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**Combining phenomenology and sociology : the use of « consumer careers »  
as an objectivation tool for interpretive consumer research.**

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ABSTRACT

**In this paper, we introduce the sociological notion of career to examine the multiple consumer trajectories within the same consumption activity. Our objectives are twofold : (1) highlighting the underlying factors involved in the construction of consumer careers and analyzing the emergence of acculturative trajectories in the realm of consumption, and (2) demonstrating the heuristic value of the "career" notion for interpretive research. Using (n)ethnographies, we show that consumer careers are mainly influenced by the level of socialization, the relationship to the cultural majority and identity uncertainty. We conclude by discussing the benefits of using the career notion as an objectivation tool in interpretive consumer research.**

*Keywords* : interpretive consumer research, consumer careers, acculturation, consumption subcultures, netnography, manga.

*Track* : Marketing theory and new paradigms.

## Introduction

Interpretive consumer research has grown into a very popular research field since the eighties and the « interpretive turn » (Sherry, Jr, 1991). As an epistemological reaction to cognitivism and the information-processing paradigm, interpretativism has led consumer researchers to explore more deeply consumers' daily lives and to produce more detailed accounts of real-life experiences of consumption. Drawing especially from existential phenomenology, interpretive consumer research has focused its efforts on individual or micro-social levels of analysis, neglecting macro-social structures and influences (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). Several calls for the consideration of a more socially-embedded consumer and for new conceptualizations and tools have been made (e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005 ; Moisander et al., 2009, Askegaard and Linnet, 2011) and through this research we aim to bring a modest contribution to this discussion. In this paper, we argue in favor of the sociological notion of « career » and its relevance for interpretive consumer research.

The notion of career has been central in the field of interpretive sociology since the mid-fifties and its use by the Chicago school of sociology. It was coined by Huges (1958) as a sociological notion to analyze with great precision professional careers. He defined careers as the individual's series of positions held during the course of his or her life. Progressively, the use of this notion was extended to others contexts by the students of the Chicago school and gained its value as a powerful conceptual tool. The notion of career was popularized by Howard Becker (1963) and his works on jazz musicians and marijuana smokers. In this paper, we draw from Becker's analytical approach to illustrate how the notion of career can be used to highlight the complexity and multiplicity of paths taken by consumers in the same consumption activity. We chose the manga (Japanese comic books) fans community for our investigation. We performed ethnographic interviews and netnographic exploration to comprehend the acculturation processes at work in this consumption subculture. We conclude by discussing how this notion allows to combine a phenomenological approach of the manga consumption phenomenon and a broader sociological analysis.

### 1. Theoretical Underpinnings

#### 1.1 Howard Becker's contribution to the conceptualization of careers

Becker's major work, *Outsiders* (1963), contributed significantly to the reconceptualization of the career notion. In this seminal research, Becker presents an analytical framework that he uses to expose the various trajectories of « deviant » individuals. According to Becker (1963), the notion of career as an analytical tool encompasses objective facts related to the social structure, but also the individual's perspectives, motivations and desires. Drawing from this approach, he identifies a three-staged career for marijuana smokers : (1) the transgression of the social norm, (2) the social labeling as a « smoker », and (3) the integration to an organized group. Joining a group makes the marijuana consumption easier, and provides a sense of legitimacy and belonging to those who share the same consumption practices. Every stage of the smoker career has its own dynamics that make possible (or impossible) the transition to the next stage. Becker stresses the importance of thinking of social situations, structures and facts as very fluctuant factors. These factors do not influence the different stages of the career at the same intensity. At one point, a social variable may have a decisive importance and be pretty much insignificant afterwards. This observation also true for individual variables. Therefore, careers do not ignore structural variables, they only contextualize their practical effects for each of the identified stages.

Becker's work reveals the analytical benefits of the career notion as a conceptual tool. Paradoxically, the strength of such a notion is its great plasticity. This notion embraces both the subjectivity of individual meanings (self image, identity construction, etc.) and the objectivity of the social situation (life styles, economic situations, etc.). Thereby, career as a conceptual tool allows the researcher to go back and forth from the individual to the social level of analysis.

### *1.2 Careers as complex processes*

Following Becker's trail, Hannerz (1983) describes the career notion as a sequential organization of experienced situations. « Experienced situations » take place in multiple « social worlds » (cf. Becker, 1982). Hannerz argues that careers can be seen as a layout of different overlapping social domains where a new evolving life world takes place. The plurality of social life is therefore central in Hannerz's analysis.

Another advantage of the career is its unpredictability and uncontrollable nature. Even if they sometimes seem similar, careers can abruptly change direction and rarely prove themselves to be harmonious. It is only when you pass to the next stage that you can figure the path that the career has taken, even though bifurcations and going backwards are still viable options.

Furthermore, careers have a predetermined nature. When entering a career, the individual does not start fresh and free himself from his previous social roles. Individual trajectories are partly determined by social positions and corresponding relationships that had already been occupied. The notion of career allows to grasp the dynamic and fluctuant ways people have to deal with the same social process and the same particular conjuncture. It reveals how people follow differentiated paths according to their social attributes and their position in the social structure.

Finally, the notion of career highlights the appropriation of the socialization and engagement processes within a social activity. This notion emphasizes the individual's activity and creativity in his socialization, but without denying the existence of constraining social structures. Thereby, careers prove themselves to be a middle path between constructivism and functionalism. All of these characteristics make the heuristic value of this notion.

### *1.3 Extending the notion to consumption activities*

Devotees of a specific consumption activity or sport enthusiasts for instance are a very interesting field to use the notion of career and demonstrate its heuristic power. Fine (1983, 1998) showed the relevance of using this notion to study individual and collective phenomena related to consumption passions. Schotté (2012) also used this notion to comprehend the trajectories of Moroccan amateur runners that lead them or not to become professionals. The main point is to highlight the agency of individuals without neglecting their social background which allows to understand the different paths they take. Therefore, the notion of career can be used as an « objectivation tool » (Darmon, 2003, 2008). The researcher can build from the interviewees' discourses to reconstitute the objective stages of the career and understand the influence of individual and social variables on each of them. Each individual trajectory can be understood in regard to the stages of the career, whether this trajectory entails a brutal exit from the carrier, or the opposite, that is going through the whole career and embracing a deep transformation of the self.

The notion of career is also useful because it allows to avoid the pathologization of consumer passions and consequently distancing of the analyst from the field of study (Belk and Costa, 1998 ; Le Bart and Ambroise, 2000). Careers encompass individual perceptions, definitions and experiences as much as their objectivation. Thus, the researcher is neither an omniscient judge, nor a mere passive tale-teller.

In this research, we chose to study the fast-growing French manga fans community to illustrate the usefulness of career as an analytical tool for interpretive consumer research.

## 2. Methodology

Consistent with an interpretive approach, we aimed to provide a thick description of the phenomenon of interest (Geertz, 1973). We tried to capture the various individual points of view as much as the underlying social mechanisms and discourses. The French manga fans community being very active on the Internet, we used netnographic methods (Kozinets, 2010) which consisted of the collection of online forum discussions, and their thematic analysis according to the constant comparative method (Spiggle, 1994). Several French major online forums were studied (155100 to 304674 members). In parallel, we conducted 13 ethnographic semi-directive interviews that allowed us to reach saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The sampling was purposive and constituted by snowball effect. All respondents (age 20 to 26 years old) were French and had different ethnic backgrounds (French, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Congolese and Senegalese family backgrounds). Data analysis was inductive and open-ended, that is every new interview was confronted to the previous ones in order to verify, refine or dispute the gathered information. As the data were collected, recorded and transcribed, multiple themes emerged, allowing us to reconstitute the mangaphile career and to comprehend the acculturation processes entailed by this consumption career.

## 3. Results Overview

### *3.1 Stage I, « discovering » : the systematic exploration of Japanese traditional and popular cultures.*

Manga comic books are extremely popular in France, the second largest market in the world after Japan. Manga consumption has gathered a considerable community of fans who meet on the Internet or in specialized conventions (« Japan expo », the biggest manga convention in France had more than 240,000 visitors in 2014). The existence of such a large community was made possible by the wide diffusion of Japanese cartoons (« animes », often inspired by mangas) on French television networks in the eighties and nineties. Nevertheless, this trend suddenly stopped after a vast movement of protest against the brutal violence of the anime imagery (especially, *Dragon Ball Z* and *Ken the Survivor*). Since then, mangas still carry the stigma of being violent without purpose, silly and miseducating. Despite this bad reputation, the whole generation who grew up watching animes or reading mangas remained loyal to these practices. The development of the Internet allowed this generation to share about its passion and to pass it on to the next one.

The mangaphile career begins with an initiation which takes generally place during childhood (through the eighties and nineties television programs) or adolescence (through an mangaphile friend). The manga consumer enters then the first stage of the career where his motivations and perspective are mostly hedonistic. In this stage, the manga consumer also strives for social differentiation (when the social milieu despises mangas or values other types of cultural products) or conformation (when mangas are popular and widely shared at school for instance). On the individual level, the manga consumer's desires are related to escapism and entertainment. On the social level, desires are mostly related to social differentiation or conformation. According to the data, a majority of mangaphiles remains at this stage of the career and returns eventually directly to the cultural majority.

### *3.2 Stage II, « joining in » : the search for social binding and passion sharing*

The existence of a large online mangaphile community allows people to look for social relations outside their social milieu. According to the data, the initial level of socialization greatly influence the individual's need for joining the online community (and consequently passing to this stage of the career). In fact, a lot of people of this community see themselves as shy or/and introverted. People who are subject to low socialization (that is, quantitatively, in terms of number of social relations, or qualitatively, the absence of mangaphiles within the circle of friends) are more likely to join the community. At this stage, mangaphile motivations and perspectives are directed to sharing with mangaphile fellows and finding a role in the community. At this point of the mangaphile career, manga consumption is still high since social interaction relies on that practice. During stage II, mangaphile desires are mainly related to self expression (since sharing about mangas outside of the community is pretty hard due to their bad reputation).

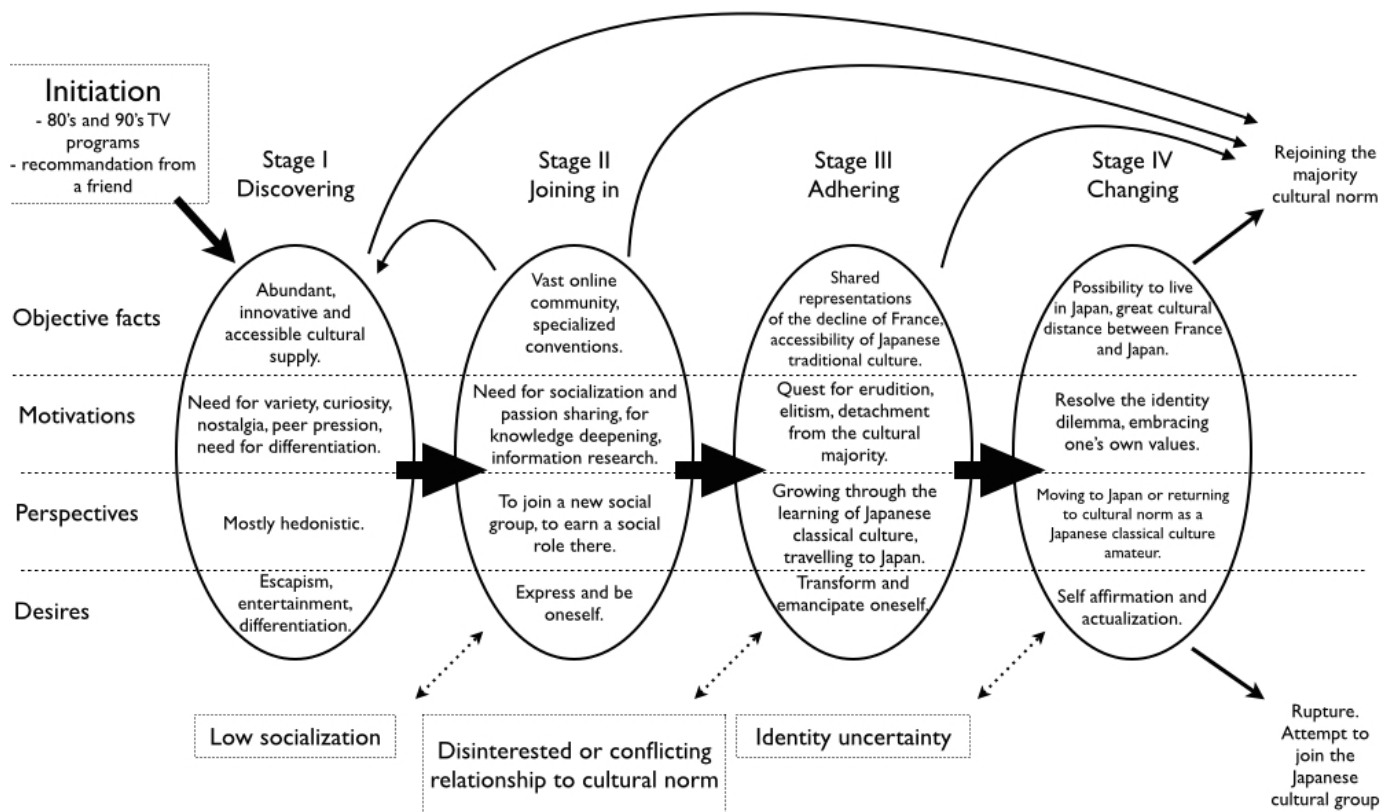
### *3.3 Stage III, « adhering » : the assimilation of a subculture's ethos based on a fantasy Japanese value system*

The passing to stage III depends on the nature of the mangaphile's relationship to the cultural majority. If this relationship is either characterized by disinterest or conflict, the mangaphile may assimilate the subculture's ethos which is build upon a distorted Japanese value system. This biased representation of the Japanese value system is due to a limited knowledge within the community which is mainly nourished by the mangas' meliorative imagery. The subculture's ethos exalts tolerance, solidarity, respect and chivalry, and opposes the French cultural majority which is perceived as lacking these values. At this stage, people consume more Japanese traditional culture and tend to become Japanophile as they learn to like other Japanese cultural products than mangas. Acculturation processes are induced by the community : people value learning Japanese, eating Japanese authentic food, etc. Their motivations and perspectives are mostly driven by the need to detach themselves from the cultural majority. Their desires are related to a self transformation that allows their emancipation from the cultural majority constraints.

### *3.4 Stage IV, « changing » : a quest for self affirmation and actualization through the consumption of Japanese cultural products*

The passing to this stage is greatly influenced by identity tensions experienced by the mangaphile/Japanophile. The data shows that members of ethnic minorities might be more likely to develop identity uncertainty due to their consumption of Japanese cultural goods. In this stage, the central motivations and perspectives are related to resolving an identity dilemma (« should I leave France for Japan ? »). Nevertheless, the Japanese sociocultural conditions do not make social and cultural integration for foreigners easy. So, some mangaphiles/Japanophiles try to move to Japan (in this case, the motivation is to achieve complete acculturation) but the majority stays in France and finally returns to the cultural majority as an amateur of Japanese culture (which is an widely accepted social position more easy to hold). Data shows

that consumers who went through this stage often declare having « changed » and feel way



better about themselves than before the beginning of the career.

### Conclusion

In this research, we argued for the use of the notion of career in interpretive consumer research. Careers take into account consumers' perceptions, definitions and experiences but also allow their objectivation and integration into a global perspective through a systematic comparative approach. This notion makes the articulation between individual, micro-social and macro-social levels of analysis easier by confronting objective facts and individual experiences. The analytical framework (objective facts, motivations, perspectives and desires) used by Becker (1963) allows a deep understanding of the variety of consumer trajectories within the same consumption activity. Each stage of the career has its own dynamics and is influenced by specific social structures or individual characteristics. Indeed, this notion reminds us the fact that consumer trajectories are very complex : motives for consumption as much as consumer goals and aspirations always evolve, regress and sometimes abruptly disappear. Thanks to its plastic, analytical and processual nature, the notion of career seems particularly relevant to study consumption subcultures and activities that involve identity construction : that is, the bread and butter of interpretive consumer research.

Figure 1. The mangaphile career.

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