

23 Distilling Insights to Mobilize Responses

Anticipating Trajectories of Research and Intervention

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Having ricocheted from the premodern to the postmodern to the posthuman to the proto-Anthropocene, we invite our intrepid readers to pause their peripatetic journey and consider some of the waypoints that have nominally guided our progress. Chief among these are reflexivity, representation, and reformation. Other cairns include close observations, close readings, and close encounters. Socioeconomics, social engineering, and societal impact are striking blazes as well. Performances, practices, and precedents also point the way. Each of these indicators is considered in our interpretive summary.

Before we commence our wrapping up, let's take a moment to assess developments that have arisen since the publication of this volume's predecessor (Sherry and Fischer 2009). A professional society—the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium (CCTC)—has been established, and its Facebook page (www.facebook.com/groups/213134458706536/) boasts a following of several thousand. The CCTC board is international in its composition, reflecting the global character of the organization's membership. The annual CCT conference approaches its twelfth meeting, alternating sites every other year between North America and Europe. Many of the papers from these conferences are regularly published by Russ Belk and chairs in the Emerald series, *Research in Consumer Behavior*. CCTC confers the Sidney J. Levy Award annually to the best article based on a doctoral dissertation published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. The chapters that appear in the present volume represent the diversity of orientation, topics, contexts, and controversies that animate our vibrant field. We address many of these aspects in this conclusion.

The Rethinking

In the spirit of “go big or go home,” our volume opens with a swipe at ontology. Conjuring a literal ghost in the machine, a portending mech-animism of sentient things, Russ Belk ushers us eloquently into a brave new world. His sobering meditation on the potential redefinition of personhood seems the inevitable conclusion to his seminal inquiry into

be a consequence of the impending singularity are profound and should become the foci of seminar discussions in classrooms, boardrooms, and legislative chambers.

Our poets might have heard Langston Hughes (1995) intone, "I, too, sing America," between the lines of Alladi Venkatesh's essay on the disentangling of economic capital from other forms, the better to understand them all in their influential mutuality. Venkatesh proposes a progressive activist research agenda, a program of institutional reform in the face of demographic change and in the service of liberal democracy. His call is all the more compelling for its being issued in a time of U.S. presidential transition, polarized politics, and resurgent global nationalism. The complex constellation of ethnicity as it bears upon consumption and identity politics will occupy CCT researchers worldwide for the foreseeable future.

Embarking upon a reformation that is ultimately resumed in the chapter by Bode and Kjeldgaard, Sidney Levy, arguably the godfather if not the grandfather of consumer culture theory, expounds upon his signature contribution to the field: the nature of the brand. Upon completing a (pre) historical overview of the evolution of the brand—a process of successive encompassment—that culminates in the inexorable emergence of the grand brand, Levy propounds a model of the ideal brand pyramid (IBP). The IBP is the metaphorical equivalent of the golden section, designed to help us understand the contemporary quintessence of the brand, which he finds skewing toward the aesthetic. We can imagine the labels of the vertices changing with the zeitgeist and the increasing sophistication of our theorizing, such that, for example, the "ecological" might rise to prominence on the agendas of future brandthropologists. So also will the "digital" and the "virtual."

Embeddedness is at the heart of the vignettes that Melanie Wallendorf uses to explore the moral dimension of pricing. Her buyers and sellers perform an embodied, communal process of exchange that confounds market and gift. Her recounting of a revelatory incident that theorists have labeled "lagniappe"—a small gift given by a merchant to a customer at time of purchase by way of good measure—is a compelling example of this interpenetration of spheres. The lagniappe is also implicit in a later chapter by Bradford and Sherry. Wallendorf suggests a social tinkering with conventional pricing strategies might produce outsized rewards for exchange partners, including a restoration of some of the organic social solidarity that nostalgic citizens seem to miss. Such quality of life issues shaped by consumption compose a worthy field of inquiry for CCT research.

The Revisiting

Using the secular ritual of the bridal shower—an arbitrarily efficient medium hedged about with ambivalence—to explore the complexity of postmodern gift giving, Tonya Bradford and John Sherry offer a

synthetic interpretation that seeks to reconcile three conceptions of the gift. This complexity theme reverberates throughout the volume. Their exploration of the interplay of gift and market economies joins a growing list of investigations that probes the ritual underwriting of consumer culture. The analysis of ceremonial strolling by the Covas (Bernard and Véronique) and Hounaida El Jurdi is a case in point. These authors provide a different slant on the spatial turn in consumer research by focusing on the way that place is embodied by the traversal rather than the occupation of space. Further, their presentational strategy of autoethnographic reminiscence, playlet, and photography speaks to the challenge of representing research insights authentically that has captured the imagination of many of the volume's contributors. Continued ethnographic attention to consumption rituals should result in academic, managerial, and public policy contributions uniquely notched by CCT research.

At the time of this writing, actor Glenda Jackson has ended a twenty-five-year hiatus, returning to the stage to great critical acclaim in the title role of *King Lear*, whose leitmotif of disposition will not be lost on CCT researchers. Linda Scott's magisterial chronicle of the shifting oppression-empowerment dialectic in our theories of the entanglement of women and consumption vividly reminds us that consumption is a form of political power. In so doing, she calls attention to important neglected precedents, much as Arnould does in a later chapter. Her activist approach that implicates consumption in programs of social engineering is also echoed in later critical chapters by Firat and Dholakia, as well as Holt. The nuanced and variable impact of gender-role fluidity on brand narratives that Maclaran and Ornes discover in their study suggests that both brands and social structure can be refreshed by consumers intrigued enough by managerial intervention that provokes and delights, rather than merely preserves inertial satisfaction. Such media reconfigurations are responsive to the criticism of the limiting cycle of self-fulfilling representations that Venkatesh levels in an earlier chapter. Gender fluidity and escalating social and mass mediation have become cultural cynosures, and their intersection should keep CCT researchers engaged for years to come.

The Reassessing

Once *les enfants terribles* of the field, chief now among *les éminences grises* of conscientious inquiry, Fuat Firat and Nik Dholakia continue to hold what they see as our slow-moving feet of clay to the fire, to promote a disciplinary ethos of critical reflexivity. They remind us that CCT might rather be a movement than merely a moment, an emancipatory force that, if properly revitalized, would have wide-ranging scholarly consequences. Doug Holt, an early if not solitary practitioner,

to managerial challenges—that the subdiscipline has assumed a generally non- or antimanagerial stance is itself an interesting development—now advises that the field abstract its apparatus up to the level of strategy and focus on the solution of practical problems of genuinely societal import. He maintains that the social impact of developing theories-in-practice far outweighs the benefit of continuing to build elaborate crypto-positivist academic silos. Taken together, our trio of critics suggests that, because we have become a part of the problem, however unwittingly, we must now become part of the solution. We are urged to develop an engaged scholarship, and Eric Arnould's historically meticulous intellectual précis of two of CCT's underappreciated role models points the way toward a career that might handily combine a love of social scientific inquiry with a commitment to social activism. Weaponizing CCT to make it more suited to introspective evolution and culture change seems a reasonably radical expectation of future work.

Living up to his billing as the Antichrist of marketing, Stephen Brown shreds the conventions of academic writing in reminding us of the stylistic obligation that we owe our readers. Knowing that representation is intimately bound up with understanding, and believing that the urgency of our prose should be proportional to the urgency of our ideas, his typologizing of gambits and lampooning of conventional sectioning should serve as a primer for those who want their insights to be received authentically. [Note: One of the editors was pleased to expand the SNARS database by forwarding a copy of one of his own consumer research articles (Sherry 2009) that begins with the words "Urethral Awakening Dream."] His rhetorical challenge is accepted by the poets whose work we consider next.

As a capstone consideration of the influence that such new intellectual darlings as actor-network theory, assemblage theory, flat ontology theory and others are exerting on the field currently, Matthias Bode and Dannie Kjeldgaard use performance theory to explode our notion of how to understand phenomena that we have previously deemed known. Taking perhaps the most central unit of marketing—the brand—as their point of departure, they demonstrate how impoverished our previous conceptions have been, by dramatically illustrating the multiplicity of brand authors, by exploring entailing versus shaping processes of brand engagement, and by beginning a preliminary inventory of performative elements animating the brand. We can imagine the decentering effect that construing the fundamental concepts and notions of both marketing and consumer behavior as a form of improvisational theater might have upon the disciplines. Perhaps the most profound and intriguing immediate impact would be their opening up to a host of additional scholarly fields of inquiry. An ecumenical pursuit of enlightenment is a virtuous aspiration for CCT researchers to embrace.

The Poems

Poetry has been a part of the CCT tradition from the beginning. At the first annual conference at Notre Dame in 2006, poems were printed in large font on easel paper and posted on the walls outside of the meeting rooms, which sometimes resulted in clogged corridors as readers, clustered in the hallways, jostled shoulders with attendees rushing to the next session. Subsequently, many of those poems were published in *Consumer Culture Theory*, volume eleven of *Research in Consumer Behavior* (Belk and Sherry 2007). The following few years, poets read their work aloud in makeshift sessions and published their poems in outlets such as *Explorations in Consumer Culture Theory* (Sherry and Fischer 2009), *Culture Markets and Consumption*, and the *Journal of Business Research*. Beginning in 2010 with an inspiration by Roel Wijland, the poetry readings have been held in more intimate off-site venues, attracted a dedicated and growing audience, and become one of the highlights of the conference. Poems have been published in chapbook format as an unofficial "proceedings" of the event, under the following titles: *Canaries Coalmines Thunderstones*, *Coyotes Confessions Totems*, *Clarence Clobbers Tenderly*, *Cardinal Cuento Tianda*, *Caribou Coracle Terä*, *Chickasaw Craft Threnody*, and *Calabash Cadence Taisgeadan*. At the time of this writing, an eighth chapbook is in production.

The poems in our present volume range widely across the consumption experience, sometimes amplifying and sometimes challenging the themes of the preceding chapters. We empathize with the artisanal self, fraught with anxiety. We bristle at the presumption of prediction. We sway with the subtle dance of accommodation and resistance. We peer voyeuristically at the earthy, erotic insurgency of street art. We rollick with the rogue's gallery of patronage that retail spectacle has encouraged. We marvel at the polyvocal perversity of poetry and are amused by the confusion of analects with analytics. As always, we continuously observe the interlacing of the material with the immaterial. And our emotions and interpretations deepen with each subsequent rereading. As the power of the spoken word is enormously moving, the reader is encouraged to voice the poems aloud to enhance appreciation.

The poets probe that lyrical moment of consumption that will evoke in readers a visceral and emotional comprehension of the researcher's insight. Their language thrums with intensity and precision. The lilt of Hilary Downey's phrase "sliding scales of beauty" insinuates the interplay of artifice and authenticity in the presentation of self and is mirrored by Terry Gabel's lamentation "disposable like that me," the frustration of trying to integrate a multiphrenic self. The close observation of John Sherry's playfully intoned "rimed with exhaust,"

which captures the subversive palimpsest of urban surfaces, is echoed in Sandy Smith's thunderous proclamation "NO REFUNDS WILL BE GIVEN," a voluptuous account of a sanctuary of eccentrics and everyday oracles whose performance more than compensates for service-day shortfalls. The weary resignation in John W. Schouten's avowed "nowhere to grapple," which reflects the angry desperation of displacement in the face of loss, reverberates in Roel Wijnland's assonant assertion of the "algae value chain," a sardonic commentary on disciplinary entrepreneurs engaged in a process of search engine suboptimization and authors' lifeworlds being audited but unread. Finally, the unexpected imagery of Pilar Rojas Gaviria's cadenced "army of normality" will feel familiar to every CCT researcher bent upon resisting the tyranny of social institutions, as will David Mick's idiom "the skew-whiff decisions," deriding the arrogance and delusion of measurement. Somewhere between incantation and thick inscription, our poets attempt to transform, and not merely inform, the reader with their understandings. We hope this higher order goal will sustain our avant-garde as the field individuates.

Walking the Labyrinth

Taking our cue from the *passeggiata*, let's slow our pace in these concluding comments to savor what we've distilled from our contributors' insights. There seems to be a series of tensions or dialectics between the poles of which the field of CCT is unfolding. Will we reenact a dominant origin myth, and, like the larger consumer research discipline from which we calved, become either an ecumenical, big-tent enterprise or a Balkanized formation of circled wagons? The resolution of these tensions will likely tell the tale.

Academic and Interventionist Inclinations

On the one hand, it is clear that CCT is thriving either as a discipline unto itself or as the subdiscipline of multiple contiguous fields, complete with professional associations, conferences, and a handful of receptive journals. Short of possessing a flagship journal and an efficient networking system across its diverse camps, the domain seems well established. On the other hand, the application of CCT as a technology of influence in the managerial and public policy areas is in its infancy. Activists might look to organizations such as the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) or causes such as the transformative consumer research (TCR) movement for guidance in creating a practical variation of CCT. Ideally, CCT inquirers will move beyond a "pure" and "applied" dichotomous view of the future and integrate their options.

Positivist and Humanistic Inclinations

Although the preponderance of effort is devoted to crafting a CCT that is social scientific in character at its best and crypto-positivist at its worst, both the delayed arrival of the crisis of representation to consumer research and the discovery of consumption by humanities scholars and artists has helped fuel the rise of more humanistic treatments of consumption experience. As the field branches out in each of these directions, we currently see little more than an (un)easy coexistence of the trends, such as the curated galleries at the annual CCT conferences. We wonder what insightful hybrids will arise as these inclinations continue to bump up against one another.

Theoretical and Descriptive Inclinations

Ardent critics and brute empiricists alike have argued that, for better and for worse, the gatekeepers of CCT are consumed with theorizing as the touchstone of worthy contribution. The derogation of practices such as description ("Ah description, of all the arts least appreciated," keens poet Charles Wright (2008) in his "Homage to What's-His-Name") chafes those "slow professors" attuned to "reflective inquiry" (Berg and Seeber 2016, 53), interpretive inquiry (Geertz 1973), and arts-based research (Leavey 2015). More confounding still is the increasing interest in assemblage theory, which itself will require escalating levels of meticulous description to sustain its advance (as is implicit in the chapter by Bode and Kjeldgaard). A rebalancing of evaluative criteria and an expansion (and legitimization) of alt-outlets for scholarly work are possible ways of addressing this tension.

Quasi-Economic and Moral Inclinations

CCT research has traditionally focused on the economic sphere, even (perhaps especially) in the unpacking of the extraeconomic dimensions of consumer experience. Although predominantly positive in its orientation, CCT has taken normative positions, typically in respect to its nominal consideration of the managerial implications of its insights. There is a rising interest in the moral and ethical consequences of consumer behavior, with CCT researchers being challenged to take normative positions on insights impacting societal welfare (Sherry 2014). As in the TCR and critical marketing literatures, to whom many CCT researchers are active contributors, there should be ample opportunity in the CCT literature to explore the constructive and destructive consequences that consumption has upon the common good and to recommend appropriate interventions, complete with specific guidance.

For all its accomplishments to date, as any insurrection might be, CCT has been fraught from the beginning with conflicting goals, mixed intentions, and blind ambitions that are constantly being confronted. We have a traditional North American, Western European, and Nordic core, a vital Eurasian, Asian, Australian, and Latin American periphery, and an African potentiality, with divisions and distinctions within and between the regions too numerous too chronicle. We have franchises in business schools and colleges of arts and sciences, commonly operating as silos, with differently sanctioned publication outlets. We have institutions like CCTC working to create bridges to all these constituencies, in the hope of creating a global system of like-minded scholars. With good work continuing to be produced in the regions and in the silos, and the creation of collaborative networks across boundaries of all kinds, the growth and individuation of the field can be encouraged.

Can we negotiate orthodoxies that do not ossify into dogmas and interrogate our beliefs in a way that encourages innovative inquiry? Can we account for the complexities of our cultures of consumption, including their antecedents and consequences, in a holistic fashion and harness their awesome energy in the service to the common good? Can we apply our research insights to the solution of important practical problems? Can we be a floor wax and a dessert topping? As Stephen Brown might conclude, "Don't touch that dial—stay tuned for the next thrilling episode of our octennial series on the ripening of consumer culture theory!"

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