

## **Art-based research of consumer culture**

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Contemporary Western culture is a culture of consumption (Slater 1997): our socializing institutions have been saturated with market logic, our identities are based in brands, and our communities emerge from relationships to and activities around objects of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Jenkins 2006). As Slater (1997, p. 8) writes, “consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process, but ‘consumer culture’ – a culture of consumption – is unique and specific: it is a dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west over the course of Modernity.” To better understand ourselves and the world we live in, it is thus important to explore consumption as well as the practices and culture that form around it, as these are intrinsically tied into contemporary everyday life.

In 2011 Slater further points out that consumer culture is a contradictory term, as it has the characteristics of both economics and culture, which have been seen as opposites. Nevertheless, such a contradictory culture exists and thrives! To gain understanding of consumer culture, we would then need to go beyond the perspective of consumption as something that can be explained and understood in a strictly rational and scientific terms (which currently reigns in consumer research), and take on its cultural and creative aspects. Art-based research emerges as a good way of engaging in the exploration of consumption from a new, more creative point of view, as it allows researchers to approach the whole research process from a multisensory perspective and develop knowledge in new forms. More specifically, we propose that the approach allows for research to be conceptualised, analysed, and presented in new ways.

The aim of this research project is to explore how consumer culture research (sometimes also called consumer culture theory, Arnould and Thompson (2005)) and art-based research can be combined. Through the endeavour, we hope to open new topics of research and new forms of knowledge up for discussion, and tap into research that is multisensory, ties into topical themes of contemporary culture, and engages the audience. First, we introduce the tradition of consumer culture studies, from which our project stems. Then, we propose different ways in which consumer culture research and art-based research can inform, extend, and enrich one another. Lastly, we provide an example of a research project that combines these two traditions that is being conducted by one of the authors.

### **Consumer culture research**

This research project emerges from the tradition of consumer culture studies, which have been defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005, p 868) as “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meaning”. The approach is in many ways different from the more ‘mainstream’ consumer research, which is rooted in psychology and positivist science. Going against such tradition, consumer culture studies looks at consumption as something that extends beyond any single moment of purchase (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). This means that consumption is not just the buying and using of goods and services in connection to needs and wants of an individual. Consumption is rather a way and a form of connecting people to one another and to society. It is a multi-sensory, corporeal activity that is spread out in time and space.

Following Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) work, a whole spectrum of phenomena connected to consumption became validated and relevant for research. Consumer culture research turned its focus on the *experience* of consumption, exploring things like identity and consumption (e.g. Belk 1988; Ahuvia 2005), marketplace culture (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 2001), sociohistoric patterning of consumption (e.g., Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Allen 2002), and the ideology of consumption in contemporary culture (e.g. Holt 2002; Joy and Sherry 2003). Consumer culture research often extends into other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, media and cultural studies.

### **Methodologies of studying consumption**

In shifting focus to experience, consumer culture research also became more open in terms of methodology, embracing interpretivist approaches, such as phenomenology and hermeneutics (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Moreover, so-called alternative methods have emerged from time to time within consumer culture research. These have mainly included video (e.g. Smith, Fisher, and Cole 2007; Hietanen 2012) and poetry (Sherry and Schouten 2002; Downey 2015). However, with a few exceptions, such 'alternative' research has mainly retained an ethnographic epistemology and ontology. In this way, video, for instance, replaces the existing technology of writing, but keeps the associated ways of structuring research and approaching knowledge. In short, these are technological, rather than epistemological, developments.

Focusing on phenomenology and narratives, as well as having writing as the dominant medium, consumer research risks overlooking consumption experiences that are outside such conceptualizations. Hence, we believe that gaining a more complete understanding of consumer culture and consumption as well as addressing it as a spectrum of experiences and interaction requires a wider methodological and epistemological perspective.

Art-based research emerges as an excellent way for approaching topics of consumer culture research from new perspectives, which have previously gone largely overlooked because of focus on the prioritization of text, language, and narratives. We believe that combining art-based research and consumer culture studies would allow the exploration of new topics and new forms of knowledge as well as approaching existing understanding from new points of view.

### **Art-based research and consumer culture studies**

Taking on art-based research within consumer culture studies provides the opportunity for researchers to engage in the entire research process on a more interactive, embodied, and multisensory level. This both pushes and frees the researcher to take a new point of view, thus approaching knowledge and developing understanding in new ways. We believe that, at the same time, research fields that are more readily using art-based research, such as art education and public pedagogy, as well as the methodological field itself may also gain a lot from the combination with consumer culture studies. Research based in business schools is often put away as too commercial and sales-oriented. However, the processes of production and consumption are central to our culture, and are studied in a multitude of ways. Linking the two fields can then aid us in understanding human nature as well as in creating a better educated and informed public that is capable of change. Moreover, consumer culture studies has its roots in various academic fields, and tapping into the tradition thus opens the doors wide for various cross-disciplinary collaborations.

There are three main ways that we see the combination of art-based research and consumer culture studies contributing to new perspectives in approaching research and knowledge as well as developing understanding. Firstly, research can be conceptualized and theorized in new ways. For consumer culture studies, this becomes a shift in epistemological

and methodological aspects. By approaching both the research process itself as well as the focus of research as experience beyond language and text, researchers can see things anew and become more aware of both their own and others' experiences (following Graham 2000; Bennett 2012). Moreover, using art-based methods supports explorative work through emotional engagement, embodied response, and dialogue with one's theoretical and/or empirical context (Barone and Eisner 2012). Art-based research as a field can also greatly profit from its use alongside consumer culture research, as the former can become better informed of consumption aspects of the culture it studies. Through tapping into conceptualizations, theories, and findings of consumer culture research, new connections can be made within the art-based research understanding of consumption, providing completely new types and forms of insight into cultural, communal, and individual processes.

Secondly, the combination of art-based research and consumer culture studies can result in new approaches to data collection and analysis, that is, the method of the research. For consumer culture research, this can open the door to analysis that takes on new forms both in terms of methodology and medium, thus allowing greater depth and detail. Art-based methods can generate new possibilities for developing and building understanding, as they greatly aid in synthesis and the creation of patterns through visual-kinesthetic processes (Hatcher 1999). Such processes help researchers think and experience by revealing things they are not normally aware of (Becker 2007). For art-based research, the addition of consumer culture tradition could mean analysis that tie into various fields of research that use more traditional academic approaches. While this may seem like taking a step back in terms of methodology, we believe this would rather allow researchers to tap back into their roots and allow research to be more widely linked, informed, and available.

Thirdly, the combined efforts of art-based research and consumer culture studies can result in new forms and approaches to the presentation of research. Consequently, the research and researchers gain possibilities of interacting with their audience in new ways, as well as gain access to new types of audiences. For consumer culture research, this means going beyond textual, linguistic, and discursive communication, which results in communicating emotion and experience as well as inciting self-awareness (Graham 2000). The approach also allows for interaction with the audience that creates possibilities of learning and reflection through disrupting norms and pushing people to work in order to attain full meaning (Hatcher 1999; Barone and Eisner 2012). Moreover, because such presentation is based on more intuitive and in less formalistic ways of understanding, we believe it would allow better spread and accessibility of research to the wider public outside of academia. For art-based research, the cross-disciplinary approach would allow the use of presentation more accessible to traditional humanities as well as businesses. This means influencing audiences that have more power and influence in consumption and production contexts, as well as inciting self-awareness and exploration in them, thus broadening horizons and causing higher levels of power to question norms.

It is important to note that the three points we have presented are not distinctly separate. We have made the distinction only for purposes of their presentation. In practice, the three aspects of research flow in and out of one another, impossible to untangle or even perceive separately. Moreover, we believe that the combination of art-based research and consumer culture research will rely heavily on collaboration among researchers (following Jones 2006; Douglas and Gulari 2015). Hence, the aim is not necessarily for researchers to learn each others' fields and practices in their entirety and on their own, but rather to come together with their own strengths and skills to learn from and support one another.

All in all, we believe that combining art-based research with consumer culture studies can progress research in general through their combined potential to engage people, raise questions, and tie into central themes of contemporary culture, which we deal with on a daily

basis, but are largely blind to. The two traditions can clearly inform, extend, and enrich one another, allowing better understanding of contemporary western culture that is largely tied into consumption processes. We hope that our work inspires future collaborations in cross-disciplinary research. Next, we provide an example of cross-disciplinary research that combines art-based research and consumer culture research.

### **Implementation: “Shopping at ‘Capitalist Peace’”**

To illustrate how art-based research and consumer culture studies can be combined, we use the example of a research project by one the authors, Anastasia Seregina, that is done in collaboration with Aurélie Broeckerhoff. The research project, “Shopping at ‘Capitalist Peace’”, is based on a 6-week field study conducted in the West Bank in spring and summer of 2015 by Aurélie. The aim of the fieldwork was to explore how market liberalisation has affected participation in consumer boycott, problematizing the real and ideal roles of the ‘Palestinian consumer’ (Broeckerhoff 2016). Since negotiations for peace began in the 1990s, the situation in the Occupied Territories can be described as capitalist peace bringing a rise of consumer culture previously unknown to many Palestinians. Capitalist peace is underpinned by a view that liberal peacebuilding – a mechanism of resolving violent conflicts by establishing democratic processes and market liberalization – will lead to more peaceful relations between countries (Gartzke 2007). Market liberalization does have positive effects for consumers, their lifestyles, and quality of life, yet, in the long term, societies can experience grave costs in the form of individual frustration, social inequality, as well as negative environmental effects (Ger and Belk 1996).

The initial research was conducted by Aurélie, and it started out as quite a traditional qualitative study within consumer culture research. The research was based on a review of previous literature; data was collected and turned into textual form through transcription; and analysis was done through narrative and textual methods. The project was extended into collaboration with Anastasia with the aim to involve art-based research and thus allow new perspectives for the research. The artwork became a tool to rethink and take a new approach to the context and phenomenon at hand. The collaboration thus became the basis of the art-based research project through the combination of different perspectives and the taking on of a new methodology. The new approach did not change the initial conceptualization of the project and fieldwork. The art-based research was still very much based in the original project, with the goal being to gain better understanding of how political activism takes place in and ties into the marketplace through directly tapping into lived experiences of consumers that reside in occupied territories. Nevertheless, taking on the art-based approach helped the researchers to reconsider data analysis and the dissemination of findings.

Firstly, data was analyzed in new ways within the research project. Taking on artistic practice as part of the research pushed the context as well as field notes and interviews to be analyzed and interpreted in new ways, opening possibilities for new meaning and perspective. This involved tapping into visual, interactive, and experiential understanding. Moreover, focus shifted to not just understanding but also expressing the phenomenon as it is lived and experienced by individuals. Consequently, the combination of traditions allowed for a more multisided, experiential understanding and presentation of the research context and the informants.

Secondly, the combination of art-based research and consumer culture research opened new possibilities for presentation of research. The focus turned to visuals and experience, which was nevertheless heavily grounded in consumer culture theory. The aim became to explore the concept of ‘capitalist peace’ as it is experienced and understood by people within it, as well as allow the audience to engage with that experience. Most importantly, the focus

was to open up a different world of lived experience to the wider public, not just academic circles, so they can engage with the topic on various levels on interaction.

In practice, an art installation was created for a conference, which will be shown at several academic events, with plans for presentation in spaces more available to the wider public. The installation took form of a grocery store shelf that bears the sign “Capitalist Peace”. The shelf was filled with generic, fake products one could normally procure at a grocery store in Palestine. This included things like juice, yoghurt, milk, hummus, chocolate, and cereal. The products were colorful, yet included quotes from the interviews that depicted how individuals in occupied areas consume particular products with political purpose (or not). The installation is interactive in the sense that people are encouraged to pick up products, look at them, and move them around. Once products are removed, the back of the shelf turns out to be a drawing of a checkpoint in the West Bank. Behind the colorful façade created by capitalist peace lies the everyday experience of life under occupation.

The result of the research project is a more emotional and experiential approach to the phenomenon of capitalist peace, as well as its connections to the market and the freedom we expect of it. Instead of mere description, the authors engaged in as well as provided opportunities for the audience to tap into experience of consumption and consumer culture itself. The emotional, embodied, non-verbal aspects tied into these topics become accentuated, giving rise to new awareness and reflection in concepts, activities, and ways of life.

All in all, combining art-based research and consumer culture research provides an opportunity to communicate phenomena that people engage in on a daily basis yet are painfully unreflexive of. This allows for creating a situation supportive of reflection and self-reflection through new knowledge and experience, causing individuals to become aware of cultural processes as well as the role they have in supporting and sustaining them. Knowledge takes new forms and is imbued with richer, interactive content, giving individuals an opportunity to engage with new ways of understanding their world and their culture on a more embodied and emotional level.

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