Big, Thick, Small… are Data What Really Matters?

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Every now and then, disciplines are radically revised thanks to the introduction of new paradigms and theoretical or methodological currents. At this very moment, big data and data analytics pillars are turning upside down the foundation of our discipline, from management, data analysis and interpretation perspectives (Kitchin and McArdle, 2016). These new methodologies are usually counterposed to more traditional ones – with the extreme opposite being qualitative data born from ethnographic research – that try to defend their value in terms of complementarity with respect to quantitative data that aim to better understand consumer behavior (Wang, 2016).

We are witnessing a transformation in our marketing departments through the generation of new content, programs and degree courses that can better provide the competencies now required in the job market, which asks for a more quantitative and multidisciplinary outlook capable of confronting various business roles. Research needs to open up to new methodologies, ones that are able to take advantage of these new opportunities, in order to understand our digital society. The current debate on which method should be considered the most appropriate to approach marketing research – and thus how to transfer its knowledge to our students – is not a trivial one. When a new paradigm emerges along with new resources, it is important not to fall into the mistake of focusing on its myth and believing it to be the best and only means by which to observe our reality.

In a very detailed way, Thompson (forthcoming) shows the paradox of the big data "myth". While acknowledging its impact and its value compared to previous quantitative predecessors (i.e., geodemographic segmentation systems and Bayesian analyses of scanner data), he explains in a clear and in-depth way how big data analytics fails in understanding the new structures of the markets (e.g., hybrid economies, platform capitalism, emergent markets,

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unorthodox use of brand and brand meanings) and "directs marketers' attention away from this sweeping structural complexity, suggesting instead that the socio-technical innovations that produce these voluminous, heterogenous interlinked databases do nothing more than leave a comprehensive digital ledger of real-time consumer behavior and reveal preferences".

The outcome of this hegemony is the risk of overestimating the capability of big data analytics to interpret consumer behavior and underestimating the role of other pillars of the marketing discipline. For the big data myth, the digital technologies provide the platform and the stage for consumers' actions, decisions, and preferences in a way that can be easily traced and measured. For the opposing tradition of the "thick data" perspective, it is reductionist to measure analytically something that is emotionally and culturally multifaceted (Thompson, forthcoming). Supporters of the "thick description" are struggling to defend their value against quantitative data (Wang, 2016). Their strategy, however, may be ineffective, as it appears as a mere comparison of competing sets of techniques and methodologies and not as fresh and compelling ways of looking at consumers. What Thompson (forthcoming) suggests, especially to the different groups of culturally-oriented marketing scholars – and that I extend as a general recommendation to other subfields – is to promote a different ontological frame, able to provide a comprehensive and accurate overview of the new kinds of emergent and hybrid market structures. This could be fruitful both in the academic and applied contexts, in both culturally and psychologically related issues, and could help managers and researchers to understand how socio-technical infrastructures shape consumers' behavior, how everyday practices are shaped by technology and how technology works in a given way.

Streams of research and epistemologies survive when they are able to provide a solid argumentation and good answers to new questions. Are we sure that techniques are enough for this kind of job? What the field of marketing needs is multiple and competing ontologies, able to explain how consumers build their identities, how the markets are shaped, and where and how the power can be located. If we overcome the narrow views of just "measuring," we can consider that there is the possibility of including multiple techniques even in different ontologies. Relying on the parallel concept of Foucault's analytics of power (1979), Thompson (forthcoming) proposes to use the idea of the *analytics of market assemblages,* as in his view it is capable of including and explaining the role of big data. He writes: "From a market assemblage standpoint, big data are the digital traces of consumers' mobilizing (and simultaneously being mobilized by) a network of market-mediated actants and these territorialized figurations need not extend beyond the par-

ticular network of relationships in which they are assembled". This perspective puts emphasis on movements, relationships, flows, mobilities, experiences, and object-centered views rather than consumer-centric ones, and appears suitable for studying power relations and the norms of reciprocity.

A similar suggestion – to develop strong and solid ontological pillars that can provide a comprehensive understanding of the digital world – can be extended to the marketing field in general and not limited to the culturally oriented groups of researchers that, at first sight, appear to be the ones more "endangered" by the big data wave. Any subfield, at this point, requires a new way of looking at the market, its structures and the relationships between the different actors.

Along with this argument, though, another issue intertwines with it and makes it even more challenging. On a different ontological level, we are also interrogating ourselves on the contribution that marketing in general is producing for our society and, in particular, its efficacy in generating theories, knowledge and managerial implications able to really better consumers' lives (Weingarden, 2018). Our discipline is required to develop new research instruments and to adopt new perspectives enabling us to observe and interpret relevant phenomena, not just original ones (Friedman, 2017; Campbell, 2017). Above all, what is needed is a novel focus on the individual, aimed at researching how to resolve central problems for human beings and society at a large not just for the academic world (e.g, Inman, Campbell, Kirmani and Price, 2018).

This newfound tension toward the focus on the individual and his or her needs has important implications, especially in consumer research, its priorities, goals and boundaries. It is believed that too much emphasis has been put on the search for new results, the production of new theories and the presentation of new contexts, without considering the relevance of their originality (Campbell, 2017; Shavitt, 2011). Therefore, no long-term programs have been created for the promotion of more programmatic research approach, the only type capable of producing true scientific knowledge.

The invitation to adopt new methods and perspectives, allowing the understanding of phenomena and behaviors with a more critical approach, aims to call upon relevant and rigorous research capable of generating social impact. These calls have also been made at the international level in two of the most important journals in the field, the *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Consumer Research*. This topic is no longer limited to discussion in small groups (e.g., *Transformative Consumer Research Group*), but also during the annual conferences of the AMA. They affirm emerging voices speaking from multiple points of view: from the consumers themselves, who ask to be heard by companies, to various authors proposing to reframe the way consumption has been studied, which has underestimated the weight given

to practices compared to more cognitive dimensions related to the sphere of decision making. If heard, our discipline would benefit from these voices, since it could receive inspiration from real problems, replicating and intercepting quality data in every domain, whatever its nature.

From this point of view, marketing research in Italy has multiple opportunities. It can follow the emerging trend or turn toward a future based on courage of exploring multiple ontologies able to confronting each other rigorously and critically on their capability to generate social value.

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