*Enriching the ‘Epistemic Culture’ of CCT: Revisiting consumer and researcher subjectivity via the work of Sara Ahmed*

Liz Parsons, Daniela Pirani, Athanasia Daskalopoulou, Cathy McGouran, Katy Kerrane & Rachel Ashman

Liz Parsons, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, Elizabeth.Parsons@liverpool.ac.uk. Daniela Pirani, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, D.Pirani@liverpool.ac.uk. Athanasia Daskalopoulou, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, A.Daskalopoulou@liverpool.ac.uk. Cathy McGouran, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, C.Mcgouran@liverpool.ac.uk. Katy Kerrane, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, K.Kerrane@liverpool.ac.uk. Rachel Ashman, University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK, Rachel.Ashman@liverpool.ac.uk. Address correspondence to Liz Parsons.

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In 1993 Bristor and Fisher (p. 518) wrote a path breaking article in the Journal of Consumer Research in which they argued, quite gently by today’s standards, that ‘a portion of consumer research’s theory and knowledge are gendered in unrecognized ways, and that feminist critique is required to clarify the implicit assumptions.’ As such they positioned their piece as a ‘reappraisal, revision, and enrichment of consumer research’ (Bristor & Fischer, p. 518). Arguably consumer research, and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) in particular, has travelled a distance in the intervening 27 years. However, in their 2013 introduction to a Marketing Theory special issue on the state of CCT research Askegaard and Scott observed that ‘the political voice of feminist theory, which made a big splash in the mid-1990s, has grown silent’ (2013, p. 141). Importantly, since 2013 we have seen a reinvigoration of feminist theorising in the discipline (i.e. Maclaran & Stevens, 2018; Maclaran, 2015), however there is still much reappraisal, re- visioning and enriching work to be done.

Our intention is to highlight and to critically discuss the (re)production of theoretical toolkits within CCT with a specific focus on debates surrounding consumer subjectivity. In recent debates the discipline has been accused of harbouring an overly individualistic view of consumers; scholars blame a history of existential phenomenological methods for this over emphasis (Moisander et al., 2009b; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) commentary on the importance of understanding the ‘context of context’ was a particularly trenchant call for CCT scholars to shift up one register, from micro consideration of the individual consumer, to macro structural and contextual influences. A parallel critique has been that the discipline is stalked by a shared (broadly neoliberal) ideological commitment to a sovereign, agentic and empowered consuming subject (Fitchett et al., 2014; Shankar et al., 2006). Although important to note that this position is not without its critics (Thompson et al., 2013; Askegaard, 2014).

Poststructuralist feminist scholars have rehearsed similar critiques largely in relation to postfeminism. For example, in the context of advertising Gill (2008, see also Lambert, 2019) finds young women are represented as active, independent and sexually powerful. However she finds in these depictions evidence of a form of regulation ‘that requires the re-moulding of feminine subjectivity to fit the current postfeminist neoliberal moment in which young women should not only be beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practised and always ‘up for it’ (Gill, 2008, p. 35). Similarly, Daskalopoulou and Zanette (2020) illustrate the contradictory nature of ‘risky’ or ‘taboo’ consumption experiences for women. They argue that women who consume pornography grapple with aspects of the genre that need to be questioned, negotiated and reconciled in order to continue using pornography to satisfy desire. Indeed, both feminist and more general critique within CCT highlight the oppression that comes hard on the heels of neoliberal constructions of individual subjectivity (Fitchett et al., 2014; Earley, 2014, 2015; Maclaran, 2015; Moisander et al., 2009b; Cova et al., 2013).

Our target therefore is an enrichment of the ‘epistemic culture’ of CCT (Moisander et al., 2009a), as we seek to both understand the ways in which it privileges forms of knowledge production and ways of knowing, and offer alternatives informed by feminist theory. In this respect we explore how the work of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed might enrich our understanding and purview of consumer subjectivity. Ahmed’s area of study includes the intersection of feminist theory, queer theory, lesbian feminism, critical race theory and postcolonialism. In ‘Living a Feminist Life’ (2016), Ahmed considers feminist theory as ‘homework’, a quest for rethinking epistemological foundations in the academic homes we inhabit. Thus, we suggest a feminist critique of CCT theoretical tenants that stems from our experience as a collective and reconsiders our embodied model of knowledge production and reproduction (Maclaran et al., 2009). In doing so, we challenge the neo-liberal ideology that permeates the CCT scholarship (Fitchett et al., 2014). As we try and understand the subject consumer as other from an active, atomised agent (ibid.), similarly, we try to understand scholarship on consumption as other than the product of atomised scholars, exploring the possibility of working as a collective.

We aim to draw on Ahmed’s work in order to address the agentic neoliberal consumer by questioning it through a feminist perspective, and by emphasising the role of emotions and power relations. Like Ahmed, we are interested in how emotions ‘do things, and work to align individuals with collectives – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 26). According to Ahmed’s cultural politics of emotions (2004, 2013), emotions are productive of the ordinary, of physical bodies and the way these bodies relate. Like actions, emotions manage to ‘make’ bodies: only certain bodies are likely to be considered ‘emotional’, and this shapes also the way they relate to others (Ahmed, 2013). Through the contact with others, we align our emotional responses with (or against) others. As a feminist reading group, our sense and identity as a collective emerged through co-presence, discussion and emotional alignment. We thus aim to expand the collective feelings and thinking of this reading group in two ways. First, we want to use Ahmed’s cultural politics of emotions (2013) as a springboard for feminist critique of CCT scholarship. We are also interested in (re-)evaluating how the development of CCT theory is performed and how we can, as a collective, break through masculine performances (Maclaran et al., 2009). As Butler (1999, p. 243) argues ‘genuine knowledge emerges only after we act upon our theories, to thus reform them and reform ourselves’.

Second, we want to put our academic performativity into play in our writing, writing as a collective and writing through feminist scholars. In doing so, we build up on the experience of the VOICE group (2008), who have published on the politics and emotions of writing as a collective. Moreover, we question how we choose companion texts, texts whose company enables us to develop, extend, reformulate, support or refute CCT theory. The idea of canonical classics raises the question of ‘how these histories happen, how selections are made; we need to ask who or what does not survive these selections’ (Ahmed, 2016, p. 17). We need reflexivity in order to understand how we build “libraries” in our community; like Ahmed, we believe that books [and theories] make communities. Through this collective housework, we do not aim to point out ideological blind spots, but rather look at how we can rethink research within CCT, offering opportunities to make it a more comfortable home for feminist theories.

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