Transformative Consumer Culture Theory?
Session Chair: Julie Ozanne, Virginia Tech
Discussion Leader: Craig Thompson (and Eric Arnould), University of Wisconsin (University of Nebraska)

Transformative Consumer Culture Theory? Co-chairs: Julie L. Ozanne and Susan Dobscha
Discussants: Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson
“We are What They Consume: The Neglect of the Non-consumers” June N. P. Francis
This paper argues that the field’s current focus on consumers provides only a limited perspective on the effects of consumption activities. It ignores the culturally or economically marginalized groups who may not be consumers but are affected by these consumption activities. For example, drawing on social identity theory, the paper suggests that some consumption acts may be used to provide a positive image for the consuming group at the expense of the group whose image is affected by the consumption. “Communities Beyond the Brand” Eileen Fischer and Lisa Peñaloza
Considerable recent work investigates the ways in which particular brands form the basis for communities. This paper re-examines research on communities that are not based upon brands, in particular, studies concerned with communities of marginalized racial and ethnic minorities. It explores the transformative potential of consumer research on marginalized racial/ethnic communities, and suggests how Consumer Culture Theory can benefit from more explicitly acknowledging social and market oppositions in communities, thereby advancing its critical potential. “Transformational Theory and Methodology” Jeff B. Murray and Julie L. Ozanne
We propose “interpretive structuralism” as a method for critical theory and transformative consumer research (Morrow and Brown 1994). This approach embraces insights from both hermeneutics and structuralism. The interpretive tradition emphasizes idiographic interpretations of social beings that contextualizes and localizes social action. But the hermeneutical tradition refuses to engage in social critique or offer paths for social change. The structural tradition offers insights into the relationship between agency and structure and gives avenues for connecting our theories to practical social action. By way of illustration, we present the results of an analysis of a depth interview using interpretive structuralism.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12452/volumes/v33/NA-33

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

Transformative Consumer Culture Theory?

Julie L. Ozanne, Virginia Tech
Susan Dobscha, Bentley College

SESSION OVERVIEW

Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson (2005) offer a synthesizing overview of the past twenty years of consumer research addressing the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. By entitling their article Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research, they emphasize the theoretical and conceptual contributions of interpretive research. This project is important for three reasons. First, an overview explicitly acknowledges and celebrates the many contributions of interpretive researchers. Second, this review provides a conceptual map of what has become a very complex field. This map may help newcomers better position their research for publication and funding. Finally, this paper provides an opportunity for our community to reflect upon our past and envision our future. The purpose of this session is to imagine a more transformative CCT and to chart possible courses toward this destination.

While we applaud that the CCT framework highlighted consumer resistance and ideology as one significant stream of research, the unintended consequence was an emphasis on a narrow view of critical research programs. From a critical perspective, an emancipatory interest underlies all research activities. Critical theory is more than just a critique of ideology; it is a sensibility that can be brought to a wide range of topics. Moreover, all observation presupposes interpretation, which also presupposes the freedom needed to interpret and use knowledge. Thus, empirical-analytic, hermeneutic-historical, and critical-emancipatory interests (Habermas 1971) guide the construction of all consumer culture theory over the last twenty years. Arnould and Thompson (2005) implicitly acknowledge that the empirical-analytic and hermeneutic-historical interests cut across all four categories. Yet, this same assumption is not made for the critical-emancipatory interest, which becomes encapsulated in a fourth category and bled of its transformative potential.

The three following papers are united in their transformative goals: they seek to critique consumer and social practices toward improving society and the lives of consumers. These papers draw on insights from a range of critical approaches such as, community studies, reflexive interpretive methods and action research, and feminist and critical theory research (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Peñaloza 1994; Stern 1993, 1996). In each of the papers, the substantive and theoretical issues discussed span across all four categories in the CCT typology. Each paper is also united in its focus on the struggle of people to control the meanings that inform their identity and sense of community.

June Francis’ suggests that a field centered on the consumption of the “haves” both silences marginal voices and fails to see the harm caused to them by those people who consume the most. Eileen Fischer and Lisa Peñaloza contrast work on brand communities with communities of marginalized ethnic/racial minorities. Jeff Murray and Julie Ozanne promote and delineate interpretive structuralism as one possible method for transformational research.

This session challenges the field to think through what consumer behavior can and cannot do to transform our communities and societies. We explore how the market as an institution is configured socially and economically vis a vis public and community interests, and how these configurations impact consumer behavior. Clearly, not all consumers are positioned equivalently in society, and thus another vital consumer behavior issue is how consumer behavior arrests and/or reproduces extant market and social relations. What is under-examined is the actual and potential ability of consumers to engage in the transformation of social practices and social structure, and to what degree this happens at the level of individual and community action.

These papers seek to explore ways to reduce human suffering (i.e., the transformative impulse) based on critique that is contextualized to the interests and historical circumstances of small, localized groups (the impulse of CCT). If suffering is caused by hegemonic meta-narratives, then this discourse can be destabilized by examining the dance between social actors’ subjective understandings and social structure and by seeking to identify fissures and tensions that can be used to forge new contextualized discourses that may alleviate suffering. While this new discourse could itself become oppressive, if it arrives from the voices of the participants and reduces suffering, then it is potentially better than a discourse that is imposed from outside (Agger 1994). We avoid grounding our critique on modern goals, such as rationality, and view the critical moment as never-ending; the goal is an immanent critique emphasizing freedom, justice, and equality, values that are inherent to our culture.

We anticipate that this session will appeal to researchers interested in interpretive and critical research, as well as people interested in social and public policy issues. Craig Thompson and Eric Arnould, as both authors of the CCT framework and experts in the area, are the ideal discussants who are well positioned to comment on research that seeks to extend their work.

ABSTRACTS

“We are what They Consume: The Neglect of the Non-consumers”

June N. P. Francis

The syntheses of the developments in the field of consumer behavior advanced by Arnould and Thompson (2005) is a timely and warranted contribution if viewed as a gauge of how far the field has come. However, the consumer research agenda suffers from “American myopia,” which dictates its research approach and agenda. This synthesis still reflects the field’s love affair with consumption and is rooted in the socio-cultural context of the developed world with a presumed access to the market consumption experience.

This perspective puts market consumption at the center of the discipline and, therefore, those who consume and what they consume become the focus. We are intrigued by their activities, motivations, and dispositions. We inquire into their perspectives. Certainly, the CCT research stream has served to provide even greater perspective by examining the consumer from a widened epistemological, paradigmatic, and methodological perspective, but the central actor remains the same—the consumer. This paper is concerned with one such bias, the field’s focus on consumers and consumption to the neglect of the marginal or non-consumers.

The act of consumption has intended and unintended consequences on those who do not consume. Some people, given their disproportionately lesser access to consumption, for economic, political or ideological reasons, are not considered as worthy of...
research attention. This approach neglects the effects of consumers on the non-consumer and in so doing adopts a capitalist driven paradigm that has consumption as the invisible hand allocating research attention and recourses. This paradigm also escapes the need for critique.

Why should consumer culture theory be concerned with the non-consumption experience? Many of the phenomena of consumption can only be understood from the perspective of the non-consumer, often those that are weaker economically or culturally marginalized. Economics determine which products get consumed and how. When “Bob Marley” as an icon gets consumed by an increasingly global world, then the citizens of Jamaica are cornered into accepting this image as their defining brand identity. Given our current approach of focusing on the consumers, it is really not possible to understand how foreigners wearing Bob Marley locks affect Jamaican self-identity and perhaps engenders cultural alienation from one’s own roots.

Consumer Culture Theory, as typified by the work of Belk (1988), points to the role that possessions and consumption play in creating and expressing identities. However, consumers not only affect their own identities but the identities of others. In describing the types of African films that get produced, Wiwa (2005) describes these films as “cinema village”–“films that play to the gallery with rustic, ritualized scenes, increasingly foreign and even offensive to many Africans.” He points to the appetite for these films in Europe as dictating the content and approach. The idea that the powerful dictate of market demand is, of course, not novel. However, when we focus only on the perspective of the consumers, we miss the role consumption experiences, such as these, have on those whose images are being consumed.

Power differences occur in a myriad of intercultural situations but they are perhaps most visible in tourism consumption. Here products acquired by one group from another group can serve to define the selling group’s identity. In tourists’ search for authenticity, often products or experiences that may no longer exist (Turkish Fez widely available in tourist shops in Istanbul) or never existed (feathered headdresses once sold as souvenirs by first nations tribes that had never worn such adornments) are often sought by nostalgic tourists. This search by the consumer, rather than being benign, often dictates the dimension of the culture that survives or, in some case, are even invented. Even those studies that are concerned with marginal consumers, such as Hill (1991), view the possession or lack of it. Thus they still focus on the consumption experience rather than the creation of identities among those who do not consume.

In conclusion, this paper argues for a widening of the perspective to ensure the voices of non-consumers who are significantly affected by consumption and may not qualify as consumers be examined and heard. This agenda would turn our focus to the non-western, developing world and to the culturally and economically marginalized peoples.

“Communities Beyond the Brand”
Eileen Fischer and Lisa Peñaloza

Consumer researchers have understandably demonstrated considerable interest in the phenomenon of communities based upon common consumption interests. An expanding body of work investigates the ways in which particular brands form the basis for communities (e.g. Kozinets 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). As characterized by Arnould and Thompson (2005), the work that focuses on marketplace cultures, of which studies of brand communities are a part, seeks to “unravel the processes by which consumer culture is instantiated in a particular cultural milieu” and to address “the ways in which consumer forge feelings of solidarity and creates… cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests.”

In the spirit of repositioning the CCT brand to highlight more transformative aspects of consumer research than has been (and is being) undertaken, this paper re-examines research on communities that are not based upon brands. In particular, it examines the questions raised and the theoretical projects developed by consumer research that is concerned with communities of marginalized racial and ethnic minorities (e.g. Peñaloza 1994; Oswald 1999; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). To be certain, the kinds of research on marginalized communities that is examined here were not ignored by Arnould and Thompson; rather, they were characterized in a manner that underemphasized the tensions and social conflicts at the heart of this work, thus compromising its critical potential.

Research on marginalized racial/ethnic communities can be contrasted with research on brand communities along multiple dimensions in order highlight this critical potential. For example, whereas research on brand communities is concerned with establishing how consumers create a sense of shared identity in relation to brands, research on marginalized communities looks at how shared identities based on race/ethnicity are configured in terms of social distinctions—exclusions and subordinations, and how/whether these social hierarchies are reconfigured in the course of community members’ engagements with market institutions and other consumers. While research on brand communities is concerned with how rituals evolve around the uses of branded products, research on racial/ethnic communities is concerned with how consumption behaviors impact patterned interactions with products and markets, subsequently reproducing and/or destabilizing the relationship of the marginal with the mainstream. And while studies of brand communities consider how a sense of moral responsibility can develop toward protecting a brand and those within the boundaries of its community, studies of marginalized racial/ethnic communities are concerned with the dynamics of community practices and ideologies as marginalized community members attempt to navigate new identities and transcend the limits of social and market representations and treatments through consumption and market engagement beyond their community boundaries.

This paper explores the transformative potential of consumer research on marginalized racial/ethnic communities, and suggests how the CCT brand can benefit from more explicitly acknowledging these social and market oppositions in advancing its critical potential.

“Transformational Theory and Methodology”
Jeff B. Murray and Julie L. Ozanne

Critical theory assumes that every form of social order includes relations of domination-subordination and that the critical-emancipatory interest underlies the struggle to change these relations. Given this basic assumption, critical theorists believe in the existence and influence of social structures, such as education, mass media, and fashion. They remain committed to some form of structuralism believing that social structures influence social actors and shape their social constructions of reality often without their knowledge or consent. In other words, critical theorists believe that part of the deep structure of every society is power and domination; it is the purpose of critical theory to excavate these relationships, reveal and explain them, hoping that awareness may eventually lead to transformation (Murray and Ozanne 1991). Thus, critical theory offers theories and methods that are compatible with the goal of transformative programs in consumer research.

Recently, in the wake of the postmodern turn, these assumptions have become increasingly difficult to justify. In fact, this is the key challenge for the most recent generation of critical theorists.
Researchers, such as Ben Agger, Stephen Best, Stephen Bronner, Douglas Kellner, and Mark Poster, are interested in reconstructing critical theory so as to embrace the critical insights of postmodernism. These theorists point to a number of primary contributions of postmodernism including an awareness of the repressive potential of meta-narratives, a critique of empiricist and realist accounts of representation, the importance of a reflexive theory of textual reading, and an emphasis on the self and identity.

This new generation of critical theorists seeks to revitalize critical theory by embracing insights from both hermeneutics and structuralism. They hold that social sciences must be based on interpretive foundations. The hermeneutical tradition emphasizes idiographic interpretations of unique social beings whose actions are contextualized and historical, and mediated through language (Arnold and Fischer 1994). But the hermeneutical tradition is silent on the goal of transformation; it refuses to engage in social critique or offer paths for social change. The structural tradition offers insights into the relationship between agency and structure and gives avenues for connecting our theories to practical social action.

In our presentation, we propose that this form of “interpretive structuralism” or “hermeneutic structuralism” (Morrow and Brown 1994) is an appropriate method for critical theory and transformative consumer research. This type of research helps to illuminate consumption cycles and marketplace behaviors. By way of illustration, we present the results of an analysis of a depth interview using interpretive structuralism. We discuss how this critical analysis fits all of Arnould and Thompson’s (2005) four categories: it is an identity project; which focuses on marketplace cultures; is part of the socio-historic patterning of consumption; and it is a critique of ideological reproduction, which enables a form of resistance. Clearly the critical transformative impulse spans substantive problems and theories.

We discuss the processes our informant used to seek out and create meaning useful for identity construction. The problems our informant encountered are all related to the struggle to maintain control of meanings needed to negotiate identity. Consumers seek and find meaning in their life world often through their consumption. These consumption signs are valuable resources for identity construction. Marketing researchers identify these signs and the “sign value” becomes systemized through marketing processes, such as appropriating the meaning of the sign and reshaping it in advertising (i.e., the sign is sanitized in order to appeal to broader market segments). The meanings are then uncoupled from the original life world of the consumer and become mobile, “floating signifiers.” These signifiers are then returned and marketed in the consumers’ life worlds, colonizing them, commodifying identity, and stripping the original meaning from their life world and identity. Thus, whoever controls the meaning of the signs influences the construction of individual and group identities.

But humans have the capacity for reflexivity; that is, they can reflect on their social behavior and change it. For example, if informants learn of the colonization of their life world, then they can jam the process of uncoupling. When humans discover that a social belief is false, they can alter their ideas and any social actions linked to these ideas. “From this it follows that criticism of false belief is a practical intervention in society, a political phenomenon in a broad sense of that term” (Giddens 1984, quoted in Morrow and Brown 1994).

In conclusion, Arnould and Thompson’s synthesis, although a useful starting point for some forms of interpretive research, does not represent the important range of alternatives for critical and transformative theory and method. This presentation will review interpretive structuralism as one such alternative.