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‘The wild and wacky worlds of consumer oddballs’: Analyzing the manifestary context of consumer culture theory

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Abstract
The article starts with the assumption that the research community of consumer culture theory (CCT) is materially experienced and negotiated in its continuous rhetorical construction. Here, we use the concept of manifestos to analyze the fragile dialectics of a rhetorical and social praxis. In two manifestary moments in the historical development of CCT, we compare how manifestos materialize the transitions from individuals to the linked subjects by a shared relation to ‘the other’. The analysis shows how the ‘we’ of yesterday was written differently from how the ‘we’ of the present and the future requires to be articulated. This sense of ‘we-ness’ is then connected to the changes in the internal and external layers of the academic environment. We conclude that to ensure a sustainable, dynamic development of CCT that avoids disintegration as well as eroding subjugation and stasis, a balance between radical and pragmatic voices has to be established. This balance incorporates the idea that power and knowledge are dynamically intertwined. In this sense, ‘we-ness’ is not a utopian final state, but a permanent necessity for CCT that emerges out of struggles and engages in conflicts.

Keywords
CCT, history, manifestos, rhetoric, sociology of science

To launch a manifesto you have to want: A. B. & C., and fulminate against 1, 2 & 3.
Tristan Tzara, Dadaist Manifesto, 1918

Yes, we can. And we do: talking about us as a consumer culture theory (CCT) sociality and about them, the uninvited, uninitiated and the mainstream hegemony. Yes, we are the 99%, we’ll never be divided (when the kids are united), we are the world and we have nothing to lose but our chains.

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The ‘we’ of CCT is a fragile construct, which needs to be constantly nourished and cherished. As we are a lose tribe, geographically more and more dispersed, we might not have corporate bungee jumping team-building events, instead we have conferences. But in-between and beyond these face-to-face interactions, we have the written word. And we, the CCT people, live, breathe, publish and sometimes perish with the word. As CCT scholars, we are very aware of the quotation marks for the ‘we’, to indicate the constructedness and even colonizing textual power. We have our eyes been opened up by identity politics (Calhoun, 1994), to see through the suggestive vocality of limitless kinship. And we heard Benveniste (1971: 328) loud and clear, when he emphasized the impossible duplication of ‘I’s that a ‘we’ as a multiplication of identical objects implies: ‘in “we” it is always “I” which predominates since there cannot be “we” except by starting with “I”’. But for all that, by sleight of hand, the rhetorical use of the ‘we’ evokes a material reality of a potentially larger community than the usual one or two authors behind the words. It delineates the border between the included and excluded subjects. In the most condensed rhetoric use of the ‘we’, the manifesto, the demarcations are between the old order and the new one, between insurgents and reactionaries and between standing on the right or wrong side of history. There is no time for dialogue or discussion; it is now or never, without any intention of reconciliation. Good manifestos – which Marinetti exemplifies in the precision of accusation and the violence in the insult (Perloff, 1984: 66) – are not for the faint-hearted. They are visceral, highly emotional, often angry utterances and most of the time bordering on lunacy. And at the same time, they are as performative speech acts, a form of social action.

We (the two authors of this article) see in the genre of manifestos with the sensual and unstable dialectic of rhetorical and social praxis a productive access to analyze the formation and current status of CCT. As textual manifestations of critical historical moments, a manifestary perspective emphasizes the intertwinedness of textual and social practices. The history of pre-CCT and current CCT scholarship is interspersed and driven forward by self-reflective, critical, alerting and demanding texts. These texts are contextual junctions of mythologizing the past and writing the future (Shankar and Patterson, 2001). This connects our perspective with attempts to capture the aesthetic moment of academic writing (Brown, 2005; Hackley, 2001). However, with the manifestary perspective, we see the aesthetic praxis connected to a more pragmatic sociology of science outlook. The written word that addresses scientific communities and tries to mobilize is part of a social power structure that pervades the academic world. Thanks to Arnould and Thompson (2005), this power structure has been recently foregrounded and a proactive strategy is formulated to advance the power position of CCT. We argue that this move cannot be separated from its links to research positions and requires a contextualized attention to the question of ‘we-ness’ in the CCT research field. To ensure a sustainable, dynamic development that avoids disintegration as well as eroding subjugation and stasis, a balance between radical and pragmatic voices has to be established. A manifestary perspective can be productive to think within the liminal spaces of ‘we-ness’ that exists between the forces of attraction and repulsion. The ‘we’ in CCT is as much a social, affective and political construct as a textually produced one. And yesterday’s ‘we’ was written differently from how the current and future ‘we’ require to be articulated.

We will focus on two critical moments in the development of CCT that we will analyze in their manifestary instantiations. The first moment is the origin for CCT, with events like the Symbolic Consumer Behavior Conference 1980 in New York, where a first understanding of being a group with similar interests and ideas was coming into existence and the build-up towards the defining research project of that period, the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey. The second critical moment is a more current situation with the publication of the CCT articles by Arnould and Thompson (2005,
2007) and their reverberations. We will first give a short overview of the two historical moments. Afterwards, we analyze differences in the textual constructions of a ‘we-ness’ in these two moments. We argue that the sense of ‘we-ness’ has to be understood in a broader dynamic system of internal and external variables. A manifestary perspective can then emphasize the different power fields within and outside of the CCT field that differentiates the two historical moments. The field of tensions between research and realpolitik will then finally be discussed as a requirement for the continuation of a dynamic collectivity in CCT. But, first we have a look into manifestos and their future.

The unbecoming scenario

On or about in December 2017, the character of CCT changed (compare Woolf, 1966). We are not saying that CCT went out, but there was a change, nevertheless. The new radicals in CCT had decided to boycott the ‘CCT Camp David Accords’, which was supposed to find a joint future for the so-called ‘becoming’ and the ‘unbecoming’ factions of CCT. It had not started with a bang, but rather innocently as a Twitter-networking platform between peripheral CCT researchers. First, the insurgents agreed in their shared dissatisfaction with the ‘mainstream, old school CCT research’. Then a core group of researchers in the queer studies environment of Rotterdam organized a liquid cyber discussion circle, where they outlined their positions. Under the name of the ‘Handelings- bekwaam Beweging’ (or in the Anglo-American mainstream context known as the ‘unbecoming queersumptioners’), they started to question the hegemonic logic in CCT of progress, development, empowerment, liberation, activity and success (compare Halberstam, 2008). Their conceptual focus on ‘unbecoming’ tried to salvage degraded knowledge procedures like oblivion, failure, silliness or intelligibility. Opposed to the ‘individual genius’ identity paradigm, all their off- and online articulations appeared under the collective alias of ‘Alan SmiThee’, which gained quickly a notorious quality in peripheral CCT circles (compare Smithee, 1997). However, it needed a bigger research project to get heard by the CCT establishment. To recruit participants, they launched a YouTube video, called ‘A manifesto for the unbecoming of consumer culture theory’ (compare Belk, 1984). This mash-up of the existing videographic and poetic CCT research went viral and secured the resources to finance a summer vacation in Mallorca’s most dubious mass tourist spots (compare Belk, 1991). It became the most twittered CCT research project ever. The fluid results consisted out of a meandering, rhizomatic network of interrelated Pinterest, Foursquare, Flickr and Facebook material under the ‘SmiThee’ alias. Internally, the material output is also known as the ‘How we spent our summer vacation: A preliminary non-report’ (compare Kassarjian, 1987). The social drama was foreseeable (Sherry, 1991). PhD advisors warned their students to subscribe to the ‘unbecoming’ channels and feeds; suspicions of hidden loyalties, intrigues, accusations and defamations started. It escalated when ‘unbecoming’ sessions at CCT conferences and submissions to journals like Marketing Theory and Consumption, Markets & Culture (CMC) were rejected (often out of ‘formal, stylistic’ reasons that did not favour uncredited manuscripts). The official position was: ‘unbecoming’ is endangering the reputation of CCT and future job prospects of PhD students (compare Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The mainstream faction could find assurance and satisfaction in articles like ‘Why don’t they un-make their own flash mobs? Deconstructing the unbecoming slacker myth’ (compare Hunt, 1994). However, less fundamentalist mainstream voices could be heard that did not share the unbecoming ideology, but appreciated the newly raised discussion culture in CCT (compare Cote and Foxman, 1987). New voices from the queer field were also welcomed, trying to clarify the positivity/negativity concepts based on a queer theory
background. Despite several chat backroom meetings, no balance between radical research and mainstream reputation was found. The unbecoming networks declared their non-interest in becoming. In the end, the unbecoming faction decided to split from the CCT field and to reject authored publications with commercial, monopolistic publishers. They were sharing open source environments, published in overlay journals (specific open access academic journals, compare Houghton and Oppenheim, 2010), and low theory environments like local bingo halls for their offline interactions. The non-appearance at the ‘CCT Camp David Accord’ was just the most visible sign of failure for CCT to integrate new radical, fringe research.

This scenario is a fiction, and with a split between central and peripheral forces, or between bold, daring researchers and sober, responsible researchers, it is an undesired one. What we want to emphasize with the hypothetical scenario is the historical, contextual and contingent character of research programmes. Contexts matter in scholarship as in the researched phenomena (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011). It is as tempting as foolish to reduce the success story of CCT to product quality: convincing, necessary ideas. Breaking innovations require more than ‘building a better mousetrap’ (Hultink and Hart, 1998). As in product marketing, the success of innovative research ideas depends on an internal and external organizational support system (Peter and Olson, 1983).

The CCT pre-history and its progress have implications for the ongoing positioning of CCT in terms of the old and new pragmatic positioning strategies as well as being aware of the changed contextual circumstance. All the more, as the recent influential articles on CCT by Arnould and Thompson (2005; 2007) resulted in an ongoing debate about the future paths of CCT. Participants in the debate warn about ‘normal science’ as the consequence of dogmatic institutionalizations, criticize the exclusion of fringe voices in the name of a totalizing narrative of one unified theory or articulate words of warning against a mistaken epistemology (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Moisander et al., 2009). What the discussion contributions all have in common is the attempt to initiate, provoke and guide the future development of CCT. They try to gain notice, to convince and to convert as part of a rhetorical and ideological strategy. These interjections carry semantic weight in their stylistic address that can only succeed in confirming with existing iterable models (Derrida, 1977). Or in other words, they align themselves in the long history of publishing manifestos. In Tristan Tzara’s dictum (1918/2011), the logic is simple and powerful: first, a bleak diagnosis is made that demands a palpable change (fulminating against 1, 2 and 3). Then the pastures new are painted in bright colours (you have to want: A, B and C). Hereby, a triplefold identity is constructed, based on the relationship of the textually produced ‘we’ to the old order, the legitimizing authority on behalf of a group to speak and the collective identity in becoming.

The history of CCT, starting with the Symbolic Consumer Behaviour Conference and the build-up towards the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey can be told as a history of manifestos, rousing the troops, getting attention in the field of consumer research and heralding new phases in the social drama of the 1980s and 1990s. There are explicit manifestos (e.g. Belk, 1984; Scott and Peñaloza, 2006), almost manifestos (Hirschman wanted the name ‘The Esthetic Manifesto’, but Holbrook decided to go for Kant and called it ‘The Esthetic Imperative in Consumer Research’, Holbrook, 1981), and we have manifestos that display manifesto-like qualities (Bradshaw and Brown, 2008: 1406 on the quality of Belk, 1987a).

The range of manifestos that has been studied is wide, from political to aesthetic texts and from pre-modern to post-modern contexts (Caws, 2001; Cormack, 1998; Lyon, 1999; Danchev, 2011). In the study of manifestos as a genre, the argument is made that to be a manifesto, a text need not necessarily be called as such as long as it ‘looks and behaves like one’ (Yanoshevsky, 2009). It is the Bakhtin (1986) position that wherever there is a style there is a genre. Manifestos have a
certainty in the tone. They oppose, attack, declare, clarify, reject and demand (Caws, 2001). They develop an idea of new knowledge, which gains a status of almost epiphanic knowledge and intend to mobilize. Manifestos in the academia are in this way a fragile balance between academic norms, polemic discourse and social action. What we will look at now are two manifestary moments in the history of CCT and how in these moments the specific sense of collective identity was shaped.

**Moment 1: turning dissent into action**

It was a time to celebrate. Consumer research had been established in the 1970s with the ‘Association of Consumer Research (ACR)’ (1969) and the ‘Journal of Consumer Research (JCR; 1974; Kernan, 1995). Looking back to over 10 years of official consumer research, Gerald Zaltman (1983) could express his pride in the presidential ACR address in 1982 with the words: ‘The overall quality of work is high. The variety of areas we cover is broad. The boldness of many of our researchers is refreshing’ (Zaltman, 1983: 1). It was exactly the time that a group of ACR-affiliated researchers felt increasingly dissatisfied with the narrowness of covered areas and used methods. It did not take long that the acclaimed boldness turned into ‘certifiable insanity’ in the eyes of the consumer research mainstream (Hirschman, 1986).

Manifestations of dissent started rather innocently with special sessions on style, taste and consumer aesthetics by Hirschman and Holbrook at the ACR in 1979. Quickly, a conference was organized that took place the next year on May 16 and 17, 1980, in New York. Besides Hirschman and Holbrook, Russ Belk, Jerry Olson, Dennis Rook and Melanie Wallendorf were the participants among others. The call was open and inclusive, trying to unite academics and industry specialists, both inside and outside of conventional marketing research (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1981). The published contributions were rather traditional and none was later cited as an important contribution to interpretive consumer research. More important was the first manifesto, written by Morris Holbrook (1981). It introduced a new tone in the academic discourse at that time: rhetorical, ironic, partly introspective, articulating a subjective author position and constructing an emergent community, while still positioned in the ‘we’ of the whole consumer research discipline:

Yes, we can build multiattribute models that predict preferences toward toothpaste; we can generate complex multidimensional spaces that represent perceptions of cigarettes; we can construct devilishly clever procedures that trace the acquisition of information on cereal brands; we can – with our bare hands – construct mighty regression analyses that relate detergent usage to 300 separate life-style variables. In short – when it comes to the factors of least importance to the consumer’s emotional, cultural and spiritual existence – we excel (Holbrook, 1981: 36).

Soon Holbrook and Hirschman published articles on the ‘real’ high-involvement consumption phenomena, which meant art in the widest sense (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). The fundamental position towards the mainstream community was in general conciliatory, inviting and the overall direction was towards enriching conventional research. Still, the seeds were planted and the mid-1980s turned into a watershed time for the discipline: ‘All hell had broken loose’ (Hirschman, 1998: 385).

While the diagnosis of the current state of consumer research got bleaker, the demands for a palpable change became louder as well as the alarmed establishment voices. If symbolic consumption should become a new research area, then it might require a new experiential perspective to
counterbalance the James Bettmann school of information processing. If symbolic consumption
becomes a topic, then maybe a non-managerial perspective might also have its eligibility (Holbrook
and Grayson, 1986); and maybe in the end, different ways of doing science could be the appropriate
background (Anderson, 1983; Deshpande, 1983; Peter and Olsen, 1983). At that point, Russ Belk
(1984) published a ‘Manifesto for a consumer behavior of consumer behavior’. It went further in his
criticism (consumer researchers have studied buyer behaviour and overlooked consumer behaviour)
as well as in his demands for non-managerial consumer research and a broader sociocultural frame.
But the ‘manifesto’ tonal quality was still not fully developed. It took a bit before Russ Belk
was officially declaring at the 1986 ACR conference that he has enough of the ‘dog-food level of things’,
of all the ‘petty, stupid or dull’ topics and demanding that ‘we’ must adopt a broader, macroconsumer
behaviour agenda (Belk, 1987b). The same call to arms could be heard from Beth Hirschman, who
declared that ‘we’ (the ACR community) are perceived as eggheads and impractical oddballs in the
world of marketing managers and some marketing academics. But ‘we’, the experiential–hedonic
fringe elements, are widely viewed as certifiably insane: ‘If we continue to pursue our errant ways,
this perception will no doubt increase. So be it’ (Hirschman, 1986: 435).

Russ Belk was taking the lead to turn dissent into action: the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey. In
January 1985, he circulated a letter to the ‘most innovative and open-minded people I knew in the
discipline’ (Belk, 1991: 2): Hirschman, Holbrook, Kassarjian, Levy, Olson, Rook, Sherry,
Wallendorf and Wells. In February, a first meeting took place in Phoenix at the American Market-
ing Association (AMA) conference and the idea to explore American consumption via naturalistic
methods on a road trip from Los Angeles to Boston became a project to plan for. Participants were
selected (also with a session at the 1985 ACR conference), material resources were acquired
(mainly from the Marketing Science Institute) and a pilot test at a swap meet in New Mexico was
executed in November 1985 (Belk et al., 1988). As Belk explained, the project was an attempt to
‘coalesce the questioning into a collectivity’ (Belk, 1991: 4). All that was left was a good rallying
cry. In the build-up towards the Odyssey, Belk developed a presentation that he gave at several
universities in North America, making fun of the traditional consumer research perspective: if the
consumer is too stupid to behave like a rational information processor, may be the consumer should
be build into a bionic computer, so that the theory might finally work. For Bradshaw and Brown
(2008: 1403), Belk ‘not only spat in their [the mainstream marketing academics] faces but drew a
line in the scholarly sand’. However, Belk himself spoke of a ‘light-hearted poke at the dominant
approach’ and regretted in hindsight that this might have narrowed the range of potential partici-
pants for the Odyssey (Belk, 1991: 6). There was a constant indeterminacy, playing on a tonal reg-
ister of antagonism, while the basic chords still indicated a broader affiliation. In the increasingly
heated atmosphere of the consumer research community, the open insurgency did not declare a
final secession. The ‘we’ of the weird collective was still conceptualized as a potential and
intended part of a more general consumer research ‘we’. This can also be seen in the Odyssey par-
ticipation of self-labelled ‘positivists’ like Joseph Cote (Cote and Foxman, 1987).

Moment2: building social capital

In contemplating the future development of interpretive consumer research, Morris Holbrook
compared the situation in the mid-1980s with a newborn baby: ‘Who knows? It might grow up to
be a prince’ (Holbrook, 1987: 108). We should know by now. Out of a small group of rebellious
scholars emerged a global research stream, with its own doctoral courses, journals, conferences
and an ever increasing canon of scholarly works. And the young prince (or maybe princess) has
a new title called CCT. As every marginalized group knows, the labelling process is an important
requisite in the process of forming a collective identity. There are two choices, either to appropriate
the given (often derogatory) name from the outside or proactively rallying around a self-given one
(Galinsky et al., 2003). The group of fringe scholars tried everything. In the invitations for the
Heretical Consumer Researchers (HCR) meetings, which worked as a quasi-official, almost institu-
tionalized meeting ground at the ACR conferences since 1996, they named themselves: the group
formerly known as Heretical Consumer Researchers (HCR), Critical Consumer Researchers
(CCR), Interpretive Consumer Researchers (ICR), and Radical Consumer Researchers (RRR).
In 1997, a different approach was suggested: ‘No other brand name – interpretivism, alternative,
post-positivism, super-duper rigorous touchy, feely stuff – sold as well to the field [as postmodernism]’
(Thompson, 1997: 261). It might have sold for a while but it was a rebranding
strategy in 2005 that was more successful (Cova et al., 2009). The strategic direction was still the
same: how to overcome the marginalized status of a research tradition that was known as and at
times even proudly wore the name tag ‘weird science’ (Brown and Schau, 2008: 357). In 2005,
Arnould and Thompson published ‘Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research’
in the JCR and established the name ‘CCT’ for this research tradition. This was not an individual
research article, but was initiated by Dawn Iacobucci, then-editor of the JCR. She asked all the area
editors of JCR to write reflections pieces that distilled their respective areas of expertise, and the
area of expertise was seen in interpretive and cultural work (Arnould 2012, personal communica-
tion). CCT became an influential point of reference and took on a life of its own, beyond the con-
trol and intentions of the originators. The child was so intractable that the founding fathers had to
interfere with a follow-up article (Arnould and Thompson, 2007), in which they tried to clarify
some of the criticism, or in their view, misperceptions, misunderstandings and misreadings. After
this second article, it was obvious that CCT had become a powerful and influential label and fram-
ing device. It also became evident that CCT had conceptual ambiguities and the reception of the
first article was not as unequivocal and direct as the authors had intended.

Based on the genre theory of manifestos, the 2005 article can be filed as a manifesto, due to its
framing and impact. This happened with the first Futurist Manifesto, gaining legitimacy through
the editor of Le Figaro, who solicited the manifesto and accompanied it with a note. In a similar
way, essays by Nathalie Sarraute or Alain Robbe-Grillet only became manifestos on the Nouveau
Roman through their critical reception (Heimpel, 1999). The kind of reading of the article should
not have come as a surprise. First drafts of the article created heated discussions when they were
presented both at the North American ACR conference in 2004 and the European ACR conference

Insofar, the CCT publication also differs from other overview texts, like the analysis of the
disciplinary status of consumer behaviour by MacInnis and Folkes (2010), which files CCT as a
legitimate subfield of consumer behaviour and marketing. Rather, Arnould and Thompson display
typical manifestary qualities: they paint a bleak picture of the current state (we lack in social
reproduction as PhD programs in marketing do not include CCT research), they assume a
legitimizing speaker position (via editor solicitation and group interactions), they construct the
position of ‘them’ (the broader marketing community that misunderstands us), display the certainty
of tone (especially in the evaluation of radical or unorthodox tendencies in CCT as charming, but
not to be taken too serious whimsicalities) and demand pastures new to come into reality (a more
powerful integration into the broader consumer research and marketing family). What is missing is
a clear mode of address in constructing the ‘we’. In the structuralist frame, the ideological structure
of texts constructs the subject(s) in addressing them in a certain way. Althusser (1971: 174)
described this interpellation in the 180° physical conversion of a subject-in-becoming as a reaction to a police officer hailing: “Hey, you there”! While the manifestary perspective does not believe in a magical textual creation of new subject positions by fiat, there is a necessary rhetorical strategy of address, which sustains a sense of a subject position. It is a nascent sense of taking sides, of either rejecting the text and identifying with the uncomfortable “them” position or stepping into the opened up position of the “we” in forming an affective identification (Iser, 1978; Lyon, 1999: 24). One can reasonably argue that group identity has always been the elements of a collective fiction in the sense of imagined communities. Yet, there are material consequences. However, the authors rather presuppose a collective identity, commitment and responsibility. This is linked to a big difference with the Moment1 manifestos, which can be read as peculiar, angry, quirky or even insane: ‘We were stubborn, reckless and obnoxious’ (Hirschman and Holbrook, 2002: 11). But the overblown bordering to cockiness had an important function in creating a sense of community. In the extreme, manifestos are soaked with a feverish insomnia, with the desire to declare to the world that a new ‘we’ exists and it is here to stay. They are symptoms of a system in instability or crisis and their authors demand to be heard. Being marginalized and creating a loud moment in the public discourse are not a luxury but necessity, to prove their existence to themselves as well as to others. In the Moment2, the marginalization is stated but neither expressed in the tonal quality nor in the directional address. Moisander et al. (2009: 9) call the article an ‘act of power’. Justifiably so, as every manifestary text should be an inexorable act of power. However, as opposed to the Moment1 acts of power, here the effect was more generating the feeling of marginalization and exclusion inside of the collective identity of the ‘we’, rather than in the relation of the ‘we’ to the outside. In the second CCT article, Arnould and Thompson tried to change the mode of address, in arguing that the coherent, serious ‘we’ in the first article was a strategic decision. Now we (Arnould and Thompson) can also point out that our vision of CCT is richer, and also includes less pragmatic, instrumental research positions. To adopt the vernacular of brand management, the CCT project failed in building a coherent corporate brand due to non-aligned internal and external branding (Morsing and Kristensen, 2002).

Our argument is not that what the CCT project needs right now is a new manic manifesto (not that we would not give it a warm welcome). It is even impossible to reproduce the manifestary quality of Moment1 texts for the CCT position. It rather needs a clarification of the collective sense of ‘we’ that can position and reproduce itself in the consumer behaviour and marketing field. This can only be achieved by understanding the broader contextual changes in the construction of the ‘we’ from Moment1 to Moment2, and the necessity of a ‘we’ that can balance both the pragmatic breadwinner position as well as the more esoteric, rebellious spirit of innovation (Sherry, 1991).

The embedded construction of a sense of ‘we-ness’

In the characterization of the two moments in the development of CCT, we focused on the rhetorical construction of the ‘we’. Now we can turn to the construction and continuation of a sense of we-ness that constitutes a research program like CCT.

The ‘we’ of CCT is often described as an epistemic community, where particular ways of knowing are produced and prioritized by a network of scholars (e.g. Moisander et al., 2009). In the 2005 CCT article, Arnould and Thompson refer to these ways of knowing as a ‘family’ of theoretical perspectives and in the 2007 article as the ‘CCT community’. But how do these communities work? As Bradshaw and Brown (2008) pointed out, there is a peculiar lack of interest in the CCT community to apply the strong research interest in tribes, communities and co-creation to
collective academic actions. Dominant is rather the cult of individual heroes of action, exemplified in ‘great men’ and ‘great women’ with an a priori system of collective integration. To counterbalance this tendency, Bradshaw and Brown apply the idea of collaborative circles that was developed for the art world to the academic circle of the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey. However, the dynamic development of the collaborative circle is closer to the familiar life cycle model, assuming a quasi god-given development of introduction, growth, maturity and decline (O’Rand and Krecker, 1990).

We rather argue that the sense of ‘we-ness’ is embedded in a dynamic system of internal and external variables. There are microlayers of individual values, motivations, mesolayers of institutions and disciplines and macrolayers of national and international relationships (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Clark, 1987; Huber, 1990; Tierney, 1988). In this layered system, academic cultures like CCT shape their specific methods, standards, subjects and traditions as well as role-specific values. This group works as a peer group that negotiate the discipline’s hierarchy with a strong influence on individual careers (Palonen and Lethinen, 2001). The community sets the standards with which the work of researchers is evaluated and their integration into the discipline is assessed: ‘local control over scientific work is never complete and is mediated by reputational groups’ (Whitley, 1984: 70). Insofar, academic communities like CCT are embedded in a material context of knowledge production and the ‘we-ness’ has a positive social value but implies also dynamics of power, competition and hierarchy. ‘Academics do not share a discipline base (…) they share conditions, status and functions’ (Kogan et al., 1994: 28f). Though this highlights only one aspect, it should remind us not to equate ‘community and peers’ too easily with communitarian values, good and cosy relations and a general ‘warm glow’ (Kogan, 2000: 209).

In Moment1, the group size of the ‘oddball’ scholars was limited. For the beginning of the 1980s, Hirschman and Holbrook (2002: 11) characterize their position as a ‘minority-of-two mentality’. Social coherence could be managed by direct communication. Belk (1991: 3) speaks in reference to the sociologist Diane Crane (1972) about an ‘invisible college’. Reading lists were circulated and meetings were organized at ACR conferences. These social interactions were all the more important, as the researchers were intellectually isolated at their home departments. What they shared was originally the strong feeling of dissatisfaction with the current dominant orientation in consumer research. Personal motives also came into play. The first core group of interpretive scholars was relatively established. They were freshly tenured professors (e.g. Belk) or associate professors (e.g. Holbrook) and interpreted their intellectual dissatisfaction also as a personal crisis (e.g. Brown and Schau, 2008). Holbrook (1986a: 617) talks about his therapist who recommended him to research something he would be really passionate about, like music. The individual motivations and the social affiliation allowed them to turn dissent into action, and to transform intellectual and cultural capital into potential reputational capital. Supported was the capital transformation strategy by a stronger outsider origin, with Morris Holbrook having an English literature BA from Harvard, Melanie Wallendorf as a trained sociologist, John Sherry as an anthropologist or Tom O’Guinn coming from Media Studies.

In this situation, manifestos played a double role. They created a sense of ‘we-ness’ by gaining attention and experiencing themselves as a group. At the same time, they enhanced the vehement reactions of the mainstream community and created ‘we-ness’ as protection and support while being under siege. The manifestary identity is often a provisional one, a cry for a denied viable one. Insofar, it is less defined essentially by positive traits rather than via a negative projection towards the attacking and attacked antagonistic other. The marginalized identity as it is constructed in manifestos is a reaction to the non-being as an outsider and the crossing as not-yet-being into, what
Rancière (1992) calls ‘political subjectification’. Manifestos materialize the transitions from individuals to the linked subjects by a shared relation to the other.

Sherry (1991) describes the situation as a ‘social drama’. Hirschman and Holbrook (1992: 114) compare ‘what “they” are doing to “us”’ with an armed conflict that breaks hearts, ruins careers and threatens to defoliate, depopulate and demolish the bigger community of consumer research scholars. It was perceived as a higher risk strategy to claim the individual identity as an interpretive scholar. It did not work yet as a clear reputational marker to the outside, though it could create solidarity in the inside of the interpretive community.

In Moment2, the broader context has changed drastically. Overall, there are strong indications that cohesion of disciplinary cultures in general is eroding. Empirical examples are studies of individual academics by Stiles (2004) or Hackett (1990), where personal arrangements and negotiations with external demands are highlighted. Today’s academic identity is shaped by the disparity of academic professionals, from star professors to adjunct, part-time faculty, contract researchers and ‘academic wandering gypsies’ (Enders, 1999: 80). The individual academic culture is furthermore threatened by external changes in academia, characterized as ‘academic entrepreneurialism’ (Etzkowitz, 1983) and ‘academic managerialism’ (Deem and Johnson, 2000). Changed governance structures in universities emphasize centralized administrative institutions, resulting in a loss of autonomy, diminished spans of control and greater surveillance and accountability on the side of the faculty (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Currie et al., 2010). In this broader context, the configurations of ‘we’ as CCT community and the ‘I’ as a CCT researcher have changed. Thanks to the continuous struggle of the Moment1 researcher and the powerful labelling strategy of Arnould and Thompson, CCT became a reputational marker to be used to signal an affiliation to the broader marketing field. It is still a marginalized position, but less risky than in the 1980s and 1990s. However, less risk and more reputation lead to a paradoxical twist for the sense of ‘we-ness’. The CCT community is now (almost) global and manifold. The borders of the ‘we’ became more blurry, including also potential collaborators from sociology, history, anthropology, cultural studies or media studies (Arnould and Thompson, 2007: 8). The interactions became more selective, and core/periphery positions emerged in the inside of the CCT ‘we’. This increases the likelihood of experiencing social affiliation inside diverse CCT factions. It is the equivalent of moving from second-wave to third-wave feminism (Scott, 2006). The proclaimed universal identity of a CCT scholar is internally in danger of being perceived as a bounded white Anglo-American middle-class ideology. Erosion into micropolitics is at the horizon, which emphasizes differences in terms of ethnicity, locality, class positions, ideological beliefs, cultural orientations and so on. The high-risk but potentially high gain position combined with an affective identity experience of radical manifesto strategies can now be positioned inside of the CCT community. In this way, the markers of being CCT affiliated (I am a CCT researcher) can be still utilized in the outside interactions, but differentiated in the inside positioning (I am not your kind of CCT researcher).

If the sense of ‘we-ness’ should be sustained, and we definitely subscribe to this view, it requires to go beyond a quasi-natural life cycle model and to look into the intertwinedness of research and realpolitik or what we call the power and knowledge poles.

The field of tension between research and realpolitik as a requirement for a continuous ‘we’

Our reading of Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007) reveals two different aspirations for CCT. The first one is the quest for new and groundbreaking knowledge, which has always been a part of the
agenda for interpretive consumer research. The other aspiration is to move CCT from a marginal position outside the mainstream into a position in which this kind of research can achieve institutional legitimacy and power. These goals can be read as an indication that CCT research has been marginalized and has mainly focused on striving for new knowledge. As it is clearly pointed out by Arnould and Thompson (2007), a scientific discipline cannot survive within the university system without both knowledge and power. The focus on both knowledge and power is a break with the self-image as the rebel, as it was described in Moment1. It is vital to point out that knowledge and power are always connected and cannot be thought separately. When Hirschman and Holbrook (2002: 11) emphasize “We had no clue about how “the field” operated, about the trajectory of academic careers”, it does not mean they were not engaged in a power nexus. The emphasis of one pole of the relation is a rhetorical as well as a political strategy. In both manifestary moments, we can see specific configurations of these two discourses: scientific knowledge and empirical reality (here represented as power).

The university can be defined by the interaction between knowledge and power. When the first universities were founded in Europe in Middle Ages, they were primarily a power institution governed by the church. Later, Humboldt (1767–1835) coined the idea of the university as an institution independent of both the church and the state. The historical justification stemmed from a consensus to protect the activities of pursuing the truth (Altbach, 2001). Thus, the focus has shifted from power to knowledge for its own sake. In Merton’s prescriptive value set for a scientific ethos that makes science possible, this was expressed as ‘disinterestedness’. Scientists should primarily be motivated by the general advancement of science. They should not apply illegitimate means for their own gain (Merton, 1973: 274).

Today, the university is still defined by the interaction between knowledge and power, a reality ‘Arnould’ and ‘Thompson’ are well aware of. Here we use brackets for the individuals to indicate an important ontological distinction. Our perspective differentiates between theoretical concepts, like research and realpolitik strategies, and individual subjects. Individual scholars are not just representatives or material embodiments of strategies. They are engaged in specific material and symbolic practices that can be seen as contextual instantiations and modification of discourses. These discourses that speak through and with the authors are what we are interested in.

The power–knowledge relationship is dynamic, and there will be different strategies involved when it has to be decided how to deal with this relationship. At an abstract level, there are two ways to deal with the power–knowledge relationship. The power–knowledge relationship is the logical foundation for the university as an institution. The university is stretched out between these positions. The relationship is also characterized by the fact that the two positions can only exist if each has a share of the other’s position. Power cannot exist without some knowledge, but it is, at the same time, ‘the suppose to know’ position and thereby satisfied by the knowledge it already possesses. The knowledge position is continuously striving for new knowledge. It can be described as the ‘want to know’ position. The strive for new and groundbreaking knowledge implies that this position cannot be too closely related to the power, since the power position is the ‘suppose to know’ position and it does not want new and groundbreaking knowledge that can question its position.

The dynamic relationship between the power and knowledge positions makes it possible to move from the one to the other using different strategies, perceived as narratives. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), the original interpretive researchers from Moment1 did not succeed in developing the academic community into a legitimate and recognized research position. It is Arnould and Thompson’s narrative to change this situation by developing CCT and to move
from the knowledge to the power position. It is a classical narrative, the epic battle between the soldiers of academic institutions’ performance and the priests of research purity (March and Sutton, 1997: 703).

An analysis of the power–knowledge relationship in Moment1 will have to take into consideration the quest for new, marginalized knowledge and how it is related to the widely accepted and perpetuated knowledge. Another important issue was the resistance against connections to business (e.g. Holbrook, 1985), and thereby the power position at a business school. This can be seen as the idea of pure knowledge, which is knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which is often associated with the researcher in the ivory tower (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 875). The negation of the knowledge position is the researcher as one who is participating in the world. To do this, the researcher needs to be pragmatic and give up the idealistic perception of how to gain new knowledge.

The researchers in Moment1 celebrate the idealistic point of view in opposition of a more pragmatic position, as the collective ‘we’ was primarily defined and motivated by the negativity towards the current state of consumer research. This relates to the isolation from the establishment and the power. At the same time, isolation from the power is also seen as a precondition for developing new and radical knowledge, which is ‘pure’, and knowledge for knowledge’s sake. The researchers in Moment1 stayed in the knowledge isolation relationship and they could, therefore, work on pure research (e.g. Belk, 1986; Holbrook, 1986b). A marginalized position in the field of consumer research was therefore a consequence as well as origin of a specific power–knowledge narrative.

The logic in Arnould and Thompson’s narrative does not accept these conditions. The rhetoric is moving towards recognizing CCT as a legitimate stream of research in consumer research and marketing. To do this, the pragmatic premises are accepted and participation in the mainstream community to be a part of the power position is intended (Arnould and Thompson, 2007: 18). By doing so, the logic has to accept another movement, in which those in the power position have to be persuaded to recognize CCT as a legitimate stream of research. This is done by the CCT-branding project and several co-branding projects (Cova et al., 2009). An example is aligning discussions of the service-dominant logic’s co-creation of values and CCT’s co-creation of meanings (Arnould, 2007). However, the absolute power position is a place in which you ‘suppose to know’. That is the logical opposite of ‘want to know’ in the knowledge position. Staying in the power position is the end of research as an activity, striving for new and radical knowledge. To move away from this dead end (with its prestige and power), researchers need to isolate themselves mentally from the power position and the taken-for-granted knowledge as well as to recognize isolation from the power position as premises for doing research.

The dialectical process in the knowledge–power relationship is not simple. There can only be an exchange from one position to the other if consequences of the exchange are reflected as a narrative process in which somebody has to do something under certain conditions with some implication. When a CCT logic strives for the power position, the focus shifts from research to realpolitik. Arnould and Thompson (2007) refer to Foucault when they reflect upon the fact that ‘solutions to specific institutional dilemmas are never resolutions but rather reconfigurations that pose new problems and dangers (p. 4)’. Nevertheless, we think the Arnould and Thompson narrative is too optimistic in its focus on realpolitik, and underestimate the long-term dangers in this perspective.

These long-term dangers can be further substantiated by looking into the rhetorical logic of tensions between research and realpolitik. There is a strong tendency to take-for-granted where the radical knowledge and the pragmatic junctions can be positioned. However, the positioning can
only be made in a specific context, as it is relative and never an inherent essence of ideas. As Learmonth et al. (2012) argue in their plea for the usefulness of useless research, the pragmatic relevance of knowledge is always contingent upon time, management fads and ideologies, cultural and technological shifts and last not least upon relations of power. In this way, the apparent stability of the actual signifiers has to be understood as much more complex, unstable and potentially paradoxical. There are enough examples in interpretive consumer research, where seemingly radical and pragmatically useless research turned out to be very resonant in the power field, for example, extended self (Belk, 1988) or the river magic research (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Finally, to take up an idea of the fictitious scenario we started with, which referred to existing ideas in queer studies, we can only touch on the basic premise of progress and success. As already Adorno and Horkheimer (1988) have pointed out in the dialectic of enlightenment, progress can be a double-edged sword. For the queer studies scholar Halberstam (2008: 143), the teleological project of progress is appealing and compelling and based on a ‘self-congratulatory, feel-good narrative of liberal humanism’. It is a romantic discourse that adores hope, winning, heroism, mastery, linearity and futurity. This logic avoids recognizing the contextual necessities of negativity, refusal, anger and antiredemption. As Halberstam (2011) emphasizes impressively, there is an art of failure and modes of knowledge production that do not fit into a narrative of progress. These modes are exactly part of a manifestary tradition. In a manifestary logic, we can see an excessive radicality of mythologizing the oppressive past, a disregard of good manners and reasoned civility and a deconstruction of any orderly idea of progress. Manifestos create a rhetorically performed rupture that injects a momentum and at the same time foregrounds the permutability of a progress construct. In this way, manifestos function as an extreme knowledge–power constellation in the ‘margin of error – between lunacy and social praxis’ (Lyon, 1999: 201).

We have shown how isolation in the non-power position can generate innovative research and new knowledge, when the participating non-knowledge position generates engaged participation in realpolitik to reach the power position. Despite Arnould and Thompson’s (2007: 5) claim not to strive for a normal science status for CCT, we see a revised framework for CCT research five pages later. It seems as if Arnould and Thompson cannot present a CCT article without a model for how to do research, which could easily be understood as a normal science research program by many, even those inside the CCT stream of research. That is the danger of a heavy focus on realpolitik.

**Conclusions**

We began with a fictional scenario of a new group of rebellious researchers, orienting themselves towards the knowledge position. The development ended with a split from the power position. The scenario was playing out the Moment1 history in a different context. The goal was to emphasize the contingency of the historical development of research groups. There is no necessary path for the future of CCT, just desired, anticipated, dreaded or realized ones. We emphasized the importance to understand historical moments in the development towards CCT and beyond on the basis of their wider embeddedness. Here we focused on the personal, collective, material as well as rhetorical and symbolical elements.

In the 1980s (Moment1), a strong sense of community was energized and enacted by the rhetorical strategies of dissent manifestos. A more fundamental ‘oddball’ strategy could have led to a split with the broader consumer research community (as it was actually also discussed as an opportunity). In preserving the ideological pureness of radical research, the result could have been even more innovative, groundbreaking and may be whimsical research. On the other hand, this
pure position would have been threatened by two forces: first, the lack in social reproduction would have connected the community directly with the individuals. As a consequence, the research community would have disappeared as soon as these individuals would have left the public academic arena. Second, the sense of ‘we-ness’ would have been endangered by a lack of the strong position of ‘them’. As damaging as the mainstream attacks could have been personally, they also guaranteed the energizing experience of the ‘we’ in the marginalized research community. In this critical moment, a rhetorical trompe l’oeil in the form of manifestos makes it possible to evoke an experienced oppositional identity that yearns for its materialnowness.

In the current CCT community, the dissent has transformed from action to reputation. This means a move towards the power position. As we discussed, this move towards social capital accumulation threatens the research community in two ways as well. First, groundbreaking, innovative, radical and sometimes even weird research is part of the external and internal sense of who ‘we’ are. A split or a demotion in favour of accumulating social capital would in the long run also endanger the power strategy by hollowness and dilution. Second, just assuming a sense of ‘we-ness’ is in danger of overlooking the changed relationship between individual researchers and the overall construction of a CCT ‘we’. While profiting towards the outside by a strong CCT community, the described contextual configurations strengthens an individual tendency of experiencing collectiveness in marginal CCT factions. Our main argumentation point was that the material consequences of these developments are too often discussed in content terms (e.g. a micro, macro, feminist, sustainable, transformative or neo-Marxist interjection). However, safeguarding the long-term viability of a CCT community requires a perspective towards the structural implications and consequences. It requires looking into the dependent dynamics of marginalized and majority groups and into the specific power and realpolitik constellations. A sustainable, dynamic, productive development of CCT needs a dialectic that lives the tensions between inside/outside orientations. This means reaching cohesion with coherence to the outsides and enables adhesive differences and even conflicts in the inside. As we have emphasized, the performative construction of ‘we-ness’ cannot be reduced to a cosy best friends forever (BFF) pyjama party. ‘We-ness’ emerges out of struggles and engages in conflicts. There is a necessary power nexus inside and outside of CCT that has to be reflected in the active strategies of diverse groups in CCT. In this way, we had our share of problems with Arnould and Thompson’s discourse, the rhetorical ‘act of power’ per se was not one of them. It opens up the experienced necessity of articulating a manifestary counterpoint, a scream that can come from an internally marginalized group as a negativity in-becoming. It is at this point, that the group of CCT scholars have to be able to think the betwixt, the ‘neither/nor’, the aporia (Derrida, 1993) of ‘and/and’ and not the ‘either/or’. We cannot wait to hear the next wild and wacky researchers, standing tall on the roof of the world, yet again, and hurling their defiance at the stars (Marinetti, 1909)!

References


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