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Failure: Perspectives and prospects in marketing and consumption theory

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Failure.

Perspectives and Prospects in Marketing and Consumption Theory

“Failure is all around us. Failure is pervasive. Failure is everywhere, across time, across place and across different aspects of life. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all biological species which have ever existed are now extinct. [...] On a dramatically shorter timescale, more than 10 percent of all the companies in America disappear each year. Large and small, from corporate giants to the tiniest one-person business, they fail.” (Ormerod, *Why Most Things Fail*, 2005; IX).

“I think, my daughter, she is 16, and really cool. And I am the opposed ... And she was digging in my ... workbag and we have these stickers of Museum of Failure [...] And she was stealing them from my bag and I was like “come on. What the hell are you doing?” And she was “Everyone at school wants one”. And they put it on their phones and computers. I was like “why”? And basically, because they identify themselves as failures. Because they are so force-fed by success all the time in ways us old people have no idea, you know. And she said, “that’s our way to say that we are authentic, and I am real person. I also fuck up and fail”. (Interview with Samuel West, *Creator and Curator of the Museum of Failure*, autumn 2017).

Failure is and has always been a pervasive part of life. It is most commonly understood as something going wrong, or a desired event or expectation that does not materialize, and is negatively valorized. Increasingly however, the conventional idea that failing is something negative, bad, and undesirable is being questioned and alternative valorizations of failure emerge where it is celebrated as productive and positive. For example, in business and entrepreneurial culture, failure is frequently celebrated in mantras such as “fail fast, fail often” (Babineaux and Krumboltz 2013;

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4 Donohue 2015; Surowieki 2014). But failure is more than such a mantra. Failure itself has also
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6 become a commodity, sold and consumed in the form of popular management books (e.g., *Failing*
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8 *Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success* by John C. Maxwell), tv series (e.g.
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10 the Netflix show *Losers*), podcasts (e.g. *Spectacular Failures* or *How To Fail With Elizabeth Day*);
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12 public talks (e.g. as organized by the global movement of *Fuckup Nights*), sheer endless videoed
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14 accounts of things going wrong on social media, and even museum visits (e.g., at the world-touring
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16 *Museum of Failure*).

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21 The appreciation of failure has also made inroads into academia. In 2016, Princeton Professor
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23 Johannes Haushofer shared his ‘CV of Failure’ which quickly went viral within the academic
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25 community. The CV documents Haushofer’s rejections on papers, failure to attain job positions, and
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27 declined scholarships, showcasing that even seemingly successful scholars often fall short and that
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29 failures remain hidden, lacking representation and articulation. Furthermore, a string of studies that
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31 stress the productivity involved with failure is mushrooming across a variety of areas – from queer
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33 theory to material culture studies to performance studies.

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37 While failure permeates contemporary markets, business lingo, popular culture, and various strands
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39 of academic literature, there is a paucity of research that explicitly addresses failure in and for the
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41 context of marketing theory. In this commentary, we interrogate these discourses around failure and
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43 outline what could be on offer for the marketing and consumption theory disciplines. We begin our
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45 interrogation by synthesizing how failure has hitherto been conceptualized in marketing theory.
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47 Then, we discuss how the recent rethinking of failure in other disciplines can be meaningful for
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49 marketing thought, and propose potential research streams for marketing scholarship.
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53 54 **Failure in Marketing Theory** 55 56 57 58 59 60

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4 We begin our review of failure with the question: What counts as a failure in marketing? Ever since
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6 the emergence of the marketing concept, marketers and marketing scholars have had more interest
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8 in success than its antithesis failure. The incessant focus on 'best practice' in marketing text books
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10 and popular management literature bear witness to this. Marketing success is conventionally linked
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12 to customer satisfaction with the idea that when a company does marketing well, it succeeds in
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14 satisfying customers or society. Conversely, when marketing fails, dissatisfaction ensues. This
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16 notion of failure is apparent in two bodies of marketing literature, namely service failure and
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18 product failure.
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23 First, the service failure literature is perhaps the most elaborative field that has studied failures in
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25 marketing. Here, failure is seen as a mistake that leads to customer dissatisfaction (Bitner, Booms,
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27 & Tetreault, 1990) or as customer norm deviance (Fullerton & Punj, 2004) that leads to
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29 dysfunctional behavior (Fisk et al., 2010). While not all mistakes during the service encounter may
30
31 generate dissatisfaction, they tend to only be awarded attention when they do so. Hence, the implied
32
33 credo is that companies should try to avoid failures or, when that is not possible, recover from them
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35 (Spreng, Harrell, & Mackoy, 1995; Fombelle et al., 2019), because failure stands in the way of
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37 reaching the ideal of the satisfied consumer (Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993).
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42 To be fair, several studies on service failure have demonstrated that competent recovery from failures
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44 can lead to *productive* outcomes (Spreng et al., 1995; Tax & Brown, 1998). However, in these studies,
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46 it is not failure itself that leads to a productive outcome, but rather the recovery from failure. Failure
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48 thus remains a destructive category and a productivity dimension of failure is only acknowledged
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50 when failure is corrected. Failure itself is something to avoid.
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4 Second, the link between failure and dissatisfaction is also evident in studies on product failure.

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6 These studies examine how consumers infer the root of product failures and how such inferences
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8 influence whether consumers feel negatively about the company behind the failing product. The
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10 goal of this research has been to predict when product defects lead to complaints or customer
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12 retaliation and thus minimize the damage such defects may cause (Folkes, 1984; Folkes, Koletsky,
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14 & Graham, 1987; Folkes & Kotsos, 1986).
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18 This conceptualization of failure as negative and value-destroying is, by contrast, contested in other
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20 fields such as pedagogy, art, and anthropology (Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, Parkhurst, & Shackelford,
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22 2017; Halberstam, 2011; O’Gorman & Werry, 2012). Here, scholars have emphasized how failure
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24 holds productive, generative, creative, or inventive potential. In art, the use of failure has a long
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26 tradition, ranging from classical music (John Cage composing unplayable notes to hear musician fail
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28 in the performance); working with studio technology failures to develop new sounds (like distortion,
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30 feedback or autotune), working with failure as an opportunity of improvisatory exploration in Jazz or
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32 defining a whole failure genre like *glitch*, see e.g. Betancourt, 2017). This suggests that the
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34 ontological assumption of failure as an exclusively destructive phenomenon may neglect and de-
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36 emphasize important aspects of how failure matters to marketing as a productive moment that may
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38 create a meaningful difference also in a positive way.
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45 Another tendency in existing marketing literature on failure is that it tends to study failure almost
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47 exclusively in the spatial-temporal realm of supplier-customer interactions, e.g. in the service
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49 encounter. But again, this runs the risk of leaving out important aspects and subtexts of failure. Those
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51 studies that are currently rethinking failure advocate broadening up the study of failure to capture the
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53 various “ways in which failure functions *socially*” (Carroll et al., 2017, p. 7). From this perspective,
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55 we might ask: Is the social functioning of failure in marketing captured by studying purely how
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57 failures materialize in e.g. service situations? We suggest not.
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4 In the following, we sketch out how the marketing discipline might benefit from moving beyond
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6 studying failure as a primarily destructive phenomenon that arises predominantly in service
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8 encounters.
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10 11 **Perspectives and Prospects of Rethinking Failure**

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14 Below we outline three perspectives on failure which we argue hold potential for future conceptual
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16 development: i) *a phenomenology of failure*, which aims to elucidate and understand failure as a
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18 complex consumption phenomenon appreciating its ambivalence and variety; ii) *the socio-cultural*
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20 *formation of failure*, which seeks to unfold failure beyond the individual consumer, and iii) *failure as*
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22 *critique*, which renders failure as a method for identifying dominant ideals in contemporary society.
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26 27 *A Phenomenology of Failure*

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30 Recent studies on failure have sought to supplement a focus on failure as an etic, analytical category
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32 with a focus on failure as a lived, emic phenomenon. Material culture research has recently
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34 demonstrated how ethnographic studies of failure may give rise to “local articulations” of failure,
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36 which for example are not captured by conventional understandings of failure, such as solely
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38 understanding it as the binary opposite of success. Pedagogical studies have also stressed the need to
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40 “*anatomize [failure] in all its irreducible complexity, painful ambivalence and variety*” (O’Gorman
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42 & Werry, 2012, p. 1). To pedagogy scholars O’Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4), to capture this
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44 complexity, it does not suffice to explore the emic articulations of failure, but also the affect of failure.
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47 As O’Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4) write: “*[Failure] comes laced with shame, anger, despair,*
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49 *abjection, guilt, frustration [...] Thinking with failure means making affect an object of our curiosity*”.
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54 Following these lines of inquiry, we suggest developing a phenomenology of failure, which would
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56 allow us to study failure as something that does not cease to matter as soon as consumers exit the
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58 service encounter but rather as something that permeates and variously presents itself in consumers’
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4 life-worlds. In making this suggestion, we note that various marketing studies stress the importance
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6 of studying how consumers experience failures, similar to efforts being made in the domain of
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8 entrepreneurial failure (e.g. Cope 2011). Hedrick et al. (2007) for example show how the relational
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10 bonds between consumers and service providers shape consumers' experience of service failures.
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12 Patterson et al. (2006) and McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003) suggest how 'perceptions of justice'
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14 impact how consumers make sense of failure. Ringberg et al. (2007) examine the cultural models by
15
16 which consumers interpret failures. Together, these studies demonstrate that consumers experience
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18 failure differently and, thus, begin to illustrate what studying failure as a lived experience would look
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20 like. However, these studies also narrowly focus on failure in service encounters. Consequently, they
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22 only offer a phenomenological slice of consumption failure.
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28 Zayer et al. (2015) come closer to developing a phenomenology of failure. In their study of failed
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30 infertility treatments, they illustrate how service failures can spill beyond the service encounter and
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32 into consumers' lives. Failed infertility treatments (a service failure, again) can for example make
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34 consumers question their own identities as prospective parents and pursue other life goals than
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36 parenthood. This aspect of failure – how failure interacts with consumers' lives and identities – is
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38 hardly captured by studying how consumers narrowly experience failure in service encounters. We
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40 must size up how failures take shape in consumers' life-worlds in order to better understand the
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42 impact of failure.
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47 Zayer et al.'s (2015) study also shows that a phenomenology of failure means treating failure with
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49 complete normative openness. In their analysis, failure is not a destructive force per definition. For
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51 example, failed infertility treatments may not only lead to dissatisfaction and an abandonment of the
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53 service, but also spur consumers to *try harder* or stir them to reflexively re-evaluate and *re-invent*
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55 their life trajectories (Zayer et al., 2015). Failure in these cases becomes productive. Failure may
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57 motivate, inspire, or unite consumers' efforts to overcome it. Some failure scholars even stress that
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4 failure is *inevitably* productive: “*There is a productive/generative capacity to failure; it is the*
5 *primordial goo of constant evolutionary invention*” (Carroll et al., 2017, p. 14). Treating failure as a
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9 lived experience might allow marketing researcher to embrace this aspect of failure and thus break
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11 with the traditional treatment of failure by marketing, which has tended to fixate it as a destructive
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13 force (producing dissatisfied, unhappy consumers).
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16 Finally, Zayer et al.’s study (2015) points to the affective ambivalence of failure, and thus serves as
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18 a counterforce to the tendency of existing marketing literature to treat ‘customer dissatisfaction’ as
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20 the sole affective companion of failure. As Zayer et al. (2015) suggest, failure might even come laced
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22 with positive emotions as well as negative ones. If consumers interpret failed infertility treatments as
23
24 a statistical normality, consumers might come to think of their failures with optimism. In this case,
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26 failure is a ‘part of the plan’ and merely a stop on the route to success. Thus, a phenomenology of
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28 failure must seek to go beyond dissatisfaction and dissect lived failures in their full affective
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30 complexity.
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34 35 *The Socio-Cultural Formation of Failure*

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38 The recent rethinking of failure in other disciplines also invites the question of *why* consumers
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40 experience failures the way they do. For example, the framings through which consumers experience
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42 failures do not originate from consumers themselves, at least not entirely. Like any consumption
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44 experience, how consumers experience failure is embedded in and shaped by a wider socio-cultural
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46 context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Humphreys and Thompson (2014) exemplify this in their study
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48 on the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 and the BP Gulf Spill of 2010 and point to the relevance of the
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50 mythological framing of failures. In their study, they show how consumers came to understand the
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52 failures of Exxon and BP through the development of a societal-wide ‘disaster myth’ that helped
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54 consumers make sense of the oil spills. Thus, studying consumption failure also means studying how
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4 consumers' experiential framings of failure are culturally formed. What are the myths and interpretive
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6 strategies that consumers draw on when experiencing and interpreting failures? And, how do certain
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8 failure myths acquire institutional stability?
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11 Such questions encourage researchers to move beyond both service encounters and consumers'
12
13 immediate life-worlds, to instead study failure at the level of society. Interconnected technologies,
14
15 media and ecosystems increasingly leads to failure at a systems level (Dekker, 2016) and it has been
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17 suggested that contemporary capitalism is de-facto feeding off of perpetual failures of
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19 entrepreneurship in the Silicon Valley model, and the monetization of failures in the Wall Street
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21 financial derivatives model (Appadurai & Alexander, 2019). Furthermore, governmentality regimes
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23 of happiness, self-realization and self-performance enhancement (see e.g. Kristensen and
24
25 Ruckenstein 2018) are directed towards avoiding being a failed consumer. Such regimes may in
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27 themselves be generative of an increase in scope and intensity of experienced failures for consumers
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29 as such regimes perpetuate and the ideals of the regimes shift. Exploring the affective economies of
30
31 failure (Ahmed 2004) around such consumer governmentality regimes as a basis for markets can
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33 contribute to research on market emergence and market system dynamics (see e.g. the MT special
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35 issue on market systems - Giesler and Fischer 2017).
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43 From this perspective, one important task for research looking into the cultural formation of failure
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45 is also to explore the increasing public celebration of failure. As noted above, learning about other
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47 people's failures has become a commodity in and of itself. Failure is consumed through books,
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49 museum visit, podcasts, social media, and public talks. And this recent commodification of failure
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51 does not seem to be driven by a Schadenfreudian appetite for watching other people's misfortunes.
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53 Rather, consuming other people's failure increasingly involves collectively celebrating failure instead
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4 of ridiculing those who fail. A key question to ask is: where does this new framing of failure come
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6 from, and how did it become orchestrated as an object of commerce and consumption?
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9 *Failure as Critique*

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12 A promising aspect of studying failure lies in its potential for critique. This is an aspect of failure that
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14 has been picked up by the writer Halberstam (2011) who argues that failing may be used as a method
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16 for identifying dominant ideals in contemporary society. Halberstam argues that a queer strategy can
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18 be *choosing* to fail to live up to the expectations of heteronormative ideals and thus live by an alternate
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20 set of ideals. For Halberstam (2011), failure crystallizes the dominant ways of evaluating success,
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22 making them a potential target for critique and alteration. Failure as a practice thus becomes an
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24 epistemic window. As James Fitchett points out any utopian imagery carry with it its dystopian
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26 version (Bradshaw, Fitchett and Heitanen 2020). So is success defined against the backdrop of failure.
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28 Understanding what is experienced and articulated as failure can provide insights into predominant
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30 ideals of contemporary markets and consumer culture.
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36 One may ask, however, as Carroll et al. (2017) have done in commenting upon Halberstam's
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38 perspective, "If you want to fail, is it failure if it is achieved?". Isn't failing then simply an alternate
39
40 way of succeeding? For us, the critical potential of failure lies simply in opening up novel ways of
41
42 imagining society and not necessarily in redefining success. As O'Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4)
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44 write, the power of thinking with failure lies in
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49 *"[f]inding possibility in predicament and embracing the vulnerability of moments of failure that may*
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51 *also be moments of profound discovery in which we remain open to what transpires, rather than*
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53 *measure it against our intentions."*
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4 For marketing researchers, failures in marketing become a site where the critical imagination (Murray
5 & Ozanne, 1991) comes alive. A site where new versions of markets and new ways of being a
6
7 consumer may become thinkable.
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11 The critical potential of failure may manifest itself for the individual consumer. This corresponds to
12 how Halberstam thinks of the failure: individuals may choose to fail and thereby become free to live
13
14 their life as they want. This may for example be a useful way of thinking about consumers engaging
15
16 in intentional non-consumption (Cherrier, Black, & Lee, 2011), who, by failing to consume, may
17
18 resist the societal pressure of satisfying their needs through the market. However, thinking about
19
20 failure may also provide the resource to think critically about the failure of consumption as a dominant
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22 human practice (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), and the dominant means of organizing life and
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24 society.
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31 The role of failure as part of the critical marketing imagination has perhaps not been more relevant
32 than under the contemporary crises humanity is facing – The Covid-19 crisis and its macrocosm, the
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34 climate change crisis. We are already seeing political discourse of climate change shift from climate
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36 change mitigation (e.g. through sustainable consumption and marketing practice) to climate change
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38 adaptation. That means learning to live with a failed consumer culture, if you like, and how to live
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40 and die (Scranton, 2015) in a climate change consumer culture, a consumer culture “*after the end of*
41
42 *nature*” (Giddens, 2003; 2009). We are seeing the contours of the failed consumer culture at a variety
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44 of levels as contestation over rights to consume or not, what consumption is justified, and who holds
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46 responsibility for the future – from the intergenerational over social class to the geopolitical level.
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52 53 54 55 **Conclusion** 56 57 58 59 60

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4 We propose that exploring the moral, ideological, cultural and market framing of failure, dwelling
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6 on its phenomenological contours and its existential ramifications, may deliver insights for
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8 marketing theory that goes beyond standard concepts such as satisfaction, best practice and non-
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10 contextualized service encounters.
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