JCR Research Curation
Spring 2018

Intersectional Structuring of Consumption

Curator: Güliz Ger

Contemporary inequality is so dramatic that it has been a priority for organizations ranging from the United Nations to the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. Notably, we see a rise of citizen-led social justice movements, from #Indebted in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis to the more recent #BlackLivesMatter challenging systemic racism and #MeToo calling out systemic sexism. In addition to increasing wealth polarization, we face a postcolonial globe of increasing numbers of refugees and persistent race, ethnic, national, religious, social class, and gender inequalities—a world of failed ideals of multiculturalism, diversity, and equal rights. In such a situation, more than ever since the launch of the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1974—a perhaps more seemingly progressive time than today, consumer researchers need to do research that matters and attend to the implications of their choice of topics and body of work. "To face an unequal world requires us to interpret and explain it, to be sure, but also to engage it, that is, to recognize that we are part of it and that we are partly responsible for it" (Burawoy 2015). Inequalities—racial, ethnic, disability based, national (or postcolonial), social class, gender, etc.—abound in the everyday interactions of consumers and networks of relationships in the marketplace. This curation highlights studies that attended to the dynamics of inequality, and in particular, those that employed or considered or were allied in some way with intersectionality.

Intersectionality is an approach to studying power differentials by examining the relationships among subjectivity, knowledge, power, resistance, and social structures. It began its life in law, focused on equal rights for black women, as a prism used to highlight problems and dynamics that are generally ignored or quieted (e.g., Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality is a matrix orientation aimed at uncovering the relational nature of privilege and oppression and the covert forms of complicity between them (e.g., May 2015; Yuval-Davis 2007). It entails the notion that social positions are entangled with the dynamic interaction of

multidimensional structures of domination. With a "both/and" thinking, it aims to connect the structural and the experiential/personal as well as the material and the discursive. "Intersectionality approaches lived identities and systemic patterns of asymmetrical life opportunities and harms, from their interstices, from the nodal points where they hinge or touch" (May 2015, 3). For example, it examines capitalist patriarchy rather than capitalism and patriarchy, or black women, rather than race and gender. Thus, it takes the scholar beyond thick description and contextualization, and it is "germane for analyzing and contesting systemic inequality and for reimagining how we think about agency, resistance, and subjectivity" (May 2015, 1).

Intersectionality is an epistemological practice, an ontological project, and a political orientation—contesting hegemonic logic and asking for social change (May 2015). Epistemologically, it attends to the knower's social position; considers the colonial, patriarchal, capitalist and modern histories of identities and structures under study, tracing genealogically the institutions and the power relations that create the processes of inequality under study; and aims to identify and diagnose the workings of dominance. It analyzes the interconnections of facets of identity and forms of domination—the matrix of relations. The researcher needs to be committed to the intersectional orientation from initial idea generation to the data collection, analysis, and concluding phases of a study as well as to multilevel "macropolitical and micropolitical analysis" (May 2015, 181). Intersectionality also invites us to notice the "gaps, inconsistencies, opacities, and discontinuities and insists that such omissions or silences be treated as (potentially) meaningful and significant, not just as obstacles to work around or anomalies to set aside" (May 2015, 227).

Contrary to the liberal notion of agency (i.e., free-willed choosing subject), intersectionality's ontological multiplicity treats subjectivity, as well as locational and relational power, in terms of concurrent and coalitional freedom and oppression. In other words, as we make choices within "systemic patterns of asymmetric life opportunities and harms" (May 2015, 3), we can be constrained by, resist, and be complicit with dominance. As a political orientation, it needs a defiant scholar who explores the complete construction of structural inequalities

and asymmetrical life opportunities and seeks a more socially just world. Thus, there are clear implications for consumer research and critical theory as well as policy and activist practice (Gopaldas 2013).

Although many of the tenets of intersectionality might sound familiar to socioculturally oriented readers of JCR, it underscores facets we do not deliberate as much as we could and should, and types of data collection, analysis, and writing we do not practice much. First, with respect to its axiological aim of working toward social change, it overlaps, to some extent, with other approaches, such as Transformational Consumer Research (TCR) (Mick et al. 2012), "praxis-oriented social science" (Flyvbjerg 2001), "theory-in-practice" (Holt 2017), and critical studies of consumption and markets (Fırat and Dholakia 2017; Schwarzkopf 2011). Second, its focus on the structuring systemic institutions and relations and histories of these structures and subjectivities overlaps with the interrelated approaches of contextualizing the context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) and historicizing (Canniford and Karababa 2013; Karababa 2012). Intersectionality can also be seen to partly overlap with the notions of marketplace ideologies and sociohistorical patterning of consumption in consumer culture theoretics (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson 2005, forthcoming 2018). Studies that explore consumer resistance, subaltern consumers, social movements, acculturation, social class, or marketplace ideology resonate with selected aspects of intersectionality: Crockett and Wallendorf (2004), Giesler and Veresiu (2014), Izberk-Bilgin (2012), Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006), Kozinets and Handelman (2004), Peñaloza (1994), Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013), Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), Thompson and Arsel (2004), Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007), Üstüner and Holt (2007), and Varman and Vikas (2007), to name but a few.

However, the entirety of intersectionality's epistemology and ontology, and its resolute focus on power relations, are different from well-being-oriented TCR, critical studies that do not pursue a matrix orientation, and the "culture"-focused CCT work, even the ones that attempt to contextualize the context and/or historicize. CCT has not yet excavated dominance relations in the context of the context. For example, in their influential study of acculturation, Kjeldgaard and

Askegaard (2006) find that Greenlandic migrants form a hybrid identity drawing on their ethnic culture commodified in the dominant Danish culture, and without much difficulty. While the authors acknowledge the relationship between ethnic and colonial relations, they do not unpack how power dynamics structure the ethnic culture. As opposed to former notions of the passive consumer, most CCT-type studies have focused on consumers as creative interpretive agents and thus on an agentic view of the relationship between consumption and the market. While CCT-aligned work acknowledges or operates with notions of embeddedness, assemblages, and actor network theory, it (even the body of work on "identity politics") tends to overemphasize agency and underexplore the power relations and their genealogies (and how they unequally configure agentic potentialities) within assemblages or networks. Given the global problem of inequality, it is time to move beyond the individual (or the community) and the "culture" to the intersectional relationships among subjectivity, power, resistance, and sociopolitical structures. Comparison of intersectionality to consumer research thus indicates that we need to explicitly analyze and unpack various power and privilege differentials that play out in the marketplace—that frame consumer choices and practices. Intersectionality asks us to expose historical silences: macro context and politics of consumption. While CCT has not been silent on that front, it has not been as loud as it could have been.

Secondly, intersectionality's (and also Flyvbjerg's [2001] attention to the knower's position, values, and interests (rather than a supposed value neutrality) has yet to be responsibly practiced. Intersectionality asks for a thicker reflexivity than the relationship between the knower and the known: it asks that we interrogate our privileged position in the kinds of research questions we ask and the analyses we do as well as the outcomes we seek in research. For example, we CCT-aligned scholars, ourselves usually middle-class whites, study mostly middle-class whites—and thus become allies in securing the market. We researchers do not always give due attention to how the same ideologies that captivate consumers might be shaping our own thinking, logic, focus, and rhetoric.

Accordingly, CCT, as a body of work, has been critiqued for reproducing a neoliberal view of markets (e.g., Fitchett, Patsiaouras, and Davies 2014) and

lacking a critical dimension (Fırat and Dholakia 2017). Thus, the outcomes of our research will benefit from heeding to the call of intersectionality: a broader researcher reflexivity on the choice of topics to study, approaches to inquiry, and research questions to ask, and in developing conceptualizations, explanations, and conclusions.

In sum, we have learned a lot about agency, the individual consumer, and groups of consumers from the research we have done on identity and resistance since the 1990s. What we understand a lot less are systemic dynamics—the structural, institutional, and political factors—which have a momentous bearing on inequality issues among consumers, and which restrain consumption practices, within and across markets and countries. The emergent relational focus is promising, especially if we begin to focus on power (as well as affiliative) relations.

I summarize five articles that entail intersectionality either explicitly or implicitly, and that address some of the issues outlined above. I analyze them through a power relations lens to emphasize manifest and latent or not fully developed insights relevant for power differentials and dynamics.

Crockett (2017) provides the most explicit examination of the intersection among social class and race (and, implicitly, locality) in status-oriented consumption. He shows that black middle classes in the United States employ respectability as a strategy of resistance to deal with everyday racism. The strategy of respectability summons display-oriented consumption and links blackness with high cultural capital. True to intersectionality sensibilities, Crockett historicizes while theorizing and thus illuminates the connections between consumer strategies and historically based ideologies as well as the changes and continuities. Exploring the logics of "natural hierarchy" and "egalitarianism" and the resulting ideologies—"racial uplift" and "black respectability"—over time, he specifies the linkages between ideologies and strategies of action as well as strategies and tactics, and among objects, tactics, and outcomes. His relational analysis, also illustrative of the intersectional approach, enables him to show the diversity of reactions to inequality and their outcomes as well as why the black middle class has little normative influence on blacks of lower status. He finds that black middle-class consumers continue to draw on the nineteenth-century racial uplift ideology still tacitly

conveyed by parents. The ideology of racial uplift is enacted through normative respectability aimed at stigma avoidance, like a century ago, and through oppositional respectability, which employs blackness in an effort to destigmatize. Thus, Crockett illuminates the sociohistoric conditions that shape consumer micropolitical responses to (racial) domination as well as the boundary conditions on stigma avoidance and destigmatization efforts. While the author's aim was to investigate the intersection of race and class, he finds that the particular historical structure of the town also makes a difference in the cultural scripts. Thus, his findings depend on the intersection of class, race, and locality.

Peñaloza and Barnhart (2011) analyze the credit/debt discourses and practices of white middle-class consumers in the United States, where they hold a central position. By specifying race, social class, and country, they make the reader aware of the implicit intersectional structures that build normality. Employing a Foucaultian notion of subjectification, they reveal how white middle-class consumers, in collaboration with their social milieu, media, and the financial institutions reproduce their subject positions as consumers—able to consume as normal middle class white Americans. These actors collaborate to normalize credit/debt as well as the consumers who use credit. At the individual level, the goal of being independent from family and friends converges with those of indulgence and self-discipline in normalizing credit/debt. The credit that makes them buy more than they can afford soon becomes debt that restrains some of them. Peñaloza and Barnhart argue that the US legacy of abundance contributes to the normalization of credit/debt. They underscore the coalition between US culture and market capitalism, a coalition that harms some consumers. They draw "attention to the personal, social, and national obligations US values foster on its consuming subjects and the repercussions of using credit/debt to advance them" (760).

Varman and Belk (2009) investigate resistance to consumption and the role spatial politics plays in global consumer cultures. As Beck (2016) would have it, they highlight the inequalities among national societies—a welcome approach that is not common in studies of inequality or consumer culture. Varman and Belk illustrate how the nineteenth-century ideology of swadeshi was used to mobilize participation in the anti-Coke movement and reveal ties to the colonialized past and

modern globalized present. Swadeshi had entailed the boycott of British products and was part of the independence movement against the empire. Depiction of Coke as a foreign invader disturbing local space—there was a water shortage due to Coca-Cola's excessive use of underground water, not to mention pollution and extradition of profits—kindled a neonationalist anti-consumption movement in the village of Mehdiganj, where Coca-Cola has a bottling plant. Varman and Belk read this as a reflexive local response to the historical sensibilities about the dislocations caused by globalization. They demonstrate how spatial and temporal politics structure consumer movements and explicate the relationship between anti-consumption and the notion of national identity. Moreover, they pay attention to another intersecting dimension of inequality: the rural-urban divide. Pointing out that the movement did not have much traction for the urban middle class, they argue that the agrarian crisis in the Indian economy and the neoliberal state policies "constitute the discourse of swadeshi against globalization and the neoliberal development model that shapes the Mehdiganj anti-consumption movement" (688). Their work features spatial intersectional aspects of power relations.

Thompson and Üstüner (2015) examine embodied resistance in the context of roller derby. Their deployment of Butler's notion of gender performativity, which underlines regulative institutional structures, and Bourdieu's gendered habitus ally their work with intersectionality's focus on power relations. Following Butler, they conceptualize gender "as a discursive and material network of power relations, rather than as a loci of agentic subjectivity" (238). They analyze how women competitors enact their "derby grrrl personas" and how they manage the conflicts between the gender resignifications in the roller derby field versus everyday life. They find that consumers engage in "ideological edgework" (rather than negotiation) between derby and daily life, and thus push against the normative constraints naturalized in their gender socialization. They define ideological edgework to be "the material and discursive struggles that emerge when marketplace performances function as expressions of embodied resistance" (258). While Thompson and Üstüner's focus is on gender performativity, their findings reflect an implicit intersection of gender with space (small town vs. big urban center), social class, and physique (lean vs. heavier). They find that the rural women's edgework also entails distancing themselves from their urban

counterparts and adapting to local tolerances. The accounts of the middle-class women echo middle-class norms, such as clean fun and respect. The account of the only working-class participant is rather different: much more about social recognition and pride in herself. Lastly, there is also a physique-based status hierarchy within roller derby. Thompson and Üstüner's focus on gender leaves the intersectional power relationships—gender, location/space, physique, social class—implicit.

Luedicke (2015) approaches acculturation from the angle of "interactive encounters of difference" rather than individual identity projects. He examines the relationship between Turkish immigrants and Austrian indigenes in the small town of Telfs, Austria, where the former were recruited as guest workers in 1963. He situates these relationships in the context of the historical wars between Austria and the Ottomans as well as the current economic situation and right-wing politics in Austria. His focus on relationships and attention to dominance allies his article with intersectionality. Rather than viewing consumer acculturation as an individual adjustment to the new host country, he treats it as an interdependent and mutual acclimatization process that entails the indigenes' interpretations and adaptations as well. Luedicke finds that the intergroup relationships evolved from conflict-free domination to conflict-ridden destabilization, as immigrants changed from being invisible workers to conspicuous consumers. Luedicke unpacks the hostility toward immigrant consumption patterns, such as driving status cars and buying flats that used to be owned by indigenes. This hostility fuels discrimination and social conflict, despite the moral awareness that discrimination is illegitimate. Luedicke explicates the relationship between the immigrants and the indigenes as encounters of ethnic difference rather than intersection of ethnicity and social class. However, the shift from invisible workers to conspicuous consumers can also be interpreted as social class mobility, which can be an interacting source of conflict.

Indigene-immigrant relationships are apt for research on intersectional ethnic–social class power relations. So are many other power relationships in the marketplace. Intersectionality is germane for consumer research that matters and fertile for new insights that matter, for scholars who choose to analyze and contest systemic inequality.

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