

# Process Theorization in Cultural Consumer Research

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How do researchers studying the cultural aspects of consumption theorize change? We propose four analytical workbench modes of process theorization in combination with nine genres of process-oriented consumer research, each presenting a distinctive combination of assumptions about the nature of change in market and consumption systems and consumers' role in these processes. Through this framework, we provide consumer researchers with a useful interpretive tool kit for deriving a process-oriented theorization from the unwieldy complexity of longitudinal data.

*Keywords:* market change, process theorization, consumer culture theory

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*We knew we wanted to tell a story about change, a story about how various actors, including consumers, entrepreneurs and others, created the yoga marketplace as we know it today. We believed in the theoretical importance of capturing changes in consumer behavior as markets evolve. However, it was very challenging to tell a longitudinal story, tracking actions of the many players that constituted the market while capturing the diversity of consumer experiences and practices over time. It turned out to be very different from what we had done before. (Burçak Ertimur and Gokcen Coskuner-Balli on Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015)*

How do researchers studying the cultural aspects of consumption theorize change? How do they generate

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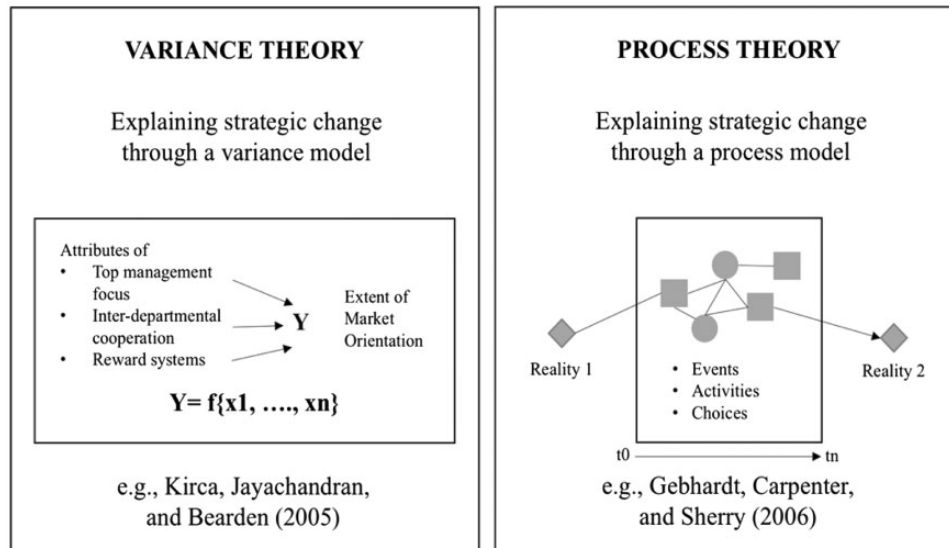
theoretical insights, not only about what constitutes our core cultural constructs in consumer behavior, but also about how and why relationships among these constructs dynamically emerge, evolve, or dissipate? Consumer researchers have become increasingly sensitized to the dynamic nature of market and consumption systems (Giesler and Fischer forthcoming), as evidenced by recent scholarship on market emergence (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Giesler 2012; Martin and Schouten 2014), the legitimation of consumption practices (Humphreys 2010b); consumer subject formation (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Karababa and Ger 2011), value co-creation (Figueiredo and Scaraboto, forthcoming), brand audience dissipation (Parmentier and Fischer 2015), and risk acculturation (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993).

In this article, we focus on the question of how theories of sociocultural change can be derived through the analysis of qualitative data. Whereas general guidelines for deriving theoretical insights from qualitative data are readily available (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013; McCracken 1986; Sherry and Kozinets 2001; Thompson 1997; Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013), these methodological resources seldom address the specific problems and issues that are unique to change-oriented analyses. This omission is problematic because any consumer culture researcher who has studied change has likely struggled with one or more of the following questions: What types of qualitative data are most suited for theorizing change? At what point

FIGURE 1:

## VARIANCE THEORY VERSUS PROCESS THEORY

Adapted from Langley (1999).



during data collection and analysis do I know that my research may be process oriented? How can I distill different enough conceptual stages or phases from my longitudinal data set? How can theory help explain why change happens in the data? And most importantly, what theoretically relevant role(s) do consumers play in the change process?

To answer these and related questions, we adopt a theoretical orientation that management scholar Ann Langley (1999), drawing from Mohr (1982), characterizes as process theory (or more accurately theorization). From this perspective, process theorizations address questions about how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time, as distinct from variance questions dealing with covariation among dependent and independent variables (Langley et al. 2013, 1). The full implications of this process theorization logic are perhaps best illuminated through a comparative contrast to its more widely employed intellectual counterpart—variance theorization (figure 1).

Variance theorization draws on cross-sectional data (data collected at the same time) to establish covariation between dependent and independent variables; (e.g., “more of X and more of Y produce more of Z” [Langley 1999, 692]). However, variance-based analyses tend to elide these diachronic processes by theoretically framing them as a lag effect, compressing them into discrete variables or reducing them to simple before-after comparisons at successive times. To illustrate this difference, let us first consider Kohli and Jaworski (1990), who adopted a variance

orientation to identify three antecedents to firms exhibiting a stronger market orientation: top management emphasis, interdepartmental cooperation, and market-based reward systems while also noting that interfirm competition (despite common wisdom to the contrary) has little measurable impact on a firm’s market orientation (Kirca, Jayachandran, and Bearden 2005).

In their ethnographic investigation of how firms actually create a market orientation, Gebhardt, Carpenter, and Sherry (2006) posited that these snapshot-based analyses may have captured these relationships after the fact of their emergence and establishment. If so, the presumed function of these variables as context-independent antecedent factors might have been overstated. Basing their process analysis on oral histories, historical documents, and ethnographic observations from multiple firms conducted over time, Gebhardt et al. (2006) were then able to demonstrate that Kohli and Jaworski’s (1990) antecedent variables were embedded in a larger process of transformative change whereby proactive managers establish an organizational culture and institutional infrastructure that supports a market orientation. Lacking these enabling conditions, the antecedent (i.e., predictive) value of the identified factors would be significantly curtailed.

Although the value of a process theorization is quite evident and its broader ontological and epistemological underpinnings are well documented (Langley 1999; Langley

et al. 1992), workbench-level actionable advice on managing the creation of a process theorization, specifically as it pertains to the study of marketplace phenomena, is currently amiss. To redress this gap, we have sought to assess how authors in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and beyond have undertaken the interpretive move from qualitative data to process theorization. Accordingly, we reflected systematically on our own challenges and experiences in creating a process theorization; carefully reviewed previous consumer culture research adopting a process theorization; and perhaps, most importantly we sought out the perspectives of consumer researchers who developed some of these canonical studies.

We identified a diversity of studies that we have summarized at the end of this tutorial (Table 1) in terms of nine genres of process theorization available to consumer researchers interested in the study of change. We also discovered that the authors of these studies shared a number of methodological and theory-building challenges that were different from those facing researchers adopting a variance-based approach to the study of marketplace phenomena. Specifically, we found that these challenges can be broadly organized into four analytical modes that process researchers must simultaneously manage because each adds important elements and insights to a full-fledged process theorization: data collection, analytical bracketing, theoretical focusing, and consumer enrollment. In the following sections, we unpack each mode in greater detail and draw on verbatim quotes from consumer researchers to illustrate their application.

## WORKBENCH MODE 1: PROCESS DATA - COLLECTING FOR CHANGE

What types of qualitative data are most suited for a process theorization? In general, a process data set needs to be as rich, varied, and multilayered as any qualitative data set (Belk et al. 2013). For example, in addition to micro-level consumer data (interviews, photography, postings, diaries, tweets, etc.), authors should collect market-level data (e.g., institutional and policy documents, commercials, print ads, leaflets, and other promotional materials) and macro-level data (about larger social and economic trends). However, one of the important insights to emerge from our assessment of process theorizing is that it is not a direct reflection of any specific characteristics of a data set per se. Rather, it has much more to do with the analytic logic that researchers use to make sense of their data.

Whereas variance theorization relies on a logic that seeks to identify relations among *variables at a given point in time*, process theorizing is attuned to the relations among events *over time*. We heuristically define an event as an occurrence that has some kind of reverberations in a network of sociocultural relationships. Hence events can

range in terms of scale and their significance to particular social actors in a given network. An event could be a consumer participating in a yoga class; a company introducing a new cosmetic good into the marketplace; or an industrial accident. All of these illustrative events could in turn precipitate a cascade of related marketplace and sociocultural events. We further note that some degree of interpretive judgment will always be involved in determining the temporal boundaries of an event (that is, when does event 1 end and ensuing event 2 begin?). Relatedly, we propose that events are themselves embedded in narratives or stories that help to shape their temporal and symbolic contours. Thus an understanding of narrative structure (Celsi et al. 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1994; Thompson 1997) can help set the parameters of an event and its constituent subevents (e.g., taking a yoga class might also entail subevents such as buying the right attire, practicing various poses at home, eating lunch with a friend after the class, etc.).

We define “over time” as a longitudinal set of events that can range from a few hours or days to months and even years but that are narratively linked together, as in the case of the series of events that constituted the transformations of the Botox Cosmetic brand, the evolution of the American yoga market, or the unfolding events that led to a sense of closure in the aftermath of the BP Gulf Oil spill. In process theorization, the length of the set is not the critical concern; rather, the analytic goal is to identify notable shifts between the event (or events) that correspond to Reality 1 and those that correspond to Reality 2, to use the parlance of figure 1. To identify these shifts, researchers need to gain clarity about (1) event type(s), (2) the chronological accessibility of the event, and (3) the use of surrogate event data.

Let’s begin with event types. First, it is important for consumer researchers to understand what types of events they are collecting or could collect data on. In a given research project, researchers could investigate a multiplicity of event types ranging from micro-events such as consumers’ identity-based self-descriptions, tweets, and newspaper articles to market-level events such as advertising campaigns and television seasons to larger historical events such as oil spills or even political revolutions. We further suggest that in many market contexts, it would be useful to distinguish between precipitating events and secondary events. Precipitating events are those which tend to function as collectively shared anchor points and reference points in a given narrative structure—the Starbucks revolution, the rise and fall of Napster; and the explosion of consumer debt following the 2008 financial crisis would all be examples of macro-scaled precipitating events. On a more micro scale, a major career change, geographic relocation, marriage, or childbirth could all be precipitating events in the context of a family’s consumption routines and practices. Secondary events are therefore those that are narratively structured as the contingent consequences or

**TABLE 1**  
GENRES OF PROCESS-ORIENTED CONSUMER RESEARCH

<i>Change as</i>	<i>Agent of change</i>	<i>Subject of change</i>	<i>Recursive subject</i>
<b>Transformative</b> Coherent narratives of development over time	Consumer-Driven Transformation Figueiredo and Scaraboto forthcoming; Martin and Schouten 2014; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfenbarger 2009	Institutional Transformation Barnhart and Penaloza 2013; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kravets and Sandikci 2014; Press and Arnould 2011	Recursive Transformation Bardi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012; Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Epp and Price 2010
<b>Topological</b> Shifts in patterns of power relationships	Consumer-Driven Reconfiguration Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013	Institutional Reconfiguration Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013; Humphreys 2010 a, 2010b; Thompson and Tian 2008; Zhao and Belk 2008	Recursive Reconfiguration Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Canniff and Shankar 2013; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Giesler 2012; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Penaloza and Barnhart 2011; Ustüner and Holt 2010
<b>Disruptive</b> Ruptures in consumer or marketplace worlds	Consumer-Driven Disruption Cherrier and Murray 2007; McAlexander et al. 2014; Parmentier and Fischer 2015; Wong and King 2008	Institutional Disruption Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Vikas, Varman, and Belk 2015	Recursive Disruption Giesler 2008, Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Karababa and Ger 2011; Luedicke 2015

reactions to the precipitating events, whether in the context of changing group dynamics and consumer motive evolution (Celsi et al. 1993)—where for example, an initial captivating experience of high-risk leisure consumption leads to greater identity investments in these activities—to shifts in how an organization implements a market orientation (Gebhardt et al. 2006) to changes in how entire markets and industries are culturally framed (Giesler 2008; Humphreys 2010b).

Process-oriented consumer culture researchers also have to make adaptations based on the chronological accessibility of the event. On the level of data collection, the general goal of process-based research is to acquire a sufficiently comprehensive data set to support the resulting interpretations of the process manifest in the event series. However, events can present different degrees of chronological accessibility, which in turn affects the comprehensiveness of the available data. For example, historically oriented consumer culture researchers typically have access to archives that offer fairly comprehensive documentation of events that unfolded at some time in the past. As a case in point, Karababa and Ger (2011), who drew on material artifacts and historical documents from the Ottoman Empire, were able to cull a continuous set of event data from the archives. In contrast, Giesler and Veresiu's (2014) study of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual gathering had to track the historical course of this event in real time. As a consequence, their data collection on the primary event is punctuated by year-long breaks, during which they collected data on secondary events precipitated by prior WEF gatherings.

Our third consideration is whether the analysis may require the use of what can be characterized as surrogate data. For example, in a given study, a researcher may be collecting data on consumer experiences of a given marketplace event and then decide it would be useful to have information on how such events had been experienced by consumers at prior historical inflection points. For example, consider a consumer culture researcher who is investigating an annual event, like Comic-Con International or Slow Food's Terra Madre gathering (an annual international conference on issues related to food and sustainability), and let us further assume that, as these studies unfolded, the researcher began to suspect that these contemporary consumer experiences might be fundamentally shaped by the prevalence of social media (and the new array of consumption practices that emerge from the use Instagram, Snapchat Twitter, and other forums). To validate this proposition, a research would need comparative data from consumers who attended these events before the advent of social media. Under this scenario, it would not be possible to gather comparable like-for-like data on events that happened more than a decade earlier. However, surrogate data could be used to glean some information on whether there have been qualitative changes in



### COLLECTING FOR CHANGE IN ACTION: AT WHAT POINT IN THE PRODUCTION PROCESS DO I KNOW THAT MY RESEARCH MAY BE PROCESS ORIENTED?

In theory, process theorization can be adopted as an a priori lens. For a good example of this tact, consider Ashlee Humphreys's recollection of Humphreys and Thompson (2015) in "Coding for Change in Action" below. In many cases, however, we found that consumer researchers initially began with a variance-based lens and decided to shift gears only after an observation raised unprecedented questions about change. Consider the following two recollections:

**Ashlee Humphreys on Humphreys (2010a, 2010b):** *When I started studying casino gambling in 2005, I pursued it ethnographically. I dutifully went off to casinos in Gary, Indiana, Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Connecticut to observe, take notes, and interview gamblers and employees. I gambled with people at the craps and blackjack tables, made small talk during slots, and then went to record notes surreptitiously in the bathroom, just as I was taught. One night after being shown an elaborate dice ritual at the craps table that a fellow gambler assured me would "give him control," I realized that I needed to change my approach. Although anthropologically interesting, I realized then that this man would not be able to tell me why he was here, even through many hours of interview analysis and coding. What interested me was how we all got there. What process created the existence of this option for this particular person to consume this particular form of (expensive) entertainment? The 'why' of why he was here was much larger than either of us and had to do with city contracts, legal statutes, coalitions of companies, and tax revenue. Once I realized this, I shifted to using institutional theory (Scott 1995), which led me to collect data associated with the three "pillars" of institutions—regulatory, cultural-cognitive, and normative. Thus I collected minutes from state gaming commissions and newspaper articles and movie analysis to represent normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of the change. With all of this data, particularly with newspapers, I needed a way to convincingly represent change over time, and so I adopted content analysis, and particularly automated content analysis. Through quantitative text analysis I was able to represent more macro-level categories—like the press coverage from an entire year or from an entire group—so that I could study aggregates rather than individuals and study change over time versus single-state phenomena.*

**Markus Giesler on Giesler (2008):** *I started collecting the data for Giesler (2008) at a time when I had no idea that I was going to develop a process theorization. Originally, I was only interested in gift giving and how music downloaders using Napster and other downloading platforms justified their actions. That part of the data eventually provided the springboard for Giesler (2006), an ethnographic but cross-sectional based analysis of social exchange in consumer gift systems. Naturally, revisions take a while and so, following advice from Rob Kozinets and John Sherry, I decided to continue to collect netnographic data beyond what I needed for this first paper. After a while, I realized that the content of the board postings, interviews, and court documents was changing significantly. For example, the music downloader narratives shifted from highlighting the positive aspects of the technology and how it could help improve society to critiquing copyright and the greed of record labels while court action shifted from targeting downloading platforms to targeting individual consumers. That's when I switched from looking for evidence of variables, that is 'what enables the sharing of music online?' to looking for events, that is, 'what happened at different times over here, here, and there in the music marketplace.' Importantly, this shift wasn't easy at first. Not only had I been trained previously to collect data for qualitative variable testing purposes. I was also still in the middle of collecting and analyzing cross-sectionally for what eventually became Giesler (2006). What helped me was the realization that collecting for variable load typically collapses some of the most interesting temporal differences in the data. But now I had a chance to work with these differences more directly and creatively.*

consumers' experiences of these events, owing to social media usage.

For example, reflective interviews (asking consumers to recall their experiences of these event in pre-social media years) would be one kind of surrogate data that could be gathered, as well as archival records in the form of consumer diaries, journalistic reports and other documentation of past events and their experiential qualities. In terms of actual process-oriented consumer research, some examples studies that employed surrogate data include the use of message board postings when identity-level consumer interviews (on past events) were not a viable option (Giesler 2008); meeting notes from prior strategy setting sessions used to substitute for management interviews (Gebhardt et al. 2006); and perhaps most commonly, archived netnography data have been used as a surrogate indicator of consumer perceptions of consumption communities at

different points in these communities' history (Parmentier and Fischer 2015).

Considering these three issues helps consumer researchers in the creation of a coherent set of event-based data through which change in marketplace phenomena can be reasonably studied. On the downside, it also invariably produces large volumes of longitudinal data. Gebhardt et al. (2006), for example, collected more than 120 hours of audio recordings of managers' oral histories in addition to written materials and their own observations. In the presence of such data volumes, it is easy for even the most experienced researchers to get overwhelmed. That is because each event is contingent on the decisions and actions that are negotiated by many interdependent marketplace actors. And each moment is itself structured as an assemblage that can be further parsed into smaller constituent events, having its own history. To manage this complexity, consumer

culture researchers analyze their data for patterns in events and how sequences of events lead to an outcome, a process called analytical bracketing (Langley 1999).

## WORKBENCH MODE 2: ANALYTICAL BRACKETING - CODING FOR CHANGE

We define analytical bracketing as the act of translating empirical change into analytical change, or a sequence of events into a more systematic interplay of meaningful analytical categories, by grouping event data into “bracketing units”—interpretive lenses through which the complexity in the data can be more meaningfully understood. These units can be managerial strategies (Giesler 2012), consumer subjectivities (Karababa and Ger 2011), framing strategies (Humphreys and Thompson 2014), types of cultural conflict (Giesler 2008), or memories and counter-memories (Thompson and Tian 2008).

For example, assume that a consumer researcher has identified changes in brand meanings over time. To gain further clarity, this researcher may explore the different consumer or managerial actions that have played a role in constituting these meanings, thereby bracketing the data through the lenses of “consumer justifications” or “managerial strategies,” respectively. Likewise, a researcher who finds that meanings and legitimacy associated with a consumption practice have changed over time may code for “framing strategies” to determine how and by whom the meanings of this practice were repositioned.

To identify analytically useful brackets, process researchers draw on qualitative and quantitative techniques. These range from purely discursive methods to determine changes in language over time (such as the constant comparative method [Celsi et al. 1993; Glaser and Strauss 1967] and automated content analysis [Humphreys 2010a, 2010b; Humphreys and Thompson 2014]) to methods that track changes in both discursive and structural relationships (such as historical methods [Smith and Lux 1993; Karababa and Ger 2011] or variations of the part-whole process of hermeneutic analysis [Giesler 2008; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Thompson 1997]).

These methods of “coding for change” all seek to group seemingly disparate events, activities, and choices into qualitatively distinct categories by comparing and contrasting the various forms of event data that are the basis of the analysis. Consider, for instance, how the move from individual event data points to a bigger picture understanding of the different types of dramatic conflict in the post-Napster music marketplace is described in Giesler (2008, 742). Giesler analyzed music downloader identity narratives for differences in heroic self-representations. Once bundled, these narratives allowed Giesler to identify the analytical unit of “dramatic conflict:” “First, I conducted an intratextual analysis treating each interview as a

separate ego drama. Next, in an intertextual analysis, I developed thematic commonalities among contemporaneous interview cases. Here, I sought to unpack the most recurrent themes of dramatic meanings that contextualized these individual dramas and to summarize them into overarching “hero models” (Holt and Thompson 2004). Finally, I conducted an intertemporal analysis to link these models to different stages of a chronological process” (Giesler 2008, 742).

Through analytical bracketing’s interpretive bundling exercise, consumer researchers should be able to organize a nebulous data set representing a seemingly disparate array of consumer and marketplace events, activities, and choices into a collection of plausible categories in conjunction with a sequence of (consecutive or overlapping) temporal variations thereof. As such, this empirically grounded analytical exercise generates one or more formulations about *how* change happens. To further reduce the number of theoretical possibilities, however, researchers must also tackle *why* change happens, that is, the specific triggering events or turning points as well as the overarching theoretical apparatus that can help explain the change from analytical phase to phase, a workbench mode we call theoretical focusing.

## WORKBENCH MODE 3: THEORETICAL FOCUSING—CONCEPTUALIZING FOR CHANGE

How can I explain *why* change happens in my data? Answering this “why” question requires theory that enables researchers to explain patterns in events and how sequences of events lead to an outcome or, in short, an “enabling theory.” Recall that “understanding how individual actions and objects connected to create value at the collective level” required Figueiredo and Scaraboto (forthcoming) to mobilize an external theory that addresses changes’ spatiotemporal formations, in this case Nancy Munn’s (1986) work. But how do process researchers find these theories? We found that one heuristic device that points them to the most helpful enabling theories is asking what model of history their case resembles the most and then finding a theory or theories that speak to this model. Along these lines, we found three models: a transformative, a topological, and a disruptive.

From a *transformative* perspective, history evolves along a fairly continuous path, organized by a structural logic that a researcher aims to explicate. This underlying coherence can be revealed by identifying the systematic interconnections between seemingly disparate historical events, activities, and choices. Change, then, is a process of adaptive responses to contextual demands and influences that, in turn, represent variations on these historical structures. While these historical forces do not operate in

### CODING FOR CHANGE IN ACTION: HOW CAN I DISTILL DIFFERENT ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES OR PHASES FROM MY LONGITUDINAL DATA SET?

Analytical bracketing can operate discursively, on the level of language, as is shown in [Humphreys and Thompson \(2014\)](#), who bracketed analytically using the narrative turns identified through a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles as the basis for a wordlist and quantitative tracking over time. Note how these authors have combined qualitative and quantitative methods to track both the types of discourses and how often they were mobilized over time. In many cases, however, it is useful to move beyond the discursive level of analysis in order to be able to tease out changes in materiality. Consider how [Figueiredo and Scaraboto \(forthcoming\)](#), who examined the systemic creation of value through circulation in collaborative consumer networks, used this approach to arrive at their circulatory subprocesses of enactment, transvaluation, assessment, and alignment.

**Ashlee Humphreys on [Humphreys and Thompson \(2014\)](#):** *For [Humphreys and Thompson \(2014\)](#), we began with a very strong sense of what was theoretically interesting and exactly what we wanted to study—the goal was to compare the Exxon oil spill of 1989 with the BP Gulf spill in 2010 and to do so by looking at newspaper coverage as a form of grotesque realism ([Bakhtin 1984](#)) that could potentially undermine ideas of clean energy. When we got into the data, we saw that the filth discourse, so important to grotesque realism, was strong at first, but then abated as a narrative of cleaning up the spill took hold. This was evident both qualitatively and quantitatively and both textually and visually when we added AP photographs to the data set. Following this, we set about trying to understand the narrative stages that appeared to discursively resolve or contain the initial risk anxieties raised by these crises. After finding these narrative turns—segregation, exception, reprobation, and restoration—qualitatively, we were able to develop wordlists to represent them so we could track them quantitatively over time and compare the resolution of the Exxon spill with the BP Gulf spill. This was nice because it allowed us to see that the Exxon spill, which was legally and culturally unprecedented at the time, took longer to resolve narratively than the BP spill, and this was largely because the stages of reprobation and restoration, where the legal process plays a role, were more drawn out.*

**Bernardo Figueiredo and Daiane Scaraboto on [Figueiredo and Scaraboto \(forthcoming\)](#):** *As data collection progressed, we were quickly overwhelmed by the amount of data amassed. Our data set involved records of thousands of actions performed by different individuals across time and space. We first tried categorizing actions as practices, but many of these actions were haphazard and not routinized, so not alike practices. We needed another way of understanding how individual actions and objects connected to create value at the collective level. The solution came from the value literature and being more systematic with our methodological approach. In her work, Nancy [Munn \(1986\)](#) states that value is generated by “spatiotemporal transformations” caused by actions. This was the clue that got us to think about mapping the different stages in the value creation process across time and space. But we were only able to match that idea with our data once we “followed the thing,” a methodological approach inspired in the mobilities paradigm. We followed a single object across time and space to understand its journey and its role in value creation. And then did the same thing for several other objects that circulated in the consumer network. Even though each of the objects we followed had a unique journey, we soon began to see patterns in the ways these journeys created value for the members of the network. By following and comparing these journeys, we started to identify clear distinguishable moments in the value creation process. That was an intense period of iteration between micro analysis focused on individual objects and macro analysis focused on the process. At the end, it became clear for us that systemic value creation is a process composed by several subprocesses, which we called enactment, transvaluation, assessment, and alignment. When writing the paper, we focused on the stories of a few objects that could help us best illustrate each subprocess and their role in the overall process of value creation in the network.*

a deterministic fashion, they function as a fairly obdurate system of path dependencies. In effect, we have a system in which the forces of inertia tend to be stronger than the countervailing pressures for change. In consumer research, Bourdieusian-inspired analyses of how experiences can transform the consumer habitus over time often invoke this style of temporal bracketing ([Arsel and Bean 2013](#); [Arsel and Thompson 2011](#); [Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013](#); [Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013](#); [Üstüner and Holt 2007](#)).

In contrast, the *topological* model ([Collier 2009](#)) theoretically focuses in on the points of discontinuity that exist among analytical brackets with the goal of identifying the ways in which conflicts, contradictions, and accidents of history shape institutions, whose contemporary form is always contingent and more fragile than it appears

([Foucault 1979](#)). Reality 1 is connected to Reality 2 through a complex series of historical contingencies. Rather than following an orderly structural logic, historical processes unfold through struggles over various kinds of resources that continuously disrupt status quo relations, unanticipated consequences, and topological displacements. This latter construct refers to institutional practices that are transposed from one context, for any number of micro-political reasons, onto another, thereby altering the meanings and function of the practice as well the receiving institution ([Collier 2009](#); [Foucault 1979](#)).

*Disruption* is the third conception of history. Like the topological approach, it is concerned with shifts in power within a given social field. But the focus is on historical changes that are so disruptive to the institutional

### CONCEPTUALIZING FOR CHANGE: HOW CAN I DRAW ON ENABLING THEORY FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES TO MEANINGFULLY CONCEPTUALIZE THE CHANGE I SEE IN MY DATA?

During process theorization, consumer researchers continuously screen external literatures in sociology, anthropology and other fields for theory that can help explain not only the “how” but also the “why” of change. Here are two examples of theoretical focusing in practice. [Parmentier and Fischer \(2015\)](#) identified a pattern of disruption in their data, which they were able to theorize through assemblage theory. [Giesler \(2012\)](#), in turn, identified a topological pattern in his data, which he was able to conceptualize through actor-network theory:

**Marie-Agnès Parmentier on [Parmentier and Fischer \(2015\)](#):** *As we continued to collect new data, extending our period of analysis to 2012 and broadening the kinds of data we were looking at, we realized that the show itself [America’s Next Top Model] was “falling apart” in that it was losing audience and being subjected to scathing critiques by those fans who were still watching, and by the media. At that point, we realized we were observing a process of “brand audience dissipation.” We saw few explanations of this process in the literature, and none that actually shed light on how consumers themselves might help precipitate the loss of audience. Thus our research question came into view. But we didn’t at this point have a good answer to it. We spent a lot of time thinking about alternate theoretical lenses that might help us make sense of the role of the fans in the dissipative process. After considerable reading, we realized that assemblage theory was well suited, because we could conceptualize fans and the material elements of the brand itself as part of the same assemblage, which we needed to do to make sense of changes over time. The assemblage theoretic concept of capacities was particularly critical since it helped us see fans’ potential to destabilize the brand and to focus on triggers (changes in other elements of the brand assemblage) that led that capacity to be realized.*

**Markus Giesler on [Giesler \(2012\)](#):** *Around 2010, half way through the analysis process for [Giesler \(2012\)](#), I had a pretty good handle on the general parameters of how Botox Cosmetic’s brand image changes. I had also been able to identify three managerial strategies that Allergan was using over and over again to combat Botox’s negative brand images and meanings. Then, while preparing a version of this research for a doctoral workshop, I realized that, while I was able to show that all these changes and managerial responses happened, I was at a complete loss about why they happened in this manner. I had no explanatory mechanism about why I found this pattern of conflict and no other, nor was I able to argue why I found these particular conflict management strategies and no others. So I began to search for clues in the sociological literature on other, similar topological shifts in technology contexts. One early candidate was the technology acceptance model, which offered a number of good insights but also suggested a linearity that I just couldn’t see in my data. The breakthrough came with [Callon \(1999\)](#) and [Latour’s \(1996\)](#) actor-network theory. Sociology apparently had an apparatus called “translation” to explain similar meaning making processes in the context of radically new innovations. More specifically, I was able to find empirical evidence for the three managerial strategies I had already identified. But Latour and Callon also talked about a fourth translation strategy called “problematization.” With this question mark in mind, I then went back into the field to collect more data and to see if I was able to bracket events around the hypothesized concept of problematization. And it turned out that, although I had initially overlooked it, problematization was indeed present in my data too. So bringing in actor-network theory and the translation model added a new level of conceptual focus to the data and allowed me to address the important “why” of the change under study.*

marketplace status quos and/or consumer identity narratives that there is a phase of instability where elements in the institutional network no longer have a predictable or controllable alignment. These destabilized conditions can result in a discursive scramble to reestablish a new institutional order and a more stable reconfiguration of preexisting and new elements ([Humphreys and Thompson 2014](#); [Karababa and Ger 2011](#)).

By conceptualizing the change under study, theoretical focusing helps significantly reduce the complexity of a longitudinal data set. An enabling theory from sociology, anthropology, and other fields helps elicit the broader *how* and *why* behind a tentative sequence of stages, phases, or episodes. Almost invariably, however, theoretical focusing also gravitates the researcher toward the enabling theory’s social science discipline and away from the protagonist actor: the consumer. To address this issue, process researchers must specifically determine the role of the

consumer in the process under study, a technique we call consumer enrollment.

### WORKBENCH MODE 4: CONSUMER ENROLLMENT—POSITIONING FOR CHANGE

What theoretically relevant role(s) does the consumer play in my process-oriented scholarship? One of the most fundamental, and often implicit, tasks facing consumer researchers engaging in process theorization is to “locate the consumer in the story.” We found that researchers typically use three primary consumer enrollment styles, each suggesting a distinctive axiology, that frame process theorizations in consumer research: (1) consumer as the agent of change, (2) consumer as subject of change, or (3) consumer as recursive subject, where the consumer is both an agent



of change, as well as affected by the revised institutional conditions the consumer(s) have helped to instigate. Mapping these enrollment styles against the theoretical focusing styles, as we do in [table 1](#), gives researchers access to nine distinct genres of process-oriented consumer research.

*Consumer-driven transformation*, for example, examines the role of consumers in production processes, following a coherent institutional logic. A recent example of this approach is offered by Figueiredo and Scaraboto's (forthcoming) analysis of systemic value creation in collaborative consumer networks. Their analysis develops a distributed process of value creation in which consumers undertake a myriad of interdependent actions to create value outcomes collaboratively for all participants in the network. [Martin and Schouten \(2014\)](#), in turn, offer a theoretical corrective to firm-centric models of market creation that tend to represent consumers as relatively passive actors. These authors theorize consumption-driven market emergence as a three-stage process involving practices of consumer innovation, where creative consumers mobilize available objects and other resources to overcome barriers to entry; practices of community formation, when creative consumers engage other people in the same activities, leading to the development of products, practices, and infrastructures; and entrepreneurial practices that consolidate, institutionalize, and legitimate these consumer-driven assemblages of marketplace resources.

*Institutional reconfiguration* is a genre of process-oriented consumer research that highlights how consumer subjectivity is produced and reshaped by intersecting marketplace discourses, conflicting goals and agendas among institutional actors, and tactical adjustments to the prevailing system of power relations ([Peñaloza 2001](#); [Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011](#)). Such analyses have provided novel insights into sociocultural and institutional struggles that eventually led to the legitimation of a consumption practice or industry ([Humphreys 2010a, 2010b](#)), the evolution and competitive dynamics of markets composed of multiple practices, beliefs, and rule systems ([Zhao and Belk 2008](#)); the dynamic process of myth market competition and the interplay of memories and countermemories ([Thompson and Tian 2008](#)), or the dynamic interplay of heterogeneous mythic narratives in the collective production and consumption of an ambiguous iconic brand ([Brown, McDonagh and Shultz 2013](#); [Holt 2006](#)).

*Recursive disruption*, in turn, is a particularly well-suited genre for analyzing how consumers actively contribute to disruptive changes that, in turn, reshape and often constrain their conditions of possibility. These analyses have demonstrated how, during periods of disruptive change, consumers move from obeying governmental prescriptions to rejecting them, or, from being obedient sultan's subjects to becoming more self-determined consumer subjects ([Karababa and Ger 2011](#)); how immigrant and

indigene consumers mutually shape their respective responses to the consumer acculturation process ([Luedicke 2015](#)); how disruptive consumers promote and are subjected to specific compromises between countervailing utilitarian and possessive ideals ([Giesler 2008](#)); or how religion, myths, and ideology intertwine to shape consumer brand attitudes that, in turn, drive resistance against global brands ([Izberk-Bilgin 2012](#)).

## ON CHOOSING

The goal of this article is to facilitate the development and positioning of a process theorization in cultural consumer research. We have detailed four analytical workbench modes of process theorization in combination with nine genres of process-oriented consumer research, each presenting a distinctive combination of assumptions about the nature of change in market and consumption systems and consumers' role in these processes. Through this framework, we hope to provide consumer culture researchers with a useful interpretive tool kit for deriving a process-oriented theorization from the unwieldy complexity of longitudinal data.

Importantly, although the manner in which we introduced and described the analytical modes may suggest otherwise, data collection, analytical bracketing, theoretical focusing, and consumer enrollment are not stages in a progressive sequence. Developing process theorization is never a linear enterprise (First, I collect data . . . Second, I bracket analytically . . . etc.). Instead, we found the actual research process to be much more of an exercise of interpretive multitasking whereby researchers constantly move back and forth between these four modes and seek to foster interpretive coherence among them relative to new insights generated in each mode. As such, at any given point in the research process, researchers engage in all four workbench modes simultaneously.

A question we have not addressed to this point is when (and why) any one of the nine process-based genres should be employed vis-à-vis another. Against the ever-tempting empiricist answer of "let the data guide your decision," we suggest that this interpretive choice is not resolvable by appeal to a methodological rule or some definitive features of the data set, creating a kind of lock and key affinity. In a related vein, we have tried to remain patently agnostic in regard to the epistemological adequacy of each of these interpretive genres. While each genre affords a different perspective on change dynamics, none provide a more definitive account than another because each presupposes different ontological formations and corresponding core assumptions.

If we accept that consumer culture researchers lack an omnipotent perspective to determine whether change is evolutionary, discontinuous, or disruptive or whether

### POSITIONING FOR CHANGE: WHAT THEORETICALLY RELEVANT ROLE(S) DOES THE CONSUMER SUBJECT PLAY IN MY PROCESS-ORIENTED SCHOLARSHIP?

Constantly shifting back and forth between four analytical modes can make the positioning of the consumer in the process theorization challenging at times, as these two researcher vignettes illustrate. [Parmentier and Fischer \(2015\)](#) represent a case where the consumer was visible as an agent of change from the beginning, but the type of agency evolved during the analysis and journal review process vis-à-vis data collection, analytical bracketing, and theoretical focusing—from an architect of emotional consumer-brand relationships via attachment styles in earlier rounds to a brand-assemblage disrupting agent in the final version. In contrast, one of the main challenges facing [Veresiu and Giesler \(2014\)](#) was to locate the consumer in the story from the beginning. Several rounds of theoretical focusing and analytical bracketing were required until the authors were able to identify the consumer as a subject of change in their analysis of responsible consumption:

**Marie-Agnès Parmentier on [Parmentier and Fischer \(2015\)](#):** *Consumers were “enrolled” in our conceptual efforts to make sense of the America’s Next Top Model (ANTM) study from the start, because our initial data was very consumer-focused, being drawn primarily from fan discussion boards. The original submission of this manuscript was based on data that covered the boards from the time ANTM started through to 2008. The phenomenon we saw in our data at that point was the variability of consumers’ apparent attachment to some of the contestants on the show: we characterized the contestants as human brands, and were attempting to explain why consumer collectives formed different types of relationships with different human brands. Reviewers rightly gave us feedback that we didn’t have strong enough evidence that fan/human brand relationships had actually formed, though we could document differences in attitudes. That feedback led us back to the data to reconceptualize it and to figure out what “story” we could tell that we could convincingly support with the data.*

**Ela Veresiu on [Giesler and Veresiu \(2014\)](#):** *We collected data at the World Economic Forum, an annual event in the Swiss Alps where institutional actors gather to address global problems such as poverty, chronic illness, or unemployment. By any stretch of the conventional imagination, we didn’t have consumer data. And so one challenge we were facing early on is that we didn’t know how to position the consumer in our analysis. When we presented early iterations of our paper to colleagues at conferences, workshops and invited talks, we would often hear comments like “interesting but where is the consumer?” or “if there is no consumer in your theorization, you may want to submit it to a sociology journal rather than a journal of consumer research or marketing.” It took us a while to figure out that, while we were not analyzing the consumer experience per se, we were analyzing those who were shaping the consumer experience, in other words, policymakers, marketing mangers, journalists, and other institutional actors in charge of shaping the institutional frameworks that, in turn, shape our experiences and choices as consumers. One study that really helped us comprehend this take on consumer subjectivity was [Karababa and Ger’s \(2011\)](#) historical analysis of coffee-house consumer subject formation in the context of the Ottoman Empire. [Emi and Guliz](#) had picked up [Janet Borgerson’s \(2005\)](#) call for more research on the constitution of the self-identifying consumer subject. So we settled on positioning the consumer as a subject of change whereby our research would investigate some of the practices and processes that precipitate responsible consumption. Once we had embarked upon this line of inquiry, it was far easier for us to contrast our investigation with previous research on responsible consumption, something that you can now see very clearly in the article’s introduction.*

consumers are agents of change, subjectivities produced by institutional forces, or recursive actors in a dynamic process, then it also becomes untenable to justify a choice of a particular process-oriented strategy on the grounds that it provides a perspective that is inherently deeper, more accurate, or more intrinsically compatible with the data.

Accordingly, we suggest that these interpretive decisions, much like a process-oriented theorization itself, depend on the network of propositions that a given study seeks to transform, diverge from, or even radically disrupt. For example, if the broader theoretical conversation around a marketing or consumer behavior construct has assumed that consumers are agents of change, then a process theorization that treats the consumer as an institutionally constituted subject position (or a recursive subject) would likely identify and specify change dynamics that had been previously ignored. Likewise, if a theoretical conversation around a core consumer behavior construct has assumed a

transformative model of history, developing a topological or disruptive theorization may reveal new theoretical and process relationships likely under theorized by orthodox scholarship. In closing, a key implication of process theorization is that structures are constituted through relations; consumer researchers’ interpretive choices are no less relational.

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