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“And may the odds be always in your favour”:

What “*The Hunger Games*”-trilogy can teach us about today's

marketing academia

By

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ABSTRACT

Some consumer researchers suggested in the 1980s that fictional novels and artworks would tell us more about consumer behaviour, life and the human condition than scientific papers in our top-tier journals. Following in their tradition, this critical paper argues that “*The Hunger Games*”-trilogy provides a perfect mirror for *The Publishing Games* that haunt marketing academia in recent years. Just like the Hunger Games are the means by which the Capitol's ruling elite subdues Panem's wider population, the Publishing Games seem to reinforce the dominance of what an established scholarly elite perceives to be the appropriate marketing thought and methodology – perhaps to the detriment of innovation, creativity and broader impact within marketing academia. This paper suggests that marketing scholars have the choice: Either to sacrifice your integrity and play the game or to subvert the system. Perhaps a new consumer behaviour odyssey is needed to rekindle a new way of thinking...

Keywords: The Hunger Games, marketing academia, the academic ‘publishing games’, academic integrity vs. career,

“And may the odds be always in your favour”: What “*The Hunger Games*”-trilogy can teach us about today’s marketing academia

“And may the odds be always in your favour!”

(Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 2008)

Introduction

Following in the wake of JK Rowling’s ‘*Harry Potter*’-series and Stephanie Meyer’s ‘*Twilight*’-series, Suzanne Collins’s dystopian ‘*Hunger Games*’-trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010) has already become commercially the next big literary success story in the vital young adult market (Springen, 2010, 2012). Indeed, even though it was only released by Bloomsbury as a dark horse with little expectations and, therefore, with virtually no real marketing support, the first book ‘*The Hunger Games*’ (2008) managed to outperform even ‘*Breaking Dawn*’, the much anticipated and heavily marketed final instalment in the ‘*Twilight*’-series (Sellers, 2008). Since then, each of the three novels – ‘*The Hunger Games*’ (2008), ‘*Catching Fire*’ (2009) and ‘*Mockingjay*’ (2010) – has not only topped all the leading bestseller lists upon release for at least 9 consecutive weeks (Springen, 2012), but combined they have also sold more than 50 million print and digital copies in the US alone (van Straaten, 2012). And despite originally been aimed at a slightly older teenage market, ‘*The Hunger Games*’-trilogy appeals to a much broader and diverse audience of teenage and adult, male and female readers – just like the ‘*Harry Potter*’-books previously (Brown, 2005). Still, it seems that in particular female readers in North America are captivated by the heroine Katniss Everdeen’s struggle and fight for survival – and that of those people close to her – in the dystopian future state of Panem and have devoured the three books wholeheartedly (Dominus, 2011; Miller, 2010). Moreover, the film adaptation of the first book, which premiered on 23rd March 2012, has become one of 2012’s commercially most successful and profitable films by generating US\$ 435 million in revenues at the US box office alone on total production costs of US\$ 50 million (Mumford, 2012). And due to a clever marketing campaign based on social media and word-of-mouth, the film adaptation of the second book ‘*Catching Fire*’ is exceeding all expectations since its cinematic release on 21st November 2013. Thus, the films’ producers and distributors have decided to follow in the footsteps of the ‘*Harry Potter*’- and ‘*Twilight*’-films and to split the adaptation of the final book into two films (Mumsford, 2012). But on this occasion I’m not interested in examining the marketing campaign behind this trilogy, although it is as intriguing as the one behind the ‘*Harry Potter*’-series (Brown, 2001, 2002, 2005; Brown & Patterson, 2010). In line with Dunn and Michaud (2012), I propose instead that the fictional narrative of ‘*The Hunger Games*’-trilogy offers a fascinating theoretical prism through which we can gain valuable insights into various current human phenomena.

In what already looks like a long forgotten past, a few visionary marketing scholars (Belk, 1986, 1987; Brown, 1996, 2005, 2007; Hirschman, 1988, 2000; Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1993; Mick, 1986) have taken inspiration from the Humanities and argued that we could learn much more about marketing, consumer behaviour, real life and the human condition from a fictional novel or any other piece of artwork than from the many ‘scientific’ papers that fill the pages of our top-tier marketing journals. Not only do I fully agree with their viewpoint, but fictional literature, films, theatre plays, songs and any other artworks can provide us to obtain deeper insights into who we are, who we have become and who we would like to be(come) by opening an alternative window into our inner self as an individual person as much as into the ‘reality’ of our environment that we take for granted (Hansen, 1986; Nowell-Smith, 2000). And ‘*The Hunger Games*’-trilogy is particularly well-suited to teach us marketing scholars some really valuable lessons about the present situation

in marketing academia and the path we are taking. Indeed, this critical paper demonstrates how the narrative of '*The Hunger Games*'-trilogy presents us with an excellent analogy for the 'Publishing Games' that are at the heart of today's marketing academia and drive not only the review process at our leading journals, but also the ever-growing obsession with journal rankings and dubious research quality assessment exercises. First, I briefly introduce the context and narrative setting of Panem to all those readers that are not so familiar with '*The Hunger Games*'. Then, I discuss in more detail how '*The Hunger Games*'-narrative holds up a perfect mirror to the underlying ideology-driven policies and practices of the 'Publishing Games' in today's marketing academia. In doing so, I also examine whether '*The Hunger Games*' can offer an explanation why a previously heteroglossic movement like Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is increasingly moving towards a narrow homoglossic agenda while adapting the same political practices they initially set out to denounce. Finally, instead of continuing to play the publishing games and to pander to the obsession with journal rankings and other deceptive research quality assessment criteria, as Shankar (2009) suggests, I call on marketing scholars to (re-)embrace the scholarly virtues of intellectual curiosity, sensitivity, integrity and staying true to their research ideals.

Welcome to Panem!

Suzanne Collins's dystopian trilogy is set in the future state of Panem that is governed by the dictatorial rule of an unelected president and his cronies. Panem is said to have emerged from the ashes of North America, which had been devastated by an unspecified apocalyptic event and the brutal war for the remaining scarce resources that followed, in order to bring peace and prosperity to the people. It consists of a big, rich and 'shining' Capitol surrounded by initially 13 districts, which supply it with the goods from the specific industry that each district is specialised in (i.e. farming, fishing, mining, carpentry, textiles, energy, etc.). While the Capitol's citizens tend to work in retailing, beauty, fashion, the media or civil service, most of their time is devoted to the consumption of fashion, leisure and entertainment. True to the economic ideals of neo-liberalism, the wealth of the Capitol is supposed to trickle down to even the remotest districts and benefit every citizen. But it seemed that Panem was not such a peaceful, prosperous place for most people outside the Capitol after all, as the 13 districts started an uprising against the Capitol approximately 75-80 years before the events in the books, which became known as the '*Dark Days*'. However, the military might of the Capitol eventually defeated 12 of the districts and, supposedly, obliterated District 13¹. To guarantee peace and prevent another uprising, Panem's authorities passed the '*Treaty of Treason*', a set of punitive laws to ensure that each district is governed by a government-appointed mayor and policed by a strong presence of '*peacekeepers*' (= the military). But chief amongst those punitive laws are the 'Hunger Games' – an annual televised game that is dressed up as a festive celebration of the end of the 'dark days', but is in truth a reminder to the people in the districts that the Capitol is in charge.

In punishment for the uprising, each district must each year provide a girl and a boy between 12 and 18 years of age as 'tributes'. The 24 tributes are imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that '*can hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland*' (Collins, 2008), where they have to fight against each other to the death. The last one standing wins. The trilogy's story of protagonist Katniss Everdeen and her family and friends in the poor mining

¹ The final book, '*Mockingjay*', reveals that the Capitol had made a secret deal with District 13, in which the latter received their independence. Because District 13 was in charge of nuclear energy, they had threatened to use their stockpile of nuclear weapons against the Capitol. And since District 13's entire population has moved underground into an elaborate bunker system, the Capitol could officially claim victory by showing filmic evidence of the district's total destruction across Panem.

District 12 starts with the run-up to the 74th Hunger Games. While the people in the districts are still forced to watch their tributes ‘competing for the district’s glory’, the hunger games have become a massive TV spectacle for the blissfully ignorant citizens of the Capitol. For them, it is a major entertaining part of their consumer culture, which bestows previously ‘unknowns’, the tributes, with 15 minutes of fame and turns the winner into a popular celebrity. Hence, they consume the hunger games by betting on individual tributes, collect their autographs (or even more) and engage in ritualistic spectatorship for pleasure. One of those popular rituals is the ‘cheery’, but in fact cynical ‘encouragement’: “*And may the odds be always in your favour!*” In each district, the unfortunate teenagers are greeted with it at their ‘Reaping’, the ceremonious public lottery, right before a boy and a girl from their midst are drawn to ‘represent’ their district as tributes in the Hunger Games – to give them hope by reminding them of the chances that their name may *not* be drawn. The 24 tributes, then, get to hear “*And may the odds be always in your favour!*” again at the official opening ceremony, when the president publicly addresses them with these words to cheer them up and remind them of the riches that await the winner.

The point is that, depending on your social and regional background, the odds usually tend to be stacked against you. Firstly, the teenagers’ names are not entered in equal numbers into the lottery bowls at the Reaping. Indeed, not only does the number of their names entered in the lottery increase by one with each year they get older, but poorer teenagers are also offered the opportunity to buy a person’s annual food ration for each additional time they enter their name into the lottery. All these accumulated entries are then carried over to all subsequent years as well. Thus, the poorer the family, the more mouths to feed and the older the teenager, the more often is his/her name in the lottery and the bigger is his/her chance to be drawn. Secondly, even though rich rewards may await the winner, each of the 24 tributes knows only too well that only one of them can win while the other 23 will be dead. But, thirdly, the odds are even less in favour of most tributes, since the teenagers from the rather well-off districts 1, 2 and 4, the so-called ‘careers’, are essentially raised and trained their entire lives for taking part in and winning the Hunger Games. Although it is against the rules to train in advance for the games, the authorities kindly overlook this infringement because District 1 and 2 supply the Capitol not only with energy and jewellery, but also with well-trained peacekeepers – hence, their comparative wealth. And besides knowing how to kill your competitors most ruthlessly and efficiently, the careers’ training also involves learning how to win the favours of the sponsors that supply tributes in the arena with urgently required food, water, medicine and weapons. In short, they know how to ‘play the game’. Needless to say, the tributes from the poorer districts, like the protagonists Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, lack all those special preparations and survival skills and, hence, are placed at a severe disadvantage right from the start! No, the odds are generally not in your favour...

‘The Publishing Games’

Following this brief contextual synopsis, it should not take much imagination to see how ‘*The Hunger Games*’-trilogy offers an excellent analogy and mirror for the ‘Publishing Games’, which are the underlying ideology-driven policies, practices and other shenanigans in today’s marketing academia that govern the review process at our leading (but increasingly also at conferences and lower-ranked) journals (Firat, 2010) as well as our growing obsession with journal rankings and formalised research quality assessment exercises (Lee, 2011; Saunders & Wong, 2011). For some time now, marketing academics around the world have bought religiously into the dogma that only studies published in our field’s top-tier journals could be regarded as world-leading, original, novel and innovative research of the highest quality (Rosenstreich & Wooliscraft, 2012; Saunders & Wong, 2011). In fact, irrespective of

whether there is any real proof to support such a claim, young researchers and junior faculty are not only advised by university research policies and senior academics at the conferences' doctoral colloquia to submit their work only to those select few journals, but they are also encouraged to believe that they all have an equal chance of getting their work published in these prestigious outlets – assuming, of course, that it is original, novel and '*high in quality*' (Lee, 2011; Saunders & Wong, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014). From here, it does not take much extrapolation to suspect that soon these '*academic tributes*' are also greeted with the cynical words "*And may the odds be always in your favour!*" Similar to '*The Hunger Games*', however, the truth is that – unless you are one of the fortunate 'careers', who are enrolled or employed at one of those select self-styled 'elite' universities that prepare their doctoral students and junior faculty for the 'Publishing Games' by training them in how to tick the right boxes with editors and reviewers and how to adopt the methodological approaches that are popular with the journals and who are fortunate enough to be mentored personally and 'initiated' into the field's tight-knit inner circle by one of its leading academics (Brown, 2012; Thompson et al., 2014) – the odds are generally stacked against most new researchers, who are not affiliated with this tightly-knit inner circle or who even come from a different cultural background (Brown, 2012; Firat, 2010). But, sad to say, the odds these days are even worse for those '*academic tributes*' whose preferred methodological approach (Heaven forbid!) departs from the mainstream paradigms and conventions espoused by the editors and reviewers of our field's leading academic journals or, lately, even conferences (Brown, 2012; Firat, 2010; Lee, 2011) – which is a curse that has always been true for introspective research approaches (Gould, 1991; 2008; Holbrook, 1995, 1998, 2006), but is now threatening other interpretivist/subjectivist research approaches like ethnography and phenomenology, too.

Inspired by the (in)famous Consumer Behaviour Odyssey, the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of various exciting new qualitative, postmodern, constructivist, interpretivist and subjectivist methodological approaches, which ranged from grounded theory over semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, literary criticism, critical theory, ethnography, (existential-) phenomenology, action theory and netnography to photographic essays, videography and subjective personal introspection and were eventually brought together under the umbrella of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Thompson et al., 2014). And, despite strong resistance from traditional circles, they enjoyed widespread publication. But since 2003, with politically enforced research assessment exercises (RAE) and research excellence frameworks (REF) placing an ever growing emphasis on journal rankings (Lee, 2011; Saunders & Wong, 2011; Shankar, 2009), virtually all leading top-tier marketing journals – including the previously very open Journal of Consumer Research – have under the cloak of '*promoting original, innovative and novel*' research become increasingly reluctant to accept any papers for publication that do not follow the traditional quantitative, neo-scientific (or rather scientific) methodological approach(es). In fact, even those journals immediately below the top-tier line, such as the European Journal of Marketing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Advertising or even the Journal of Marketing Management, have begun to follow a similar editorial approach in fear of losing their status (Firat, 2010; Lee, 2011). Thus, it comes to no surprise that the current members of the CCT movement's 'inner circle', who – like anyone else – are also in desperate need to secure their own top journal publications (Shankar, 2009), increasingly define the quality criteria for what would constitute appropriate, contemporary research projects in the field (Askegaard & Linne, 2011; Thompson et al., 2014) to meet presumed journal policies. While in particular introspective research approaches have always only been tolerated on the fringes, content reviews of the recent ACR and CCT conference programmes and CCT-oriented journals clearly show – under the guise of a so-called '*emic-etic debate*' – a strong move towards a narrow(er)

homogeneous socio-economic constructivist paradigm that is very much in sync with the very same research interests of certain influential members at the heart of the CCT community (Brown, 2012). Thus, the odds for interpretive research projects using more emic approaches like ethnography or phenomenology have dropped significantly in the last three to five years.

Catching Fire

Personally, I have never really bought into the belief that our top-tier journals such as *JCR*, *JM*, *JMR* and *MS* would actually publish any genuinely original, novel and innovative research. There are too many cases where the same methodological approaches, conceptual ideas or theories that were heralded as original and ground-breaking after appearing in those journals had already been published years earlier, either in a lower-ranked journal or in a publication like *Advances in Consumer Research*. Thus, the main role of the leading journals rather appears to be that of ideological and political gatekeepers for the academic discipline's establishment, who assign official approval to new ideas, methodologies, concepts or theories and, thereby, to signify and legitimise their acceptance by the mainstream. But more often than not, their primary job is to maintain the status quo. From this point of view, it is quite telling that Gould's (1991) famous *JCR* paper still remains to this very day the only paper using introspection that has ever appeared in one of our top journals and, subsequently, has faced stern criticism from all sides (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). Indeed, it can safely be said that introspective research is considered today as much a controversial detour pursued by a few mavericks as it was the case when Holbrook began his ACR trilogy in 1986. But, now, research manuscripts using previously accepted interpretive methodologies such as ethnography and existential-phenomenology are increasingly treated in a similar manner, as can be witnessed in Askegard and Linnet (2011) and Thompson et al. (2014) for example. But much worse than the official published criticism are the hidden prejudices and ideology-driven obstacles that arise as the real roadblocks when submitting an introspective, ethnographic or phenomenological paper for review. While the review process purports to evaluate the quality of each submitted paper *on its own merits*, the common habits of reviewers and editors, for example, ensure the rejection of introspective research papers by strategies that range from assessing their quality based on quantitative research criteria to requesting the author(s) to turn their papers, which study phenomena using introspection, into conceptual treatises that offer another philosophical defence for using introspective research. Of course, the implied changes to such a paper loom too large to permit even the most lukewarm invitation to revise and resubmit. Likewise, a genuine phenomenological or ethnographic study is dismissed for being *too much grounded in consumers' emic narratives* and not imposing a critical (meta-)theoretical lens onto the data – with Foucault, Bourdieu or Adorno being the preferred choice – to expose broader hidden social power relations (Thompson et al., 2014). Just like in the 'Hunger Games', the goalposts and rules are moved quickly to prevent an 'undesired' paper from being accepted. No, if you use emic research approaches like phenomenology, ethnography or introspection to gain genuine insights into a phenomenon, the odds are clearly not in your favour.

Mockingjay

The question, thus, is why – despite all this – junior academics as the 'tributes' of today's marketing academia should follow in the footsteps of Holbrook (1995, 2006), Gould (2008), Belk (1987, 1988) or Brown (2005, 2007). After all, from an academic career perspective, this move could be described as the equivalent of entering the *Hunger Games* arena without any basic weapon and survival training – in other words, plain suicide. So, why have I put my faith in introspection, for example? Is it a reflection of my rebellious streak and 'difficult'

anti-establishment attitudes? Well, I can assure the reader that I'm definitely not a mockingjay (Collins, 2010). I'm sure that a Jennifer Lawrence would never take a first or second look at me; nor would I be a symbol (and/or leader) of a rebellion. No, the answer is actually much simpler and more personal than that. At a time, when I had become disillusioned with the traditional scientific research approaches and their detached artificial depictions of consumers that had guided my earlier research (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2006, 2007), it was Holbrook's (1987) *'25-Cent-Tour of a Jazz Collector's Home'* that really captured my imagination and inspired and influenced the current direction of my own research, my way of thinking and my personal style of academic writing. Its simplicity, its honesty and its subjective writing style "*felt good to read*" (Holbrook, 1991) and allowed me, as a reader, to mentally and emotionally relate to the narrative account of how the role of jazz music in his everyday life is manifested by a collection of jazz records that have slowly invaded his physical living-space. This rang true to me, as I just needed to replace jazz records with films-on-DVD for him to be effectively describing the role of film in my everyday life. Apart from introducing me to introspective research as an alternative methodology for understanding of consumer behaviour, these were actually the first academic publications in marketing and consumer research that touched something inside me, that truly spoke to me, and that genuinely opened my eyes to the everyday wonders in a consumer's mundane consumption experiences and practices. The presented narrative and voice of an individual consumer's personal consumption experiences feels more real, natural, true and insightful than the various artificial or imposed consumer depictions provided by the traditional 'scientific' (often scientific) scholarship (Holbrook, 1988). Allowing the reader to engage personally with the presented consumer narrative and getting to hear a consumer's real voice is one facet that sets introspective, phenomenological and any other interpretivist research approaches apart from other (usually detached and/or elitist) academic approaches. Just like Holbrook's introspective writing was inspired by his *Grandfather's Log* (Holbrook, 1991), I knew instinctively that I "*would like to try something similar*" as well. Indeed, none of my recent publications (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2008, 2011, 2012) – of which I'm genuinely proud of (not because they were published in journals but because I truly believe that they are well-written papers) – would have never seen the light of day if it weren't for Holbrook's work (1986, 1987, 1995, 2005, 2006) – and I owe a lot of gratitude to him for his patience and for the tons of constructive advice he has given me over the past years.

But because research approaches such as introspection, phenomenology and ethnography with their focus on concrete emic knowledge may have more in common with the literary tradition of autobiographic, documentary or even fictional writing, Brown (1998) has always argued that their scholarly quality should be judged on artistic rather than scientific criteria. Because of this, it seems highly unlikely that any of those research approaches will (re-)gain the badge of approval from the powers at our (conservative) top-tier journals anytime soon. So, why should anyone these days continue embracing interpretivist or subjectivist research approaches instead of, as Shankar (2009) strongly advocates, opting for a less controversial and more 'career-friendly' methodologies? Well, I would argue that is purely a question of academic integrity (Holbrook, 1998). If I must play the 'Publishing Games', then – just like Katniss and Peeta (or Johanna Mason in *'Catching Fire'*), instead of fulfilling the authorities' expectations, have decide to play the Hunger Games on their own terms – I would rather do it on my own terms and stay true to my research ideal and myself rather than pandering to 'popular demand' and turning into someone that I am not. My advice to new researchers and those who have remained young at heart, thus, is to forego the short-term rewards promised by the publishing games and to follow instead your passion, which is the reason you got into academia in the first place. Embrace your curiosity and creativity, whatever your preferred

research approach is. Maybe we need to reconsider our obsession with journal rankings and rebalance the power by submitting our work consciously to other journals and outlets – thereby starving the top-tier journals of supply. What is more important for our work – being published in a specific journal or being read by a wide(r) audience? The unspoken truth is that papers in our top-tier journals are only read by a narrow group of like-minded academics (Shankar 2009). Perhaps what we really need is for a new group of marketing scholars to embark on a new consumer behaviour odyssey – nearly 30 years after the original changed the marketing discipline – to get back in touch with how marketing and consumer behaviour is really lived and experienced by ordinary people and companies in the real world? But until then, may the odds be always in your favour!

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