

Ten Questions for Russell Belk

John Sherry: How has the evolution of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) affected your assessment of our field as a provider of competent technicians but incompetent theorists?

Russell Belk: It is gratifying to see the progress of the CCT label, conference, and organization, and the people and innovative work it attracts. But I think we still come up short on generating original theory. Thanks to the theory push of business journals we have become great users of others' theories that we occasionally tweak a little, but we seem to loathe to construct theory of our own. I think it starts at the dissertation stage when it would be most unusual to find encouragement for truly original thinking. But if anyone among those publishing primarily in *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) can do it, it is certainly the CCT group. On the other hand, with too much emphasis on theory, theory, theory, we can lose sight of the phenomenon that likely inspired our research in the first place and the opportunity for good thick description. Theory is an important goal, but it should not be our only reason for doing research and seeking publication.

JS: What is the current prospect of art serving as a source of explanation and a source for data in the field of consumer research?

RB: I have an emeritus colleague, Don Thompson, who has written an interesting book called *The Twelve Million Dollar Stuffed Shark* using Damien Hirst's work as an example in trying to explain the wacky valuation of artworks, but I know that isn't what you have in mind. If we construe art broadly as including films, television, YouTube, plays, poetry, photography, novels, comics, and musical lyrics, then I think the prospects are quite good. Consumption since the 19th century (but more recently in some places) is similar to the situation of Christianity in the Middle Ages—it is the water we swim in and the air we breathe (to mix a few metaphors). So it is only natural that a great many artists in all of these media have addressed consumption phenomena directly and continue to do so. Granted, little of this work is making it into the journals and conferences generally seen as

comprising the field of consumer research. But wittingly and unwittingly, I think that most of all CCT researchers are influenced and inspired by the artistic treatments of consumption that we encounter. I hope we are! And there are also plenty of opportunities to use art as data. Jonathan Schroeder has done this. Art Historians like Christin Mamiya (*Pop Art and Consumer Culture*) have done this. And Güliz Ger and I have a long-term project comparing the emergence of consumer culture in late Ming China and Golden Age Netherlands through the visual art of the two places and overlapping time periods.

JS: What would a Consumer Behavior Odyssey look like in the virtual or digital era?

RB: Great question! There is both the consumption of the virtual and the digital as well as the various ways in which offline consumption is represented in and entwined with the Internet, the computer, the game console, the smart phone, and other digital interfaces. This is an arena that is so vast and pervasive that any study of consumption ignores it at its peril. But to undertake an eye-opening Odyssey that focuses on these phenomena would require a large team. I have a book in press that Rosa Llamas and I have edited for Routledge called *The Digital Consumer*. Collectively, the 37 chapters in the book comprise a mini-Odyssey of sorts. There is some great stuff there, but it is not the result of a concerted project in which a team decides to delve in and explore the digital and virtual world using a variety of ethnographic methods. That I think would take a large team willing to dedicate a year or so to different aspects of this realm, like Tom Boellstorff did with *Second Life (Coming of Age in Second Life)*. Although I think you'd want to examine digital consumers offline as well as online, it wouldn't be necessary that the team was assembled in "real" time and space or that they journey together, even in cyberspace. But it would take a concerted effort to bring together some likeminded scholars and get them to commit to the project. Quite a good idea, actually. I have a paper under revision on the extended self in a digital age, and there are quite literally thousands of relevant publications that touch on this topic alone. So some degree of specialization and narrowing of focus by different individuals would no doubt be needed. It is hard to be a renaissance person in a digital age. But with aggregate selves like Wikipedia and Google, it is less necessary that we regard this goal as a purely individual pursuit. And I think that is one phenomenon that a digital Odyssey would want to address.

JS: Is there a need for an "unfreezing moment" on the contemporary consumer research scene? What currently "familiar" behaviors need to be made "strange?"

RB: Almost everything. Almost every consumer behavior needs this unfreezing defamiliarization. Nicholas Baker has a wonderfully observant novel (*The Mezzanine*) about returning from buying a pair of shoelaces. John Vernon (*A Book of Reasons*) has some great reflections on buying a hammer to repair his late brother's cluttered

home. William Powers (*Hamlet's BlackBerry*) has some nice insights on the effects of all the screens in his life. Catherine Hakim (*Honey Money*) has terrific insights into what it means to be good-looking in today's world. David Lyon (*Jesus in Disneyland*) does a great job of looking freshly at postmodern religion. And a number of recent books have probed the many small objects that are special in our lives (e.g., Joshua Glenn and Carol Hayes, *Taking Things Seriously*; Danny Miller, *The Comfort of Things*; Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects*). What does a key represent? What is the difference between reading analogue and digital time, temperature, or speed? Why do some of us still wear ties? How does outsourcing our knowledge to Google and the computer affect us? There are any number of basic questions about everyday life and consumption we have not asked nor sought to study.

JS: *Has a "canon" emerged in CCT research, and, if so, what are the consequences for our field?*

RB: One de facto canon is the inadvertent enshrinement of the *JCR* articles cited in the CCT article by Arnould and Thompson (their mandate for the review was to focus on *JCR*). It is unfortunate that this journal, good as it is, has become the sole arbiter of CCT research, at least as many see it. The result is that literature reviews for papers submitted to *JCR* and CCT conferences rarely venture outside the CCT/*JCR* nexus in their literature reviews. We handicap ourselves when we do so because there is a wealth of good consumer research being done in a variety of fields that don't publish in *JCR*. Ironically at a time when it is easier than ever to access such material without ever leaving our keyboards, our vision and scope have narrowed rather than expanded. It is not that there isn't some good consumer research being published in *JCR*; there is. But there is so much more out there that has something important to say about consumption. And for that matter, when we only read and cite the CCT portion of *JCR*, we miss the opportunity to bridge the gap between subcultures of *JCR* consumer researchers. If we expect them to read and cite our work, we need to read and cite theirs as well as think differently about points of overlap. There are more convergences than we imagine.

JS: *When and how will the next paradigm wars be fought?*

RB: This is very hard to say, but one possibility is that it will concern the outlets addressed in my answer to the last question. David Weinberger (*Everything is Miscellaneous*) has suggested that the old analogue model of information management is to filter on the way in. Libraries, for example, used to decide which books to buy and then catalogue them using note card indices with only a few fields and limited space for putting in key information (mostly author, title, date and place of publication, genre, and perhaps some key words or a brief abstract). Journals also operate this way so that editorial review boards act as gatekeepers who decide what gets published and what doesn't. But with the digitization of everything (not

just print, but also images, videos, music, and even smells, textures, physical objects, and the human genome) and with the efficiency of current search engines, it is possible to instead filter on the way out. And rather than having to limit our search to examining a few key words or abstracts, we can search the entire text of books and articles. So it is possible to turn to an open source online publication of everything. Or if we want to keep the review process, why not publish not only the paper, but also the different paper versions, reviews, responses, and editorial guidance offered? Granted, we don't yet have good search engines for non-textual material, but with facial recognition software, this may not be far off. And for that matter, why stop with the article or book? We can also publish all our raw data and intermediate analyses. There are questions of privacy, promotion, and tenure perhaps, but at least promotion and tenure may be going away in any case. Supposedly academia follows an open model of knowledge sharing rather than secrecy. But it is interesting to contemplate what would be possible if we shared everything we thought was ready for scrutiny by our colleagues.

JS: What challenges remain to be addressed if consumer research is to become a discipline unto itself?

RB: First and foremost we need some theory of our own. It would also help if we had some methods of our own, but perhaps with netnography and videography we are beginning to pursue some. Either way, we need to develop a distinctive voice that says something unique. Cultural studies is an example of a discipline that does this. We also need to do some outreach by bringing other disciplines into our conferences and participating in theirs. It would also be helpful if we developed more of a book-writing tradition that went beyond edited volumes. Assuming that it is the CCT component of consumer research that is most likely to do these things (and I think this is a very reasonable assumption), we need to go forth and multiply. We need more really good CCT people. We need more schools with CCT people at them and ideally not just a token one or two. We need CCT people in more countries and a greater presence on continents beyond North America and Europe. These changes will not happen overnight, but there are some legitimizing benchmarks that will help us mark progress. We have already reached some milestones with the recognition of the brand name and the establishment of the CCT conference and organization. The next beachhead may be striving to get people on the faculties of all the world's best universities.

JS: Can you describe a project planned but not yet undertaken that would require a team approach, and specify the nature of the roles your ideal team would fulfill?

RB: You've been a good exemplar here with American Girl stores and a series of other projects. There's a project I want to do that involves finding a new condominium

project with more or less identical units. With the permission of the builder, real estate agent, homeowner's board, and homeowners, the idea would be to study, photograph, and do videos of the residents as they fill their new homes with stuff. The goal would be to find how identical or nearly identical spaces in the same complexes are decorated and how this fits with the lifestyles of the owners. There are many angles that a team could study, including sustainable versus unsustainable lifestyles; self-expression and the extended self; differing subspaces by different household members; connections to the outside world via media of various sorts; differences by age, gender, ethnicity, and class; teenage bedrooms and teen identity; feelings of collective identity in the complex; neighborly interactions and feelings of community; and so forth. This would be an evolving project over perhaps a year, with follow-up visits at some future time. I had applied for a grant so that an architecture Ph.D. from Berkeley, a colleague from Spain, and perhaps several others might join in such a project, but the grant didn't come through. So this is one project I have on hold for the right group and conditions. I've seen some less ambitious museum and photo exhibitions on parallel themes, including one of cells in the New Mexico State Women's Correctional Facility. But this would be multidisciplinary, multimedia, and involve multiple roles. Some researcher roles would be gender-specialized, focus on photography, videography, or netnography, concentrate on different ages of informants, and focus on different households. Those with different disciplinary orientations would also likely focus on different aspects of the same households.

JS: What advice do you have for young scholars trying to manage a portfolio of projects?

RB: There is a trade-off between being too broad and being too narrow. You are too narrow if you focus only on your dissertation stream of research, effectively putting all your eggs in one basket and having nothing else going after that project has been pursued to its apparent conclusion. On the other hand, you are being too broad if each project is unique and unrelated to any of those that preceded it and followed in building your research portfolio. You need multiple projects to establish a reputation of expertise. By all means, think about joint research projects on which you may or may not be the first author. And find a way to introduce enough variety to keep yourself motivated and interested. Don't continue to grind away at a research stream that you find uninspiring or that has left you burnt out. You need to keep reinventing yourself and this will mean new literatures, new methods, and new projects. I have been rather promiscuous in following my own advice. When I returned from a sabbatical in Hong Kong recently, my dean wanted a report on the research I had worked on while I was away. To my shock, I found that I either had 25 projects with 30 different coauthors or 30 projects with 25 different coauthors. Either way, this is a little too broad for a young scholar. But having one project with zero coauthors is even worse.

JS: William "Tom" Tucker. Great inspiration or greatest inspiration?

RB: As you know, William T. (Tom) Tucker was our muse on the Odyssey. His 1967 book, *Foundations for a Theory of Consumer Behavior*, contained a number of qualitative case studies of consumer behavior involving acts such as buying a shirt, buying a peach-faced parrot, and buying a car. His message was simple: these are simple everyday acts of consumption that cannot be understood with the multivariate methods and lab experiments that were sweeping business schools at the time. In the studies he presented there were different ethnicities, different family members, and different emotions. But the book appeared at a time when the multivariate revolution had captivated everyone but a few stalwarts like Sidney Levy. It was not until the Odyssey that we got any serious momentum to start a counter-revolution. Our initial encampment in Dennis Rook's Santa Monica apartment happened to have a kitsch wrought iron ash tray with a glorious parrot on it. Combined with some stories from Melanie about someone described as being "about half shit-faced" (i.e., drunk), the parrot got mixed with another of Tom Tucker's informants, Juan Navarro, and became Juan Navarro's about half shit-faced parrot. Such irreverence in no way distracted from Tom Tucker's inspirational role as hero and muse. In fact, we use the parrot ashtray as the lead-in and lead-out to the Odyssey video that resulted from the project—an in-joke, yes, but also an homage to Tom Tucker.

Legends in Consumer Behavior

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Volume 2

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH RE-ENCHANTING CONSUMPTION

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