Intersectionality is a paradigm that considers how multiple social systems co-determine the experience of human life. This article (1) charts a brief history of the paradigm, (2) distinguishes intersectional research from prior approaches, (3) organizes intersectionality’s ontological, axiological, epistemological, and methodological meanings, (4) delineates the anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical methodological approaches to intersectional research, (5) explores intersectionality’s general utility across the social sciences, and (6) offers specific implications for important topics in three consumer research paradigms: consumer vulnerability in Transformative Consumer Research, diversity issues in Consumer Psychology, and identity interpellation in Consumer Culture Theory.

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Intersectionality: Insights for Consumer Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Intersectionality is a research paradigm that considers how multiple social systems (such as race, class, gender, education, marital status, sexuality, religion, nationality, immigration status, disability, etcetera) co-determine the experience of human life (Collins 1986, 1990; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Over the past decade, numerous, diverse, and even conflicting definitions, methods, and applications of intersectionality have preoccupied social theorists and paradoxically popularized the paradigm across the social sciences (Davis 2008). In this article, we conduct a multidisciplinary review of literature on intersectionality to chart a brief history, distinguish it from prior perspectives, organize its various meanings, and delineate McCall’s (2005) tri-partite classification of (anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical) methodological approaches to intersectional research. Next, we consider the general intellectual utility of intersectionality across the social sciences and specific implications for important topics in three consumer research paradigms. We believe this line of inquiry is important for a number of reasons:

Proliferation. The intersectionality paradigm is gaining currency in theory, education, and practice. It has been hailed as the “most important contribution that women’s studies has made so far” (McCall 2005: p.1771). Major social science journals now expect intersectional approaches, while race-, class-, and gender-only studies can be seen as “theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical” and are thus often rejected (Davis 2008: p.68). Intersectionality is now also taught in introductory undergraduate and graduate courses (Ritzer 2007). Collins’ (1990) foundational text on intersectionality (Black Feminist Thought) has been discussed and applied widely across the social sciences (its citation count currently exceeds 3000), and in 2008, Collins became the 100th President of the American Sociological Association. Finally, though theory is several steps ahead of practice (Verloo 2006), legal awareness of intersectionality is slowly reformulating governance policies in domains such as affirmative action, human rights advocacy, and social work.

Conceptual confusion. Despite its “spectacular success,” Davis (2008: p.67) notes that intersectionality remains a confusing concept because it suffers from “ambiguity” and “incompleteness” (p.76). Hence, in this article, we aim to clarify the meanings of intersectionality by contrasting intersectional and non-intersectional approaches to social research and disentangling the paradigm’s ontological, axiological, epistemological, and methodological facets.

Methodological complexity. Acknowledging the intersectional nature of social systems challenges researchers to account for an incredible amount of phenomenological complexity. However, the task of intersectional research is itself also a complex endeavor requiring careful methodological considerations to make it comprehensible. McCall (2005) offers the most extensive review of methodological approaches to date. We build on her tripartite classification of approaches to develop a comparative framework that elaborates on the distinctive features of each approach.

Transferable utility. Thus far, intersectionality has been applied to a limited number of substantive topics. We argue that intersectionality can be applied to any systematic study of difference, among or within social systems, in economic, cognitive, social, or cultural processes, in quantitative or qualitative research.

Transformative Consumer Research (TCR). TCR (Mick 2006) is an emerging paradigm that emphasizes the public policy goal of achieving consumer welfare in an otherwise theoretical discipline of consumer research. To further bridge the transformative-theoretical divide, we discuss how intersectionality is particularly well suited to address the theoretical concern of consumer vulnerability, a top TCR priority.

Consumer Psychology. Diversity is an important but significantly overlooked domain of consumer psychology (Williams, Lee, and Henderson 2008). We suggest how future diversity research can be attuned to the intersectional nature of social categories without losing sight of consumer psychologists’ current methodological competencies (i.e. experimental and quantitative methods).

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The CCT paradigm (Arnould and Thompson 2005) has already begun to tacitly appropriate intersectional ways of thinking, especially studies of the sociohistoric patterning of consumption. In this article, we discuss less apparent implications for studies on identity interpolation.

The meanings of intersectionality. A multidisciplinary review of the current literature on intersectionality generates a plethora of nuanced meanings. Intersectionality has been described as a social phenomenon, a theoretical perspective, a set of normative guidelines, and a set of methodological practices. To encompass this wide array of meanings, we describe intersectionality as a paradigm and attempt to disentangle its ontological, axiological, epistemological, and methodological facets. The foundational ontological proposition of the intersectionality paradigm is that identity categories (American, European, Black, White, Poor, Working-class, Middle-class, Professional, Men, Women, Illiterate, Educated, Single, Married, Divorced, etcetera) are integrated in subjects (e.g., White Professional Men) and collude to produce unique social experiences, which cannot be adequately accounted for by the sum of essences (e.g. White-ness, Professional-ness, Masculinity) or the interaction effects at the level of systems (e.g. race, class, gender).

However, the intersectionality paradigm does not make a universal statement about the extent or manner in which systems of categories are integrated but contends that this question be left open to empirical investigation in context. The paradigm’s purpose is to highlight the prospect of partial to extensive integration of systems and to prescribe concepts and methods to investigate the extent and manner of such integration. In addition, the intersectionality paradigm also posits that the nature of being for any social subject is always multi-categorical, sometimes multi-level, internally heterogeneous, dynamic, crosscutting, and context-specific. In axiological terms, the paradigm is a two-fold political project to (1) reveal the matrix of privilege/oppression and (2) amplify the lived experience of marginalized individuals. For example, McCall (2001) empirically demonstrates the intersectional roles of race, class, gender, and context in producing wage inequality. The remainder of this article uses McCall’s (2005) tri-partite classification of (anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical) intersectional approaches to social research to organize a discussion of methodology. While all methodological approaches share the
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paradigm’s ontological and axiological facets, they diverge on epistemological counts. We hope our discussion highlights the theoretical potency of the intersectionality paradigm and draws more research attention to the dynamic interplay of social systems.

REFERENCES


