Advancing the Production/Consumption Dialectic in Consumer Culture Theory

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The purpose of this roundtable is to provide a forum for interdisciplinary researchers to discuss new concepts, frameworks, and theories that can reformulate and advance the study of the production/consumption dialectic in consumer culture theory. We hope fresh examination of this dialectic will enable links among consumer culture theory, interpretive consumer research, consumption anthropology, consumption sociology, critical marketing studies, and critical management studies and encourage novel conceptualizations at the junctures of production and consumption.

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The purpose of this roundtable is to provide a forum for interdisciplinary researchers to discuss new concepts, frameworks, and theories that can reformulate and advance the study of the production/consumption dialectic in consumer culture theory (CCT). Though the concepts of production and consumption are defined diversely within and across the disciplines of anthropology, consumer research, cultural studies, economics, marketing, sociology, and media studies, they are widely understood in opposition to one another. However, the relative emphasis on production, consumption, or hybrid conceptualizations has always been contingent on sociohistoric conditions. For example, as capitalism and globalization matured through the 20th century, both business practice and social theory gradually deprivileged production and divided their attention between production and consumption in more equal measure. This trend roughly coincided with shifts from modern ideologies and mass production to postmodern ideologies and market segmentation (Cohen 2004; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Zhao and Belk 2008).

CCT has a long history of considering production, in addition to consumption, in its analyses (for a review, see Arnould and Thompson 2005). Within CCT, it is often argued that the production/consumption dialectic structures intra-person (e.g. Tian and Belk 2005: work self/home self); inter-person (e.g. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007); and inter-group (e.g. Giesler 2008) identities and activities. Long-standing questions about cultural construction, reproduction, opposition, and transformation in the market sphere remain at the heart of contemporary CCT research: How do dominant cultural producers transform the core ideologies of a society (e.g. Zhao and Belk 2008)? How do marketers employ mass-mediated and micro-cultural discourses to craft compelling offerings and reformulate historical discourses in doing so (e.g. Thompson and Tian 2008)? How do producers imagine and interpellate consumers and consumption communities (e.g. Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kozinets 2008)? How do producers and consumers negotiate the (dis)junctures of market and social logics (e.g. Giesler 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Tian and Belk 2005)? The agenda of this roundtable may be articulated accordingly:

- What underexplored and unexplored concepts, frameworks, and theories can help researchers explicate the myriad intersections of production and consumption in practice?
- Which contexts, informants, and phenomena are appropriate for investigating these intersections?
- What insights can be gleaned from production/consumption research not only for theory, but also for consumer empowerment, political engagement, and social justice?

Exploring new theoretical directions for this domain of research is perennially important for a number of reasons. First, the production/consumption dialectic is at the core of CCT and its sibling fields of interpretive consumer research (for a review, see Cova and Elliott 2008), consumption anthropology (for a review, see Miller 1995), consumption sociology (for a review, see Zukin and Smith Maguire 2004), and critical marketing studies (for a review, see Saren et al. 2007). What all these fields share is an interest in how market logics are produced, reproduced, opposed, and transformed by cultural, economic, political, and social forces, both within and beyond the marketplace. Accordingly, the production/consumption dialectic gives an extensive network of scholars a node to link their sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory trajectories of scholarship.

Second, the production/consumption dialectic links to numerous other dialectics that shape the agenda of CCT. For example, the dialectic links to the supply/demand dialectic in economic discourse, the management/marketing dialectic in business discourse, and the work/spend (Schor 1991) or work/life (Tian and Belk 2005) dialectics in social discourse. To advance the reach of CCT, it would behoove consumer culture theorists to challenge such discursive divides and forge links with compatible theorists in other areas of the business academy (e.g. critical management studies [Alvesson and Willmott 1992]) with whom we share critical and interpretive research agendas and domain boundaries.
Third, along with structure-agency theoretics and identity politics, the production/consumption dialectic has inspired increasingly sophisticated understandings of production and consumption and their multi-level (institutional and individual) and multi-sphere (cultural and economic) roles in social reproduction and transformation (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1991; Ritzer 1993). These interlinked understandings of production/consumption, structure-agency, and identity politics are not universal but situated resolutions to theoretical debates. For example, while marketing researchers have proposed that the service-dominant logic of co-creation/co-production is a substantive merger of production and consumption logics (Vargo and Lusch 2004), consumer researchers have argued that these concepts are rhetoric bandages over a sustained divide between the production of exchange-value (i.e., production) and the production of use-value (i.e. consumption) (Humphreys and Grayson 2008). It is through cycles of such dialectic discussions, syncretic conceptualizations, and reformulated dialectics that business practice and theory evolves in society and the marketplace (Giesler 2008).

References
Cova, Bernard and Richard Elliott (2008), “Everything you always wanted to know about interpretive consumer research but were afraid to ask,” Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 11, 121-129.