Reflections

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research

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This article provides a synthesizing overview of the past 20 yr. of consumer research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. Our aim is to provide a viable disciplinary brand for this research tradition that we call consumer culture theory (CCT). We propose that CCT has fulfilled recurrent calls for developing a distinctive body of theoretical knowledge about consumption and marketplace behaviors. In developing this argument, we redress three enduring misconceptions about the nature and analytic orientation of CCT. We then assess how CCT has contributed to consumer research by illuminating the cultural dimensions of the consumption cycle and by developing novel theorizations concerning four thematic domains of research interest.

The past 20 yr. of consumer research have produced a flurry of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption. In this article, we offer a thematic overview of the motivating interests, conceptual orientations, and theoretical agendas that characterize this research stream to date, with a particular focus on articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*). Owing to the length constraints of this forum, we regrettably cannot give due consideration to the full spectrum of culturally oriented consumer research that appears in other publication venues such as the *European Journal of Marketing; Culture, Markets, and Consumption; International Journal of Research in Marketing; Journal of Consumer Culture; Journal of Marketing; Journal of Material Culture; Research in Consumer Behavior*; and a host of books and edited volumes. Accordingly, our thematic review is by no means intended to be exhaustive or all inclusive.

Over the years, many nebulous epithets characterizing this research tradition have come into play (i.e., relativist, postpositivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic, postmodern), all more obfuscating than clarifying. Each fails to signify the theoretical commonalities and linkages within this research tradition. They either place too much emphasis on methodological distinctions or they invoke overly coarse and increasingly irrelevant contrasts to a presumed dominant consumer research paradigm. A more appropriate and compelling academic brand would focus on the core theoretical interests and questions that define this research tradition. Accordingly, we offer the term "consumer culture theory" (CCT).

This CCT is not a unified, grand theory, nor does it aspire to such nomothetic claims. Rather, it refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. 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

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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 sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism. Thus, consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets.

The consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols is central to consumer culture, and yet the perpetuation and reproduction of this system is largely dependent upon the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life (Holt 2002). The term "consumer culture" also conceptualizes an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives (Kozinets 2001). These meanings are embodied and negotiated by consumers in particular social situations roles and relationships. Further, consumer culture describes a densely woven network of global connections and extensions through which local cultures are increasingly interpenetrated by the forces of transnational capital and the global mediascape (Appadurai 1990; Slater 1997; Wilk 1995).

Perhaps most important, CCT conceptualizes culture as the very fabric of experience, meaning, and action (Geertz 1983). Owing to its internal, fragmented complexity, consumer culture does not determine action as a causal force. Much like a game where individuals improvise within the constraints of rules (Bourdieu 1990), consumer culture—and the marketplace ideology it conveys—frames consumers' horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense-making interpretations more likely than others (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard 2002; Holt 1997; Kozinets 2002; Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

This "distributed view of cultural meaning" (Hannerz 1992, 16) emphasizes the dynamics of fragmentation, plurality, fluidity, and the intermingling (or hybridization) of consumption traditions and ways of life (Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). While a distributive view of culture is not the invention of CCT, this research tradition has significantly developed this perspective through empirical studies that analyze how particular manifestations of consumer culture are constituted, sustained, transformed, and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies) and grounded in specific socioeconomic circumstances and marketplace systems.

Other colleagues have produced overviews of CCT's philosophy of science foundations and methodological orientations (Anderson 1986, 1988; Arnold and Fischer 1994; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman 1993; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Sherry 1991; Sherry and Kozinets 2001) and domain-specific reviews of its substantive contributions (Belk 1995; Mick et al. 2004; Sherry 2004). Rather than replicate prior efforts, we provide a thematic framework that profiles four major interrelated research domains that are explored by CCT researchers. We further suggest that this body of research fulfills recurrent calls by Association for Consumer Research (ACR) presidents and other intellectual leaders for consumer research to explore the broad gamut of social, cultural, and indeed managerially relevant questions related to consumption and to develop a distinctive body of knowledge about consumers and consumption (Andreasen 1993; Belk 1987a, 1987b; Folkes 2002; Holbrook 1987; Kernan 1979; Lehmann 1996; Levy 1992; MacInnis 2004; Olson 1982; Richins 2001; Sheth 1985; Shimp 1994; Wells 1993; Wright 2002; Zaltman 2000). In sum, CCT is an interdisciplinary research tradition that has advanced knowledge about consumer culture (in all its heterogeneous manifestations) and generated empirically grounded findings and theoretical innovations that are relevant to a broad constituency in the base social science disciplines, public policy arenas, and managerial sectors.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING (WHAT CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY IS NOT)

We offer this review both as an entree for those who have not followed the development of CCT and as an integrative frame of reference for those who have. While CCT research has witnessed tremendous growth over the last 20 yr., PhD programs in marketing (the primary academic constituency of the ACR/*JCR* community) remain oriented around microeconomic theory, cognitive psychology, experimental design, and quantitative analytical methods. Accordingly, most consumer researchers have not received training in the theoretical traditions and research methodologies common in CCT research. This circumstance, coupled with some lingering vestiges of the 1980s paradigm battles, has given rise to three enduring misunderstandings about CCT that impede appreciation of its aims, analytic logics, and disciplinary contributions.

First and foremost among these myths is that consumer culture theorists study particular contexts as ends in themselves; therefore, the argument goes, CCT contributes little to theory development in consumer research (Lehmann 1999; Simonson et al. 2001). To paraphrase Geertz's (1973) famous axiom, however, consumer culture theorists do not study consumption contexts; they study in consumption contexts to generate new constructs and theoretical insights and to extend existing theoretical formulations. Consumer culture theory has its historical roots in calls for consumer researchers to broaden their focus to investigate the neglected experiential, social, and cultural dimensions of consumption in context (Belk 1987a, 1987b; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Thus, the field, rather than the laboratory,

became the natural context for CCT. However, the resulting diversity of investigative contexts (see table 1) makes it easy to lose sight of the theoretical forest and to classify these studies on the basis of their topical setting—the flea market study, the *Star Trek* study, the skydiving study—rather than the theoretical questions interrogated in that research setting. This mistake would be analogous to classifying experimental research in terms of its research stimuli, thus leading to discussions of the beer and wine study, the camera study, or the cake mix study.

A second misconception is that the primary differences between CCT and other traditions of consumer research are methodological. Unquestionably, qualitative data and an array of related data collection and analysis techniques have been quite central to CCT (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Kozinets 2002; Mick 1986; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Spiggle 1994; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). This methodological predilection follows from the aims that drive CCT rather than from a passion for qualitative data or vivid description per se. Consumer culture theory focuses on the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption that are not plainly accessible through experiments, surveys, or database modeling (Sherry 1991), including such issues as product symbolism, ritual practices, the consumer stories in product and brand meanings, and the symbolic boundaries that structure personal and communal consumer identities. However, CCT neither necessitates fidelity to any one methodological orientation nor does it canonize a qualitative-quantitative divide. Consumer culture theory researchers embrace methodological pluralism whenever quantitative measures and analytic techniques can advance the operative theoretical agenda (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000; McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Moore and Lutz 2000; Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1996).

Given this commitment to multimethod investigations of consumption phenomena in natural settings, it is ironic that CCT research is misperceived in some disciplinary quarters as a sphere of creative expression, voyeurism, entertaining esoterica, and sonorous introspection of limited relevance to consumer research's broader theoretical projects or the pragmatic interests of managers and policy makers. Accordingly, we observe that the occasional *JCR* article on introspection (Gould 1991) or the use of poetry as a mode of representation (Sherry and Schouten 2002) sometimes looms larger in the disciplinary imagination than in the day-to-day conduct of CCT research itself. To adopt the vernacular of the behavioral decision theory (BDT) tradition, this myth manifests a classic judgment bias—availability—whereby a few exceptional and controversial experimental moments in the CCT tradition take (social) cognitive precedence over its baseline research activities.[1]

Although *JCR* is not a managerial journal, this myth of irrelevance arose, in part, from the ferment of the 1980s paradigm-broadening controversies (see Lutz 1989), which also inspired reflections on the relationships between consumer research and its academic, public, and business constituencies. Most particularly, Belk (1986, 1987b) and Holbrook (1987) cautioned that being unduly wedded to a managerial perspective posed formidable barriers to investigating consumption in its full experiential and sociocultural scope and to developing an autonomous discipline of consumer behavior that would not be regarded as a subspecialty of marketing, advertising, or the base disciplines. In the fervor of those debates, such calls for an ecumenical conception of relevance were sometimes misconstrued as a renunciation of managerial relevance.

At that time, consumer researchers most typically defined managerial relevance in terms of a rational choice paradigm and its corresponding focus on purchase behavior. However, subsequent developments, such as customer relation management, lifestyle and multicultural marketing, and the proliferation of so-called identity brands (Holt 2003), have brought consumer meanings to the center of managerial concerns, and consequently ethnographic methods have become commonplace in applied market research (Frank 1997; Osborne 2002). In hindsight, even during the disciplinary turmoil of the 1980s, it would have been possible to argue that an understanding of consumer symbolism and lifestyle orientations is essential to successful marketing strategies (see Levy 1959, 1981) and to have anticipated many of Wells's (1993) discovery-oriented proposals for enhancing the relevance of consumer research.

As we will detail in the next section, the dominant thrust of CCT research addresses issues that are highly relevant to social scientific, managerial, and public policy constituencies. Consumer culture theory is organized around a core set of theoretical questions related to the relationships among consumers' personal and collective identities; the cultures created and embodied in the lived worlds of consumers; underlying experiences, processes and structures; and the nature and dynamics of the sociological categories through and across which these consumer culture dynamics are enacted and inflected. In pursuit of this project, CCT research draws from an interdisciplinary body of theory to develop novel analytic theoretical frameworks that can illuminate the sociocultural dynamics that drive the consumption cycle and to advance a theoretical conversation that has arisen around four interrelated research domains.

[1] These controversial experimental moments (e.g., Gould 1991) do serve an important function within the CCT tradition by periodically testing its epistemic boundaries, calling for renewed reflections on the relationships between the knower and the known, and forcing reconsideration of status quo paradigmatic conventions (e.g., Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). As Sherry and Schouten discuss (2002, 221), researchers working in this research tradition have a pronounced preoccupation with methodological issues of validity, voice, reflectivity, and representation. Owing to its epistemological grounding, CCT is infused by a spirit of critical self-reflection and paradigmatic reinvention and a corresponding antipathy toward the idea of settling into a comfortable, but intellectually stultifying orthodoxy.

ILLUMINATING (WHAT CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY IS)

Illuminating the Consumption Cycle

The disciplinary pioneers of CCT encouraged investigation of the contextual, symbolic, and experiential aspects of consumption as they unfold across a consumption cycle that includes acquisition, consumption and possession, and disposition processes and analysis of these phenomena from macro-, meso-, and micro-theoretical perspectives (Belk 1987b, 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook 1987; McCracken 1986; Mick 1986). This research agenda has been significantly advanced over the last 20 yr.

Consumer culture theory has illuminated the symbolic, embodied, and experiential aspects of acquisition behaviors (Fischer and Arnold 1990; Joy and Sherry 2003; Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997; Sherry 1990; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990) and the sociocultural complexities of exchange behaviors and relationships (Belk et al. 1988; Belk and Coon 1993; Deighton and Grayson 1995; Peñaloza and Gilly 1999). Gift giving provides an exemplary case of a whole class of consumption phenomena whose study emerged from this shift in research aims (Belk 1976; Joy 2001; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983; Wooten 2000).

Consumption and possession practices—particularly their hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions—have perhaps been the most widely studied constellation of phenomena identified with the CCT tradition (e.g., Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003; Belk et al. 1989; Fournier 1998; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Joy and Sherry 2003; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Mick and Fournier 1998; Richins 1994; Rook 1985, 1987; Thompson 1996; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). While disposition practices have received comparatively less attention, CCT studies have shown that they play a significant role in consumers' negotiation of role and identity transitions (Bonsu and Belk 2003; McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts 1993; McCracken 1986; Ozanne 1992; Patterson, Hill, and Malloy 1995; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Schouten 1991; Young 1991).

More broadly still, CCT research has emphasized the productive aspect of consumption. Consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Mick and Buhl 1992; Peñaloza 2000, 2001; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994a). From this perspective, the marketplace provides consumers with an expansive and heterogeneous palette of resources from which to construct individual and collective identities (e.g., Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Murray 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003).

Illuminating Four Research Programs in Consumer Culture Theory

The theoretical questions and research agendas pursued by CCT cut across the process-oriented categories of acquisition, consumption, and disposition much in way that the theoretical scope of marketing research transcends the 4Ps framework. In broad terms, CCT has advanced consumer behavior knowledge by illuminating sociocultural processes and structures related to (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. To avoid the error of reification, we stress that these research programs form a holistic research tradition. Specific CCT studies address various aspects of each, and hence they are not neatly typologized. Still, for purposes of analytic exposition, it is possible to distinguish among the kinds of issues that fall under each and to identify studies that bring these respective theoretical issues to the theoretical foreground.

Consumer Identity Projects. Consumer culture theory concerns the coconstitutive, coproductive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986). The corollary premise is that the marketplace has become a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people, including those who lack resources to participate in the market as full-fledged consumers, construct narratives of identity (Belk 1988; Hill 1991; Hill and Stamey 1990; Holt 2002; Levy 1981). In this work, consumers are conceived of as identity seekers and makers. Consumer identity projects are typically considered to be goal driven (Mick and Buhl 1992; Schau and Gilly 2003), although the aims pursued may often be tacit in nature (and vaguely understood; see Arnould and Price 1993; Thompson and Tambyah 1999) and marked by points of conflict, internal contradictions, ambivalence, and even pathology (Hirschman 1992; Mick and Fournier 1998; Murray 2002; O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Otnes et al. 1997; Thompson 1996). These complications frequently engender the use of myriad coping strategies, compensatory mechanisms, and juxtapositions of seemingly antithetical meanings and ideals. In their work on digital self-presentation, for instance, Schau and Gilly (2003) show how consumers use brands and hyperlinks to create multiple nonlinear cyber self-representations without necessarily sacrificing the idea of an integrated self.

Consumer culture theorists have turned attention to the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structuring influence of the marketplace, arguing that the market produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit. While individuals can and do pursue personally edifying goals through these consumer positions, they are enacting and personalizing cultural scripts that align their identities with the structural imperatives of a consumer-driven global economy. In this spirit, Kozinets (2001) explores how fan identity is constituted in relationship

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND THEIR CORRESPONDING THEORETICAL INTERESTS

Context	Author(s)	Points of theoretical contribution
Working class adoption of business education	Allen 2002	A sociological theory of tacit consumer choice
Possessions in a less-developed country (Niger)	Arnould 1989	A cultural theorization of preference formation and the diffusion of innovations
White-water river rafting	Arnould and Price 1993	Defining extended leisure service encounters and its implications for customer satisfaction
Consumers' intergenerational transfer of possessions	Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000	Individual and familial identity formation processes; the dynamics of inalienable wealth
Gift giving and gift reception	Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Joy 2001; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983; Wooten 2000	Formation and structuration of a moral economy; age and gender role definition and enactment in consumer society
Reenactments of Mountain Men rendezvous	Belk and Costa 1998	Consumer fantasy, the ritual impulse, and the reformulation of social roles via the enactment of consumer fantasies
Swap meets and flea markets	Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990	Consumer relationships to market structures; sociocultural dynamics of exchange relationships
Death rituals in Ghana	Bonsu and Belk 2003	Postmortem consumer identity work
Sky-diving	Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993	A dynamic model of consumer motivations and cultural account of consumer risk taking behaviors
Romanian women's use of cosmetics	Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003	Rethinking the origin and development of brand knowledge and involvement
Consumers who lost money in the Chondra-Za mail order scam	Deighton and Grayson 1995	An empirically based theorization of consumer self-seduction
Five women and their favorite brands	Fournier 1998	A social relationship model of consumer-brand relationships
Thanksgiving dinners; ordinary family dinners	Heisley and Levy 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991	Cultural rituals; construction, maintenance, and negotiation of family relationships through consumption
Homeless women	Hill 1991; Hill and Stamey 1990	Materialism and self-identity in cases of involuntary disposition
Drug addiction experiences	Hirschman 1992	Toward a theory of the lived experience of compulsive consumption behavior
Baseball spectatorship	Holt 1995	A model of consumption practices
Consumer lifestyle choices in a small town/rural setting	Holt 1997	The role of consumption practices in sustaining symbolic boundaries between social groups, as formed by complex intersections of sociological collectivities
Aesthetic experiences of museum patrons	Joy and Sherry 2003	A post-Cartesian theory of embodied consumer experiences
Urban gay men	Kates 2002	Oppositional consumption practices and the contesting of gender distinctions
Star Trek fans	Kozinets 2001	Theorizing how consumers find Utopian meanings in the commercialized sphere of popular culture and explicating the ideological constitution of fandom
Burning Man Festival participation	Kozinets 2002	Investigating the dialectic between consumer resistance and capitalist ideologies
Indian, Haitian, and Mexican immigrants	Mehta and Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994	Contributing to a postassimilationist, poststructural theory of ethnicity
Danish brothers' interpretations of advertisements	Mick and Buhl 1992	A theorization of how consumers interpret multiple meanings of advertisements depending on their life themes and projects

TABLE 1 (*Continued*)

Context	Author(s)	Points of theoretical contribution
Consumers reports of self-gifting occasions	Mick and DeMoss 1990	A theorization of nonrational consumer purchase decision and the role of their consumption in self-identity maintenance
Consumers of Volvos and Apple computers	Muñiz and O'Guinn 2000	A cultural theory of community in postmodern society and the role of brands in community formation
Heritage Village theme park	O'Guinn and Belk 1989	The impact of consumer culture and consumerist ideologies on religious norms and experiences of the sacred
Western stock shows and rodeos	Peñaloza 2001	Consumers' active process in the coproduction of marketplace meanings and the role of commodified cultural myths in mediating marketplace relationships
British high school students talking about advertisements	Ritson and Elliott 1999	A theory of the social usages of advertising
Personal Web sites	Schau and Gilly 2003	A theorization of consumer's commercialized, nonlinear self-presentation in cyberspace
Harley Davidson riders	Schouten and McAlexander 1995	The structure and dynamics of consumer subcultures and reworking of identity
Natural food and health alternatives	Sirsi, Reingen, and Ward 1996; Thompson and Troester 2002	A microcultural theorization of consumer belief and value systems and their diffusion through social networks
Working mothers (jugglers)	Thompson 1996	The gendering of consumer lifestyles and its impact on preferences
Men's and women's experiences of fashion and body image	Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997	Consumers active use marketplace ideologies via resistance interpretations that play off ideological contradictions and paradoxes, and the ideological mapping of their identity projects via brand meanings and fashion styles
Expatriates living in Singapore	Thompson and Tambyah 1999	An analysis of cosmopolitanism as a consumer ideology and its role in the shaping of consumer goals

to utopian ideals and the cooptation of those ideas by corporate media; Belk et al. (2003) explore how desiring consumer subjects are constituted by the marketplace ideals promulgated in the discourses of global corporate capitalism (also see Murray 2002; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Holt (2002) details how the postmodern economy thrives by producing "unruly bricoleurs" who express personal sovereignty and claims to personal authenticity through nonconformist acts of consumption and thereby place the marketplace and its symbols at the center of their identities. In a related vein, Grayson and Martinec (2004) suggest that experiences of authenticity (in tourist settings) are systematically linked to particular forms of signification (indexical and iconic authenticity) and consumers' corresponding imaginative and fantasy-oriented elaborations upon these different semiotic modalities.

Marketplace Cultures. The study of marketplace cultures addresses some of the most distinctive features of the marketplace-culture intersection. In contrast to traditional anthropological views of people as culture bearers, consumers are seen as culture producers. The key research question driving this program of research is this: how does the emergence of consumption as a dominant human practice reconfigure cultural blueprints for action and interpretation, and vice versa? One family of CCT research devoted to marketplace cultures has sought to unravel the processes by which consumer culture is instantiated in particular cultural milieu and the implications of this process for people experiencing it. Such research has examined North American (McCracken 1986; Witkowski 1989), African (Arnould 1989; Bonsu and Belk 2003), Asian (Applbaum and Jordt 1996; Joy 2001; Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989), and eastern European contexts (Coulter et al. 2003).

This stream of CCT research also addresses the ways in which consumers forge feelings of social solidarity and create distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometimes transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Whether characterized as a subculture of consumption (Kates 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), a consumption world (Holt 1995), a consumption microculture (Thompson and Troester 2002), or a culture of consumption (Kozinets 2001), this genre of CCT builds upon Maffesoli's (1996) ideas on neotribalism. According to Maffesoli, the forces of globalization and postindustrial socioeconomic transformation have significantly eroded the traditional bases of sociality and encouraged instead a dominant ethos of radical individualism oriented around a ceaseless quest for personal distinctiveness and autonomy in lifestyle choices. In response to these potentially alienating and isolating conditions, consumers forge more ephemeral collective identifications and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests and leisure avocations (also see Cova 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001).

Much of the initial work on marketplace subcultures has focused on youth subcultures (Thornton 1996). Consumer

culture theory research has shown that the tribal aspects of consumption are quite pervasive. These studies highlight how experiential consumption activities, such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), fandom (Kozinets 2001), countercultural lifestyles (Kates 2002; Thompson and Troester 2002), and temporary consumption communities (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002), foster collective identifications grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies, rituals, social practices, and status systems.

This research has also shown that marketplace cultures often define their symbolic boundaries through an ongoing opposition to dominant (i.e., middle-class) lifestyle norms and mainstream consumer sensibilities (see Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kates 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2000; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In contrast to classic sociological accounts of subculture, in-group social status in these settings is achieved not through adherence to monolithic consumption norms but through displays of localized cultural capital (particular forms of knowledge and skills valued in the group) and skill in combining, reworking, and innovating the pool of symbolic resources that are shared by group members (see Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

The Sociohistoric Patterning of Consumption. The third domain that CCT addresses is the institutional and social structures that systematically influence consumption, such as class, community, ethnicity, and gender. Consumers are conceived of as enactors of social roles and positions (Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993). In short, the driving research problematic is set by the question: what is consumer society and how is it constituted and sustained?

To address this problematic, consumer culture theorists investigate the processes by which consumption choices and behaviors are shaped by social class hierarchies (Allen 2002; Holt 1997, 1998; Wallendorf 2001); gender (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990); ethnicity (Belk 1992; Mehta and Belk 1991; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983); and families, households, and other formal groups (Moore-Shay, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Ward and Reingen 1990). In this branch of work, Holt (1997, 1998) shows how cultural capital endowments distributed by social class systematically structure consumer preferences. Wallendorf (2001) suggests that literacy, a skill set fundamental to effective consumer behavior, is distributed by class and race. Allen (2002) shows how working-class consumer choices are molded by tacit cultural capital endowments into which they have been socialized and that systematically thwart their explicit social mobility goals.

Reciprocally, CCT examines the relationships among consumers' experiences, belief systems, and practices and these underlying institutional and social structures. For example, research on brand communities shows that such communities retain traditional markers of community, while relaxing constraints of geography, and are characterized by explicit attempts to build community through consumption of commercial brands (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2000). In another vein, postassimilationist consumer research suggests that ethnic identities have, in some sense, become hypercultural in that the culture of origin is socially reconstructed as something consumable (costume, foods, crafts, music) as part of attempts to assert an anchoring for identity in fluid social contexts (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Oswald 1999). Further, postassimilationist consumer research provides a dynamic and agentic alternative to more mechanistic structural models of acculturation (Peñaloza 1994).

Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers' Interpretive Strategies. Consumer culture theory examines consumer ideology—systems of meaning that tend to channel and reproduce consumers' thoughts and actions in such a way as to defend dominate interests in society (Hirschman 1993). The questions guiding this research program figure prominently in much critical and media theory outside of consumer research (e.g., Dawson 2003; Fiske 1989; Hall 1993; Lears 1994; Twitchell 1996). They include the following: What normative messages do commercial media transmit about consumption (Hirschman 1988)? How do consumers make sense of these messages and formulate critical responses (Hetrick and Lozada 1994; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994)? In this research program, consumers are conceived of as interpretive agents whose meaning-creating activities range from those that tacitly embrace the dominant representations of consumer identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media to those that consciously deviate from these ideological instructions. This latter family of interpretive strategies gives rise to variegated forms of identity play and sometimes shades into strident criticisms of corporate capitalism and marketing as a social institution (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Murray 2002; Thompson 2004).

At the macro level, CCT research investigates the influences that economic and cultural globalization exert upon consumer identity projects and identity-defining patterns of social interaction distinctive social contexts (Arnould 1989; Belk et al. 2003; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Coulter et al. 2003; Wilk 1995). Moving down to a meso level of analysis, consumer culture theorists also explore how particular cultural production systems, such as marketing communications or the fashion industry (McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997), systematically predispose consumers toward certain kinds of identity projects.

The theoretical understanding of structural predisposing has been significantly developed by research on the design and management of servicescapes (both built and natural) and the systematic effects they exert over consumer experiences (McAlexander et al. 2002; Peñaloza 2000, 2001; Price and Arnould 1999; Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1995; Sherry 1990, 1998; Sherry and McGrath 1989). These studies highlight how servicescapes transform cultural ideals

into material realities and, furthermore, how treasured cultural narratives, such as Wild West mythologies, tales of athletic achievement, or romantic narratives of revitalization through nature, are reworked to serve commercial aims and to channel consumer experiences in certain trajectories (Arnould and Price 1993; Joy and Sherry 2003; Peñaloza 2001; Sherry 1998). Just as a store layout can direct consumers' physical movements through retail space, servicescapes have a narrative design that also directs the course of consumers' mental attention, experiences, and related practices of self-narration.

Studies operating in this research domain frequently draw from semiotic and literary critical theories to analyze the symbolic meanings, cultural ideals, and ideological inducements encoded in popular culture texts and the rhetorical tactics that are used to make these ideological appeals compelling (Escalas and Stern 2003; Hirschman 1988, 1990; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Mick 1986; Sherry and Camargo 1987; Stern 1993, 1995, 1996). Scott (1990, 1994a, 1994b) has shown how a culturally oriented view of the elements that form the gestalt of an advertisement (i.e., its music, imagery, and copy), coupled with an understanding of typical interpretive strategies that are used to make sense of an ad, leads to a dramatically different account of how advertising works from that found in conventional information processing accounts. Similarly, Escalas and Stern (2003) and McQuarrie and Mick (1992, 1996, 1999) employ pluralistic multimethods approaches, the latter to analyze rhetorical and imagistic qualities that contribute to advertising resonance and encourage more complex advertising processing than classical models describe.

Consumer culture theorists read popular culture texts (advertisements, television programs, films) as lifestyle and identity instructions that convey unadulterated marketplace ideologies (i.e., look like this, act like this, want these things, aspire to this kind of lifestyle) and idealized consumer types (Belk and Pollay 1985; Hirschman 1988, 1990; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Stern 1993, 1995). By decoding and deconstructing these mass-mediated marketplace ideologies, consumer culture theorists reveal the ways in which capitalist cultural production systems invite consumers to covet certain identity and lifestyle ideals. Deighton and Grayson (1995) offer a counterintuitive spin on this interpretive agent viewpoint by analyzing how consumers willingly become complicit in their own seduction by marketplace narratives.

Most research on consumers' practices of ideological resistance highlights the creative and often sophisticated ways in which consumers critically reinterpret media and advertising ideals and ideological inducements (Scott 1994a). For example, Mick and Buhl (1992) profile the way in which consumers' life themes and life projects shape their readings of advertisements. Thus, consumers bend advertisements to fit their life circumstances rather than feel a pressure to conform to a specific ideological representation. Ritson and Elliott (1999) show that advertisements often become a social resource for humor, social bonding, and conversational interactions in which consumers collectively critique and rework the meanings of a given campaign. It is interesting that few of these interactions actually instigate pressures to buy the product or brand advertised.

In this family of CCT studies, consumers are conceptualized as interpretive agents rather than as passive dupes. Thus, various forms of consumer resistance inevitably greet the dominant normative ideological influence of commercial media and marketing. Consumers seek to form lifestyles that defy dominant consumerist norms or that directly challenge corporate power (Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Kozinets 2002; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Murray et al. 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997). In this vein, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) call into question the standard assumption that a natural alliance exists between consumers and consumer activists. By highlighting activists' quasi-evangelical quest to instigate significant changes in the moral outlook of mainstream consumers (who are deemed to be part of the problem), this study also extends prior theorizations that construe consumer activism as primarily motivated by an ethos of good citizenship and an antinomy toward corporations.

DISCUSSION

Consumer culture theory is fulfilling the recurrent calls of consumer research's thought leaders for a distinctive body of theoretical knowledge about consumption and marketplace behaviors. It strives to systematically link individual level (or idiographic) meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structure and then to situate these relationships within historical and marketplace contexts. It presents a continual reminder that consumption is a historically shaped mode of sociocultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces. Whereas mainstream consumer research is sometimes critiqued for ivory tower theorizing (Lehmann 1996; Wells 1993), CCT research is fundamentally concerned with the cultural meanings, sociohistoric influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life (Fournier 1998; Holt 1997, 1998; Peñaloza 1994; Thompson et al. 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Accordingly, CCT researchers investigate how consumers consume (Holt 1995) across a gamut of social spaces (e.g., the home, the office, diverse retail settings, the Web, leisure enclaves, tourist sites), frequently making use of multiple data sources and triangulation techniques (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk et al. 2003; Celsi et al. 1993; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Mick and Fournier 1998; Moore and Lutz 2000).

Consumer culture theory research also highlights that the proverbial real world, for any given consumer, is neither unified, monolithic, nor transparently rational (Belk et al. 2003; Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Hirschman 1985; Mick and Fournier 1998; Price et al. 2000; Rook 1985; Thompson 1996). Consumer culture theory research shows that many consumers' lives are constructed around multiple realities and that they use consumption to experience realities (linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and

identity play) that differ dramatically from the quotidian (see Belk and Costa 1998; Deighton and Grayson 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Joy and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Martin 2004; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

What are the new frontiers for CCT? One area conspicuously absent from this review, and by implication *JCR*, is broader analyses of the historical and institutional forces that have shaped the marketplace and the consumer as a social category (e.g., Cohen 2003). One likely reason for the paucity of macro-level analyses of consumer culture is the difficulty of undertaking such work in a journal-length article. One way to encourage and stimulate more encompassing historical research would be for consumer researchers to give greater credence to books and the *JCR* monograph series. One specific form of this research that we would like to encourage strives to tell cultural history through the commodity form (broadly defined). These works not only highlight the sociohistorical significance of consumption generally but also often have an impact on broader academic and social conversations concerned with marketing's effects on society (e.g., Ritzer 1993; Schor 1998). For example, Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) uses the ubiquity of fast food consumption to critically analyze the socioeconomic and cultural forces that have transformed the nature of work, leisure, and family relationships in post–World War II America. Holt (2004) shows how longitudinal changes in advertising campaigns for iconic brands, such as Bud and Mountain Dew (and their respective failures and successes), are related to specific cultural tensions and economic anxieties that dominate particular historical moments. Finally, Firat and Dholakia (1998) provide a sweeping historical panorama that delineates how a new kind of consumer has emerged from the sociocultural ferment in the transformative shifts from modernity to postmodernity.

Moving to a more mid-range level of analysis, an intriguing issue, still in its theoretical infancy, concerns the moral constitution of consumption and the nature of moral dilemmas and challenges that the commercialization of everyday life, including its most intimate moments, pose for consumers (Belk and Coon 1993; Borgmann 2000; Hochschild 2003; Illouz 1997). A second promising area is the temporality of consumption experiences, a topic instigated through interest in nostalgia (Holbrook 1993) and reinvigorated under the rubric of retroscapes and retrobranding (Brown and Sherry 2003; Brown et al. 2003). Implicit to a number of recent CCT studies is the idea that servicescapes afford consumers different kinds of (embodied) temporal experiences, enabling museum patrons to revel in the languid experience of aesthetic appreciation (Joy and Sherry 2003) or ESPN Zone patrons to feel the dizzying rush of a rapid fire, adrenalin-infused sport spectacle (Kozinets et al. 2004). These studies point to a need to explore consumer understandings of history and temporality more generally. A third promising sphere for further inquiry is the globalization of consumer culture and its manifestations in less-developed countries (Arnould 1989; Bonsu and Belk 2003) and those characterized by transitional economies (Belk et al. 2003; Coulter et al. 2003; Wilk 1995). Finally, building on the idea of cultural capital (Allen 2002; Holt 1998), CCT could readily pursue a culturally informed resource-based theory of the customer that dovetails in some ways with resource-based theories of the firm (Hunt and Morgan 1995, 1996). Such a consumer-centric theory would investigate how customers allocate economic, social, and cultural capital resources between competing brand and service offerings and use them to enrich their endowments. This theoretical innovation could move us toward a theory of customer value cocreation (Vargo and Lusch (2004).

What about the relationship between CCT and other consumer research traditions? The expansion of CCT coincides with increasing concerns over the field's fragmentation and the seeming lack of a common theoretical vernacular and agreed-upon motivating problems and questions to bind consumer researchers together in a common, distinguishing intellectual project. These concerns follow from a decidedly modernist construction of science and the concomitant idea that a scientific field progresses by developing a unified system of knowledge around a common domain of interest (e.g., Hunt 1991). From this standpoint, disciplinary diversity is a problem because it fosters differing camps, each pursuing their own particularistic questions, whose knowledge claims are unlikely to coalesce. In this way, consumer research threatens to become a tower of Babel.

In contradistinction to this angst-inducing allegory, we suggest that the field is enhanced by the presence of multiple conversations. Consumer research is a vital and maturing field of inquiry, not because it has steadily advanced toward a singular body of theory but rather because it can generate and sustain multiple theoretical conversations, each speaking to distinctive theoretical questions. To anthropomorphize a bit, this polyvocal fluency makes the consumer research field a more interesting and creative conversationalist and enables it to forge greater and more varied linkages to other branches of social science, governmental and public policy agencies, and the world of management.

Furthermore, the presence of different conversations does not preclude cross-paradigmatic engagement and enrichment. By virtue of sharing a common disciplinary matrix, broad topical concerns link different consumer research traditions and enable consumer researchers to poach and cross-fertilize ideas, methods, and contexts from a variety of theoretical conversations that differentially address core topics. In prior work, we characterized the cross-fertilization that can arise from this kind of conversational interaction and poaching as retextualization (Thompson, Stern, and Arnould 1998), whereby theoretical insights and constructs from one paradigmatic conversation are reconceptualized and reworked in relationship to a different paradigmatic vernacular. Through retextualization, CCT research has reframed and revitalized core analytic constructs, such as brand loyalty (Fournier 1998, McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2000), consumer lifestyles (Holt 1997; Thompson 1996), retail experiences (Kozinets et al. 2004; Peñaloza 2001; Peñaloza and Gilly 1999; Sherry 1998),

advertising information processing (Escalas and Stern 2003; McQuarrie and Mick 1992, 1996, 1999; Scott 1994a, 1994b; Stern 1995, 1996), customer satisfaction (Arnould and Price 1993; Fournier and Mick 1999), and consumer involvement (Coulter et al. 2003).

To close with an anthropological insight, scientific culture as an organization of diversity creates myriad situations in which "people must deal with other peoples' meanings . . . at times, perhaps, one can just ignore them. Often enough however, one may comment on them, object to them, feel stimulated by them, take them over for oneself, defer to them, or take them into account in any of a number of other ways" (Hannerz 1992, 14). Such a disciplinary situation may not always be comfortable or comforting, but it can be energizing, thought provoking, and inspiring, and it can provide a fertile intellectual ground for theoretical innovations and advancements.

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