

Art-based Research of Consumer Culture

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the combination of consumer culture research and art-based research through an example of an existing cross-disciplinary project, as a part of which researchers created an interactive art installation *Shopping at Capitalist Peace*. In exploring the example and tying it into existing literature, we suggest that the combination of the two traditions can be beneficial in the development of both consumer culture research and art-based research. We propose that in using the approaches together, researchers can engage in a methodological framework that allows and urges interactive, contextualized, and reflexive co-creation of knowledge among participants. Moreover, this framework becomes a fitting tool for exploring themes of consumer culture, which involve norms and structures inherent to our daily lives, yet ones that we are often blind to due to their naturalisation.

Keywords: consumer culture, consumption, art-based research, cross-disciplinary collaboration, capitalist peace

Bios

Anastasia Seregina is a postdoctoral researcher in the field of consumer culture research in the Department of Marketing at Aalto University's School of Business, in Helsinki, Finland. Anastasia's research focuses on the intersection of consumer culture with aesthetic experiences and encounters with fantasy. She often works with pop culture contexts, such as cosplay, fandom, and live action role-playing games. Anastasia is further developing performance and art-based research methodologies with the aim to engage wider audiences interactively and discursively.

Oskar Christensson is a PhD student in consumer research at Borås and Lund University in Sweden; his thesis project is on consumer perspectives on everyday transportation. Arts-based research is, at the moment, a passion that encapsulates his methodological and pedagogical interests.

In this paper we explore combining consumer culture research and art-based research within academic practice. Through this endeavour, we hope to add to both traditions by opening up the discussion of new topics, new approaches, and different forms of cocreating understanding. We believe that the combination of consumer culture research and art-based research could allow researchers to tap into multisensory, discursive understanding that ties into topical themes of contemporary consumer culture. We explore the combination of the two research traditions through the example of an art installation *Shopping at Capitalist Peace*, which was created as part of a cross-disciplinary research project studying consumer culture in Palestine. Before turning to the description and discussion of the art piece, we first give an overview of our theoretical background.

Consumer culture research (also called consumer culture theory) was defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) as “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meaning” (p. 868). Consumer culture research is based on the idea of contemporary Western culture being a context, in which our socializing institutions are saturated with market logic, our identities are based in brands, and our communities emerge from relationships to and activities around objects of consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Slater, 1997; Holt, 2002). From this perspective, to better understand ourselves and the world we live in, it is important to explore consumption and the culture that is formed around it.

The consumer culture research approach emerged as a response to the prevailing positivist and postpositivist logics of the so-called ‘mainstream’ consumer research (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Holt, 1991). Going against such tradition, consumer culture research looks at consumption as something that extends beyond the moment of purchase (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Consumption, as it is seen here, is rather a multisensory, corporeal activity that connects people to one another and to society. Following Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982) work, researchers turned their focus on the *experience* of consumption, exploring such topics as identity (Ahuvia, 2005), marketplace culture (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), sociohistoric patterning of consumption (Allen, 2002), and the ideology of consumption (Holt, 2002). Such research often extends into and draws from other fields, including anthropology, sociology, media, and cultural studies.

In approaching art-based research, we follow Hervey's (2000) work. She proposed that such research has three main characteristics: it uses artistic methods to gather, analyze, and/or present data; it engages in an acknowledged creative process; and it is driven by the aesthetic values of the researcher. Eisner (1997) suggested that art-based research was born out of discontent with restrictive forms of "traditional" academic research. Its goal is to explore life as it is lived through engaging knowledge as intersubjectively created, contextualized, and embodied. This allows researchers to open up topics for discussion and criticism, rather than zero in on precise answers (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Shopping at Capitalist Peace

To illustrate how art-based research and consumer culture research can be combined, we use the example of a research project *Shopping at Capitalist Peace*, by Aurélie Bröckerhoff and Anastasia Seregina. The art-based research project is based on a qualitative data set, a 6-week field study conducted in the West Bank, which is a part of the occupied Palestinian territory. The study was conducted in 2015 and involved in-depth interviews with Palestinians living in the area, as well as cultural contextualization of these through the researcher living in the area. Bröckerhoff turned the interviews and field notes into textual form through transcription, and she used narrative methods for her analysis. Her aim for the fieldwork was to explore how market liberalization has affected participation in consumer boycotts, problematizing the real and ideal roles of the "Palestinian consumer" (Bröckerhoff, 2017). Because negotiations for peace began in the 1990s, the occupied Palestinian territory has experienced liberalization and marketization through the introduction of capitalist peace. 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). Since then, the West Bank has witnessed a rise of consumer culture previously unknown to many Palestinians. This has positive effects for consumers, their lifestyles, and quality of life. However, in the long term, societies can experience grave costs in the form of social inequality and negative environmental effects (Ger & Belk, 1996).

The project was extended into an art-based research collaboration with Anastasia Seregina with the aim of rethinking and taking a new approach to the context and phenomenon at hand, as well as to communicate findings of

the fieldwork in a more interactive way. The new approach did not change the initial conceptualization of the project and fieldwork (i.e., 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 conflict-affected countries). Nevertheless, taking on the art-based approach helped the researchers to reanalyze data from a new perspective and disseminate findings in multiple ways. We describe this in detail next.

First, data was reanalyzed. Taking on artistic practice as part of the research pushed the context, field notes, and interviews to be interpreted from different perspectives, opening possibilities for visual, interactive, and experiential meaning. Moreover, focus shifted to not just understanding, but also expressing the phenomenon as it is lived by individuals. Consequently, the combination of traditions allowed for a multisided, experiential understanding of the researched context and phenomenon.

Second, the combination of art-based research and consumer culture research opened up new possibilities for presenting research. The focus turned to visual expression of bodily experience, with the theoretical background nevertheless being heavily grounded in the consumer culture tradition. The aim of the research developed to exploring capitalist peace as it is experienced and understood by people within it, as well as allowing the audience to engage with that experience. Most importantly, the aim shifted to opening up a different world of lived experiences to the wider public, not just academic circles, so they could engage with the topic on various, multisensory levels of interaction. In other words, experiences were not just described and analyzed, but also created for the audience to engage with.

In practice, the researchers made an art installation, which took form in a grocery store shelf in a fictional store “Capitalist Peace” (see Figure 1a). The shelf was filled with generic products one could normally procure at a grocery store in Palestine. This included juice, yoghurt, milk, hummus, chocolate, and cereal. The brands and packaging that we used are, however, fake. The packaging was colorful and alluded to aesthetics of early consumption-oriented culture of the 1950s. The aim of the use of such aesthetics was to allude to the recent birth of consumer culture in the West Bank, and get a Western audience to associate the products with consumer culture as it was only developing, an era that they possibly have personal experience of or at least vicarious associations with via media. The two temporal contexts thus became juxtaposed.

The product boxes further included quotes from the above-described interviews that depicted how individuals in conflict-affected societies consume particular products with political purpose (or not; see Figure 2). Here, the aim was to humanize consumption practices, as well as to provide personal, human connection to the context. The installation was interactive in the sense that people were 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 (see Figure 1b).

The art installation was first shown at the Consumer Culture Theory conference, held in June 2016 at the Lille Grand Palais in Lille, France. Further exhibitions of the piece at academic events and in spaces more available to the wider public are being planned. The installation in Lille incited a lot of positive feedback, interaction, and discussions. Without being probed, exhibition visitors connected the product aesthetics to an earlier era, engaging in discussions of the development of consumer culture, as well as creating parallels among consumer culture in different cultural and temporal contexts. Moreover, many expressed having little prior knowledge of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, and thus learned a lot about life in that context through the art piece. Individuals discussed their own experiences of consumer culture, and reflected on the presented context via personal memories.



Figures 1a and 1b. *Shopping at Capitalist Peace*, shown in June 2016 at the Consumer Culture Theory conference, Lille Grand Palais, Lille, France.

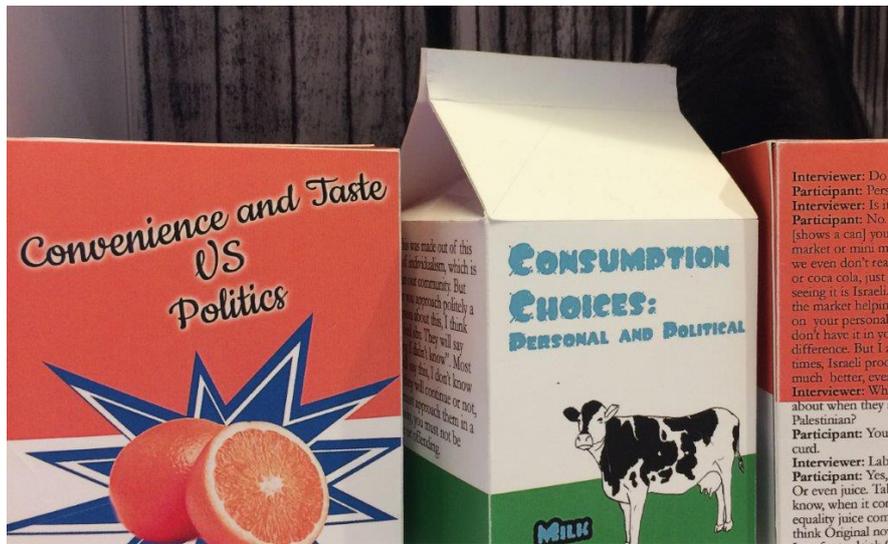


Figure 2. Close-up of products sold at Capitalist Peace.

Toward Discursive, Cocreated Knowledge Embedded in Consumer Culture

As we noted earlier, consumer culture research emerged as a response to a largely positivist tradition of academic work. Yet, while moving away from strict notions of “truth” and “reality,” consumer culture research has mainly relied on ethnography and interviews, taking on a phenomenological methodology that focuses on thick descriptions of individual consumer voices. Such approaches often fail to contextualise research or tap into subjective, affective, lived understanding that is cocreated (Sherry & Schouten, 2002; Moisander, Valtonen, & Hirsto, 2009). Some “alternative” ways of doing consumer culture research have emerged, such as videography (e.g., Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Hietanen, 2012) and poetry (e.g., Sherry & Schouten, 2002; Canniford, 2012), yet these tend to replicate the phenomenological approach in a different medium. In the context of consumer culture research, Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto (2009) have stressed that a need exists for more discursive, cocreated knowledge within the discipline. Art-based research emerges as a way of developing the exploration of consumption by providing a different, “alternative” way of approaching research and the knowledge created through it.

According to Scotti and Aicher (2016), art-based research provides a relational epistemology, in which knowledge is cocreated among people throughout the research process. Barone and Eisner (2012) added that such an approach

allows the work to create “research gaps” rather than close them. The result is a multitude of interpretations that build on one another and connect individuals, thus creating more affective and lived understanding. This became visible in the example of *Shopping at Capitalist Peace*. The audience of the artwork compared and contrasted the work with their own experiences and backgrounds, and gave voice to these thoughts through communicating with the researchers and one another. By interacting with the installation and the other visitors, the audience gained a multisensory and multisided experience of the research. Here, we can only speculate (perhaps until someone references the installation in future work; something which is also the case for any written work), but based on our own interaction with the audience, we believe that the art installation resulted in individuals gaining new perspectives and ideas. As Barone and Eisner (2012) noted, art-based research pushes people to create meaning, rather than to passively receive it.

In addition to creating dialogue and reflexivity among the audience, knowledge in an art-based research framework is also cocreated with and among the researchers in novel ways, as they gain possibilities to step out of their norms. Similar to ideas presented by Graham (2005) and Bennett (2012), the authors of *Shopping at Capitalist Peace* were able to reflect on the research data and context from different perspectives through the different media that they used to engage various human senses (such as sight and touch). Such an approach differs greatly from the norm of consumer culture research, which usually involves analyzing data through textual approaches. Through using art-based research, researchers are placed outside of their comfort zones and are required to figure things out every time, rather than repeat existing structures of “doing” and “writing” research. As Hatcher (1999) noted, art-based methods greatly aid in synthesis and creation of patterns through visual-kinesthetic processes, which can help researchers think and experience by revealing things they are not normally aware of.

Following Pigrum and Stables (2005), art-based research is great for approaching critical, political, or emotionally difficult topics through the affective engagement, embodied response, and dialogue created via the methodology. The everyday consumer items of the presented art installation, recognizable for any individual in the Western cultural context, stood in contrast to the extraordinary political situation that is the daily life in the West Bank, with which people outside of the context are not well familiarized. The art-based

research approach aided the researchers in exploring a politically sensitive and emotionally charged research context and the lived consumption practices within it. More generally, an art-based research approach allowed the exploration and uncovering of consumption as part of contemporary culture. Consumption is an affective and deeply contextualized topic that is so naturalized in its processes that we often remain blind to its structures and its power over us in our daily lives.

Art-based research provides a novel methodology and epistemology for consumer culture research that allows for contextualized cocreation of knowledge among researcher(s) and audience through the reflection, self-reflection, and dialogue it allows. At the same time, research fields that are more readily using art-based research, such as art education, as well as the methodological field itself may also gain a lot from consumer culture research. The processes of production and consumption are central to our culture, yet often left unaddressed, as we have already noted. Moreover, consumption is commonly a stigmatized term within nonbusiness school settings. Yet, in becoming better informed of consumption aspects of the culture it studies, art-based research could engage different forms of understanding of cultural, communal, and individual processes. Linking the two fields can thus develop our understanding of human nature in the context of consumer culture, as well as aid in educating the public in these themes.

The combined efforts of art-based research and consumer culture research can further result in novel approaches of presenting research, and, in effect, of reaching different audiences. For consumer culture research, taking on various artistic and aesthetic methods could allow reaching audiences beyond limited academic fields, as work can be presented in nonacademic contexts, using nonacademic language (such as field-specific jargon) or nonlinguistic modes of communication. This was evident in the interactive art installation we described earlier. The more down-to-earth language of the quotes, as well as material, spatial, and tactile interaction with the art piece allowed the audience to interact in ways a journal article or a book could not. For art-based research, the combination of traditions could allow the use of presentation more accessible to businesses and traditional humanities. This means connecting to audiences that have more power and influence in consumption and production contexts, as well as inciting self-awareness and exploration in

these contexts, thus broadening horizons and gaining higher levels of political power to question norms.

In conclusion, the combination of consumer culture research and art-based research can provide researchers with a methodological and epistemological framework, in which both researcher(s) and their audience are encouraged to reflect and engage in order to create experiences that are affective, discursive, critical, and lived. Knowledge is imbued with interactive content, giving individuals an opportunity to engage with new ways of understanding on a more embodied and emotional level. The consumer culture tradition further allows collaborative work on topics of consumption phenomena that people engage in on a daily basis, but often take for granted. Individuals gain the opportunity to become aware of cultural processes and the role they have in sustaining them.

As we wrote in the introduction, both consumer culture research and art-based research were born through resistance against strict, traditional forms of academic work. Although stemming from and thus responding to different traditions, both “rebellious” approaches have the shared drive to approach knowledge as lived understanding of human behavior. Hence, in combining their efforts, cross-disciplinary endeavours have the opportunity to support one another’s aims through a methodological shift that allows different ways of approaching and communicating knowledge.

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