Chapter 97

Consumer Culture Theory:
Ideology, Mythology and Meaning in Technology Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Consumer culture theory helps us take note of the cultural forces and dynamics in which technology consumption is entangled. It enables people to articulate the cultural processes (ideological, mythic, ritualistic, etc.) through which cultural meanings become granted to or denied to technological innovations, thus shaping the value of technologies as cultural resources sustaining consumer identities. In its urge to shed light on these aspects, CCT tends to reinforce the gaps and asymmetries between the "socio-cultural" and the "techno-material," leaving plenty of room for further study. The authors outline the strengths and limitations of CCT to offer several tentative suggestions as to how ANT and CCT might draw on each other to enrich our understanding of technology consumption.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of journalists and industry professionals, gathered in a Las Vegas hall for the world's biggest gadget expo, watched Bay take his position in front of a 105-in screen with bright, hyper-sharp images. Who better than the director of the Transformers franchise to convince us of the transformative power of a television designed to wow consumers and help safeguard Samsung's future? (Carroll, 2014)

As it turns out, Michael Bay was likely not the best choice. The presentation took a dramatic downturn when a less conspicuous "TV technology," the teleprompter, malfunctioned and the renowned movie director lost his plot and anxiously fled off stage to the surprise of the audience. We invoke this anecdote as a metaphor for the challenges faced by scholars who seek to pursue technological innovation across the boundaries that tend to separate cultural and technical production, cultural and technological innovation. Just as Bay, a

prominent cultural innovator, momentarily (but devastatingly!) lost connection to technology, so to do scholars run the risk of "losing the plot" when pursuing entanglements of technology and culture.

Our interests and, consequently, the theories we draw upon primarily deal with questions of technology *consumption*. More specifically, we introduce what has recently been labeled as Consumer culture theory (CCT) – a theoretical stream that addresses "the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meaning" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868). Rather than being taken as a unified theory, CCT is better seen as theoretic*s* and/or a community of consumer culture theorists (Arnould & Thompson, 2007; Penaloza et al., 2009) sharing an interest in the exploration of:

1. The socio-historical patterning of consumption,
2. The interplay between consumption and consumer identity formation,
3. Marketplace cultures and consumption collectives, and
4. Mass-mediated ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies, to elicit the four fundamental trajectories of CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

To make CCT more accessible to scholars less familiar with the "vernacular" of cultural consumer research and to facilitate a more holistic understanding of this research tradition, we first briefly outline where CCT comes from, historically and institutionally. This initial step helps us delineate the fundamental conception of "culture" in CCT and the ways in which it departs from conventional theorizing of culture in business studies. Finally, we narrow the debate to CCT work on technological consumption and consider the much needed opportunities for cross-fertilization between CCT and ANT studies of technological innovation. We conclude our tentative treatise with a call to ac-

tion furnished with several ideas for "smuggling concepts and data across a well-guarded border" (McCracken, 1988, p. xiii) between technology and culture.

2. THE STORY OF CCT

While the name "Consumer culture theory" is a relatively recent invention (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), the research tradition (sometimes labeled also as interpretive consumer research) this academic brand seeks to envelop has a long and dynamic history (Cova et al., 2009; Tadajewski 2006). For the sake of brevity, let us glide over the initial decades by pointing out that the *proto-CCT* work (1930s-1970s) primarily sought to challenge the "theoretical axioms of micro-economics and [behaviorist and] cognitive psychology, the methodological prescriptions of quantification" prevalent in the marketing and consumer research (Thompson et al., 2013). Proto-CCT opposed the reduction of consumption to demographic or psychographic traits of consumers (e.g., gender, age, personality, lifestyle), or the individual's utilitarian information processing and decision-making.

Subsequently, the 1980s *renaissance CCT* research embraced humanistic and experientialist paradigms to study consumption experiences and the personal meanings consumers attach to products and experiences (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). True to its preferences for "the particular over the abstract, the artistic over the technical, the emotional and expressive over the rational and utilitarian," this research stream approached consumers as "emotional, creative, and inner-directed individuals who sought self-actualizing experiences" (Thompson et al., 2013, p. 7). Exploring consumers' lived experiences and meaning-making via methods such as naturalistic phenomenological inquiry, CCT valorized the symbolic, autotelic, esthetic and experiential aspects of consumption (Thompson et al., 2013).

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