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Title:

Consumer Culture Theory's Future in Marketing

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Insights on the Future of Marketing.

Consumer Culture Theory's Future in Marketing

Abstract

This commentary offers a view into the contributions of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) in marketing and charts promising future avenues for research and marketing practices building a culturally sensitive and reflexive approach. After highlighting pioneering CCT perspectives, an outline for future directions in marketing is offered emphasizing the assembling of experiences, shaping of brands' symbolic universes, institutional and creative market processes, and networked and algorithmic mediation of consumption ideologies and desires. Overall, CCT's future looks promising in its commitment and ability to foster critical, contextually sensitive, and reflexive cultural insights into marketing – an important foundation for marketing strategy and practices.

Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, CCT, marketing, branding

INTRODUCTION

“Every so often there comes along a new symbol, one that makes a leap from the past into the present and that has power because it captures the spirit of the present and makes other on-going symbols old-fashioned. – Sidney J. Levy (1959)

Since the early days of marketing thought, scholars have recognized the power of brands as symbols that carry socially resonant cultural ingredients, including building blocks for consumers’ identity construction, social affiliation, meaning-making, and emotional life more broadly. As observed and underlined early on by Sidney J. Levy’s (1959) “Symbols for Sale” essay in *Harvard Business Review*, the idea of culture as a constantly evolving system of meanings is crucial, for example, for understanding how brands are used by consumers to express taste, lifestyle ideals, class, and gender within their specific contexts. This insight was soon echoed and distilled by several pioneering scholars seeking to explore and develop alternative understandings of marketing and consumer behavior, notably, by problematizing prior economic, individualist, behaviorist, and information-processing foundations of the discipline (e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Belk, 1988; Brown, 1995; Cova, 1997; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mick, 1986; Peñaloza, 1994; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Scott, 1994; Sherry, 1998; Thompson et al., 1989).

Following this creative disruption, a movement of culturally-oriented marketing and consumer research was set forth drawing inspiration from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies from the humanities and social sciences – including sociology, anthropology, semiotics, cultural studies, literature, and historical studies – in other words, fields less familiar to marketing scholars and business practitioners. Fifteen years ago the movement and community of scholars become institutionalized under its own symbol CCT – Consumer

Culture Theory – as suggested by Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson (2005; 2018), and has since been qualified and classified as a thriving scholarly label, also in the discipline’s leading journals, such as *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Consumer Research*.

The objective of this commentary is, first, to explain how CCT’s research orientation, perspectives, and programs have gradually evolved and focused on understanding current marketing and consumer behavior phenomena in the recent years (for insightful reviews, Arnould & Thompson, 2018; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Askegaard & Scott, 2013; Moisander et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2013). Second, while only few articles to date have cast a light explicitly on CCT’s influence in marketing theory and practice, to advance the field, I will sketch an outline of relevant and promising future directions.

CCT’s unique conceptual and methodological tools beneficial for marketing scholars, practitioners – and for marketing students – have been discussed and disseminated in a range of influential and pedagogical marketing textbooks and popularized chapters (e.g. Belk et al., 2012; Bode & Askegaard, 2017; Holt, 2004; Kozinets, 2010; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Visconti et al., 2020; Zwick & Cayla, 2011). Yet, more work is still needed to systematize these efforts. As many have argued, much of the contemporary marketing work and practices remain “largely a mystery” (Zwick & Cayla, 2011, p 3.), as textbooks have tended to treat marketing rather on an abstract level and providing formal descriptions of marketing processes. One area also missing is detailed accounts of CCT inspired marketing practices addressing focal marketing problems – not to mention the grass-roots level collaborations and exchanges with companies that CCT scholars have done over the past 25 years. Towards this end, I wish to conclude with a brief articulation of what kind of managerial knowledge and reflexivity CCT can offer for the future marketing practitioner.

CCT'S ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES AS A SUBDISCIPLINE

While broader history of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition is beyond the scope of this short commentary, it is important to situate and understand the paradigmatic landscape in which CCT was first articulated. CCT emerged as a subdiscipline into the broader consumer research tradition which, on the other hand, was born as a subdiscipline of marketing at the end of 1960s (Bode & Askegaard 2017). These shifts were facilitated in particular by the urgent need to widen the unnecessarily narrow perspective on consumer behavior that had prevailed until the 1970s and beyond – one of company's and marketers' perspective, in turn informed by microeconomic and information processing theories (Bode & Askegaard, 2017; Zwick & Cayla, 2011). Equally shaping the marketing and consumer research landscape since its inception were the ideological pressures in mainstream social sciences toward a logical empiricist epistemology, with an emphasis on quantification, and specification of causal relationships (Tadajewski, 2006). These had an important impact on how consumer research was being conducted and theorized – as witnessed not least by Sidney J. Levy who already early on sought to introduce novel perspectives in this regard, but often in vain.

The “cultural turn” in social sciences in the early 1980s influenced several key scholars in marketing and consumer research and finally opened the field to adopt and experiment with interpretive, sociological, qualitative, and naturalistic approaches and methods. These CCT pioneers demonstrated the need for understanding consumer behavior as embedded in cultural and social relations, and as influenced by complex symbolic, material, experiential, and emotional worlds (e.g. Belk et al., 1989; Belk et al., 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Levy, 1981; Mick, 1986; Thompson et al., 1989). These early contributions carved the intellectual space and theoretical-methodological ramifications that continue to inspire CCT research.

Yet it was not until 2005 that Arnould and Thompson outlined CCT initiative as a scholarly brand and as a framework to comprehend the characteristic aims, topical focus, and ways of investigation of the heterogeneous collective of researchers that it touches. Four heuristic research programs useful in outlining and classifying CCT-oriented work were suggested, which I will briefly describe in the following. Common threads in these programs were both their orientation towards addressing similar kinds of questions and dynamics in consumer culture phenomena – so call “family resemblances” between related studies – but also how these programs resonate with broader interdisciplinary interests and conversations (Arnould & Thompson, 2018).

First program is the exploration of *Consumer Identity Projects*. This includes investigations into how consumers – as active rather than passive market actors – integrate and enact various cultural resources, including brands’ symbols, myths, and ideologies into their own identity work in negotiating a sense of self and narratives of meaningful identity goals. Characteristic to this stream of work has been to illuminate the inherent complexity, tensions, and constraints in consumers’ identity negotiation – for instance, in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, class, status, environmental, or financial pressures (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010; Peñaloza 1994; Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). One concrete implication of this work for marketing is the shift in thinking about consumers as producers of cultural meanings (relevant to their unfolding identity projects), and consequently that neither brands nor consumers are entirely in control of the cultural meanings being produced (Fournier, 1998; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). Therefore, as highlighted convincingly by Holt (2004), in order to be culturally relevant brands need to carefully analyze how they can help consumers’ identity work by offering them resonant identity myths – that is,

sets of compelling stories and narratives – useful in addressing and negotiating their desires and anxieties, for instance about femininity or masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004).

A second focus has been examinations of *Marketplace Cultures*, that is, the influences of immediate social-cultural contexts and material environments in which consumption takes place. This work highlights above all how grassroot-level cultural formations of often small-scale collectives, networks, or communities partake in the co-creation, negotiation, and diffusion of distinct market and consumption practices, performances, and meanings. Here, CCT's role has been important in conceptualizing and theorizing the notions of brand community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009), sub-cultures (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumer tribes (Cova, 1997), online communities (Kozinets, 2010), and co-creative market practices that shape new market formation and evolution (Giesler 2008; Hietanen & Rokka, 2015). On the other hand, this stream has highlighted how specific marketplace resources and myths become central features of “collectively shared identities” (Peñaloza, 2001; Thompson, 2004), and how they are ritualized, materialized, and expressed in different consumption spaces and environments (Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Sherry, 1998; Stevens et al., 2019). This includes the study of how various market actors including so called “influencers” mediate taste and aesthetic appreciation of consumers (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Pomiès et al. 2020). Crucial marketing implications of this stream overall underline how culture is not an external influence factor or variable that may or may not impact consumption and marketing practices, but is always inseparable from consumption and marketing practices. As explained well by Visconti et al. (2020), it thus becomes misleading to speak of consumption and marketing as an “effect” of culture, even if it has been considered so in more conventional cross-cultural marketing approach. Instead marketing strategies actively – albeit often implicitly – draw from and co-create cultural

marketplace resources (e.g. stories, myths, identities, lifestyle ideals) as they seek to engage and interact with consumers.

Third CCT research program studies the *Sociohistoric Patterning of Consumption*, highlighting especially how different (macro-level) structural and historical influences pattern consumption and identities available for consumers. These accounts are specifically valuable in that they problematize the “agentic” consumer subject. Influential in this work has been Bourdieu’s theories that propose social class and cultural capital can largely explain the distribution of tastes and consumption practices (e.g. Holt, 1998). This CCT stream has inspired scholars to examine notably the relations of power, dominance, marginalization, and social distinction – for example, of class, gender, ethnicity (Crockett 2017; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Peñaloza 1996; Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998; Üstüner & Holt, 2010) – reproduced in consumer culture, not least by marketers. Other related works have advanced our understandings of how consumers’ engagement in consumption practices is socially (and historically) rather than individually shaped and established (Holt 1997; Karababa & Ger, 2011). Key marketing insights drawn from this are important, for instance, toward explaining how innovative products proliferate (Sandicki & Ger, 2010; Shove & Pantzar, 2005) and how value is created through socially shared practices (Schau et al., 2009), and how these can also be influenced (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2017).

Finally, the fourth CCT program focuses on *Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers’ Interpretive Strategies*. Considering the high-speed circulation of news, advertising, and entertainment not least spurred by digital platforms, CCT has sought to unpack the ways in which consumers read, make sense, “decode”, respond, and sometimes resist marketing messages (Scott, 1994). Building on critical media theories (Murray & Ozanne, 1991), these scholars have also examined how consumer ideologies proliferate through advertising and other media. On the

one hand, the studies highlight consumers as active “interpretive agents” who may formulate criticism, perform resistance, boycott, and even at times attack brands (Holt, 2002). On the other hand, as highlighted by Askegaard and Linnet (2012), a key strength of CCT theorizing has been the recognition of how both the macro-social (structural) and micro-social (individual) contexts are simultaneously at play and feed into each other. This means that while consumers may appear as individual and autonomous agents as they go about constructing personalized narratives about their consumption, they at the same time tacitly embrace and repeat consumption ideologies, cultural narratives and scripts circulating in media representations of identity and lifestyle ideals – for instance, about “what is a good life”. CCT work has notably paid attention to the negotiation of ideological influences of globalization processes (Arsel & Thompson, 2004; Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006) as well as localized systems of meaning, not least within branded servicescapes. In these ways, CCT has contributed to the long-standing marketing debates, including the standardization or localization of marketing and communication strategies.

CCT – FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN MARKETING

Given that several long-term technological, sociocultural, and geopolitical developments are necessarily shaping the future of marketing (for a recent review; Rust, 2020) – especially about *what marketing will be in the future* – CCT is particularly well placed in addressing these ongoing challenges. The inherent interdisciplinary foundations of CCT work will undoubtedly be an asset in this regard. To explore relevant and promising pathways for CCT in marketing, the following section highlights key research areas that call for future attention: i) assembling of experiences, ii) shaping of brands’ symbolic universes, iii) institutional and creative market processes, and iv) networked and algorithmic mediation of consumption ideologies and desires.

The listing, which is also summarized in Table 1, is by no means exhaustive but an attempt towards articulating and structuring key tendencies and agenda readily visible across numerous ongoing CCT writings, exchanges, forums, and seminars.

Assembling of Experiences

While customer experience and journey have been highlighted among the most important marketing objectives (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), it is striking that that relatively little is still known about how consumers and marketers assemble these experiences as informed by social and cultural dynamics. Thus, there seems to be a tendency to continue to frame the customer experience (and also journey) as happening in some evident isolation and detachment from their sociocultural context. As explained insightfully by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), the same tendency can be found in many studies examining consumer identity projects, due to too much empirical and methodological focus on the individual's phenomenological experience (mental context). Such a focus is unnecessarily constraining for fostering a more nuanced understanding of how consumers' experience – as well as unfolding personalized narratives of it – is formed always in relation to broader society-level and historical context(s), including nationality, gender, age, class, lifestyle, ethnicity, geographic location, political leanings, etc.

For example, understanding a “simple” consumer experience in a holiday resort as being somehow neutral to the contextual influences becomes immediately limiting and ill-defined. As consumers and marketers/service providers enter into an active encounter and interaction with each other they always carry with them particular sociocultural understandings – as well as “affective/emotional charges” – which can significantly influence the ways in which unfolding experiences are structured both for the consumers and service providers. Even the issue of how well the participants in this encounter master a particular language, or are able to follow social

norms and rules, may prove an important pivot in impacting the entire experience itself. Such an exchange is likely to include a multitude of intersubjective struggles that may impact the participants in different ways (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2019). Thus, research into consumer experiences that account for the influences of the “context of the context” (Askegaard & Linnet 2011) are especially needed. This includes continuing attempts towards addressing the difficult issue in extant research that consumers or marketers themselves are not particularly well-equipped or able to consciously reflect on their contextual influences (which are internalized and pre-reflexive). This requires considerable analytical insight and critical assessment by the researcher, as encouraged by CCT work.

The second CCT future direction is to focus much more on the work of marketers and service providers themselves (Zwick & Cayla, 2011) in assembling experiences for consumers. While CCT has been preoccupied with investigating the “lived experiences” of consumers, far less empirical and theoretical attention has been guided to the production side of experiences (e.g. Haytko, 2004). For example, in CCT and marketing generally, ethnographies of service workers or marketers are particularly rare, not to mention across different sociocultural and national (especially, non-Western) contexts – although rare exceptions can be found (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2019; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). Examining this diversity of contexts in which experiences are assembled and marketing/service work is conducted, require further understanding about how providing “good service” or “good experience” is culturally and socially structured. In addition, more work is needed in relation to advancing our knowledge of the role of “working consumers” in assembling experiences (Cova et al., 2011). This major shift is increasingly propelled by the sharing/platform economy tendencies.

A third future direction is to address specifically the creation of experiences from novel perspectives. Here, CCT work has already begun to chart how consumers and marketers

“assemble” experiences through the analytical frameworks assemblage theory (Canniford & Bajde, 2016; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Epp & Velagaleti, 2014; Rokka & Canniford, 2016), actor-network theory (Giesler, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2013), and practice theory provide (Woermann & Rokka, 2015). What is specific to these novel theorizations is how they cast new light on the heterogeneous material and semiotic capacities of things, bodies, narratives, and spaces (of different kind and scale) that affect the forging and shape of *consumption assemblages* (Canniford & Bajde, 2016). What these views share in common is their commitment to investigate the “messy” boundaries commonly established between consumers and marketers, consumption and production, objects and subjects, and local and global interconnections.

Although consumer experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Joy & Sherry, 2003) and experiential consumption have been at the heart of marketing oriented CCT work all along, it is still important to bear in mind that we continue to work with a notion that is not very sharply conceptualized or understood (Carù & Cova, 2003). Novel and promising areas of theorization can be found, for example, in insights into embodiment of experiences (Scott et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2018), temporality/flow (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019; Woermann & Rokka, 2015), atmospheres/emplacement (Higgins & Hamilton, 2019), and ideological/political influences on the assembling of experiences. A further limitation characterizing existing research is its over-reliance on “fixed” textually-based treatments and representations of experiences, despite their increasingly visual, affective, multisensory, and flowing nature (Rokka et al., 2018).

With an eye on most recent social and cultural disruptions and developments (especially the post-covid era), it is also evident that issues of gender, ethnicity, class, immigration, poverty, wellbeing, and vulnerability are likely to shape the agenda and challenges in assembling of experiences.

Shaping of Brands' Symbolic Universes

Early branding models were based on mass-media brand-building anchored in the understanding of brands as transferring meanings and representations distributed by the broadcast media. These approaches tended to conceive brands as “abstract associations” of key benefits, values, and product attributes. Soon psychologically oriented models were challenged and complemented by investigations into the interactions and relationships that consumers have with “their brands”, setting the stage for emotional, interactional, and social branding models (Fournier 1998). For decades, CCT work has shed new light particularly on how consumers adapt, re-mix, resist, and “author” brands’ meanings in various localized contexts, sometimes even producing competing *doppelgänger brand images* (Giesler, 2012; Thompson et al., 2006). Above all, these works illuminate brands’ “linking value;” how consumers build affiliation with social groupings and shared identities (Cova, 1997). Yet, perhaps the most systematic effort in building a strategic cultural model of branding so far has been suggested by Holt (2004; Schroeder & Saltzer-Mörling, 2006). The cultural branding principles underline especially how brands can leverage their symbolic and identity value to consumers, that is, how brands can perform powerful cultural myths that help consumers address their desires, tensions, and anxieties stemming from cultural contradictions in the society.

In essence, what seems to be still under-developed is a dynamic understanding of how brands are shaped and built as specific kinds of complex “symbolic universes”, akin to what Askegaard (2006) called brand ideoscapes. Brand as an ideoscape provides the ideological basis for the establishment of new meaning systems, new practices, and new identity forms for consumers. A look into the symbolic universes of luxury brands, for instance, quickly reveals that many globally leading brands operate less according to a meaning transfer model that seeks to fix

brand meanings, symbols, and image, but rather a model that produces unique experiential and highly aestheticized imaginary or “dream-like” worlds (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

This suggests that brands should be analyzed and theorized even more in terms of the powerful aesthetic, affective, and embodied encounters they create – that are not least driven by the growth of visually driven digital platforms such as Instagram. Such encounters do not produce “fixed brand images” but complex aesthetic, visionary, and ideological universes and emotional atmospheres in which consumers can indulge in and participate in their co-construction. Less is known also about how these universes are designed, performed, and managed by the marketers, and how they have (or not) the capacity to trigger various effects on consumers. Few theorizations explain how the endlessly unfolding streams of images, videos, and technologically mediated encounters (AR, VR, AI, for example) are curated in ways that produce compelling brand universes, and how these may compete, create loyalty, or “stickiness” (Siebert et al., 2020). CCT work that would address such branding and marketing processes – as well as what specific cultural competences they entail – in a more systematized way would be a much-needed future direction.

Future CCT theorizing is also well-positioned in investigating less conventional brand forms that proliferate in radically new but related ways, as evidenced in the case of “Gilets Jaunes” Yellow vest movement in France, or “Black Lives Matter” protests in the USA. These exemplify instances of ideologically-driven brands and idea branding that are founded on organically unfolding movements, mediatized and polarized images, and increasingly decentralized (or non-existing), liquid organizational forms. What is likely to be gained from such investigations is a better understanding of how brands’ symbolic universes operate also in ways that escape our current understanding of the branding process facilitated by the marketer.

Institutional and Creative Market Processes

Linking with the earlier CCT focus on examining the various market forms and systems such as brand and online communities, there is an ongoing demand for novel and alternative insights into the institutional and creative market processes (for a review, Giesler & Fischer, 2017).

First, there is an important proliferation of alternative market forms including access/platform-based, hybrid, and circular economies of collaborative networks (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016; Scaraboto, 2015) that stem from complex social, technological, and environmental changes. These changes are not yet well understood nor are their implications for different market actors. Notable is the nascent CCT research stream that examines creative consumer-driven movements as facilitators of new market forms and social change (Golnhofer et al., 2019; Kjelgaard et al. 2017; Martin & Schouten, 2013; Weijo et al., 2018). It is of crucial importance to pay further attention to how consumers and collective movements play a role in triggering social innovations that problematize existing social and market structures and creatively re-envision them. These have until now focused especially on issues linking with the breadth or limits of current market alternatives, but in the future could also include a broader set of social and environmental causes and collective movements that are still relatively poorly understood.

Second, CCT work has only recently begun to address the institutional perspectives and analytical frameworks to theorize market systems and their change. This work is visible in analyses of market legitimization dynamics (Humphreys, 2010), consumers' institutional work (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), market-driving entrepreneurs/companies (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Humphreys & Carpenter, 2019; Maciel & Fischer, 2020). This is a fruitful ground for novel theorizations that illuminate the interplay of (historical) institutional forces that hold market systems together (Press et al., 2014) as well as emergent disruptions,

often stemming from adjacent institutional fields (Kjellberg & Olson, 2017). What is specifically exciting about this work is how it unpacks long-standing trajectories of institutionalized taken-for-granted social, political, historical, and economic logics (of worth/valuation) and how they become destabilized and recalibrated as a result of institutional entrepreneurship, recruitment, and creative collaborative engagement.

Networked and Algorithmic Mediation of Ideologies and Desires

As highlighted, CCT scholars have invested in explaining broader social and cultural structuring of consumption ideologies and how they are “lived” through and translated in consumers everyday experiences and identity struggles. What is new in this picture, however, is the changing technological and media landscape that foregrounds shifts toward platform economy principles and big data-driven digitalized consumer culture. As observed by Thompson (2019), CCT has a particularly important role in addressing this (often unquestioned) shift by companies and society at large towards managerial frameworks that privilege and seek most – if not all – answers from big data analytics. These tendencies promote novel marketing perspectives but also myths (Darmody & Zwick, 2020; Thompson, 2019) regarding how digital traces of consumer data including social media, mobile applications, self-monitoring, and online searches/purchases are aggregated and employed towards predictive and automated models for increased marketing efficiency, impact, and returns. What is less known, however, is how these new “intelligent” technologies influence cultural production and with what implications.

On the one hand, CCT research has already highlighted how new digital technologies promote “liquefying tendencies” in consumer culture (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This means that the more consumption practices are digitalized (access-based, ephemeral, and de-materialized), the less rigid and more fluid the social structures that produce them may seem, or at least be

experienced by consumers. Similarly, Kozinets et al. (2017) highlight the role of networked and machinic recommendation systems – such as Instagram, Facebook – in facilitating consumers’ desires even to the direction of increasing consumer empowerment. On the other hand, as convincingly argued by Darmody and Zwick (2020), it is also likely that despite platform economy’s promise for increased consumer agency, the new logic also invites evermore control and surveillance over the datafied consumers. The authors suggest that the digital marketing era is in reality resting on the contradiction that increasing marketer control produces an autonomous and agentic consumer subject.

It would thus be crucial to advance CCT work by theorizing and empirically investigating how the networked and algorithmic systems embedded in the everyday lives of consumers transform identities, behaviors, and the broader cultural and social dynamics. For example, little is known about how social and cultural processes are mediated by marketer-controlled algorithms that recursively filter and feed inputs based on consumers’ behaviors and thus, for example, influence tastes (Airoldi, 2019). This offers a new and important CCT field to study, inviting a multitude of (re-)inquiries into the production of consumer ideologies and desires, as well as their (dis/empowering) effects.

CCT scholars are in a solid position to comment and advance theories that foster alternative understandings and approaches to the big-data driven marketing practices, which despite evident advantages run the danger of devaluing contextualized cultural and social insights, and alternative sorts of (less voluminous) data as the basis of marketing actions. CCT work is thus called to shed light on how ethnographic, embodied, and critical social-cultural knowledge are needed in navigating and addressing new market environments – perhaps more than ever before?

DISCUSSION: FOSTERING REFLEXIVE MARKETING THINKING

As evoked by the outlined future directions above, CCT can help foster different kinds of *reflexive* skills, tools, and competences highly relevant for future marketers and marketing scholars.

First of all, there is a demand for reflexive understandings of the consumption and market systems as “entities” whose connections stretch far beyond the immediate and seemingly isolated consumer-marketer encounters and interactions. This invites a greater awareness of the level and scale of the assemblage processes of “social-material life” as a whole, that is shaped by a multitude of forces. These include “external” institutional forces and constraints that often implicitly guide the assembling of experiences, brands, and market systems. For example, important financial and regulatory constraints – imposed not least by the stock markets, company owners, and governments – influence what kinds of market offerings, experiences, and brands are developed, introduced, and also how they are managed. There are the constraints of human labor and uneven wellbeing, as well as those created by surveillance and platform economy. Crucially, there are constraints of the environment and sustainable future, but also those linking with social and cultural dynamics that reproduce discrimination, marginalization, and unequal treatment of people of different color, gender, age, nationality, and class. In short, we need new reflexive approaches that problematize our preconceptions of “what we think we know” and recognize these forces to better understand where people (and marketers/service workers) really come from, and also what kinds struggles they go through. Such critical contextual knowledge should inform the marketing practices but also how we produce knowledge about consumers and market systems in general.

Second, there is a specific need for reflexivity in addressing the current shift towards the big-data driven marketing practices and obsession. On the one hand, future CCT scholars and marketers should actively question the limits of these approaches that are often referred to as having nearly “magical” powers – at least in the level of ongoing managerial discourse. Notably, it should be brought to attention how the employment of large volumes of “decontextualized” data can also be weak in explaining and answering context and situation-dependent questions about “why” and “how” consumers do what they do, but also how they “feel” about it. Big data is also likely to be unhelpful in addressing affective/emotional, embodied, and multisensory nature of experiences or knowledge – a key emphasis of CCT work. On the other hand, CCT’s future in marketing also requires examining, using, and critically engaging with the big data, algorithms, AI, smart-objects, and understanding their heterogenous outcomes and implications from the point of view of different stakeholders.

In these ways, future CCT research is likely to help marketers to continuously reflect on the “right” questions and perspectives that need to be examined, and hopefully pave ways towards more sustainable social and market innovations.

CONCLUSION

While CCT emerged originally as a corrective in the marketing discipline, to highlight the consumers’ perspective and illuminate how the marketer’s views of the consumer had been too limited and narrow, I propose that it is also time now to re-direct some CCT attention back to examinations of the marketer and marketing practice. This would be beneficial, as I have highlighted, for better understanding how marketers assemble and produce experiences, how they craft branded symbolic universes, how they engage – not least *with* the consumer – in processes

of market creation and innovation, and how they create networked and algorithm-mediated communication systems, thus propagating consumption ideologies and desires. In addition, it is important to direct further attention to and explore how CCT can help in fostering a reflexive mind-set, skills, tools, and knowledge for future marketers and marketing scholars.

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