental writing also tends to be more political in the sense of wanting to expose, critique, or alter the status quo, is that right?

**Bajde**: Yes. Of course, there is no clear line between the two, and they cannot be neatly tied to a particular geographical region, but the Continental approach does seem to fare better in Continental Europe, while the Analytic approach has been more influential in North America. Then again, the geographies are becoming increasingly porous and complex…

**Gopaldas**: For sure, but the Analytic and Continental labels still hover over contemporary debates in philosophy, so let’s stick with the distinction. Would it be fair to say that Analytic genres of philosophy are more influenced by logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences, while Continental genres are more aligned with the fine arts, literature, and the humanities?

**Bajde**: Definitely. And the tension between the two styles of scholarship is felt not just in philosophy, or interpretive consumer research, but across the social sciences.

**Gopaldas**: So I think you’re saying that the tutorials are steeped in Analytic ideals. I see that. The tutorials are definitely emphasizing clarity, logic, precision, rigor, systematicity, et cetera… all Analytic ideals.

**Bajde**: Yes, the Analytic tradition values clear-cut definitions of concepts and logical relationships between concepts, but more than that, an Analytic approach insists on choosing a particular theoretical conversation and—quoting your tutorial now—sticking to that conversation from front to back (Gopaldas 2016).

**Gopaldas**: Sure Domen, I can see your point about the tutorials stemming from an Analytic tradition of social science, for sure, but it’s hardly my decision to advocate that orientation. I was trained as such at Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) conferences, schools, and workshops. And rightly so! The Journal of Marketing (JM), the Journal of Consumer Research (JCR), and virtually all of the Financial Times 50 (FT-50) journals that business school faculty are institutionally pressured to publish in all unequivocally demand Analytic qualities. Adopting an Analytic orientation is one of the many ways in which CCT has legitimated itself as “a viable disciplinary brand” within mainstream business academia (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 868; Coskuner-Balli 2013).

**Bajde**: Even so Ahir, here’s what I wonder. What do we gain and what do we lose by adopting an Analytic style of writing that promotes a particular view of knowledge creation?
Gopaldas: I’m all for plurality in terms of methods, theories, and—now that you make me think about it—writing styles as well. Of course my coauthors and I do not wish to advocate a particular writing style. Rather our motivation is to share publication lessons that we’ve learned the hard way—from critical reviews and rejection letters. Still, I can see how these tutorials could end up promoting an Analytic style of writing.

Bajde: I wasn’t paying much attention to it before either, but then I saw the piece that you wrote with Eileen Fischer and Daiane Scaraboto, “Why Papers are Rejected,” and it got me thinking… Several of the reasons for rejection are related to staying within a particular theoretical conversation (Fischer et al. 2017). A conversation you need to pick from the start, a conversation that defines the problems you address, and a conversation that you need to make a contribution to. How about starting new conversations?

Gopaldas: Oh, there’s certainly nothing wrong with starting new theoretical conversations, but I think good scholarship always acknowledges what came before. “Standing on the shoulders of giants” is the Academy’s motto. I think if you don’t situate your own work in prior work, you run the risk of reinventing the wheel.

Bajde: That makes absolute sense when you boil it down to an engineering problem. Playing the Devil’s advocate though, we are not engineers. We don’t work with wheels. Can you imagine telling a poet not to reinvent the idea of love, because that’s already been covered by another poet? Or, imagine saying that the poet should mention what existing conversation their poem is joining, preferably one published within the same publishing house, because otherwise, they are not being respectful to those that have inspired them.

Gopaldas: LOL, that analogy is hilarious and effective! I think staunch defenders of the Analytic tradition would say that we should be more like engineers or scientists, not poets. In a scientific paradigm, many individuals methodically, incrementally, and humbly contribute to a larger project, piece by piece. That said, there are many Continental scholars in our field and I want them to have a strong presence in our journals too. Let’s just say for a moment that there’s ample room for both genres of scholarship, what do you see as the benefits of a more Continental approach to writing, one that’s less incremental and rule-bound, more holistic and adventurous…

Bajde: The benefits of a Continental style? It’s similar to asking how the arts and humanities help us see the world. You can find several calls for heteroglossia in CCT (Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013), but oddly when it comes to writing style, this sometimes seems to be a luxury that we can’t afford, or won’t permit.

Gopaldas: When I think of the upside of Continental writers, be it Baudrillard or Foucault, I think of big, bold, breakthrough ideas, so originality is one upside. I also think Continental theorists are much more likely to engage with the politics of their research contexts, whereas Analytic researchers aspire to build generalizable theories across contexts. Imagine, for instance, a Continental writer and an Analytic writer both tackling the same contemporary issue, say ethical consumerism. I imagine that the Continental writer will write an impassioned critique of ethical consumerism as a faulty neoliberal solution to socioeconomic problems (e.g., Binkley 2008). Meanwhile, the Analytic writer will probably just use ethical consumerism as an...
empirical context in which to theorize a general concept, such as consumer sentiment (e.g., Gopaldas 2014). Perhaps the Analytic mode of theorizing is keeping our field from making really original, provocative, and transformative arguments about contemporary consumer culture, let alone the human condition. It’s hard to know what we’re not doing.

**Bajde:** It’s definitely a challenge to make radical breaks with existing theory if the underlying mode of theorizing is a formulaic, piece-by-piece building of concepts and their interrelationships. If the main point of an Analytic approach is to choose a theory from the start and then seek to add to it, how can you make a radical break? Mind you, there are also serious disadvantages to taking more liberty with language and argumentation. Continental texts are often much harder to decipher, and they don’t travel as easily. The Continental style can become an excuse for sloppy scholarship, hiding behind convoluted prose.

**Gopaldas:** And writing about a phenomenon without a systematic review of your peers’ work seems awfully narcissistic. Sure, Analytic scholarship is humble, “piece-by-piece” theorizing within a community of scholars, but Continental ideals can result in a series of overreaching, grand theories with few interconnections among them. I think one runs the risk of saying the same things as others have, just dressed up in new vocabulary. Or at the very least, it’s difficult for reviewers to assess—is this a new theory or just an old theory in new words?

**Bajde:** Ahir, I would say that anyone who cannot assess that difference is a poor reviewer. If the work allows you to see the world in a new and interesting way, then it is new. If the work doesn’t change your perspective, then it isn’t new. For a Continental text, this time-consuming assessment needs to be done every time, whereas a more Analytic piece can be quickly dismissed purely on grounds of not defining the conversation properly, or failing to follow the terms of the chosen conversation, or not choosing a conversation that fits the journal...

**Gopaldas:** Let’s take stock. I think we’re in agreement that an Analytic style emphasizes conceptual rigor, theoretical coherence, and broad generalizability, whereas a Continental style values imagination over systematicity and contextualization over abstraction. But are we really saying that both styles don’t already co-exist in the pages of our community’s journals, including not just JCR and JM, but also Consumption, Markets, and Culture (CMC), Journal of Consumer Culture (JCC), and Qualitative Market Research (QMR)?

**Bajde:** Ahir, I am sure that they do. I see things less in terms of categories and more along a spectrum, wherein no journal is purely Continental or Analytic, the same with authors and papers. Yet overall, I am tempted to say that the mantra that “we study a context to build a theory” is becoming dogma. It’s a very Analytic idea. Why do all of our contexts need to be a context of something more general to be worth studying? If a context is not a good case of a more generalizable phenomenon, then the research tends to be considered too descriptive by the Analytic-minded.

**Gopaldas:** And maybe even esoteric.

**Bajde:** Don’t forget self-indulgent!
**Gopaldas:** Domen, I think it’s worth noting that most of the original Continental scholars published books that were only lightly edited. They did not publish rigorously peer-reviewed journal articles. And that lack of rigorous peer review allows scholars’ unique voices to shine through.

**Bajde:** You are right. Analytic writing is more aligned with the relatively short length and frequent pace of journal article publications. However, I think Continental writing can work in shorter formats too. It just requires reviewers and editors to be more open to such work.

**Gopaldas:** As someone primarily socialized in a more Analytic approach to CCT research, I’m not sure I am fully aware of its critiques. What would you say are the corresponding stereotypes of Analytic work?

**Bajde:** Flat, soulless, mechanistic, stifling, lifeless, trite, superficial, overgeneralized, hyper-stylized (while pretending to be a-stylistic), and above all, not particularly critical. I guess worrying about fitting and extending extant conversations makes it hard to be overly critical towards them.

**Gopaldas:** Wow, let me digest all those critiques for a moment… I think you’re right that CCT articles published in JCR and JM can be rather overgeneralized, mechanistic, hyper-stylized, and so forth. But an Analytic scholar would probably reframe those characteristics as abstraction, consistency, and parsimony. And I’m less sure that you’re right about the lack of criticality. Most papers I review begin with a major problematization of prior scholarship—not just some minor quibble, but a major critique.

**Bajde:** Well, I am not talking about any journal in particular and you did ask about stereotypes of Analytic research. In fact, thinking about it some more, one could argue that an Analytic approach would invite more debate and critique, because it orients authors to consider each other’s work more.

**Gopaldas:** Domen, I wonder if CCT is already finding a way to mix and match ideals from both Analytic and Continental traditions. If we compare interpretive consumer research across the decades, I think we can see considerable epistemological diversity in its theoretical evolution from micro-social to macro-social concerns, from structural to post-structural theorizing, and from somewhat a-political and a-historical interpretations to historically informed, political commentaries (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Askegaard and Linnet 2011; Thompson et al. 2013). I see both Analytic and Continental ideals in this evolution.

**Bajde:** Agreed. That’s why we might want to think of Analytic and Continental traditions less as styles of knowledge production and more as styles of knowledge articulation. You can articulate existential phenomenology in a very Continental manner or you can articulate it in a more Analytic style.

**Gopaldas:** That’s a useful clarification.
**Bajde:** Having said that, the articulation style will of course always exert an impact on all the other aspects of knowledge production. I would say all the more so in the Continental tradition, where the style tends to be more conversationalist.

**Gopaldas:** Conversationalist?

**Bajde:** What I mean by conversationalist is that it tends to be written in a style where the twists and turns of prose (or poetry) reveal insights that might otherwise escape the cold, rule-bound logic of Analytic argumentation. Think of Nietzsche, or Derrida. The fact that it is hard to impose a one-track reading on what they are saying can work to their disadvantage, but it also stimulates thought, complicates our understandings of the world, and provokes discussion.

**Gopaldas:** To be frank Domen, I recognize the extent to which Analytic ideals outweigh Continental ideals in JCR, JM, and other FT-50 journals, but I just don’t see those journals changing their styles anytime soon. In fact, CCT articles might already be the Continental extreme in the pages of those journals.

**Bajde:** Yes, everyone is Analytic to someone, and Continental to someone else.

**Gopaldas:** True. As I see it, the most realistic outlets for Continental scholarship in our field are CMC, JCC, and QMR.

**Bajde:** I am not that pessimistic. Even when it comes to the elite journals. As soon as we start to be attentive to these differences in style, there’s an opportunity for broader inclusion. After all, we are the journals. We are the reviewers. Some of us are also editors and associate editors. If we continue to unconsciously reproduce a single style, then we can hardly blame the journals.

**Gopaldas:** I confess that I have been an overly Analytic reviewer on some Continental manuscripts in the past. But I promise to change!

**Bajde:** And I’m sure I have been an overly Continental reviewer on some Analytic manuscripts.

**Gopaldas:** At the very least, I hope that our conversation builds more understanding across differently oriented scholars, literatures, and journals in the CCT community.

**References**


Table 1. A Comparison of Analytic and Continental Ideals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>The Analytic tradition</th>
<th>The Continental tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core ideals</td>
<td>Emphasis on abstraction, agnosticism, clarity, coherence, consistency, generalizability, parsimony, precision, reason, rigor, science, and systematicity</td>
<td>Emphasis on creativity, critique, depth, experience, history, holism, imagination, metaphor, originality, phenomenology, politics, and transcendence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing styles</td>
<td>Convergent, disciplined, and sometimes dry writing styles, inspired by logic and the sciences</td>
<td>Divergent, playful, and sometimes convoluted writing styles, inspired by the arts and humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical aims</td>
<td>Analysis; developing precise definitions of key concepts and linking these concepts in logical propositions based on coherent arguments</td>
<td>Synthesis; developing critical, holistic, and imaginative analyses of contemporary social issues and linking them to interrelated issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logics of progress</td>
<td>Each empirical study makes a novel but additive contribution to a widely established theoretical puzzle embedded in a communally shared research paradigm</td>
<td>Each grand theorist aspires to articulate a radically original interpretation of the world, with few presuppositions, sometimes invoking the ideas of other grand theorists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of contexts</td>
<td>Using real-world sites as contexts for the development and clarification of generalizable theories</td>
<td>Examining real-world sites for their inherent significance and engaging with the politics of those contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiques</td>
<td>Continental thinkers view Analytic scholarship as formulaic, lifeless, mechanistic, overgeneralized, rigid, soulless, stifling, and uncritical</td>
<td>Analytic thinkers view Continental scholarship as convoluted, descriptive, esoteric, fanciful, sloppy, speculative, unscientific, and unsystematic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note—The contents of this table are inspired by the dialogue reported here as well as prior commentaries on Analytic and Continental ideals in philosophy (Blattner 2017; Brogaard and Leiter 2011; Gutting 2012; Jones 2009; Levy 2003).