



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Consumer Culture Theory (Cct): Twenty Years of Research

Eric Arnould, University of Nebraska

Craig Thompson, University of Wisconsin

Kent Grayson, Northwestern University

Jean-Sebastien Marcoux, HEC Montreal

This presentation provides a thematic overview of the past twenty years of consumer research addressing the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption, primarily through an assessment of the work produced in the Journal of Consumer Research and closely related forums. The paper has two goals. First, it aims to provide a disciplinary brand for this research tradition which we call Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Second, it assesses the current state of research within CCT by defining four interrelated research programs, identifying their key research questions and progress to date. We conclude with directions for future research within CCT.

[to cite]:

Eric Arnould, Craig Thompson, Kent Grayson, and Jean-Sebastien Marcoux (2005) ,"Consumer Culture Theory (Cct): Twenty Years of Research", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 7, eds. Karin M. Ekstrom and Helene Brembeck, Goteborg, Sweden : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 605-607.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13793/eacr/vol7/E-07>

[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

Consumer Culture Theory: Retrospect and Prospect

Eric Arnould, University of Arizona, Tucson, U.S.A.

SESSION SUMMARY

In their restatement of their 2005 JCR, Arnould and Thompson stressed four points: first, their motivation in undertaking a disciplinary rebranding exercise; second, some caveats worth discussion in the European context; third, a broad definition of consumer culture theory research; and fourth, a discussion of European exemplars of the research streams they identify.

Three main issues motivated the crafting of the 2005 JCR. One is the desire to rectify several enduring misconceptions about this tradition of culturally oriented consumer research in the broader field of consumer research. The second is the recognition that CCT research faces significant problems of social reproduction, particularly in regard to placement of new PhDs. In other words, many doctoral students and new lecturers or assistant professor have considerable difficulty in understanding how to make a contribution to the tradition, and defend their interests to colleagues working in other traditions. This concern was informed by the authors' tenures as Associate Editors at JCR. The third motivation is a response to a pandemic disciplinary conflation of context and methodology with theoretical agenda that impedes the diffusion and acceptance of culturally oriented consumer research.

The authors offer some caveats to their position with relevance for European consumer researchers. In the authors' opinion, the institutional problems we identify are most relevant to the American marketing context; a network of CCT-friendly scholars is relatively well established in Europe. In US consumer research, the dominant scientific paradigms are information processing psychology and econometric modeling, and it appears that disciplinary boundaries are hardening at many schools. Still, some of the misconceptions and disciplinary biases identified in the 2005 JCR still operate in some quarters of the European academy, so it may prove useful to some European scholars.

The terms of the authors' JCR review piece required that they focus on work published in JCR. Hence, the review does not cover the body of CCT work published in European journals or edited volumes. Insofar, as European marketing academics are experiencing more institutional pressure to make a mark in the US journals, the CCT framework and review may be useful for European researchers seeking to position their work relative to North American CCT research and targeting American journals, particularly JCR.

In CCT, consumer culture is the central construct, conceived as a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets. The consumer research inspired by this construct generally addresses the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. More specifically, CCT is an emergent theoretical program that addresses the complex dynamics between consumer identity projects; popular culture; marketplace structures; emergent socio-historic patterning of consumption; and, marketplace ideologies.

CCT research dealing with consumer identity projects focuses on the co-constitutive, co-productive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials forge diversified and contextually fragmented senses of self. In this work, consumers are conceived of as producers of identity projects that they undertake using the material and symbolic resources offered by the market-

place. The study of consumer identity projects meshes well with consumer research's more traditional interest in consumer goals and motives. One example is Askegaard, Arnould and Kjelgaard (2005), who in a post assimilationist theoretical context, illustrate the multiplicity of emergent identity positions discursively produced by immigrant informants and the centrality of consumption choices in constituting ethnic identity positions.

CCT research on popular culture explores how with marketer derived resources consumers produce feelings of social solidarity and create distinctive, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of shared consumption interests. In this work, consumers are conceived as social actors who participate in multiple cultural worlds, enacting subculturally specific identities and values in each. Such work poses a major dilemma for demographic and psychographic classifications. In CCT we are more and more giving up typing and classifying consumers, and instead studying what they do, and the conditions of cultural enactments. Building from Michel Maffesoli, Guy Lipovetsky, and the work of the French Mouvement Anti-Utilitaire en Sciences Sociales (MAUSS), Cova 1997 establishes this terrain conceptually, while Cova and Cova (2001) illustrate with an apposite example drawn from an effervescent French in-line skating tribe. Similarly, Goulding, Shankar and Elliot (2002) have developed the ideas of neotribal consumer culture in the context of British rave culture. And emphasizing marketer-consumer interaction, Szmigin and Reppel (2004) begin to theorize the centrality of technology, interactivity, and value to the emergence of on-line brand communities in the full sociological sense of the term.

CCT research on the socio-historic patterning of consumption explores the institutional and social structures that systematically influence consumption and reciprocally, the relationships between consumers' experiences, belief systems and practices and these institutional and social structures. In this work, consumers are conceived of as players in a social game who are predisposed toward certain actions and improvisational moves by their history of socialization and governing social norms and rules. For example, building from classic work on the Italian motor scooter Hebdige (1979); O'Donohoe (1994) and Ritson and Elliott's (1999) examine the uses of advertising among teens. Goulding, Shankar and Elliot (2002) show how in consumer culture age becomes a differentiated and contextually malleable construct. Likewise, Hogg and Garrow (2003) challenge classic information processing conceptualizations of gender within advertising research because they show gender groups have become cognitively heterogenous and disconnected from biological sex. And Malina and Schmidt (1997) illustrate how a novel retail environment can facilitate dramatic reconstructions of female sexual identity.

A final stream of CCT research explores mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. This work conceives of consumers as interpretive agents whose meaning-creating activities range from those that tacitly embrace the identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in mass media to those that consciously and critically deviate from these ideological instructions. Examples include discussions of postmodernity and its theoretical and pragmatic consequences such as Elliot's (1997) seminal paper on desire. Patterson, et al.'s (1998) brilliant, polyvocal exegesis of a Caffrey's Irish ale ad is an exemplar. Maclaran and Brown (2001; 2005) illustrate the role of utopian ideologies in

consumers' narrative readings of and experiences in a festival mall. And in a critical vein, Schroeder and Borgerson (1999) describe some darkside dimensions of the ideological constitution of omnivorous, appropriating consumer culture via a pathway that privileges sound over the visual.

In his presentation, Kent Grayson focused primarily on one of the myths identified by Arnould and Thompson (2005): that the primary differences between CCT and other traditions of research are methodological. More specifically, he addressed three questions. Where does this myth come from? To what extent is it a myth? And, if it is a myth, does the CCT label help to dispel it?

When considering many of the seminal articles written in support of what Arnould & Thompson (2005) now call CCT research, it is not surprising that methodological misconceptions exist. These papers frequently argued that the research methods dominant at the time had inherent limitations that kept consumer research from developing a full picture of the consumer experience. They also usually suggested alternative methods for gaining a more complete picture of the consumer experience, with particular emphasis on qualitative data collected in-context (i.e., in the field), for the purpose of understanding (not prediction) and particularization (not generalization).

Seminal CCT papers introduced consumer behavior topics to the field that were not previously considered by consumer researchers. These topics included extended service encounters, impulse purchasing, possession ownership, brand relationships, subcultures of consumption, and gift giving. Yet, although these research topics are justifiably considered part of the CCT domain, it is interesting to note that a non-trivial percentage of these articles use quantitative methods that are usually considered to be more "positivist" than "postmodern." As an example, of 14 JCR papers on possession attachment, 6 rely either extensively or exclusively on quantitative data.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) briefly recognize that CCT's methodological inclinations lean away from positivist techniques. But more importantly, they define the sub-domains of CCT research in terms of topics and phenomena examined rather than by the research methods used. Grayson felt that this is a potentially useful step toward dispelling the methodological myths associated with CCT research and more accurately capturing the diversity of methods that has historically been (and should continue to be) used to examine these topics.

Nevertheless, there are some reasons why the new label may not be accepted. First, because even the best categorization systems are imperfect, it is likely that the CCT label as defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) will inadvertently exclude some postmodern research topics. Second, the postmodern label emphasized epistemological and paradigmatic issues that are not emphasized by the CCT label. Some researchers may feel that too much is lost with this shift in emphasis. Third, the postmodern label emphasized a critical stance toward the field, while the CCT label does not. Some postmodern researchers may therefore resist both the loss of an explicitly critical research perspective and the institutionalization of a new set of labels. Fourth, Arnould and Thompson (2005) suggest that CCT researchers are wrongly accused of having a fascination for context at the expense of theory. To the extent that Arnould and Thompson (2005) are being more aspirational than descriptive with this claim, not all researchers will feel that these aspirations are worthy ones and not all researchers will be able to live up to them.

Jean-Sebastien Marcoux outlines a specific extension of CCT in the general domain of the relationship between possessions and identity. Specifically, his aim was to discuss the prospects for the development of a theory of "possessions" in consumer research. In

doing so, he expanded Doug Holt's critique of the well-known "container" metaphor of possession meaning to examine how contemporary material culture studies may advance our reflections in the areas of materiality and temporality. Marcoux argues that despite Holt's critique and major advances in the last 10 years, the container metaphor remains a predominant one. The problem with the metaphor is that by focusing so much on the meanings, or the personal memories that objects "contain", consumer researchers underestimate the importance of objects per se. CCT research has actually rarely attempted to grasp the materiality of objects. Few CCT researchers have examined and problematized the properties (the sensuality, the presence, etc.) of objects, and how these objects *work*; namely what they do, in addition to what they mean.

An alternative perspective is offered by the material culture group pioneered by scholars at University College London and Cambridge. These scholars examine the material components of social life. They focus on how things come to matter physically, and socially. Above all, they are concerned with the ways in which social phenomena assert their presence in the world. As such, their view of materiality is radically different from the psychological vision of materialism that almost invariably links materialism to a lack: of social skills, emotional strength, intellectual depth, etc.

In particular, material culture studies show promise for the study of collective memory. Memory, here, relates to the peoples' understanding of the past, and their expectations of the future. It rests upon a distinction often used in social sciences, since Halbwach's (1992) work, between individual and collective memories. A number of researchers have explored different forms of objects that constitute the material world, and their role in the social construction of time and memory.

The silence over commodities may reveal that different forms of materiality (and their hierarchisation) are intertwined in moral and social systems of values. But if we were using Arnould and Thompson's words, commodities may also become an important source of mythical and symbolic resources for consumers. Similarly, they may provide the basic empirical material for the construction of the past, and the articulation of the future. As such, CCT research may assert itself as important in understanding the complex interplay between collective and individual aspects of memory construction, while expanding beyond the psychological dimensions of the memory.

The discussant Richard Elliott raised several points of concern that aimed to stimulate a dialogue with the audience. The first issue he raised was whether it would be either necessary or desirable "to legitimize and institutionalize" the loose congeries of theoretical orientations Arnould and Thompson try to group under the CCT heading. In other words does this move respond to any actual need? A second issue he raised was whether adopting the CCT label might cost us certain critical or theoretical ground gathered around the labels postmodernism, poststructuralism, and interpretivism. In other words what happens to these perfectly serviceable intellectual trends if the CCT label is adopted? A third issue raised is to question whether what Arnould and Thompson are up to represents anything more or less than a modernistic/hegemonic project perhaps largely beneficial to these authors or to North American consumer researchers. A fourth important issue he raised concerns demarcation criteria; in other words what is included, what is excluded from the CCT umbrella. A fifth issue of concern is whether scholars need or want CCT in Europe. Considering alternative movements underway in the UK such as critical marketing and in continental Europe such as the Latin marketing movement, European scholars may well wonder if CCT is a mere distraction from more important projects closer to home. And finally, Richard offered the parable of "My SAAB and me." Richard explained that he loves his SAAB.

When SAAB was bought by Ford it made him feel uneasy, but he continued to love his SAAB. He felt like something of the original soul of SAAB had been lost but he couldn't put his finger on what was lost. He felt something similar when reading the Arnould and Thompson article on CCT. It made him feel uneasy but he can't say precisely why.

REFERENCES

- Arnould, Eric J. and Craig J. Thompson (2005), "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (March), 868-882.
- Cova, Bernard (1997), "Community and Consumption: Towards a Definition of the "Linking Value" of Product or Services," *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (3/4), 297-316.
- Cova, Bernard and Veronique Cova (2001), "Tribal Aspects of Postmodern Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 1 (1), 67-76.
- O'Donohoe, Stephanie (1994), "Advertising Uses and Gratifications," *European Journal of Marketing*, 28 (8/9), 52-75.
- Elliott, Richard (1997), "Existential Consumption and Irrational Desire," *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (3/4), 285-296.
- Goulding, Christina and Avi Shankar (2004), "Age Is Just a Number: Rave Culture and the Cognitively Young 'Thirty Something,'" *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (5/6), 641-658.
- Goulding, Christina, Avi Shankar, and Richard Elliott (2002), "Working Weeks, Rave Weekends: Identity Fragmentation and the Emergence of New Communities," *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 5 (4), 261-84.
- Halbwachs, Maurice (1992), *On Collective Memory*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Hogg, Margaret K. and Jade Garrow (2003), "Gender, Identity, and the Consumption of Advertising," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 5 (3), 160-174.
- Maclaran, Pauline and Stephen Brown (2001), "The Future Perfect Declined: Utopian Studies and Consumer Research," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 17 (3-4), 367-390.
- Maclaran, Pauline and Stephen Brown (2005), "The Centre Cannot Hold: Consuming The Utopian Marketplace," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (September), 311-324.
- McQuarrie, Edward F. and David Glen Mick (1999) "Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-Interpretative, Experimental, And Reader-Response Analyses," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26 (June), 37-54.
- Danusia Malina and Ruth A. Schmidt (1997), "It's Business Doing Pleasure With You: Sh! A Women's Sex Shop Case," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 15 (7), 352-360.
- Patterson, Anthony, Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens and Pauline Maclaran (1998), "Casting a Critical 'I' Over Caffrey's Irish Ale: Soft Words, Strongly Spoken," *Journal of Marketing Management* 14, 733-748.
- Ritson, Mark and Richard Elliott (1999), "The Social Uses of Advertising: An Ethnographic Study of Adolescent Advertising Audiences," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26 (December), 260-277.
- Schroeder, Jonathan E. and Janet L. Borgerson (1999), "Packaging Paradise: Consuming Hawaiian Music," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 26, Valdosta, GA: Association for Consumer Research, 46-50.
- Szmigin, Isabelle and Alexander E. Reppel (2004), "Internet Community Bonding: The Case Of Macnews.de," *European Journal of Marketing*, 38 (5/6), 626-640.