



# Informing marketing theory through consumer culture theoretics

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Welcome to this first ever special section of *AMS Review* devoted to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). It has been a pleasure to serve as guest editors. In this introduction to the special section, we have four aims. The first is to raise awareness of CCT in the broader marketing community. The second is to clarify CCT's relevance for the field. The third is to seek conversation with the CCT-curious in that community. And the fourth aim is to introduce the seven papers in the special section which both separately and together demonstrate CCT's relevance to marketing and invite conversation with other marketing scholars. Detailed introductions to and overviews of CCT now abound and we invite curious scholars to examine them (e.g., Arnould et al., 2019; Arnould & Thompson, 2018a, b; Askegaard & Scott, 2013; Joy & Li, 2012; Rokka, 2021). Some summarize the field of inquiry while some aim to illustrate CCT's pertinence to topics familiar to the broader marketing community. A textbook exists (Arnould & Thompson, 2018a, b). Readers may approach this special section as both a brief introduction, an invitation to dialogue, and a sampler. It is our hope that this section is the beginning of a tradition of *AMS Review* publishing CCT influenced conceptual and empirical papers.

## Raising awareness of CCT (or, "One more time: what CCT is")

The first aim of this special section is to clarify what CCT is. Consumer Culture Theory's roots reach deeply into the history of twentieth century social science (Tadajewski, 2006), but it is also the logical extension of a "cultural turn" (Sherry, 1990) in the 1980s and a postmodern critique of natural science models applied to social sciences (Brown, 1997). CCT is an umbrella term that references a variety of socio-cultural approaches to consumer behavior and market research rather than a singular one (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It also attends to substantive issues emanating from the domain of consumption, which we characterize as the acquisition, use, and disposition of commercially circulated products, services, knowledge, images, and experiences by groups and individual actors. Thus, it incorporates a focus from purchase decision-making to the origins, outcomes, and ends of consumer demand.

According to Arnould and Thompson's (2005) formulation, CCT is a field of inquiry that seeks to unravel the complexities of consumer culture itself, not only consumer behavior. The CCT view of culture differs dramatically from the conventional consumer research representation of culture as "a fairly homogeneous 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)" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868–869). Still less do CCT scholars conceive of culture as an attribute that someone possesses or an individual difference measure. Rather, in CCT, consumer culture refers to actions consumers take and beliefs that energize them as a result of 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 & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). CCT also emphasizes the centrality of global marketing to "the intermingling (or hybridization) of consumption traditions and ways of life" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869), rendering static, place-based

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conceptions of consumer culture problematic. Consequently, CCT scholarship often utilizes meso-level theory to analyze the behavior of groups and other cultural collectives.

CCT is not a unified theory. Instead, it is a continuously evolving perspective on consumer society and markets that shape cultural life. CCT offers a way of assessing consumption from the perspective of particular socio-cultural systems and actors within those systems embedded in globalization and market capitalism (Joy & Li, 2012). Don Slater (1996) offers a useful macro-historical framing where consumer culture is a socio-economic arrangement in which markets either directly or indirectly mediate the relationships between lived experiences, or meaningful ways of life, and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend. That is to say, in macro-historical terms, “being a consumer” is an umbrella identity intrinsic to market capitalism, the dominant global economic system, and the two evolve and change in tandem. Thus, “the consumption of market-made commodities and desire-inducing commercialized symbols is central to consumer culture” (Arnould & Thompson, [2018a, p. 5]; Slater [1996]).

As Kilbourne et al. (1997) note, in this ideology of consumption, many people view their quality of life in terms of their freedom to consume an ever-greater diversity of goods. Ultimately, 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. In this way, CCT complements the micro-level focus of cognitive and decision-making approaches to consumption. Thus, many contemporary CCT studies focus on the relationship between things (objects), consumption practices, consumer identities, and the collectives to which things, practices, and identities are linked. CCT scholars also focus on the many ways to amend or extend the set of concepts and domains Arnould and Thompson (2005) originally outlined (Kravets et al., 2017). They use these concepts to understand an evolving, dynamic and unpredictable global culture of consumption rather than pursuing the “epistemic goal of making incremental contributions to a system of verified propositions” that are weakly linked to what real consumers think about the world and how they act on it (Arnould & Thompson, 2007, p. 5).

## How is CCT relevant to the marketing field?

The second aim of this introduction is to clarify the relevance of CCT for the field of marketing. Given that the articles contained in this special section aim to exemplify that relevance, perhaps it is useful to clarify the meaning of “relevance” from our perspective. One kind of relevance is

discovery-oriented work that identifies new topics of interest to a field; this is an important and recognized aspect of any kind of scientific work. For example, cataloguing new species is a recognized part of biological science and cataloguing new particles a recognized part of physics. Here we name just a few CCT “discoveries”: brand relationships (Fournier, 1998); brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001); ritual aspects of consumption (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991); extraordinary consumption experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019); linking value of goods (Cova, 1997); magical and sacred aspects of consumption (e.g., Belk et al., 1989); liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017); myth and narrative in consumption (Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004; Van Laer et al., 2019); consumer generated markets (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Martin & Schouten, 2014); and the agentic potential of consumption objects (Epp et al., 2014).

Another kind of relevance is bringing unique insights to substantive topics of interest. At least implicitly inspired by Davis’ (1971) article, “That’s Interesting!” CCT scholars have sought relevance by challenging conventional perspectives on domains either thought to be well understood or regarded as uninteresting. CCT scholars have consistently brought new insights to well-worn topics in the field by, for instance, developing cultural models of branding (Holt, 2004), rethinking the nature and social consequences of service relationships (Price & Arnould, 1999), and showing how social class and culture affect decision-making (e.g., Allen, 2002). CCT scholars have shown that money, price, and credit are not only psychologically rich phenomena, but cultural and socially embedded as well (Bradford, 2009; Henry, 2010; Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011). Consider also the role of new technologies on social networks, new product development, sustainability, strategy, multi-channel, and relationship marketing, as articulated by Kozinets (2019). CCT scholarship looks at these bedrock marketing phenomena in unconventional ways, marshalling an approach which privileges holistic dimensionalizing of naturally occurring consumption and marketing phenomenon over predictive generalizability, to generate theoretical insights. The articles collected in this special section continue these traditions of discovery and perspective shifting.

A third type of relevance is actionable insights applicable to other scholarship and to practitioners. CCT scholarship has developed actionable insights beyond its immediate sphere of influence and disproportionate to its size throughout its history. Just a few of the more prominent instances include Belk’s (1998) pioneering insights on possessions and the self, Fournier’s (1998) and Cova’s (Cova & Pace, 2015; Cova & White, 2010) respective relational and cultural approaches to branding, as well as Levy and Rook’s (1999) and Holt’s (2004). Beyond the world of academics, numerous global firms have adopted these scholars’ ideas for use in practice.

For example, companies such as Coca Cola, Tinder, and Patagonia have used Holt's pioneering cultural branding strategy, (e.g., Holt, 2020). CCT scholars can also claim a role in fostering new product development processes in which firms have outsourced some of their design and beta-testing activities to "lead users" and devoted customer communities, of which LEGO is a well-known example (Antorini et al., 2012). Finally, via a focus on the dematerialization of consumption, CCT scholars have contributed to the development of access-based and platform-based economic models (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2013).

## An invitation to the CCT-curious scholar

The third aim of this special section is to seek a broader conversational community for CCT among scholars in marketing and related disciplines. Thus, we are targeting this issue at those who are curious about the CCT approach to marketing scholarship. We suggest that to date, there have been two principle and related barriers to realizing this broader conversational community. One is that people outside the CCT community struggle to grasp CCT's theoretical heteroglossia. That is, CCT incorporates a family of loosely related, sometimes inconsistent theoretical perspectives rather than proceeding from a set of shared theoretical axioms and procedures. For the already initiated, this situation is a unique strength of the community. However, we sympathize with the uninitiated reader, who like a beginning doctoral student may be unable to decipher in the first few paragraphs of a given CCT paper what the paper is all about. Because of distinctive theoretical perspectives, the broader scholarly conversation is obscure to the reader even if they recognizes the substantive issue under discussion, such as customer journeys, atmospherics, brand meaning, value, and the like.

The other related obstacle is conceptual terminology. Each of us as authors regularly encounters reviewers and readers who are unfamiliar with, and consequently deplore, the so-called "jargon" we employ. CCT draws on distinctive conceptual vocabularies from a diverse array of theoretical programs. Consequently, we have sometimes had to spend pages of reviewer notes explicating our terminology to skeptical reviewers. We would submit that a non-aligned reader selecting a random sample of contemporary mainstream experimental and modeling work might find them equally obtuse. Even so, the CCT community can certainly do more to make its writing more accessible to the uninitiated reader, and indeed the authors in this special section have all done an exemplary job at just that. The curious scholar will inevitably have to learn some new concepts and assumptions to access CCT work, though. In the table below, we include a summary of some sources, key words, foundational scholars, and exemplar papers associated with

some of the theoretical frameworks commonly employed by CCT scholars. Thus, when the reader cracks open a paper by one of the authors identified in the last column of the table, she may expect to encounter some of the concepts mentioned in the fourth column and can reference the foundational authors mentioned in the third column to see what the theoretical conversation is all about. In addition to the classic theories included in Table 1, CCT scholars also draw on theories of space and place (e.g., Coffin and Chatzidakis this volume; DeBenedetti et al., 2014), and novel theories of social change (e.g., Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019), among others.

## The AMS Review special section on consumer culture theory

The fourth aim of this essay is to introduce the seven papers in this special section, all of which have been written with the goal of dialoguing with mainstream marketing topics and scholars specifically in mind. Akaka and Schau bring new insights to the prominent topic of customer journeys. They critique the popular "customer journey" approach for taking a firm-centric perspective that prioritizes benefits that accrue to the firm. Instead, they propose a consumer-centric *consumption journey* which considers consumption within progressive engagement with a set of value co-creating practices. They offer a culturally grounded consumption journey framework that highlights the importance of practices, communities, and institutions for value creation. Similar to Siebert et al. (2020), this paper skilfully illustrates the value of CCT led concepts for marketing management insights.

Aleksandrina Atanasova's paper takes up the theme of consumer experience, also examined by Bernard Cova in this issue. It illustrates CCT's interest in foundational philosophical concerns by revisiting the utopia concept, first coined by Sir Thomas More for his 1516 book *Utopia*, and thus sited at the other end of the continuum of experience Cova explores. She adds a new spin to the utopia concept by drawing on the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, noted for his concept of liquid modernity. If Cova examines momentary experiences of pain, Atanasova explores momentary (i.e., liquid) experiences of paradise. By stressing that consumers pursue "utopian imaginaries...through resources in the marketplace, rather than in readily discovered dreamlike worlds already conjured by the marketplace" she well illustrates foundational CCT's agentic view of the consumer as an active, creative, purposeful actor, rather than a mere processor of marketing stimuli. Her paper shows that consumer utopias may continue to take a collective form, but her key contribution is that they may also take an individual form within contemporary consumer culture. She carefully parses the differences. This is an important insight for

**Table 1** Sampling of Theoretical Frameworks Utilized in Consumer Culture Theory

Theory	Provides insights into what?	Notable theorists	Concepts	Exemplar papers within marketing
Cultural theory	The supra-individual and supra-organic organization of socio-cultural systems (e.g., groups, languages, places, organizations, etc.)	Clifford Geertz; Marcel Mauss; Mary Douglas; Marshall Sahlins; Daniel Miller	Culture, symbols, ritual, pilgrimage, sacred, fetish, myth, meaning, holism	Arnould (1989) Fernandez and Lastovica (2011) Grayson and Martinec (2004) Arsel and Thompson (2011) Wallendorf and Arnould (1991)
Institutional theory	The structure and resiliency of institutions	Anthony Giddens; Max Weber; Richard Scott	Institutions, legitimacy, ideology	Humphreys (2010) Geisler and Veresiu (2014) Press et al. (2014)
Poststructuralism	Primarily addresses the relationship between power, knowledge, and identity, and how the former exerts social control through institutions	Michel Foucault; Judith Butler; Jean Baudrillard	Power, knowledge, governance, sexuality	Thompson et al. (2018) Thompson and Ustüner (2015) Bonsu and Belk (2003)
Cultural capital	How social class and other social positions are a joint product of economic, social, and symbolic capitals	Karl Marx; Pierre Bourdieu	Social class, economic, social and cultural capital, taste, distinction	Allen (2002) Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) Holt (1998) Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020)
Practice theory	Social action, the determining role of recurrent, routinized behaviors on institutional arrangements	Karin Knorr-Cetina; Bruno Latour; Theodore Schatzki; Andreas Reckwitz; Elizabeth Shove; Allen Warde	Know-how (tacit knowledge), know-that (procedural knowledge), emotional (teleological) engagement, materials	Arsel and Bean (2013) Thomas and Epp (2019) Schau et al. (2009) Woermann and Rokka (2015)
Actor-network theory; assemblage theory	Relationship between individual agency and social structure; deprivitizes human actors	Bruno Latour; Michel Callon; Gilles Deleuze; & Felix Guattari	Relationships, networks, agents (actants), affordances, emergent systems properties	Cannifford and Shankar (2013) Epp et al. (2014) Feiereisen, Rasolofoaarison, Russell and Schau (2020) Thomas et al. (2013)
Narrative theory	The culture shaping capacity of texts; narrative discourse that pervades and patterns stories; the narrative nature of social information; narrative persuasion	Northrup Frye; Kenneth Burke; Roland Barthes; Peter Steiner; Gérard Genet	Text, genre, drama, narrative discourse, narrative persuasion, transportation	Russell and Schau (2014) Stern (1995) van Laer, Escalas, Ludwig and van den Hende (2019)
Critical theories and other counter-hegemonic traditions (e.g., critical race theory & intersectionality, feminist theory, post-colonial theory, queer theory, etc.)	Latent scientific presumptions stemming from the era of European imperial expansion	Homi Bhabha; Judith Butler; Frantz Fanon; Eduard Said; Cedric Robinson; Guyatri Spivak; Patricia Hill Collins; Kimberle Crenshaw	Cultural hegemony, and imperialism, dependency, decolonization, Coca-colonization, McDonaldization	Crockett (2017) Varman and Costa (2013) Varman and Belk (2008)

managers who may wish to provision either the former or the latter and will need to distinguish the goals of the two kinds of utopian vision. She offers a host of concrete suggestions for mobilizing consumers' liquid consumer imaginations for virtual reality to pop-up retail.

Jack Coffin and Andreas Chatzidakis draw our attention to the concept of market space and spatiality which in some ways should be familiar terrain to marketing scholars long interested in retail space, supply chains, destinations, place marketing, customer journeys, third places, and virtual commercial environments. The authors also remind us that the utopias Atanasova explores are spatial constructs. The authors aim to provide order to the plethora of spatial explorations in marketing research. A useful feature of their article is carefully identifying points of similarity and difference between CCT and managerial marketing approaches to place. Perhaps their key point is that while “managers recognize the power of placemaking... their practical knowledge could be augmented by further [CCT] analytic and conceptual insights into *the place-making processes of consumers*” and that “a CCT perspective...that...emphasises issues of ideology and institutionalism... stimulates a ...reading of place-making as a process of solidifying spatial, social, and symbolic arrangements into ossified images and identities.” In other words, commercial spaces make ways of doing and ways of interpreting culturally and commercially constituted lifeworlds, the latter a concept drawn from phenomenological theory.

Bernard Cova's article foregrounds CCT's considerable research on subjective consumer experience in distinction from the managerial work on experience as responses to marketing stimuli. He invites marketers to think beyond the pleasure principle, to recognize that consumers may derive experiential value from pain, a theme developed in a number of previous empirical marketing studies. He argues that pain offers consumers the value of escape from the “saturated self,” a concept drawn from psychology. He cogently reviews the anthropological theoretical foundations for the CCT approach to experience. He provides a simple, useful table of benefits consumers derive from experience that would be of use to managers in designing or refining experiential service offerings. In addition, his paper demonstrates CCT scholars' interest in making use of novel sources of consumer insight, video and poetry being notable examples, but in this case analysis of a novel. Finally, his reanalysis of previous research illustrates the programmatic and self-critical capacity of CCT research.

Sara Grace takes up two classic streams of research in consumer culture theory, phenomenology and semiology. The former is resolutely humanistic in its orientation, aiming to understand consumer's uniquely meaningful lived experiences. Semiology is concerned with meaning systems themselves. In some formulations such as those of the

anthropologist Levi-Straus or the sociologist Baudrillard, the human origins of semiotic systems are almost irrelevant; semiotic systems follow a logic of their own. In marketing, managers manage meaning, which is in constant flux, staying the same and changing over time. Their synthesis Grace argues, “results in a framework that excavates meanings at both the cultural level and the individual level, inviting them into a figure-ground relationship. This relationship between levels of analysis illuminates how meaning in consumer culture is constructed, and how cultural meanings come to constitute a sense of normalcy in modern societies.” In other words, Grace contributes to discussions of how meaning circulates in society, offers a reading that mediates a conceptual schism between the overly agentic consumer of micro-economic theories and overly determined consumer behavior derived from Baudrillard or Durkheimian and Frankfurt School sociological traditions.

Brondino-Pompeo offers a refreshed, historical account of the use of anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's concept of commoditization and singularization, allowing us all to see how far we have already come and what else is still to be discovered in making use of these concepts. Kopytoff brought to the fore the insight that many objects exhibit a trajectory from the world of commodities and markets to the worlds of domesticity, the public, or the sacred, and back again. He wanted to show that the status of goods is an outcome of socio-economic processes that include but are not limited to the market. But Brondino-Pompeo argues that a continuum approach is not the only way of addressing the phenomenon of object biography. The continuum approach regards the object as a traveler from/to one of the polar positions, with the object placed more toward commoditization or more toward singularization at any given moment. The sphere metaphor she proposes can provide a powerful analytical perspective on this phenomenon. Time, space, and people are the three basic dimensions in her model, and each sphere, which always consist of combinations of the things themselves, meanings, and practices, can be positioned across various dimensions of time, space, or groups of people. Spheres represent different stages in the life of an object, but different combinations of these basic dimensions and enabling disparate spheres do coexist. What her model adds is the possibility of more detailed renderings of the triggers to movement from one biographical moment to another, but also of the alternative pathways that ostensibly the same object can take over its biography.

Unlike the other articles in this special section that move from the consumer perspective to the managerial perspective, Melea Press's article starts with the latter. The paper offers an excellent summary and critique of the “weak sustainability” perspective that has dominated marketing research on sustainability. Press argues for a “strong sustainability” research agenda and points out that CCT

perspectives provide contextualized insight into the historically and culturally situated context of industrial, social and market activity in which firms are engaged and provides insight for how to induce disruptive change. The key difference between a strong sustainability perspective and a weak sustainability perspective is that “strong sustainability does not view the products of economic growth as acceptable compensations for the loss of natural resources and ecosystem functions” entailed in the current dominant economic paradigm. She argues that accepting the substitutability axiom actually goes directly “against mainstream definitions of marketing.” She identifies specific contributions of CCT scholars to an emergent program of strong sustainability research and practice such as “building business models for shifting brand, product and customer strategy; unpacking how industry and firm legitimacy are created and enacted in new contexts; identifying sticking points in developing market orientation in new markets”; and exploring the dynamics of new market formation. Finally, she uses the example of the agriculture industry to illustrate how a strong sustainability program in marketing could be developed to bring insights to practitioners and policy makers, drawing on CCT scholarship.

These seven articles dialogue directly with the mainstream marketing literature and spell out to the reader exactly how their approach moves forward our understanding of a foundational marketing construct. In sum, through this introductory article as well as the seven papers in this issue, we are proposing that CCT research can play a much stronger role within mainstream marketing, and our aim is to demonstrate how mainstream marketers can dialogue with CCT research to strengthen the insights and the practical relevance of their work. CCT has a rich history of pioneering foundational insights within the marketing literature above and beyond its focus on understanding consumption at the meso-level as a collective, pluralistic, cultural phenomenon. Examples include viewing consumption as an extension of the self, consumer-brand relationships, brand communities, the agentic capacities of consumer objects, the importance of myth, narrative and collective values in shaping consumer experience, sharing/access-based consumption, and the impact of consumption on the structure of society itself. The insights that can be gained from a CCT approach are well recognized in industry, with consultancies like IDEO, Practica, Stripe Partners, Cultural Strategy Group, and Red & Associates, which base their approach on similar principles, having an outsize effect on marketing driven companies, non-profits and governments. Within marketing academia, CCT work does not get integrated into mainstream understandings and approaches as much as it could, and it is our hope that this special section begins a larger conversation that helps to meet that goal.

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