

Art-based research of consumer culture

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We live in culture that is saturated with consumption (Slater 1997). The socializing institutions of contemporary culture, such as education and religion, have been encroached with market logic; identity is based in brands as well as the meanings we elicit from them, and communities form around individuals' relationships to objects of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Jenkins 2006). Slater (2012) points out that consumer culture is a contradicting concept, as "culture driven by market needs is not a culture at all" (p. 37). He continues that economics and culture have been seen as mutually exclusive elements of society since their conception in early modernity. Yet, consumer culture as well as marketing, the guiding tool of the former do exist, and even thrive! Slater (2012) suggests that these must then take form as both economic *and* cultural.

To gain understanding of this hybrid form, we would need to let go of the perspective of consumption as something that can be explained rationally and scientifically (which currently reigns in consumer research), and embrace its cultural and creative aspects. This research stems from consumer culture studies, which is "a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meaning" (Arnould and Thompson 2006, p. 868). The approach is very different from the more "mainstream" understanding of consumption and marketing, which is largely based in psychology and economics (Slater 1997). While venturing into more cultural aspects of consumption, consumer culture studies have retained a focus on phenomenology and narratives. Hence, aspects of consumption and consumption experiences that are outside of such conceptualisations run the risk of being overlooked.

Art-based research (cf. Leavy 2009) emerges as a fitting way of approaching consumer culture from a different, creative point of view. Including an artistic perspective would allow researchers to engage in and interact with the entire research process on a multisensory level. We believe that this will create the opportunity for approaching knowledge and developing understanding in new ways. More specifically, the approach allows for research to be conceptualised, analysed, and presented in new ways, thus changing the researcher's point of view, as well as creating new ways of interaction for and with their audience.

The aim of this research project is to explore how consumer culture studies and art-based research can be combined, and thus inform, extend, and enrich one another. We believe that such an approach will allow researchers to gain better understanding of contemporary western culture that is largely tied into consumption processes. To support this endeavour, we are also implementing art-based research practice into other research projects. For instance, one of the authors is creating an art installation as a part of a research project on the political aspects of consumption in the West Bank. This has allowed us to explore the viability of the approach we are proposing, as well as provide examples for our arguments.

References

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