



Article

'Buy buy Miss American Pie': The day the consumer died

Marketing Theory
1–5

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1470593115607943

mtq.sagepub.com**Michael Saren**

University of Leicester, UK

Abstract

Inspired by Askegaard's thought-provoking commentary in *Marketing Theory*, this response argues that music is not 'consumed'. Furthermore, there are many other market contexts where the consumption metaphor is unsuitable. The contemporary meaning of the term derives from its use by early economists like Adam Smith who labelled 'consumption' as the opposite of 'production'. Some of the theoretical and ontological issues underlying the dominance of the concept of consumption in marketing are discussed. Finally, some possible alternatives to consumption as the master narrative are identified, such as those based on experience, service, value, utility, use, satisfaction, pleasure, welfare or well-being.

Keywords

Consumption, marketing, metaphor, music, theory

Consuming music?

On April 7 2015, Don McLean's original working manuscript for 'American Pie' sold for US\$1,205,000 at Christie's auction house, New York, USA.

This commentary is inspired by the sale of McLean's lyrics and by Soren Askegaard's recent commentary in *Marketing Theory*, in part of which he reflects on the 'consumption' of musical instruments. The first question which I aim to explore here is *what is being consumed when we 'consume' music?* The second question is *do marketing academics have to talk so uncritically about 'consuming' things?*

Arguably the most iconic and recognizable American song of the 20th century, the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts named American Pie a 'Song of the Century'. At over 8 minutes, it is still the longest ever single to top the US charts. Few other lyrical

Corresponding author:

Michael Saren, School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK.

Email: majs1@le.ac.uk

manuscripts have raised over a million dollars at auction. Bob Dylan's lyrics for Like a Rolling Stone sold for just over US\$2 million at auction 2014. That broke the record for a handwritten manuscript, previously held by John Lennon's lyrics for A Day in the Life, which sold for US\$1.2 million.

Don McLean's manuscript of "American Pie" achieved the third highest auction price for an American literary manuscript, a fitting tribute to one of the foremost singer-songwriters of his generation. This result is a testament to the creative genius of Don McLean and to the song's ability to still engage and inspire. (Tom Lecky, Head of Department, Books & Manuscripts, Christie's, New York, USA)

Of course, the high auction price for American Pie is an exception, but it highlights a wider problem for marketing theory and its analysis of music and consumption. It is reasonably clear in this case what the artefact is that is being sold and bought, but this example raises other questions about the role and nature of value, product, culture, aesthetics and representation in market exchange.

In the case of the sale of Don McLean's lyrics, it is obviously not the music that is consumed, nor what is purchased. In fact the lyrics are sold completely separated from the music. It is difficult to see how it is only the lyrics that are being 'consumed' because (a) the buyer pays a high premium for the original physical documents, not a facsimile; (b) their value is linked to the song's historical, social and artistic associations; (c) millions of other music listeners have access to the lyrics and the song in reproduced formats; and (d) the purchaser may not seek to consume the objects at all, but on the contrary invest in a store of value with a view to its accumulation.

In the marketing literature, there have been several articles, special issues and books, which problematize the market 'nexus' and the distinction between the production and consumption of music (e.g. Attali, 1985; Beech and Gilmore, 2015; Bradshaw and Shankar, 2008; Brownlie and Bradshaw, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Holbrook, 2008; Larson et al., 2010; Oakes et al., 2014). All point in various ways to the difficulty and inappropriateness of applying the conventional production-consumption perspective to music.

The authors of another book on this topic conclude that:

... limiting our understanding of the relationship between music, markets and consumption to only the 'music consumer' frame narrows our focus onto too few of the important and interesting aspects of people's engagement with music ... It would be more appropriate and fruitful to think of these frames as different spheres of music engagement that people move in and out of, and which interact and interplay with each other within the wider socio-cultural-political space of the contemporary music market. (O'Reilly et al., 2013: 118)

Graeber (2011) illustrates the problem with a specific example of music consumption.

Imagine, for example, four teenagers who decide to form a band. They scare up some instruments, teach themselves to play, write songs, come up with an act, and practice long hours in the garage. Now it seems reasonable to see such behaviour as production of some sort or another, but if one takes the common de facto definition to its logical conclusion, it would be much more likely to be placed in the sphere of consumption simply because they did not themselves manufacture the guitars. (p. 491)

Consumption as metaphor

In Askegaard's (2014) *Marketing Theory* commentary, he draws on Graeber's above example of the consumption of musical instruments. In doing so, both Askegaard and Graeber explicitly

endorse Wilk's (2004) recognition of the term consumption as essentially a metaphor. This is a key ontological position because it avoids the trap of treating consumption axiomatically as a phenomenon, a category or a concept (Hirschmann, 2007). But the two authors differ significantly in their conclusions from this. Graeber goes on to critique the application of the consumption metaphor to playing musical instruments and, as we shall see, more generally. On the other hand, Askegaard concludes that 'despite being a metaphor that comes with a baggage', the consumption perspective is useful because:

... if I do not consume my drum kit when I play, when I consume it? and it allows us to reflect on ... the economic, social and cultural capital that is required to engage in such activities, which in turn allows us to remember that the freedom of the market is fairly restricted and that various types of resources are needed in order to enjoy this freedom. (Askegaard, 2014: 509)

With this reasoning, it appears to me that Askegaard rather too easily dismisses Graeber's critique of the use of the consumption metaphor. Few in the marketing discipline would doubt the contribution and new insight that we have acquired from the application in consumer research of concepts and methods from anthropology. What Graeber (2011) questions, however, is the veracity and value of a similar adoption, by anthropology, of the key concept and ideology that underpins the metaphor of consumption. He argues that this metaphor has imposed an impoverished theory of human desire and fulfilment that splits from a long tradition of Western philosophy which viewed desire as directed towards social objectives, not objects of consumption.

In premodern times, to consume something meant to destroy it or using up some material objects, often wastefully. The contemporary meaning of the term is relatively recent, first appearing in academic literature in the late 18th century, when authors, notably Adam Smith ([1776] 1961), label consumption as the opposite of 'production'. Smith adapted the model of the French Physiocrats to create a dualistic conceptualization of the modern political economy (Steiner, 2003). This was divided into two primary elements – the workplace where goods were 'produced' and the household, where they were consumed. That which was created in one, is used – that is, used up, destroyed – in the other. This was an entirely new meaning of the verb to consume and hitherto 'consumer society' would have meant a society of wastrels and destroyers.

Beyond consumption-dominant logic

We do not have to stick with Adam Smith's taxonomy. It has had the effect of further splitting economic from social relations and rendered less visible the politics of resource allocation. Service-dominant logic (SDL) has inverted Smith's conceptualization of resources and value by valorizing immaterial service over physical goods. Consistent with its co-creation of value thesis, SDL has also abandoned the concepts of producers and consumers in favour of 'actors mobilizing resources within networks' (Vargo and Lusch, 2014). So too other marketing theorists can surely find an alternative to the production–consumption duality, and preferably one that avoids the overdetermination of the modern concept and discourse of consumption. Askegaard (2014: 509) appears to recognize a problem with the universal application of the consumption metaphor when he notes the ideological consequences of labelling nearly everyone as 'consumers' – hospital patients, urban dwellers, forest walkers, transport passengers, media viewers and music listeners (see also Applbaum, 2009).

There are various critiques of overconsumption and consumerist ideology, some of which propose alternative de-growth strategies (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2014). Others recognize a problem with the overuse of the consumption metaphor and that the ontology of consumer society is itself questionable (Schwarzkopf, 2011). These all point to important theoretical and ontological issues underlying the dominance of the concept of consumption in marketing. One suggestion that might begin to address these issues is

... to design research spaces where the logic of consumption can be questioned in more critical terms, perhaps examining contexts where consumption either does not, and arguably should not, be the primary unit of analysis. (Fitchett et al., 2014: 503)

I have argued in this commentary that music is one context where the consumption metaphor is unsuitable. It is also difficult to apply it to services and customer experiences where material consumption is less evident and production is hard to separate from consumption. Co-production by customers also blurs this boundary (Saren et al., 2005). There must be many other similar contexts, especially when the aim is to minimize material consumption to attain circular economy and sustainable marketing. But if consumption is no longer to be the master narrative, what can replace it? If, for example, satisfaction or well-being, rather than consumption, was the unit of analysis for the individual and increasing welfare, not consumption, the goal for society, this would radically alter the way in which we view, analyse and evaluate market exchange and social relations. We could even try substituting the consumption-dominant logic of marketing theory with one based on experience, service, value, utility, use, satisfaction, pleasure, welfare, well-being or other concepts. Perhaps, then we would not have to force musicians and audiences to consume music, but compose, play or listen to it.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

- Applbaum, K. (2009) ‘“Consumers are patients!” Shared Decision-Making and Treatment Non-Compliance as Business Opportunity’, *Transcultural Psychiatry* 46(1): 107–30.
- Askegaard, S. (2014) ‘Consumer Culture Theory – Neo-Liberalism’s “Useful Idiots?”’, *Marketing Theory* 14(4): 507–11.
- Attali, J. (1985) *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beech, N. and Gilmore, C. (2015) *Organizing Music: Theory, Practice, Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bradshaw, A. and Shankar, A. (2008) ‘The Production and Consumption of Music’, *Consumption Markets & Culture* 11(4): 225–227.
- Brownlie, D. and Bradshaw, A. (2009) ‘A Portrait of Morris Holbrook’, *Marketing Theory* 9(3): 373–74.
- Chatzidakis, A., Larsen, G. and Bishop, S. (2014) ‘Farewell to Consumerism: Countervailing Logics of Growth in Consumption’, *Ephemera* 14(4): 753–64.

- Fitchett, J., Patsiaouras, G. and Davies, A. (2014) 'Myth and Ideology in Consumer Culture Theory', *Marketing Theory* 14(4): 495–506.
- Graeber, D. (2011) 'Consumption', *Current Anthropology* 52(4): 489–511.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2008) 'Towards a Critical Understanding of Music, Emotion and Self-Identity', *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 11(4): 329–43.
- Hirschmann, E.C. (2007) 'Metaphor in the Marketplace', *Marketing Theory* 7(3): 227–48.
- Holbrook, M.B. (2008) *Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor: An Expanded Conceptualization of Music, Management, and Marketing-Related Themes*. Boston: Now.
- Larson, G., Lawson, R. and Todd, S. (2010) 'The Symbolic Consumption of Music', *Journal of Marketing Management* 26(7–8): 671–85.
- Oakes, S., Brownlie, D. and Dennis, N. (2014) 'Ubiquitous Music: A Summary and Future Research Agenda', *Marketing Theory* 14(2): 141–45.
- O'Reilly, D., Larsen, G. and Kubacki, K. (2013) *Music, Markets and Consumption*. Oxford: Goodfellow.
- Saren, M., Goulding, C. and Maclaran, P. (2005) 'Blurring the Boundaries of Consumption and Production', paper presented at the Proceedings of 34th European Marketing Academy Conference, Bocconi University, Milan, Italy.
- Schwarzkopf, S. (2011) 'The Political Theology of Consumer Sovereignty: Towards an Ontology of Consumer Society', *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(3): 106–29.
- Smith, A. ([1776] 1961) *The Wealth of Nations*. E. Cannan (ed). London: Methuen
- Steiner, P. (2003) 'Physiocracy and French Pre-Classical Political Economy', in J. E. Biddle, J. B. Davis and W. J. Samuels (eds) *A Companion to the History of Economic Thought*. London: Blackwell, pp. 61–77.
- Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.L. (2014) 'Inversions of Service-dominant Logic', *Marketing Theory* 14(3): 239–48.
- Wilk, R. (2004) 'Morals and Metaphors: The Meaning of Consumption', in K. Ekstrom and H. Brembeck (eds) *Elusive Consumption*. London: Berg, pp. 11–26.

Michael Saren is a professor of marketing at Leicester University, UK. He holds a PhD from the University of Bath and an honorary professorship at St Andrews University. His research interests are in the development of marketing theory, particularly regarding marketing knowledge, technology and issues of heritage and sustainability. He was one of the founding editors of *Marketing Theory* and has been awarded an honorary fellowship and lifetime membership by the UK Academy of Marketing. Address: School of Management, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK. [email: majs1@le.ac.uk]