

## 9 Making contexts matter: selecting research contexts for theoretical insights

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One of the most difficult tasks of any social scientist is to negotiate the links between abstract ideas and concrete instances of these ideas (Ellsworth, 1977; Alford, 1998). There is always a tension between our theoretical concepts and their empirical manifestations. As Alford notes, 'Abstract concepts never perfectly fit the complexity of reality. Evidence never contains its own explanation' (p. 29). There are numerous examples of researchers who cleverly devise experiments, select field settings or interpret contexts in ways that deftly traverse the divide between theory and data, but there are few guidelines for novice researchers attempting to pry understanding and explanation from the contexts they study, or struggling to align theories and contexts.

As social scientists who have warily and not always successfully traversed the divide between theory and data, the intent of our chapter is to encourage more systematic attention to the choice of context and to provide some suggestions for selecting contexts that have a high likelihood of impacting consumer and marketing theory. We restrict our attention to the problem of selecting contexts for interpretive research because context is a prominent characteristic of much interpretive consumer research, yet as a discipline we have devoted little discussion to the way to make research contexts matter theoretically. Looking at the carefully crafted thick descriptions used to unfold theoretical insights in the best interpretive research, the novice reader can come to believe that any context studied carefully will render new theory. In fact, the esteemed sociologist Howard Becker argues that every context is perfect for studying something, but the 'something' that should be studied often eludes us (Becker, 1998). The subtle nuances of sampling, domain parameters and timing and range of data collected that enabled the new insights often appear to the novice as lucky accidents of setting or observation rather than structured researcher choices. Certainly, serendipity and thoughtful observation play an instrumental role in interpretive work. Thick description of a context can help activate novel and useful insights about markets and consumers, but, as we argue, serendipity and thick description are rarely sufficient to trigger such insights. A compelling context, no matter how richly depicted, cannot substitute for theory. Moreover, we argue research contexts are likely to differ in the kinds of insights they generate, with some contexts more likely to spawn interesting insights. Surfacing theory is critical for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars, good theory always builds on prior theory; contexts are comprehended through theoretical lenses. For practitioners, surfacing implicit theory may suggest how to make sense of a data set in the service of improved strategy implementation, or the desirability of alternative theoretical perspectives that could drive alternative interpretations of data to suggest new strategic directions.

Our chapter consists of four sections. In the first two sections we briefly discuss the importance of context and some of the potential dangers of context for researchers employing qualitative data. In the third section, we discuss how to make context work for

researchers in the area of consumer culture theory. Here we discuss how prior studies in CCT (Consumer Culture Theory) have used context and examine how theory and context come together in these studies. Through our discussion of interpretive research contributing to consumer culture theory over the past 20 years, we provide some guidelines for selecting contexts that pay off. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the role of context in qualitative data analysis more generally.

### The importance of context

Contexts are of fundamental importance to researchers in developing and testing theories. In simple terms, a theory is a story about why acts, events, structure and thoughts occur. The process of theorizing consists of activities such as abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing (Sutton and Staw, 1995). Contexts give theoretical stories veracity and texture. However, exactly how contexts enable and enrich theoretical insights often remains implicit. Sometimes we have difficulty articulating the crucial role of contexts in developing a better understanding of consumer behavior. At the most fundamental level, contexts engage our emotions and our senses, stimulate discovery, invite description and excite comparison.

### *Contexts engage our emotions and our senses*

We find ourselves inspired, our passions inflamed by powerfully evocative contexts. Researchers have been visually stunned by Niketown (Peñaloza, 1998; Sherry, 1998); fascinated by the fervent commitments of X-Philes (Kozinets, 1997), organoleptically enthralled by skydiving (Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993), white water rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993) and the Burning Man Festival (Kozinets, 2002). Researchers have also been transformed into fantasy game avatars (Martin, 2004), moved to intervention by the poignancy of the plight of the homeless (Hill and Stamey, 1990) or the end-of-life decisions of the elderly (Price, Arnould and Curasi, 2000), converted into Apple Newton worshippers (Muñiz and Schau, 2005) or sucked into ardent neotribal brand and lifestyle communities (Cova, 1997). The power of contexts to engage our emotions and our senses also gives them the power to transform our lives and the lives of others.

### *Contexts stimulate discovery*

In particular contexts, well-trained researchers grasp intuitively that there is a novel construct or relationship to be discovered (e.g., Becker, 1998; Wells, 1993). Simply paying attention to provocative natural occurrences is one of the most useful heuristics for generating research questions (McGuire, 1997). This involves 'cultivating habits of observation' that focus attention on productive aspects of experience including unexpected, non-obvious relations (ibid., p. 3). But it also involves analyzing one's own behavior in these settings, and role-playing behavior drawing on similar and opposite types of experiences (McGuire, 1997). Contexts and occurrences that seem puzzling or paradoxical move us to search for explanations or resolutions from our own unique combination of perspectives derived from our theoretical exposures: they stimulate discovery (Fiske, 2004).

Contexts that engage our emotions, imaginations and senses may be opportune for 'revelatory incidents' (Fernandez, 1986), locating 'negative cases' (Emigh, 1997) and 'dwelling in theory', (Burawoy, 1998). Of course, researchers' previous scholarship, or what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call 'theoretical sensitivity' informs this intuition. A prepared

mind facilitates researchers' ability to absorb experiences from a context and translate them into insights that contribute to theory.

The consumer behavior Odyssey (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989), a watershed event in academic consumer research in North America, was motivated by the conviction that the exploration of novel consumption venues such as swap meets or eclectic roadside attractions could spark new theoretical understanding, a proposition borne out in subsequent research (Belk, 1995; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). While these researchers stress the value of thick description in obtaining these insights, equally important is the foundational training in anthropology, sociology and psychology that informed their scholarship (Belk et al., 1989). This foundational training is what provides researchers with the scholarly intuition needed to detect the theoretical interest of contexts (McCracken, 1988).

#### *Contexts invite description and excite comparison*

To communicate novel constructs or relationships we must characterize contexts in terms that are in some ways conventional to a community of researchers. We do this by approaching phenomena as cases of something already known (Walton, 1992). Part of the pleasure and fascination of contexts arises from our sense that they compare in some interesting way with things we already know (e.g., Burawoy, 1998). Contexts excite comparison. Commercial white water rafting is a service encounter but it differs from other service encounters in theoretically interesting ways. Raft trips are longer, more intimate, more hedonic, and take place in environments under minimal control of the service provider (Arnould and Price, 1993). One corollary of the invitation to comparison is that such comparisons also reframe difference and similarity in interesting ways. Thus, when framed appropriately by descriptive comparison, an individual's purchase of a treat becomes a self-gift (Mick and Demoss, 1990); brand loyalty becomes a brand relationship (Fournier, 1998); forgotten brands in the kitchen pantry become invisible brands (Coupland, 2005); heirlooms become inalienable wealth (Curasi, Price and Arnould, 2004); scruffy handicraft production in West Africa emerges as a regional market cluster of networked relationships (Arnould and Mohr, 2005). Notice that these scientific transformations are at the same time metaphorical ones; and it is often the case that thinking metaphorically about one's data can lead to theoretical insight (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

#### **The dangers of context**

Evocative, surprising, engrossing contexts are not unlike the taboo objects that inflamed the desire of Indiana Jones, his many nemeses and fans in the famous movie series (Smith et al., 2005). They are fraught with danger for researchers as well. Although contexts can be dangerous in other ways, we restrict attention to the dangers associated with researchers and readers becoming overabsorbed in contexts.

#### *The researcher overabsorbed in contexts*

One of the most important dangers is that the researcher will become overabsorbed in contexts. Such overabsorption may waste resources by keeping researchers in the field too long and may hinder theoretical insights because of an inability to manufacture distance from informants' lives (McCracken, 1988). The researcher walks a fine and nebulous line between absorption in the context that enables thick description and the analytical

distance needed to uncover theoretical contributions and get on with the crafting of science. Here researchers wrestle with the inevitable paradox between the need for intimate familiarity with and distance from context.

In some cases, informants' plights can overwhelm scientific goals, creating a tension between directly affecting consumer's lives through immediate assistance and improved understandings that can inform long-term marketing strategy and social policy. For example, researchers studying homelessness, juvenile delinquency, consumer literacy, race inequities, drug and alcohol abuse, access to health care and a host of other issues must balance empathy for their informants with scientific or policy goals.

At other times, the researcher is caught up in the emotional and sensory dimensions of a context and unable to attend to or sort out the dynamic elements and processes contributing to that experience. To imagine this overabsorption and how it might interfere with doing research, assume that you have been asked to do ethnography of a roller coaster ride. In this case, riding the roller coaster allows access to your own physical and emotional experience of the event but (at least in our case) is too absorbing to allow attention to anything else. Only by getting off the roller coaster and observing others can you distance yourself enough to trace the reactions of others and examine how the experience of a roller coaster ride is patterned and socially situated. Metaphorically, getting off the roller coaster enables the analytical distance to uncover how the experience is produced and unfolded within a social space.

Overabsorption in a context can also make it impossible to break free of taken-for-granted assumptions that parameterize and structure the context (Zaltman, 1983). The use of bi-gender, bi-racial and bi-disciplinary research teams is a tactic often used to get beyond taken-for-granted aspects of a single researcher's perspective that may constrain insight (Arnould and Price, 1993; Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Feminist and post-colonial scholars have demonstrated how Western male researchers often background gender and other power relationships that not so subtly color their results (Thompson, Stern and Arnould, 1998). Hirschman (1993) recognized this in her content analysis of the *Journal of Marketing*. Bristor and Fischer (1993) more specifically pointed out several specific areas where taken-for-granted influences of gender affect consumer research on emotions.

Anthropologists refer to the danger of compelling contexts in the myth of 'going native'. In this myth, the anthropologist is so beguiled by cultural context that he or she throws scientific commitments to the wind and throws him or herself wholeheartedly into his or her adopted culture. In short, he or she assimilates to the context, much as did Odysseus on Circe's island. The 'going native' problem in marketing may be better recognized as 'becoming a consultant' or 'becoming an empathetic social activist'. Absorbed by immediate managerial or social problems, the researcher can offer solutions but is unable to envision how these solutions refer to anything more general.

#### *Contexts overabsorbing our readers*

Contexts are dangerous not only for the way they threaten to swallow researchers, but for the way contexts can overabsorb our readers. Readers are prone to remember the context better than the theoretical insights rendered. Similarly, readers sometimes judge the context as worthy or unworthy of scientific inquiry rather than assessing what theoretical insights can be rendered through study of that particular context. For example, two of the

present authors were once advised by colleagues that a study of white water rafting would never be published in a major marketing journal: the river rafting market was too small and the wilderness setting too unusual. And indeed the critics were correct. However, they mistook the substantive context for the theoretical context; the theoretical context enabled top-tier publications modifying theories of service encounters, service satisfaction drivers and the tactical role of front line service personnel (Arnould and Price, 1993; Arnould, Price and Tierney, 1995, 1998). Many contexts for qualitative research are extreme. The extremities of these research contexts evoke critiques of 'generalizability', but often the extremity of variables and values enables researchers to derive theoretical insights. Going to extremes is at heart a defamiliarizing tactic that helps us transcend some of the assumptions we have in overly familiar contexts. Further defamiliarizing in extreme contexts helps theoretically interesting factors emerge more readily. For example, Holt (2002) interviews informants living at the fringe of consumer society to uncover how brands operate as cultural resources. Kozinets (2002) investigates how the anti-commercial Burning Man Festival reproduces notions of market and exchange that it sought to escape in the first place.

Mook (1983) persuasively argues the need to distinguish between population and theoretical generalizability (see also Stewart, 1998). Mook advocates using extraordinary contexts to examine how constructs operate at extremes or as venues where complex interactions between constructs surface. He views extraordinary contexts as opportunities for uncovering the boundaries of how, when, where and under what conditions our theories apply. For example, research in more mundane contexts has shown the unfolding and dynamic character of satisfaction, and the power of 'extras' even in brief, everyday service settings (Fournier and Mick, 1999; Price, Arnould and Deibler, 1995), both theoretical insights established in the extreme context of river rafting.

#### How to make context work for you

In applied marketing research, a focus on context has fueled something of a revolution in practice, including the propagation of qualitative research as a valued research tool. In the service of improved product design and positioning, and improved target marketing, applied researchers have conducted research in a vast array of purchase and consumption sites, ranging from grocery store aisles to stadium parking lots, teenagers' bedrooms, kitchens, TV rooms and even showers for a host of corporate sponsors (Belk and Kozinets, 2005; El Boghdady, 2002; Kottak, 2003; McCarthy, 1998; Sherry and Kozinets, 2001).

Research context choices foreground or background particular theoretical arguments (Alford, 1998). Some researchers highlight the features of a specific context to argue that it can make some constructs, construct relationships or processes salient to observation. They also leave latent aspects of contexts unexamined. An individualistic focus may background the role of social collectivities in shaping the consumption of Harley Davidson motorcycles (Holt, 1997), world systems theory may silence the gendered voices in descriptive participant observation (Thompson, Stern and Arnould, 1998), or a focus on rituals may background the role of myth in patterning commercialized celebration (Stern, 1995).

One role of foregrounding context in studies employing qualitative data has been to highlight bias in previous studies in terms of both the populations and the processes studied. Research foregrounding samples of homeless, illiterate, middle-class minority,

women, European migrant and non Euro-American consumers has examined the boundaries of our knowledge by sampling understudied consumer groups. Research has also foregrounded neglected consumption processes through context selection such as gift giving, disposition, presumption, play, ritual and so on. In this section of the chapter we will focus selectively on research addressing sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* to uncover how to make contexts work. This research primarily employs qualitative research methods and has been summarized by Arnould and Thompson (2005) under the thematic title 'Consumer Culture Theory' (CCT).

#### How consumer culture theory studies use context

We can begin by asking whether a CCT research project emphasizes variations in consumers or variations across spatial or temporal circumstances as the foundation for theory building. Of course, some CCT research varies both dimensions and other CCT research does neither. Figure 9.1 provides a few examples of CCT research characterized along these axes.

As illustrated in the figure, some CCT researchers foreground variations across spatial or temporal circumstances in their research questions. For example, the theoretical insights garnered by Kozinets (2002) from his exploration of the Burning Man Festival depend on a spatial and temporal environment that contrasts with everyday consumer life,

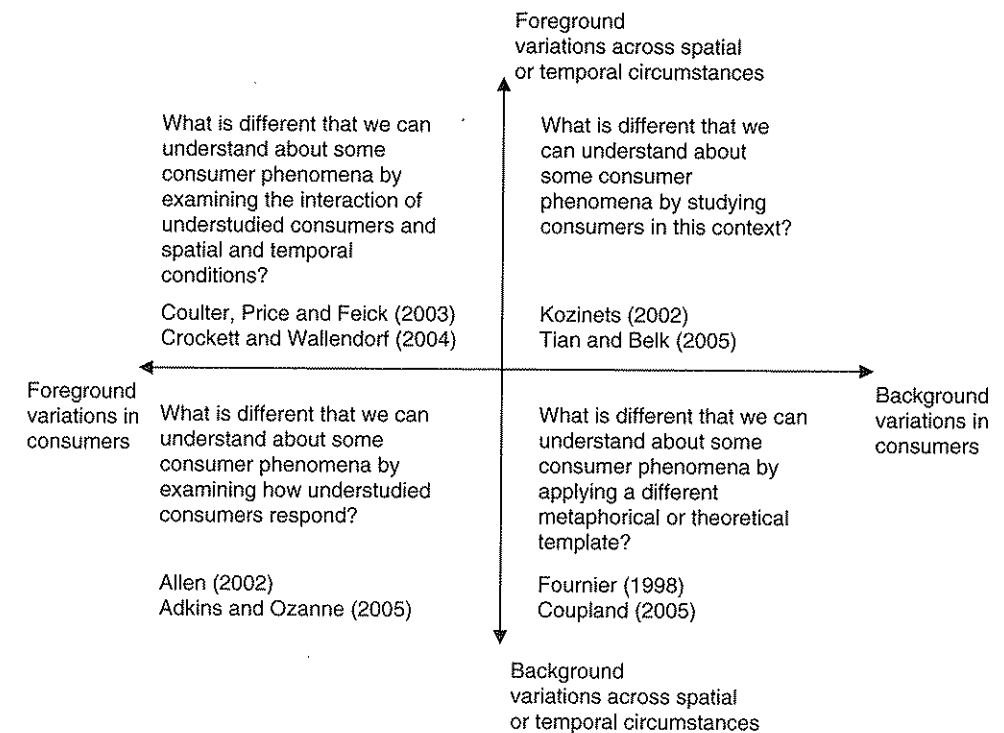


Figure 9.1 Theoretical contributions linked to variations in consumers and environments

not on variations in consumers. His research asks: what is different that we can understand about some consumer phenomena by studying consumers in this context? Specifically, what boundary conditions of consumer resistance and marketplace emancipation may we find at the Burning Man Festival? In another case, Tian and Belk (2005) study how work self and home self contend for dominance in the domain of the workplace. Researching valued possessions and the extended self in a novel spatial-temporal context (e.g., work) uncovers new theoretical insights.

By contrast, Allen's contributions (2002) do not depend on particular spatial or temporal circumstances. He could have studied choice contexts other than students' choices of higher education institutions. Instead, his research asks: what is different that we can understand about some consumer phenomena by examining how understudied consumers respond? Specifically, how does cultural capital influence the way consumers make choices? Here sampling consumers across levels of cultural capital helped to generate his theoretical contribution. In another paper, Adkins and Ozanne (2005) study low-literate consumers in order to understand the impact of literacy on buying behavior. Their implications derive from understanding how stigma linked to a consumer characteristic that varies among consumers is negotiated and mediated in market transactions. In a third study, Bernthal, Crockett and Rose (2005) reveal how individual differences in cultural capital resources pattern lifestyle regulation through credit cards and consumer debt.

Theoretical insights contributed by Crockett and Wallendorf (2004) depend on the interaction between consumer differences and spatial circumstances. They focused on African Americans in neighborhoods that varied in their racial composition to investigate the interplay between African-American families' everyday provisioning and political ideology. Their research asks: what is different that can we understand about some consumer phenomena by examining how an understudied consumer and spatial sampling interact? Specifically, how do African-American consumers employ normative political ideologies to make marketplace choices when their marketplace access is inhibited? Similarly, Coulter, Price and Feick (2003) examine a novel context (a transitional economy that represented something of a tabula rasa as far as brands are concerned) to explore variation in the way consumers' brand loyalty and commitment develop out of new political ideologies.

Finally, theoretical insights may come from the way a phenomenon is studied rather than from variations in consumers or settings. For example, Fournier's (1998) now classic article investigating consumers' relationships with brands was not particularly dependent on the context (other than North American) or the variation in consumers, but rather her insights were gleaned from the theoretical and metaphorical template of relationships that she brought to her study of consumers and brands. Her research asks: what is different that we can understand about some consumer phenomena by applying a different metaphorical and theoretical template? More recently, Coupland (2005) examines household practices that surround brands that we do not think much about but are just there – invisible brands. As with Fournier (1998), her theoretical insights derive from examining common customer activities with a new template that reveals hidden theoretical over-sights.

Although the figure provides a starting point for thinking about what theoretical arguments to foreground in our selection of a sample and context, a more nuanced read of the

way aspects of a context enable a theoretical payoff is required. In the next section, we select interpretive research examples corresponding to four different areas of theoretical contribution to consumer culture theory in order to uncover some of the particulars of the interplay between theory and context.

#### *The interplay of theory and context*

Table 9.1 provides a summary of some of the ways that choice of research contexts has enabled theoretical insights. The table follows Arnould and Thompson's (2005) framing and is organized around four categories of theoretical contributions associated with interpretive research in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, including consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, sociohistoric patterning of consumption and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. It is important to keep in mind that, although we have elaborated a particular point of contribution for the research represented, often this is not the only or even the most important contribution made by this piece of research. Moreover, this table is not intended to be all-inclusive. Much research that makes an equivalent or greater contribution to our understanding of consumer culture is not represented because of space constraints.

One thing that stands out in the table is that the value of contexts lies sometimes in its isolation of a group, process, variable or relationship that is critical for theoretical development. Moreover, across the four domains of theoretical contribution, a particular foregrounding strategy is often dominant, although multiple foregrounding strategies are present in each domain. In addition, many studies illustrate the theoretical value of selecting contexts that allow researchers to observe extreme values in domains of interest. These extreme values uncover and test our taken-for-granted assumptions about consumer beliefs and activities and help us identify the range over which particular patterns of behavior apply (Davis, 1971; Mook, 1983). Finally, examination of the table reveals that interpretive researchers often employ variants of quasi-experimental designs in order to uncover processes and differences among consumer responses.

Implicit in the table is that many perspectives are not yet represented (Fiske, 2004). For example, Adkins and Ozanne (2005), listed first in the table, make theoretical contributions to our understanding of consumer identity projects by studying illiterate consumers in a society where illiteracy is stigmatized. Further fruitful contributions might be made by exploring marketplace choices and behaviors of illiterate consumers in environments where illiteracy is not stigmatized, such as some third world contexts, or by exploring how consumers with other stigmas such as disabilities manage or negotiate those stigmas through marketplace choices (Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2000). Alternatively, rather than isolating a group of consumers who are illiterate we might look for purchase contexts, such as gray markets or second-hand stores that may stigmatize consumers (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005) and examine how consumers negotiate and respond to that stigma. Hence, for each of the theoretical perspectives represented in the table, other fruitful theoretical perspectives are not represented, but could be.

Next we detail how isolating groups, processes and variables, going to extremes and drawing on some of the principles of experimental design in researcher choice of context, can facilitate theoretical payoffs.

Table 9.1 How interpretive research contexts enable theoretical contributions

Select interpretive research	Study	Contexts	Theory	Select theoretical payoff	Aspects of context that enable theoretical payoff
Consumer identity projects	Adkins and Ozanne (2005)	Illiterate consumers' marketplace behaviors	Stigma	Consumers manage their stigma through their marketplace choices and behaviors	Illiteracy is stigmatized in North America
	Bonsu and Belk (2003)	Funerals in Ghana	Identity construction	Post-mortem identity construction	Postmortem identity is a part of the life cycle in Asante
	Holt (2002)	Low income and disenfranchised consumers	Consumer resistance	While resisting marketing's cultural authority, consumers use brands as resources in identity construction	Consumer resistance to brands is evident in the socioeconomic margins in North America
	Hill and Stamey (1990)	Homeless consumers	Extended self	Consumers engage in a self-restoration process following the loss of possessions	Homeless consumers experience loss or have few possessions
	Martin (2004)	Fantasy card gamers	Consumer imagination	Consumers use multiple thematizing strategies for giving form to the evoked fantastic imaginary	Participant observation of imaginative play within a rule-governed game
	Mick and Buhl (1992)	Three brothers' interpretation of advertisements	Cultural theory of advertising	Consumers interpret advertisements through the lenses of individual life themes and projects	Siblings share sociocultural and family heritage, thus representing an internal control group
	Mick and DeMoss (1990)	Intra-personal gift giving	Gift giving theory	Self-gifts parallel dyadic gifts on three dimensions, but also develop and sustain self-concept	Gifts to the self in four circumstantial and motivational conditions
	Schau and Gilly (2003)	Personal websites	Presentation of self in everyday life	Consumers draw on virtual resources to construct and display novel selves to online publics	Self-presentation unconstrained by resources or standards of evidence
	Schouten (1991)	Consumers of aesthetic plastic surgery	Identity construction	Role transitions trigger consumers' reconstruction of their selves	Aesthetic surgery is an extreme case of identity reconstruction
	Tian and Belk (2005)	Workplace possessions	Extended self	Disconfirms the concentric spheres model of the consumer self	Work environment exposes conflicting aspects of self in North America

Marketplace cultures

Marketplace cultures	Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993)	Skydivers	Consumer risk	Consumers normalize perceptions of risk through process of risk acculturation	Regardless of level of experience, skydiving is a highly risky consumption activity
	Holt (1995)	Baseball spectators in Chicago Wrigley Field bleachers	Consumption practices	Consumers apply a range of action frameworks to their consumption encompassing play, integration, experience and classification	Consumption activity at baseball games is temporally, spatially and socially bound, exposing the variety of consumption practices
	Kates (2002)	Urban gay men	Subculture theory	Subcultural consumption is shaped by tensions internal to the subculture and contests over legitimacy	Gay subculture is a non-elective internally heterogeneous social collectivity
	Kates (2004)	Urban gay men and their brands	Cultural branding theory	Brand's social fit with a community alters the salience of brand attributes	The interplay of a non-brand community with high profile brands
	Kozinets (2001)	Star Trek fans	Subculture theory	Consumption practices are structured by mass media articulations between producers, microcultural and wider cultural meanings and practices	Star Trek is a commercial, mass media ideological product
	Kozinets (2002)	Burning Man Festival	Consumer resistance	Consumers emancipate from the marketplace through construction of a hypercommunity	The Burning Man Festival is an anti-consumption, temporary community
	Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001)	Consumers of Volvos, Macintosh and Ford Bronco	Community	Brands organize communal consumer relationships in both face-to-face and computer-mediated environments	Brands provide a resource for focalizing community sentiment
	Muñiz and Schau (2005)	Apple Newton users	Subculture theory	Brands energize mytho-religious narrative production in perpetuating the brand community, its values and beliefs	Deletion of a valued brand from a corporate portfolio threatens extinction
	Schouten and McAlexander (1995)	Harley Davidson consumers	Subculture theory	Subcultures form symbiotic relationships with marketplace institutions, expressing patriotism through their bikes	Selecting a subculture organized around a brand
	Allen (2002)	Students' higher education institution choices	Consumer choice theory	Identifies an embodied, intuitive and sociohistorically situated consumer choice process	Sampling extreme values along a continuum of cultural capital endowments

Table 9.1 (continued)

Select interpretive research	Study	Contexts	Theory	Select theoretical payoff	Aspects of context that enable theoretical payoff
	Arnould (1989)	Consumers in Niger	Theory of the diffusion of innovations	Reveals boundary conditions of the Eurocentric model of adoption of innovation	Tracing consumers' movement between local and global spheres of consumption uncovers processes
	Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard (2005)	Greenlandic immigrants to mainland Denmark	Consumer acculturation	Transnational consumer culture represents a third acculturation agent in addition to host and home cultures	Cultural immigration without legal or political confounds found in other immigration studies
	Bernthal, Crockett and Rose (2005)	Credit card usage	Practice theory	Credit card acquisition and utilization practices reveal the role of credit in the regulation of consumer lifestyles and their structuring by cultural capital	Sampling extreme values along a continuum of economic and cultural capital endowments
	Commuri and Gentry (2005)	Households where women earn more than men	Household resource allocation theory	Multiple cultural models of resource allocation structure household pooling consumption decisions; separate gender ideology from economic resources	Households where women are the primary wage earners
	Crockett and Wallendorf (2004)	African-American shoppers everyday provisioning	Ideology	Store patronage shapes and reshapes competing normative political ideologies	African Americans in racially homogeneous and heterogeneous neighborhoods
	Curasi, Price and Arnould (2004)	Families' cherished possessions	Family (collective) identity	The role of inalienable wealth in the creation and preservation of family identity	Sample multiple generations at the family unit level
	Henry (2005)	Financial management decisions	practice theory	Cultural capital resources structure marketplace empowerment, including perceptions of agency	Sampling extreme values on a continuum of cultural capital
	Holt (1997)	Consumer lifestyles in small town/rural setting	Consumer lifestyle	Critique of VALS; lifestyles are constructed in relation and opposition to other lifestyles	Sample lifestyle practices for varied collectivities within a bounded rural setting or shared market space
	Joy (2001)	Gift giving in Hong Kong	Social exchange theory	Gift giving practices constitute a continuum of social relationships	Comparison of gift giving practices across cultural contexts and social groups
	Joy and Sherry (2003)	Museum visitors in North America	Consumer judgment	Shows how consumers' aesthetic judgments are structured by somatic and corporeal processes	Museums are loci for practices of aesthetic consumption in the West
	Oswald (1999)	Haitian immigrant family in the United States	Consumer identity	The role of immigrant social class in ethnic identity construction through consumption	Immigrants from a single country across social class distinctions
Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies	Coulter, Price and Feick (2003)	Eastern European women	Brand involvement	Differentiates involvement with brands from brand involvement, and changes in ideology have cascading effects on interpersonal relationships, consumption and brand involvement	Quasi-experimental before-after design allows observation of unfolding consumer brand involvement and commitment
	Holt and Thompson (2004)	Two US men	Masculinity	Through consumption choices middle- and working-class men accommodate competing ideological frameworks of masculinity in pursuit of a utopian ideal	Contrasting cases of men's prototypical consumption practices
	Kozinets et al. (2005)	American Girl Place, Chicago	Ideology	Via their interaction with the brand, families enact and reinterpret national ideologies and family history	Isolates intergenerational groups of female family members in a consumption process
	Maclaran and Brown (2005)	Powercourt, a Dublin shopping center	Utopia theory	Utopian processes structure consumer-marketer servicescape experiences accounting for divergence in satisfaction judgments before and after reconstruction of the mall	Quasi-experimental before-after design in an iconic, postmodern shopping mall

Table 9.1 (continued)

Select interpretive research	Study	Contexts	Theory	Select theoretical payoff	Aspects of context that enable theoretical payoff
	Peñaloza (2001)	Western Stock Show and rodeo	Servicescape theory	Marketers and consumers' cultural memories and multiple cultural representations reproduce the mythic tropes structuring the servicescape	The West evokes powerful mythic and historical associations for Americans
	Ritson and Elliott (1998)	Adolescents at English high schools	Cultural theory of advertising	Consumers use advertising as a interpersonal interactions	Observing groups active in interpersonal identity formation and very involved in popular media
	Rose and Wood (2005)	Survivor II, Temptation Island, and the Mole TV show viewers	Authenticity	Authenticity depends on imaginative familiarity; paradoxical relationships between the exotic and the familiar	Reality TV represents itself as authentic
	Thompson (2004)	Natural health consumers	Cultural theory of advertising	Advertisements can be power discourses that allocate authority and animate constellations of consumer beliefs and behavior	Adversarial authority-based advertising about fundamental question of well-being
	Thompson and Arsel (2004)	Starbucks and local competitors	Cultural branding theory	Between-brand differentiation evolves via a dialectic between efforts to 'own' the category and consumer-market resistance	Hegemonic global brand and local competitors
	Thompson and Hirschman (1995)	Self narratives of 30 male and female consumers	Self concept theory	Demonstrates the role of ideology in self concept	The body is a fundamental site for the play of social, cultural and historical influences

*Isolating groups*

A large number of studies illustrate the value of isolating groups. Notice that such studies have made theoretical contributions in each of the four domains outlined in Arnould and Thompson (2005). For instance, studies of the homeless test the boundaries of theories of self-possession relationships contributing to our understanding of consumer identity projects (Hill and Stamey, 1990). Belk's (1988) theory suggests that homeless and other dispossessed groups are likely to seek self-restoration through objects, a pursuit that focuses on a more limited range of options than those of middle-class consumers.

Numerous interpretive studies isolate a group to enhance our understanding of marketplace cultures. For example, study of a non-elective (e.g., gay) consumer subculture contributes to our understanding of marketplace cultures by testing the boundaries of theory about subcultural values examined in other subculture research with elective subcultures (Kates, 2002). Kates (2004) argues this subculture provides a good case of an internally heterogeneous subculture given its 'rich oral and written histories that support a wide variety of dynamic contents, forms, and meanings' (p. 383). Examining emerging or dissolving subcultures also contending with internal heterogeneity might further advance our understanding.

Isolating groups is also used to enhance our understanding of the sociohistoric patterning of consumption. Studies of immigrant consumers outside of North America expose how North American consumer culture exerts an acculturating effect separate from home and host cultures (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard, 2005), a fact concealed in studies of immigrants to North America (Peñaloza, 1994). Studies of immigrants varying in social classes test the boundaries of post-assimilationist theory developed primarily around lower class immigrants (Oswald, 1999). We could thus envision a re-inquiry of Peñaloza (1994) that sampled upper-class Mexican immigrants' acculturation in the US.

Finally, our understanding of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies is enhanced by research that isolates groups. For example, Thompson (2004) examines how advertising in the natural health marketplace deploys a Gnostic mythos that weds science and spiritualism. This mythic discourse is uncovered by isolating an interpretive community of marketers and consumers. Similarly, Ritson and Elliott (1998) enhance our understanding of advertising as a cultural resource by focusing on high school students who are both highly involved in popular media and active in interpersonal identity formation.

*Isolating processes*

Other interpretive studies isolate processes. Again, across all four areas of interpretive research we see examples of this theoretical foregrounding of processes. Mick and DeMoss (1990) contribute to our understanding of consumer identity projects by examining the process of intrapersonal gift giving over a range of circumstantial and motivational conditions. Our understanding of marketplace cultures is also enhanced through studies that foreground process. Holt (1995) is able to isolate a variety of consumption practices by focusing on an activity that is temporally, spatially and socially bound – in this case a baseball stadium event. An event at a racetrack, casino, soccer field, football arena or cricket pitch could perhaps have facilitated a similar theoretical contribution.

Numerous studies foreground processes as the keys to understanding the sociohistoric patterning of consumption. For example, Curasi, Price and Arnould (2004) examined cherished possessions within households and between generations, a focus that brought to light the interdependent roles of narrative, storage, use and display in intergenerational object transfers. Their design helped to reveal the process whereby alienable property is transformed into inalienable wealth. Arnould's (1989) focus on the adoption of non-local consumer goods in Niger not only highlighted deviations from expectations based on Western models but brought to light competing acculturative globalization processes.

Finally, isolating processes aids research directed at understanding the interplay between mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. For example, multiperspectival ethnography of consumption among intergenerational groups of female family members at the American Girl Place reveals the deep involvement of the American Girl brand with both family history and national ideologies concerning gender, race, freedom and other issues (Kozinets et al., 2005).

#### *Isolating variables or relationships*

Sometimes authors use context to hold certain variables constant or relax them and examine a familiar process when they do so. Numerous examples of research that contributes to our understanding of consumer identity projects use some variant of this strategy. For example, Schau and Gilly (2003) looked at consumers' self-presentation tactics in on-line contexts where resource constraints are relaxed dramatically (cf. Solomon, 1983). Only imagination and technology access posed limitations on consumers' digital self-presentations. Mick and Buhl (1992) examined the emergence of variable life themes and projects via consumers' reception of advertisements, holding some potential influences of sociocultural and family heritage constant.

Others have informed our understanding of marketplace cultures by isolating, controlling or relaxing a variable through their choice of context. For example, brand community formation and reproduction processes in on-line environments relax the geographic criteria employed in classic community studies (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Temporary social collectivities organized around commercial brands such as Volvo or Ford Bronco illustrated the existence of a postmodern virtual community.

Our understanding of the sociohistoric patterning of consumption and the interplay of marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategy has been strengthened through research that isolates, controls or relaxes a particular variable. For example, examining reality TV has enabled intriguing insights into consumers' interpretation of authenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005). We may also delve into consumer authenticity by investigating simulated products or environments (Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

#### *Going to extremes*

As discussed earlier, the virtue of a particular context may be that it facilitates sampling of extreme values on dimensions of interest. Many of the examples we have already discussed use this foregrounding of extremes to test boundaries of our understanding or uncover processes otherwise undetectable. Cosmetic surgery and tattooing make profound and permanent marks upon the physical substrate of self-concept and image. Schouten (1991) found discussion of aesthetic surgery helped expose precipitating factors and consequences of consumers' role transitions. Bonsu and Belk (2003) found that study

of post-mortem identity in Asante led to new insights into consumer identity theory. The processes of post-mortem identity construction were more highly salient in Asante than in many cultures.

For the study of risk, Celsi, Ross and Leigh (1993) sought out a high-risk consumption subculture. The fact that the high levels of risk in skydiving do not vary significantly with experience enabled Celsi et al. (1993) to theorize novel insights into the way consumers acclimate to risk over time. Discontinuation of the focal brand of a product threatens extinction of a brand community. Muñiz and Schau (2005) found that this circumstance opened up a wealth of insights into quasi-religious narratives underlying the workings of this community, processes that would have been difficult to observe in a prospering brand community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

#### *Drawing on principles of experimental design*

Table 9.1 also illustrates how drawing on the principles of experimental design in researcher selection of contexts foregrounds shifts in consumers' practices. For instance, some CCT research incorporates aspects of a before-after experimental design. Repeated probing of consumer experiences before and after renovation of an iconic shopping mall enabled Maclaran and Brown (2005) to isolate the impacts of a utopian ideological current evoked by the mall. In a study of the early diffusion of cosmetics brands in Eastern Europe, longitudinal study in a shifting cultural landscape provided a natural laboratory for study of emerging brand commitment and involvement (Coulter, Price and Feick, 2003). In particular, the use of branding strategies and large varieties of different brands were introduced to Hungary and Romania over the course of the research. Other contexts that might provide good opportunities for the study of the evolution of these constructs include Vietnam and China.

Much interpretive research resembles experiments in the way the contexts supply natural study boundaries. Many of the examples in Table 9.1 explore contexts with natural boundaries that parameterize what and who is included and not included in the study. For example, the Mountain Man Rendezvous took place in discrete locations and unfolded over a course of days (Belk and Costa, 1998). The same is true of the Burning Man Festival, Niketown, ESPNZone, Nature et Découvertes, Powerscourt, gift stores and American Girl Place share with other retail environments studied by interpretive researchers the convenience of enclosure in four walls. Similarly, a bus tour of Gettysburg, a Thanksgiving feast and a white water rafting trip exhibit convenient temporal boundaries that facilitate observation. Swap meet studies have documented a host of behavioral and symbolic processes within clearly bounded environments. On-line sites typically require participants to log in and out; behavioral rules may not cross these cyber boundaries. A semi-isolated population and market space in Pennsylvania allowed Holt (1997) to focus more clearly on between-group variations in lifestyle choices.

In summary, a discussion of Table 9.1 provides a number of guides for making decisions about context choices. A good context helps researchers isolate a group, process, variable or relationship that throws light on factors that are critical for theoretical development. Good contexts may also facilitate sampling of extreme values on dimensions of interest. Finally, certain contexts may usefully incorporate aspects of experimental design including where researchers can ask before-after types of questions or examine consumers within natural boundaries that constrain who and what is studied.



### Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that researchers can harness the potential of contexts by strategically using them to background or foreground particular theories, deciding theoretical issues to leave behind and those to invite in. Ultimately a thoughtful use of research contexts may contribute to a better understanding of our lives as human beings and consumers. We have suggested some specific guidelines for thinking about contexts, inviting researchers to select contexts that test the theoretical boundaries of constructs and relationships; contexts that are prototypical or exemplars of important consumer phenomena; and contexts that highlight responses at odds with prior research. Nevertheless, in closing, it is important to introduce two additional points.

First, what constitutes a good context in the abstract is not necessarily the same as the context that will engage *your* emotions and senses. A good context is not necessarily the same as one that will stimulate *your* sense of adventure and discovery. Neither is it one that does not converge with *your* own experience and *your* horizon of expectations. 'Good' contexts are those that fascinate the researcher and hopefully her audience as well. Ultimately contexts should fit researchers as much as they fit theoretical domains. Contexts that are readily accessible and exciting to one researcher may be inaccessible and/or unexciting to another. Holt (1995) sat in the bleachers at Chicago Cubs baseball games not just out of intellectual curiosity, but also out of an abiding affection for the Cubs. Kates (2002) mobilized shared demographics that enabled him to hang out with members of the gay community in Toronto, measuring his own responses against the responses of others. Martin (2004) lurked in an on-line gaming community in which he himself was involved. Peñaloza (1994) had to overcome class and linguistic barriers to gain acceptance from immigrant consumers although shared ethnic affiliation facilitated entrée. Researchers look for a match not only between a context and a theory, but also between a context and themselves.

Second, while we have argued for a more systematic examination of the relationship between context and theory in advance of selecting a context, contexts that are culturally significant and sociologically rich, intrinsically interesting some would say, have proved to support an array of theoretically compelling studies in part because they reflect great diversity and depth of significance for vast numbers of people. Harley Davidson rallies, baseball games or the Western Stock Show (Peñaloza, 2001) are locales in which diverse groups of people congregate around events and symbols that are powerfully resonant for North Americans. Similarly, Asante funerals play a very fundamental role in social ordering processes and their enactment draws in participants from all corners of the social spectrum (Bonsu and Belk, 2003). Selecting a consumer context that is significant in the lives of many people and that seems to have paradoxical or problematic elements in the researchers' own mind, when combined with careful study and thick description, is likely to result in a meaningful story with theoretical power.

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