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Consumer Culture Theory: Development, Critique, Application and Prospects

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Consumer Culture Theory: Development, Critique, Application and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This review takes stock of the development of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and provides a perspective from which this field of research can be framed, synthesized, and navigated. This review takes a conceptual and historical approach to map the rich theoretical inventory cultivated over almost 40 years of culturally-oriented research on consumption. The authors describe how CCT has emerged, chart various approaches to consumer culture studies, outline the dominant research domains, identify debates and controversies that circulate in the field, discuss the latest conceptual and methodological developments, and share managerial implications of a CCT approach. From this vantage point, they point to some promising directions for CCT research.

Keywords: consumer culture theory; consumption; marketing; marketing management.

Although its roots reach more deeply into the history of 20th century social science (Tadajewski, 2006), Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is the logical product of a cultural turn (Sherry, 1990b) in consumption studies that began to unfold in the 1980s. CCT is an umbrella term that refers to a variety of socio-cultural approaches to consumer behavior and market research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). CCT attends to substantive issues emanating from the domain of consumption, which we characterize briefly as the acquisition, use, and disposition of commercially circulated products, services, knowledge, images, and experiences by groups and individual actors. Putting consumer culture studies into context, let us begin by describing two examples that illustrate CCT tangibly.

1.1 Boat Hull Maintenance

Rapid loss of biodiversity and poor health of the Scandinavian coastal ecosystems led local scientists to wonder what was happening in the Baltic Sea. They soon learned that leisure boats that use of toxic boat hull paints to limit the growth of marine organisms were causing damage to the sensitive archipelago ecosystem. Throughout the Baltic, leisure
boats are a ubiquitous, conspicuous consumer object. While natural scientists know a lot about why and how boat hull paint damages nature, environmental policy makers needed to understand how to change leisure boat consumer behavior. Therefore, researchers launched an interdisciplinary EU-funded project to combine research in natural and social sciences (taking a CCT perspective) and environmental law.

The natural scientists initially relied on the classic attitude-behavior gap model of consumer decision-making to propose that increasing information about the harmful effects of toxic paints and alternative product solutions would lead to the expression of greener values and to more sustainable leisure boating consumption practices. However, the social scientists found that most boat owners already regarded themselves as environmentally friendly and possessing green values. Yet, they continued their environmentally unfriendly behavior. One boat owner even told the research team how the boating community teaches respect for nature: “You would have your ears boxed if you would be seen to litter. An outsider would come to remind you if you would leave trash to the nature and intervene.”

To develop alternative strategies to change consumer behavior, the CCT-oriented research group took an ethnographic approach to Baltic leisure boating, collecting data from over 30 boatyard visits and interviews with more than 70 boat owners in Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Denmark.

The social science team found that unsustainable boat maintenance practices result from social pressure to keep the boat both aesthetically and functionally in “good shape”. While boat owners love nature, they also love their boats, the consumption objects through which they enjoy nature. The toxic intersection between the environment and nature-and boat-loving owners emerges in boat maintenance. A group of first time owners reported: “The boat hull looked awful after the previous summer. We laughed and were embarrassed with our mistake when others at the boatyard saw our boat in such bad condition – this year we will apply all possible toxics so we won’t repeat the mistake we made last year.” Their public failure to maintain the boat in accordance with the boating community’s normative standards led to embarrassment.

Boat owners learn maintenance communally from perceived boatyard experts and old beliefs and habits that are transmitted...
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intergenerationally. As a harbormaster proudly explained: “We encourage boaters, tell the boater next to them that ‘hey, you might want to try this.’” Powerful social norms for proper “curatorial” or “grooming” practice (McCracken, 1986; Schau et al., 2009a) of cherished, iconic consumption objects fosters environmental harm. The solution lies in proposing alternative equally attractive curatorial practices.

1.2 Lactose Intolerance

With growing intensity, people are compelled to worry about the food they consume. In many ways, food no longer connotes sustenance and pleasure or lubricates social bonding and good conversation. Instead, food often signifies fear and aversion as ideological concerns over health pass through homes alongside food-related allergies and dietary challenges. People talk of food in medically loaded terms. It makes them sick, ill, fat, at-risk, in-danger, allergic, skinny, or alternatively strong and healthy.

In his doctoral research, Jack Tillotson explores the medicalization of food and health. Funded by Valio, the largest dairy producer in Finland, the study initially focused on how marketplace myths (Thompson, 2004) structure dairy consumption. Inspired by Valio’s leadership in the functional food market, such as technological innovations in dairy to offer health benefits, in relation to specific disease prevention, his focus shifted. Drawing on over 50 interviews with consumers of functional foods targeting lactose intolerance, Tillotson develops an understanding of how consumers cope with food-related illness.

As the direct result of dairy consumption, informants describe suffering bouts of “bloating,” “diarrhea,” “flatulence,” and associated discomfort. These insistent and aversive episodes occur unexpectedly and often compromise social situations. Unfortunately, the treatment of lactose intolerance is contested. A woman in the study highlights, “I went to a doctor but this is a minor problem for them, and it is not dangerous or life-threatening, so they did not really take a look.” Struggling to avoid consuming dairy in a national culinary setting that frames Finland as a “promised land of dairy,” consumers find themselves feeling personally vulnerable and socially estranged.

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1.2. Lactose Intolerance

Against the backdrop of an erupting body, awkward social situations, struggle for medical and nutritional advice, and entrenched socio-cultural dairy consumption practices, how do consumers cope? One way Tillotson finds, is to ascribe normativity to food-related illness, as revealed in participants comments like “lactose intolerance is the national disease.” In a Nordic cultural context, that espouses equality, communal responsibility, and health as civic right and responsibility, questioning entrenched dietary practices becomes acceptable.

These two distinct examples reveal some important commonalities in CCT. In both instances, researchers situate consumption, and the web of commercial products, services and experiences in the marketplace, as the principle behavioral template for how people explore, identify and engage with the world around them. Both examples portray consumers’ agentic attempts to overcome constraints on consumption, and the implications those constraints have on their identities, social interactions and affiliations. Further, these examples show how consumption values and practices intersect not merely with the domain of private leisure but with health and public policy and a variety of institutional actors. As a field of research, CCT has amassed a multitude of studies such as these two examples, which address the diverse complexities of market-driven, global consumer culture with implications for social sciences, the humanities, business studies, as well as marketing managers and policy makers. This paper is a guide to help readers find their way through existing CCT literature, the most current conceptual and methodological developments, managerial implications, and potential avenues of future importance.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we elaborate on the nature of CCT. Second, we address different approaches in CCT, including the humanistic/romantic, the social constructivist, and the postmodern modes of inquiry. Third, we look at domains of inquiry in CCT, identifying significant streams including identity work, marketplace cultures, the socio-historic patterning of consumption, an ideological turn, and critiques of CCT. Fourth, we identify some methodological issues and innovations that CCT work has addressed, including issues of data collection, interpretation, around validity and verification. We also evoke work on alternative modes of representing research.
Fifth, we introduce how CCT research has addressed managerial and strategic issues, such as through brand communities, branding, and how consumers shape market systems. Finally, we discuss tendencies that are emerging in CCT.

1.3 What is CCT?

CCT provides academics and practitioners a brand for research interested in the “real behavior of real consumers” (Wells, 1991, p. iii). It tries to put “the joy of discovery back into” such research,” yet adopts a “seriousness of purpose” [Ibid]. Its aim is to unravel questions of how and why exchange and consumption happens in particular ways; the implications of marketplace production, exchange, and consumption for society and culture; and, to critique and offer solutions to the dilemmas imposed by global consumer culture. Naming these phenomena as a group helps academics and practitioners to recognize research that belong to this diverse body of work, and to identify tendencies within the body of work, which facilitates the use of insights that stem from this work in theory development, critique, and practical action.

In 2005, Arnould and Thompson proposed this “disciplinary brand” they called CCT to envelop the “flurry of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 868). Arnould and Thompson (2005) focused on describing a set of concepts and research domains used to understand consumption better. They also endeavored to dispel myths that obstructed the legitimacy of the so-called “weird science” of interpretive consumer research (Bradshaw and Brown, 2008, p. 1400). In 2018, an edited introductory text and a handbook appeared that summarize many leading tendencies in this approach to consumer research (Arnould and Thompson, 2018b; Kravets et al., 2018).

According to the 2005 formulation, CCT is a field of inquiry that seeks to unravel the complexities of consumer culture. The CCT view of culture differs dramatically from the conventional consumer research representation of “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
1.3. **What is CCT?**

that kind of culture)” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, pp. 868–869). In CCT, consumer culture refers to what consumers do and believe rather than an attribute of character. Similarly, “being a consumer” is an identity intrinsic to market capitalism, our dominant global economic system, and the two evolve and change in tandem. CCT explores the “heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historical frame of globalization and market capitalism” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869). Further, Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasize “the dynamics of fragmentation, plurality, fluidity, and the intermingling (or hybridization) of consumption traditions and ways of life” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869).

From a CCT standpoint, consumer culture is as a dynamic network of boundary spanning material, economic, symbolic, and social relationships or connections. Slater (1997) proposes that consumer culture denotes a socio-economic arrangement in which markets either directly or indirectly mediate the relationships between lived experiences, that is, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend. According to Kilbourne et al. (2002), central to the dominant worldview paradigm in Western economies is an ideology of consumption, a faith in technology to avert environmental destruction, support for liberal democracy, defense of private property ownership, free markets and limited government intervention in the economy (Kilbourne et al., 2002). Thus, “the consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing commercialized symbols is central to consumer culture” (Arnould and Thompson, 2018a, p. 5; Slater, 1997). Kilbourne et al. (1997) refer to this as an ideology of consumption, meaning that people view their quality of life in terms of their ability to consume ever-greater quantities of goods. In other words, people are materialistic in orientation. In macro-level terms, the perpetuation and reproduction of this system is highly dependent upon the exercise of what society represents as personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life. That is, the choice to choose among commercialized offerings drives the reproduction of consumer culture and market capitalism. The term consumer culture also conceptualizes “an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and
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objects that groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting consumption practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members’ experiences and lives” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869).

Today, CCT scholars focus on the many ways to amend or extend the set of concepts and domains Arnould and Thompson (2005) outlined (Kravets et al., 2018). They use these concepts to understand the global culture of consumption as mediated by market systems rather than pursuing the “epistemic goal of making incremental contributions to a system of verified propositions” weakly linked to what living consumers think and do (Arnould and Thompson, 2007, p. 5). Moreover, CCT is not a unified theory. Instead, it is a continuously evolving perspective on consumer society and markets that shapes cultural life. CCT offers a way of assessing consumption from particular socio-cultural systems embedded in globalization and market capitalism (Joy and Li, 2012).

The dominant paradigmatic position of consumer research in marketing remains some variant of positivism, wedded to a logic of prediction (e.g., Calder and Tybout (1987) and Kupfer et al. (2018)). But in the early 1980s an alternative mode of interpretive research emerged (Askegaard and Limnet, 2011; Bradshaw and Brown, 2008; Fitchett and Davies, 2014; Levy, 2005; Shankar and Patterson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2013), Consequently, in the 1980s, research paradigm battles concerning the nature and breadth of consumer research developed. These debates produced “many nebulous epithets characterizing” CCT as a research tradition (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, pp. 868–869). These historical markers include “relativist, post-positivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic, [and] postmodern” labels (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 868). While Tadajewski (2006, p. 449) argues that “the overriding goal of science is not, in fact, prediction, but instead, understanding” and that prediction “is simply the test of understanding and the control over any consumer behaviors that result is the reward for the systematic researcher,” [Ibid] CCT has in fact long eschewed specific epistemological commitments. However, just as biologists study fish in a way distinct from the approach of fisher folk, CCT research prioritizes the goal of ‘understanding’ consumption phenomena in their cultural context. That is to say, CCT takes the interpretive perspective of biologists rather
1.3. What is CCT?

than the predictive perspective of fisher folk. Using a phenomenological approach, for example, consumer researchers “describe experience as it emerges in some context(s)” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 135), recognizing that consumer experiences are always informed by socio-cultural and historic contexts. In the classic CCT approach pioneered in the Consumer Behavior Odyssey (Belk, 1987), interpretive claims are grounded in real world consumer narrative and observation in situ that aims systematically to reveal the layers of cultural meaning that motivate and frame consumer behavior. Authors then compare their novel theoretical insights with existing frameworks and offer alternative ways of looking at the world that sometimes align with existing interpretive frames and sometimes extend or contest them.

As will be discussed in the coming sections, interpretive research approaches can make theoretical contributions that are culturally and managerially relevant. To illustrate, consider Arnould’s (1989) ethnographic study of preference formation and the diffusion of innovations, a framework derived from theories of innovation in business. In Zinder province of Niger, Arnould analyzed a cultural setting in “material poverty” (1989, p. 240), likely a priori to exhibit low levels of consumer innovativeness. Instead, the study highlighted not only massive receptivity to innovation, but also the significance of heterophily; expressive desires; aesthetic values; disruptive consumption contexts; charismatic sources of influence, ritual occasion; and situational influences on preference formation and diffusion under-appreciated in previous consumer diffusion research. His study takes advantage of a culturally distinctive context to demonstrate that consumers “act in a way that runs counter to a “rational,” choice-making model of consumer behavior” (1989, p. 246), challenging the primacy of such models in innovation and product adoption. Further, the findings invite managers to consider the shaping effects on consumer tastes and preferences of socio-culturally specific identity projects, macro level ideological conflicts, and global institutions in additional to brand attributes.

Thus, complementing approaches aimed at predicting consumer or market behavior or simply improving mathematical models, CCT opens the doors to new insights that have helped the field of consumer
research develop. In an analysis of the *Journal of Consumer Research* over the last 40 years, Wang *et al.* (2015) find that CCT articles are among the top cited contributors to the journal. They write, “Consumer culture research has experienced considerable growth since the 1980s and seems poised to flourish in the future” (Wang *et al.*, 2015, p. 12). Consistent with the ideas expressed by Wang *et al.* (2015) and MacInnis and Folkes (2010) highlight the success of CCT and its contributions by identifying it as a sub-discipline of consumer behavior. They write that the consumer behavior “expand[s] its intellectual horizons” by “adjoining disciplines” like CCT with more traditional sub-disciplines like economics and psychology (MacInnis and Folkes, 2010, p. 907). That is, while consumer behavior in general draws from economics and psychology, CCT reproduces the original disciplinary eclecticism in consumer research that Holbrook (1987b) celebrated. Thus, CCT emerged as a heterogeneous ensemble of perspectives that develop through a system of relations, offering disparate, but complementary theoretical views of the culture of consumption.

Arnould and Thompson (2005) outlined four analytical domains that systematize CCT scholars’ theoretical contributions; although nearly 20 years later, the field has evolved and hybridized further (Arnould and Thompson, 2018a). These include work at the individual level, which explores the shaping of consumer identity projects; at the group level, which examines the influence of the marketplace on lived culture and cultural resources; at the societal level, which investigates the intersection of social categories, social organization and consumption; and, at the macro level, which addresses consumers’ strategies of interpreting mass mediated marketplace ideologies and discourses. Originally, these levels were outlined as domains of theoretical contribution (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), however, they now seem better approached as research directions, groupings of particular focus or tendencies since “CCT cannot be regarded as a unified system of theoretical propositions” (Arnould and Thompson, 2007, p. 6).


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