ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Special Session Summary   Twenty Years of Consumer Culture Theory: Retrospect and Prospect

Eric J. Arnould, University of Nebraska

Craig Thompson, University of Wisconsin

[to cite]:

Eric J. Arnould and Craig Thompson (2005) ,"Special Session Summary   Twenty Years of Consumer Culture Theory: Retrospect and Prospect", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 32, eds. Geeta Menon and Akshay R. Rao, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 129-130.

[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9053/volumes/v32/NA-32

[copyright notice]:

Twenty Years of Consumer Culture Theory: Retrospect and Prospect

Eric J. Arnould, University of Nebraska
Craig Thompson, University of Wisconsin

SESSION OVERVIEW

This session aims to contribute to the disciplinary branding of an extensive body of consumer research that has over the years been variously characterized as "alternative," "postpositivist," "interpretivist," and "postmodern." In their introductory overview, Arnould and Thompson suggested that these epithets are more obscuring that clarifying and all feed into a misunderstanding of this research tradition by focusing on methodological differences. The argument motivating this session is that the defining characteristics of this research tradition are theoretically based and emanate from a collective project of systematically theorizing the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. Accordingly, this session introduces and develops a more appropriate and viable brand for this research tradition: Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

The expansion of CCT coincides with growing concerns over the fragmentation of the field and the seeming lack of a common theoretical vernacular and set of driving problems and questions that bind consumer researchers together (Simonson et al 2001; Wright 2002). These concerns flow from a decidedly modernist construction of the scientific enterprise and the concomitant idea that a scientific field progresses by developing a definitive and unified system of knowledge around a common domain of interest (e.g., Hunt 1991). From this standpoint, diversity is a problem because it fosters differing camps, each pursuing their own particularistic questions, whose knowledge claims are not likely to coalesce into a unified theoretical system (Simonson et al 2001). Rather than an orderly unified field, consumer research threatens to become a tower of Babylon (Calder and Tybout 1987).

In contrast to this angst-inducing allegory, this session argues that the consumer research field is enhanced by the presence of multiple conversations. Consumer research is a vital and indeed maturing field of inquiry, not because it steadily advances toward a singular and unified body of theory, but because it can generate and sustain multiple theoretical conversations, each speaking to distinctive theoretical questions. To anthropomorphize, this polyvocal fluency makes the consumer research field a more interesting and creative conversationalist and enables it to form greater and more varied linkages to other branches of social science, government and public policy agencies, and the world of management. Accordingly, the papers in this session elaborate upon some of key domains of research interest that have been explored by CCT researchers and illustrate how these theoretical concerns systematically link studies addressing a diversity of consumption contexts. The papers also distill some of the major points of theoretical contribution that have been offered by CCT research and discuss some of its most promising future directions.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) discuss the motivating rationales and logic driving their CCT framework. They offer CCT as a means to integrate a nexus of theoretical perspectives and contextually nuanced studies that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, marketplace structures, cultural meanings, and myriad forms of ideological reproduction and consumer resistance. They note that CCT is not a unified, grand theory nor does it aspire to such nomothetic claims. While representing a plurality of distinct theoretical approaches and research goals, CCT

researchers nonetheless share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of cultural complexity that programmatically links their respective research efforts.

Rather than viewing culture as a fairly homogenous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life and unifying values shared by a member of society (e.g, Americans share this kind of culture, Japanese share that kind of culture), CCT explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism. This "distributed view of cultural meaning" (Hannerz 1992, p. 16) emphasizes the dynamics of fragmentation, plurality, fluidity, and the intermingling (or hybridization) of cultural traditions and ways of life (Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Arnould and Thompson then discuss four major domains of CCT research that have emerged to date (which are by no means intended as exhaustive or all-defining categories). The first research domain focuses on consumer identity projects and the co-constitutive, co-productive ways in which consumers forge cultural worlds through pursuit of shared consumption interests. The second research domain addresses the focuses on specific cultures created through marketplace interactions and the cultural resources offered by brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005) or leisure activities, such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Studies of marketplace cultures explore the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism. The third research domain focuses on the institutional and social structures that systematically influence consumption and reciprocally, the relationships between consumers' experiences, belief systems and practices and these underlying institutional and social structures. The fourth domain concerns the promulgation of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' strategies for interpreting, using, and at times resisting these ideological interpellations.

Muniz and Schau's study is situated within CCT research exploring consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, and consumers' interpretive strategies. They report on the socio-cultural dynamics that animate and anchor a grassroots brand community centered on the Apple Newton, a product that was abandoned by its corporate progenitor. These users continue to support a discontinued product by creating hardware solutions to keep the Newton running in a changing environment, writing software applications to allow the Newton to perform functions unforeseen at the time of discontinuation (wireless internet connectivity, MP3 players, synchronization with newer operating systems) and maintaining a community of users to perform customer service activities and support the users who are at times the victims of social ridicule and stigmatization. Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common in the stories members of the Newton community share as they interact in various community forums. These motifs (including the miraculous performance and survival of the brand, as well as the return of the brand creator) invest the brand with powerful meanings and perpetuate the brand and the community, its values and its beliefs. As such, this research also speaks to the CCT program on mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpre-

tive strategies. Members of the Apple Newton brand community firmly believe that in their consumption and perpetuation of an abandoned technology they are challenging shortcomings in the market for computers and technology.

Muniz and Schau further argue that brand communities are most likely to form around those brands capable of producing transformative experiences in their consumers and that can sustain symbolic connections to ideals of magic and religion or the supernatural. They suggest that the most robust brand communities, which exist across a range of product categories, exhibit this quality.

Crocket and Wallendorf pick up the critical thread of CCT by exploring how resistance to marketplace ideologies can emerge for consumers who are not on the socio-economic margins—a position usually associated with a critical orientation toward the marketplace (Holt 2002)—and whose consumer identities are *not* oriented around a critical politics of consumption, as in the manner of devout eco-friendly consumers (e.g., Dobscha and Ozanne 2001). They show, however, that a particular and more subtle form of emergent consumer resistance can arise for consumers who are not seeking to escape the ideological imperatives of the capitalist marketplace (e.g., Kozinets 2002), and who are *not* motivated by a broader political or transforming or reforming capitalism (Murray and Ozanne 1991).

They develop this argument through an ethnography of a summer vacation destination sponsored by a large, mainstream Christian denomination, known as the Village. Their ethnographic research investigates the day-to-day consumption practices, as well as the emergence of ideological critiques of those practices, among a group of consumers who attend The Village. The Village typically attracts full nest families (though not exclusively) to an isolated rural setting, where they live a communal lifestyle, and attend daily workshops on topics that range widely (from Bible studies, workshops on global poverty, voluntary simplicity, etc.). Participants at The Village tend to stay on average either one week or two weeks. The setting features a wider range of consumer ideologies and critiques of consumer culture than has been typical of research on consumer resistance. Also, given the very minimal presence of marketing activity–and the relative physical isolation of the setting–for many consumers The Village constitutes their first prolonged separation from the normal routines of the commercial marketplace.

The discussant Richard Lutz, who in his tenure as editor of *Journal of Consumer Research*, contributed significantly to the emergence of the CCT tradition in the field, provided an historical retrospective on the CCT tradition. He discussed the disciplinary ferment that led to a more pluralistic conception of consumer research and some of the key articles that shaped the course of the development course of CCT.

REFERENCES

Arnould, Eric. J. and Craig J. Thompson (2005), "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (March), in press.

Calder, Bobby J. and Alice M. Tybout (1987), "What Consumer Research Is," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 14 (June), 136-140.

Celsi, Richard, Randall Rose, and Thomas Leigh (1993),"An Exploration of High-Risk Leisure Consumption through Skydiving," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20 (June), 1-21.

Dobscha, Susan and Julie l. Ozanne (2001), "An Ecofeminist Analysis of Environmentally Sensitive Women Using Qualitative Methodology: The Emancipatory Potential of an Ecological Life," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 20 (Fall), 201-14.

Featherstone, Mike (1991), *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Firat A. Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (December), 239-267.

Hannerz, Ulf (1992), *Cultural Complexity*, New York: University of Columbia Press.

Holt, Douglas B. (2002), "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?: A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 70-90.

Hunt, Shelby D. (1991), "Positivism and Paradigm Dominance in Consumer Research: Toward Critical Pluralism and Rapprochement, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18 (June), 34-44.

Kozinets, Robert V. (2002), "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illusions from the Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, (June), 20-38.

Muniz, Albert and Thomas C. O'Guinn (2001), "Brand Communities," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (March), 412-32.

Muniz, Albert and Hope Schau (2005), "Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (March), forthcoming.

Murray, Jeff B., and Julie L. Ozanne (1991), "The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18, (September), 129-144.

Simonson, Itamar, Ziv Carmon, Ravi Dhar, Aimee Drolet, Stephen M. Nowlis (2001), "Consumer Research: In Search of Identity," in *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 52, eds. Susan T. Fiske, Daniel L. Schacter, and Carolyn Zahn-Waxler, Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 249-275.

Wright, Peter (2002) "Marketplace Metacognition and Social Intelligence," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 4 (March), 677-682.