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# HERMENEUTIC PRACTICES: MALL AND MEDIA VISITING AS UNDERSTANDING-IN-USE

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## ABSTRACT

Rejecting a stimulus-response approach to research on young persons as consumers subjected to marketing, this paper draws on phenomenology's *practices perspective*. Embodied, equipped understanding is always already in use—in minimally monitored (tacit) play-like projecting, a participatory production of meaning—the *ludic substratum* of everyday life. The article discusses Malaysian mall and media immersion as generic types of young people's understanding-in-use: in focus group discussion, they vividly (re)present visiting a massive shopping place as audience consumer practices in engaging with ludic location or a 'second home'. The paper reflects on Chinese Malaysian student narratives of consumer activity. Research commences from the 'hypothesis' of hermeneutics—or the philosophy of understanding-in-practice(s) as play-like—tested in a focus group. Visiting shopping mall or social media involves 'ready-to-hand' (little reflected on) 'projecting' and producing intelligibility, an integrating narrative, (dis)enabling 'being-with-others' (Heidegger). Talk in discussion enables theory to be empirically extended, grounding philosophical horizons of understanding. Our discussants' consuming is structurally ludic, a play-like establishing of meaning from their 'horizons of expectation' (Jauss), equipped, and enabling. Visiting shopping malls manages goal-oriented or teleological meaning in embodied projecting and processing generic understanding of 'entity' (Heidegger) as equipment: people gain a purchase epistemologically in material acquisitions. 'Ludicity' is a core concept in consumer-marketing interpretation, central to the practices perspective in business, media and sociological study. Managerial implications lie in enhancing marketing address to consumers, recognizing ludicity. The authors are now exploring understanding in visitor mall practices through the latter's constructing cellphone images.

**Keywords:** *Consumer understanding, hermeneutics, ludicity, mall practices,*

*Malaysia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, Lawlor and Prothero presented their case for a reader reception approach to exploring a child's 'understanding of television advertising'. Their audience and consumer research

'requires the researcher to put to one side the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) approach which arguably has informed many of the extant studies on children and advertising. The latter have tended to ask "what does advertising do to children?" [ ... ] This research takes a different approach by asking "how do children read advertising?"' (2008: 1207)

Here, interpretive reading—or their process of making sense—replaces the conceptual repertoire of causally induced (necessary) responses from passive percipients. In this paper, we reflect on making sense when 'actively engaged in the market place' (Marshall, 2010:1), as a ludic embodied practice displayed by late teen and early twenties student consumers at a major Malaysian shopping mall - Sunway Pyramid.

Considered as 'social practices' (Reckwitz, 2002), 'shared practical understandings' (Schatzki, 2005: 12), consuming manages embodied meaning. Understanding-in-use (such as purchasing apples - see below) can be presented (e.g. in focus group) as behaviour tacitly (in)formed by teleological (goal-directed), to-and-fro (playlike) 'projection', anticipating and achieving narrative, enabling a description of 'entities'. 'We pick the apple that looks nicer with no flaws' - mundane consuming inscribes projection of meaning in the mall. Implicit in every practice, in short, is the play-like project of producing narrative - understanding-in-use.

Entering from 'horizons of understanding' (Heidegger) within which they interpret their being there, visitors to shopping mall or social media make sense of immersive experience, thus responding in purchasing to market persuasion. Consuming in phenomenology's practices account involves people's equipped implicit, play-like projecting and integrating narrative [Wilson, 2004; 2008; 2011; 2014 (forthcoming)] through:

- pleasurable distraction in a separate 'temporary sphere of activity' (Huizinga);
- engaging in skilled managing circumscribed by 'horizons of understanding'; embodied 'projecting' from 'fore-structure of understanding' (Heidegger);
- integrating textual detail [the 'hermeneutic circle' (ibid) of comprehension];
- confronting and completing an 'indeterminate' (Iser) course of events;
- seriously pursuing goals (materially and virtually intrinsic or extrinsic);
- producing eudaemonic effects (the consumer's or player's 'wellbeing');
- enjoying aesthetic (dis)satisfaction with mall or media content ('walls');
- affirming and distributing political power (in alignment or alienation);
- constructing a collective and individual (class/ethnic/gendered) identity.

The practice of consuming involves our play-like (or ludic) goal-oriented embodied understanding of entities as equipment, enabling us to tacitly (or unreflectively) project and pursue a ready-to-hand (minimally monitored) integrating meaning for material or virtual world. When issues arise (e.g. the inability to produce an intelligible narrative) - or in a focus group - the practice of consuming can be presented-at-hand (as in the following paper) for

our reflection on structuring moments or specific instances where ludicity appears as a core concept in understanding participant responses to shopping mall - or in purchasing more widely.

## PURPOSE

Marketing research has placed an emphasis on putting mall consumers in categories, on segmenting their visitors as instrumental shoppers (engaged in purchasing) and those who are instead (or additionally) focussed on more intrinsic aspects of consumer experience (immersive pleasure). In selling the mall through social media both broad categories can be addressed as potential visitors.

While Facebook is an appropriate online location for product marketing, YouTube's video narrative format offers opportunities to both corporate entities and consumer enthusiasts to record accounts of 'going to the mall'. So, for instance, Malaysia's postmodernist Sunway Pyramid Mall - nominated by Yahoo! as one of the world's 'top ten' - is vividly branded on YouTube as a narrative 'adventure' for visitors. 'Adventure. Everybody loves it!' <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_GNuFx1PCLo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GNuFx1PCLo)>

A screen narrative of mall visiting as 'adventure' is clearly appropriate or fittingly addressed to an audience of consumers in Arnold and Reynolds (2003) category of shopping for stimulation. But research on shopping motivation where pleasure intrinsic to the mall is sought has noted other groups concerned with its support for affiliation (Westbrook and Black, 1995) or with bonding (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Here the consumer (as below) is focussed on confirming, not challenging experience.

We explore mall self-affirming visitor experience from the perspective of a phenomenology of play.

This research presents the practice of young persons' consuming as *doubly ludic*—as embodying play-like understanding and referring in participant accounts to particular genres of play in a 'home away from home'.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In this article, we excavate through intensive focus group discussion with youthful visitors to a mall, volunteered moments and narratives not (as might be anticipated) of 'adventure' but instead of their identity confirming immersive 'belonging': 'ready-to-hand' (Heidegger, 1962), this place 'feels like the (sic) second home' (female, Chinese). Their stories suggest malls may also be imperfectly aesthetic, with sound-scape or striving crowds prompting consumers' attention in critical reflection as places rendered unaccommodating. Nonetheless, we suggest that the idea of a mall emerging in these accounts is that it can be enjoyed ready-to-hand, with a sense of 'belonging': '(I'm) very familiar with the mall' (female, Chinese) A future deployment of media marketing could consider its representing thus in YouTube narrative.

A focus group of self-selected third year Chinese business school students lasting about one hour was convened by a male Chinese Malaysian academic (a co-author) to discursively reflect on otherwise ready-to-hand mall practice. A male Caucasian colleague (first author) lurked in the background, behind discussants. Neither teaches these undergraduates. We met during the morning at a small discussion room in a university building (graduate school),

linked to the shopping mall we were considering by a lengthy ‘canopy walkway’.

These five Chinese (three female, two male) participants all contributed, albeit with an occasional prompting by the convener: ‘What do you expect from the (Sunway Pyramid) mall?’ Respondents duly considered the moderator’s questions (‘Tell us about the times when you are in the mall’) at length, then briefly talked about the mall as presented on social media (principally Facebook and Twitter), and on the YouTube Pyramid mall video. Discussion—occasionally blurred—was digitally recorded on a cellphone (a procedure to which participants agreed) for subsequent analytical reflection by the authors.

As evident from the open questions (above), the convener sought accounts and evaluation of the mall as a place and time enabling these participants’ activity as visitors. The paper offers a detailed exploration of consumer narratives articulated by the focus group five—as similar young persons alike in age (i.e. nineteen/twenty), and identical in ethnicity (Chinese) to many Sunway Pyramid mall-goers.

## FINDINGS

### **A Hermeneutics of Understanding in Mall Practices On the Horizon of Understanding a Shopping Mall as ‘Home from Home’**

In establishing our findings from this project, we followed Popper’s philosophy of scientific method in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*: a hypothesis derived by informed ‘creative intuition’ is tested against data. Here, the hermeneutic hypothesis is that the Sunway Pyramid Mall (albeit massive) is being understood by these young people in their habitual practice of visiting as a ‘second home’ (a phrase, as noted, used by a research participant) or ‘third place’ (Oldenburg, 1999). Within such a third place, the ‘mood is playful’ (37). Citing Huizinga (1949), Oldenburg notes ‘play occurs in a place apart’ (38). Indeed, a third place is a ‘home away from home’ (38) a ‘comfortable home’ (39). Focus group contributions exemplify extended ludicity.

From practices theory’s perspective, if the local mall is implicitly (tacitly) ‘fore-understood’ by our visitors as being a communal ‘third place’ [albeit with differing genres or types (e.g. ‘up-market’)], it will ‘offer relief from the stressful demands of work and home life and provide the feeling of inclusiveness and belonging’ (Soukup, 2006: 423). As we found, its ‘regulars’ will expect to experience a ‘home away from home’, anticipating and actualising playlike absorbing activity and conversation within its walls.

We sought to establish tacit but powerful mall visitor assumptions, as confirmed in ludic practices. More fundamentally, engaging in consuming from these horizons of understanding is *itself* argued to be a ludic - embodied, equipped, eudaemonic, goal-directed, normative, to-and-fro - tacit managing meaning.

### **The Mall as Place of Play-like Consumer Practices: The Ludic Structure of Understanding in Consumer Practices**

#### ***Buying Apples as a Consumer Practice in the Mall***

‘Let’s say, a simple one: apples. Maybe the apples look the same to the guys (laughter). No offense. But, we, we, we pick the apple that looks nicer with no flaws.

[ ... ] Like this apple looks fresher. Something like this. Normally, they would say, "it's just the same. Just grab and go." (female Chinese student mall visitor addressing the focus group)

In Heidegger's terms, employed here, this consumer primarily understands these entities (apples!) as equipment, seeking fruit 'with no flaws': she is articulating or rendering explicit a practice which shapes her mode of being-with-others ('the guys', who 'just grab and go!') Thus, ready-to-hand practical understanding - here presented-at-hand in a focus group - tacitly informs her selective behaviour as extended narrative open to reading by observers. Her project of choosing apples exercises expectation, consumer fore-understanding, integrating anticipation with actuality, establishing intelligibility. Should she be asked to further unpack this idea of an apple with 'no flaws', she could well engage in a secondary dualist account of such a fruit as being an object with particular qualities (e.g. its having a certain colour and shape).

Another female Chinese student told the group in discussion: 'Basically, I expect good security from the mall.' Visiting from her shared horizon of understanding the mall, she invests corridors with meaning as a site of secure sense-making, projecting place as activity enabled by equipment, given a 'basic' concern being the practice of 'good security' within this immersive mode of being-with-others. Tacitly evident in behaviour (e.g. how she walks), consumer expectations are integrated intelligibly with events, optimistically smoothly.

Activities of consuming as presented by our youthful research participants - focussed discursively on the eudaemonic mall and its entities - involve understanding-in-use, ubiquitous and ludic. As in play, practice involves skilled managing - albeit tacit or not reflected upon until presented in the focus group - of ready-to-hand projection, their embodied expectation of equipment. Completing goal-oriented 'projects' incorporates in behaviour a hermeneutic circle of understanding, a to-and-fro norm-governed confronting indeterminacy.

Consuming is practical, play-like understanding. Expectations of products are confirmed or changed, secured or subverted in 'multiple and often uncertain relations' (Couldry et al., 2007) as we seek consistently to engage with event. We can anticipate apples enable health, but (our female Chinese mall visitor tells us) attaining success is then a skilled activity, 'picking', selecting the best! Her 'strategy is immanent in practical coping action' (Chia and Holt, 2006: 647) (their emphasis), displaying the management of meaning.

### **Consuming as Ludic: Generic Practices in the Shopping Mall**

- Mall Visiting as *Ipsa Facto* Ludic  
'I think basically everyone visits the mall with a purpose, lah.' (female, Chinese)  
Immersion is a goal-oriented experience (whether the 'purpose' is intrinsic or extrinsic to the mall). Goals can be purely defined by absorbed participant play: 'Just because we want to relax' (female, Chinese).
- Multiple Ludic Immersing - in Mall Media (Cinema)  
Acknowledging absorption in cinema within the immersive mall, male Chinese participants assert, 'usually we go for movie(s) and dining', 'extra time only, we go shop around': equally, 'one of the reasons I usually come (here) is because there's

always a movie screening.’ (female, Chinese)

- Narratives of Surface Play: Superficially Engaging with ‘Equipment’

If mall windows are analogous to media screens (likewise supporting a consumer absorption in content) a male Chinese may be described as immersed therein rather than materially engaged: ‘I just window shop.’ Or this consumer can seek immersion in a ‘reading (newspapers, magazines) area for guys’.

- A Narrative of ‘Not Challenging’ Play: The Lagoon ‘Rides’ as Merely Ready-to-Hand  
Linked to the Mall is Lagoon Leisure Park, offering an added possibility of more literally playlike absorption. But the experience does not challenge embodied ready-to-hand rhythms of living. ‘Excitement in the Lagoon is quite ... not challenging. (laughter) No doubt it’s the best Asia ... (indecipherable)’. ‘Maybe it’s my personal thoughts [ ... ] the ride(s), they don’t give me excitement feeling.’ (females, Chinese)

### **The Mall as Gendered Ludic Location**

Ludic immersion in the shopping mall is a shared participatory experience: ‘Sometimes, (I) accompany friends [ ... ] we go together.’ (male, Chinese) Generation can be a gathering point for recognition: ‘I usually see people among our age.’ (female, Chinese) ‘When we are going for food, (the guys) will definitely join (us)’ (female, Chinese) in this conversational home away from home.

Nonetheless, play in the mall is clearly being structured by gendered difference: participants conformed to patterns located by researchers elsewhere [for instance, a male ‘desire to complete the (shopping) task in a short time frame’ (Teller and Thomson, 2012: 965) exhibiting impatience].

- Media in the Mall and ‘Calculating’ Time: Gendered Immersion in Cinematic Narrative  
‘We check the show time before (arrival)’ (male, Chinese). ‘Basically, everyone that goes for movies, they will calculate their time [ ... ] guys don’t like to loiter around the mall, if, they don’t shop. [ ... ] Maybe the girls would go earlier, while the boys would come later’ (female, Chinese).
- ‘Just Grab and Go’ - Apples and Clothes: Entities (Dis)Enabling Being-with-Others  
‘Let’s say, a simple one: apples. Maybe the apples look the same to the guys (laughter). No offense. But, we, we, we pick the apple that looks nicer with no flaws. [ ... ] Like this apple looks fresher. Something like this. Normally, they would say, “it’s just the same. Just grab and go.”’

This goal oriented practice of choosing apples is tacitly approached from differing male and female horizons of understanding as ‘grabbing’/ ‘picking’. Here, ‘materials, meanings and competences’ (Shove et al., 2012: 15) are woven together in ‘guys’ behaviour at odds with a female view of appropriation.

Our research participant is negotiating outlined ‘varieties of meaning’ (Hand and Shove, 2007: 80). She is here presenting-at-hand or reflecting upon a pre-conscious project: she has

managed to produce a narrative of 'competent' (ibid.) routine choice in a familiar 'second home', embodied in behavior manifesting practice-oriented understanding. Were such a *post-eventum* commentary to be absent, nonetheless her ready-to-hand understanding could be viewed as 'written into' this practice of selection, open to 'reading' by observers. She maintains a feminine distinction - which can be heard and addressed by marketing practitioners.

Presenting the ready-to-hand is gendered: 'They should provide a place for the guys to wait for the girls get things done.' (female, Chinese) 'Let's say, if we go shop for clothes, I don't think the guys would like to wait.' 'We don't mind, but when they are starting to be annoying, like, "Are you done?"' then [ ... ] It's a turn-off.' (female, Chinese) These engendered shopping stories are thus nuanced, registering moments (or aspects) of immersive consuming crossed by masculine distraction.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Understanding-in-Use: Materializing Meaning***

#### ***Reflecting on Mall Practices: Visitors Projecting a 'Home Away from Home'***

In phenomenology's terminology, embedded in our research participants' everyday practices was an anticipatory or projected understanding (fore-understanding) of their familiar mall as a 'third place'. Thus discussed and focussed upon, their ready-to-hand practical understanding is ludic—a process involving the skilled managing of such a 'home from home' narrative, confronting and resolving its indeterminacy, goal-directed in securing well-being. The public space equipped their being present as habitual ready-to-hand environment for consuming in specific gendered modes of play, conversation and communal experience. Gratification in visiting projected as an 'adventure' is absent from this account.

Presented-at-hand in discussion were ludic narratives of being at home in the massive mall. Stories: (i) filled out participants' elliptically self-monitored engaging with ready-to-hand contents, in their realizing expectations of equipment enabling being-with-others but (ii) also reflectively registered a disappointment with entities (e.g. the Lagoon) as objects failing to actualize anticipation.

The intensive small group interviewing of similar youthful visitors thus advanced a thesis of the mall as an aspirational agora: they expected a community, exercised in parade, participation and purchase. These gendered stories of absorption (and occasional alienation) in its multi-level spaces conveyed their orientation to a familiar recognised generic place whose daily visitors consume.

Such a 'third place' of consumer immersion is regarded as a 'warm and welcoming home away from home for the participating members [ ... ] "comfort" and "warmth" are culturally-situated concepts' (Soukup, 2006: 435) close to domesticity. Yet the mall's visitor messaging that there are 'fifteen minutes to exit from parking' can truncate a welcome: families concerned about traffic may exit early or not arrive.

Our argument draws on discursive evidence from a single focus group. Nonetheless, in this suburbia characterized by the presence of three universities and several colleges, we regard the student contributors as 'voicing out' views characteristic of many visiting this massive immersive mall. To critics who dissent, we would cite Karl Popper's scientific call to come falsify our hypothesis.

In Heidegger's terms, these students' consumer practices constitute a skilled managing

of 'ready-to-hand projection' (embodied expectation) to produce meaning from their tacit 'horizon of understanding' the mall as equipped to enable a ludic 'being-with-others' or 'belonging' in a 'second home' (female, Chinese). This presupposition was visibly incorporated in their behaviour ('mallng'), now evident in discussion.

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