

THE THREE-TIER CYCLE: CAPTURING COMPLEXITY IN CONSUMER CULTURE RESEARCH¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes the notions of agency, assemblage, and practice as explorative lenses in a research guideline for the use of consumer culture research, which adopts a complex standpoint. The three-tier cycle is proposed as a contribution to the theoretical grounds of consumer culture research, supplying an extension to the interpretative investigation toolbox. The proposed guideline enables better navigation for future studies that focus on understanding relational processes manifesting through consumption and market-related phenomena. To this end, the introduced approach can guide studies toward grasping the co-creative interactions in postmodern culture in flux from a multidimensional perspective. This paper, therefore, provides methodological implications for the operation of contemporary consumer culture research that will employ complexity theories.

Keywords: Assemblage, agency, practice, Deleuze, DeLanda, Schatzki, diffraction

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ÜÇ AŐAMALI DÖNGÜ: TÜKETİM KÜLTÜRÜ ARAŐTIRMALARINDA KARMAŐIKLIĐI YAKALAMAK

ÖZ

Bu makale karmařıklık bakıő açısını benimseyecek tüketici kültürü arařtırmalarının kullanımına yönelik bir arařtırma yönergesinde faillik, öbekleőme, ve uygulama mefhumlarını keőfedici mercekler olarak sentezlemektedir. Bu kavramsal çalıőma yoluyla tasarlanan üç aőamalı döngü, tüketici kültürü arařtırmalarının teorik temellerine bir katkı olarak sunulmuőtur. Önerilen yönerge, tüketim ve pazarla ilgili olgular dolayısıyla gün yüzüne çıkan iliőkisel süreçlerin anlaşılmasına odaklanacak gelecekteki çalıőmalar için daha iyi bir arařtırma sürecini mümkün kılmaktadır. Bu amaçla sunulan yaklaőım, deėiőim halindeki postmodern kültürdeki ortak yaratıcı etkileőimleri çok boyutlu bir bakıő açısından kavramaya yönelik çalıőmalara yol gösterebilir. Bu sayede bu makale, karmařıklık teorilerini kullanacak çağdaő tüketim kültürü arařtırmalarının iőleyiőine yönelik verimli olabilecek metodolojik çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Faillik, öbekleőme, uygulama, Deleuze, DeLanda, Schatzki, kırınım

1. Introduction

“So, when we read these three texts on top of each other, what will we encounter? I am going to ask this.” - Baker, 2014a (trans. from Turk. to Eng.)⁴

The popularization of interpretivism has triggered a qualitative turn in research (Alasuutari, 2010). This growing shift can be taken into consideration in parallel with the accelerating postmodernist thinking of our era. This implies that the culture of today is understood as liquid (Hewer, 2022), in constant flux since its subjective reality is vague in form and open to multiple interpretations (Fırat and Dholakia, 2017). However, this paper is not concerned with the far-reaching goal of delivering an in-depth question about the state of culture in postmodernity or debating the underlying reasons for this state. Rather, the concern here is to provide a rejuvenated discussion on how consumer culture research can approach today’s culture. Indeed, postmodern postmodernism initially inspired consumer research that takes an interpretative cultural approach and is currently pushing toward its limits (Askegaard and Scott, 2013). The field of consumer culture research continues to explore the “dynamic network of boundary spanning material, economic, symbolic, and social relationships or connections” (Arnould and Thompson, 2018: 4). As such, it is relevant to contribute to the constructive endeavours that are labouring on what theoretical notions can be useful to adapt into the interpretative scheme of cultural consumer research, to enable conceptual advances that can leverage future studies.

Postmodern complexity theories, drawn mainly from Deleuzo-Spinozian philosophy, are being widely appropriated in various research fields. Coleman and Ringrose (2013) pointed out that Deleuzian thinking is often viewed as a “high theory” since, as the ideas work upon such an abstract level, notions constituting complexity in the discussion are argued to carry little relevance to inform real-life actionable research. To benefit more fully from the scattered approaches, Mazzei and McCoy (2010) invited contributions aimed at converting Deleuzian concepts from their abstract forms into practical implications for research. Koro-Ljungberg and Barko (2012) pondered upon the applicability of researching through a Deleuzian understanding of the world, and they criticized approaches that offer generalized guidelines for it. There is, surely, no single way to operate with complexity theories, and, for different motivations regarding different research fields, there should be discussions on how to tailor them according to specific needs.

Marketing scholarship, particularly Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and Interpretative Consumer Research (ICR), has been engaging with relational approaches to investigate consumption and market-related phenomena. In the face of the abundance of empirical papers and theoretical discussions, there is

⁴ (org. in Turk.): “Yani acaba üç metni üst üste koyarak okuduğumuzda, neyle karşılaşacağız? Bunu soracağım.” - Baker (2014a: 117).

the absence of a thorough paper that demonstrates a research framework that can align the merits of different yet complementary complexity theories to clear a pathway for future consumer culture studies. To address this matter, this paper aims to provide an integrated reading of the key notions of now widely appropriated streams of complexity theories. By communicating those notions as research operation guidelines in an interpretative framework, this paper helps shape a multidimensional perspective developed specifically for the realms of consumer research that can comply with the shifting understandings on the culture of consumption.

The initiative of engaging different theories into a curated perspective is called “diffraction” (Barad, 2014). As Smith and Monforte (2020) put it, diffraction is an attempt to embrace the foundations of the old to be re-used in the name of thinking anew. This paper is an attempt towards a cohesive reading for the operationalization of consumer culture research to advance exploratory studies designed to understand the current interplays between consumers, markets, and contemporary culture from the gaze of complexity theories. In this sense, this paper will offer diffraction by employing a Deleuzian notion of agency, combined with the analytical stance of DeLanda’s (1997; 2006; 2016) assemblage theory, and linked to the practice theory as in Schatzki’s (2000; 2011) definition, for consumer culture research.

Jaakkola (2020) shared a variety of templates for constructing conceptual papers, among which the “theory adaptation” will be the research design currency of this study. The goal of this study is to provide a perspective that emphasizes multidimensionality in cultural consumer research based on the immersion of the notions of agency, assemblage, and practice. Therefore, in line with the theory adaptation approach, the core objectives are firstly to revise the mainstream understanding of these notions and, secondly, to reinvigorate the relationships between these in a collaborative guideline. Subsequently, the literature review in the following section will highlight the pivotal aspects of various studies that adopt complexity theories and then underline the complexity tenets that can be purposefully emphasized in a collaborative guideline as described in this paper. Secondly, the following section will draft the theoretical background by discussing the key notions of the proposed guideline. The last section will illustrate the methodological implications of the three-tier cycle for informing research operating in tangent to consumer culture research.

2. Complexity in cultural consumer research

Complexity theories, namely practice theory (Warde, 2014) and assemblage theory (Canniford and Bajde, 2015), have been valued for alternative theorization in consumption contexts. A conceptual confrontation with the normative assumptions in marketing scholarship was initiated by Giesler and Fischer (2017), introducing the market system dynamics as correctives to existing biases.

One dynamic they discussed is the awareness of “markets as complex social systems” by acknowledging agents in the market beyond the consumer-producer dichotomy. Another is the exploration of the “co-constitution of marketplace reality” through inquiring about micro-meso-macro relationships rather than reducing the market-related phenomena to the interactions of individuated agents. The last is the encouragement to “focus on change and development” in aiming to understand the relationships between heterogeneous agents in the process of becoming. We will now amplify the impulses of these dynamics and render three tenets of complexity, which are observed to be conceptually discussed and empirically scrutinized in market and consumer research (Table 1). The tenets we signify here are i) acknowledgement of agency, ii) inquiry about inter-contextual links, and iii) focus on flow. Although we acknowledge the disparities in this overview, we merge the separate conceptual discussions that provided marketing scholarship with examinations of these tenets to show how these three discussions purposefully converge in terms of grasping complexity. Examples of empirical scrutiny corresponding to these theoretical efforts are also featured.

Table 1. Aligning Conceptual and Empirical Studies under the Tenets of Complexity.

Complexity Tenet	Conceptual Discussion	Empirical Scrutiny
Acknowledgement of Agency	“Object-Oriented Ontology” Franco et al. (2022)	- Heley et al. (2019) - Mello et al. (2021)
	“Relational Ontologies” Lucarelli and Giovanardi (2019)	
Inquiry About Contextual Links	“Context Of Context” Askegaard and Linnet (2011)	- Schöps et al. (2019) - Huff et al. (2021)
	“Methodological Situationism” Woermann (2017)	- Parmentier and Fischer (2015)
Focus On Flow	“Process Theorization” Giesler and Thompson (2016)	- Anderson et al. (2017)

2.1. Acknowledgement of agency

Franco et al. (2022) offer a fresh translation of object-oriented ontology for consumption and market-related research using assemblage thinking. Owing to posthuman sensibility in complexity theories, the object in their framework is an analyzed unit that can transcend purely human or non-human qualities. They also argue that objects yield affective capacities which constantly evolve through “processes of assembling going on beyond-human knowledge that may or may

not be acknowledged as affecting us at some point” (Franco et al., 2022: 410). Accordingly, the *acknowledgement of agency* corresponds to the orientation of research on the doing together with the doer, circumventing the separation of individual components and structural capacities (object/subject). On the one hand, an entity’s human, non-human, or beyond-human nature as the object of study is fuzzy, while on the other hand, the status of knowledge acquired through the analysis of that object is regarded as bounded in particular space-time and discretion of the research practice.

As the literature in consumer culture research has readily developed around orientating on human agency, that is, on disputing the manifestations of consumer subjectivity in co-creating cultures and markets, we briefly highlight here the studies that delved into capturing beyond human agency. Heley et al. (2019) discussed materially-grounded globalization using the case of a soft-drink product. They emphasized the importance of the trajectory of the object for grasping the in situ entanglements that territorialize global brands as they are uniquely embodied in each local context where products interact. To object-oriented storytelling, Mello et al. (2021) recently added a plot twist by centralizing the consumer’s cosplay experience in case of the absence of an object. They argue that the agency of objects can operate in direct and indirect ways, extended to the object’s potential of presence, which is established by relating to the imagery of the tangible presence.

Referenced studies share the acknowledgement of beyond-human agency of objects with affective capacities in their own right, which requires to “ground assemblages according to their own scales (...) as ‘objects’ that are not solely determined by their relational contexts” (Franco, 2022: 405). Another quality of these studies, however, is, scrutinizing the object-context interactions: soft-drink in glocalization (Heley et al., 2019), and absent-object in negotiated consumer experience (Mello et al., 2021). This is far from disregarding the external relationality of objects altogether since things, human or non-human, don’t exist in a vacuum. Ultimately, consumer culture research aspires to delve into the contextual backgrounds through which the explored consumption and market-related phenomena emerge. This interest invites the first tenet of complexity to stretch from asking “what is” the object questioned for the agency to asking the situated question of “where is” the object (Wilde, 2020).

2.2. Inquiry about contextual links

Lucarelli and Giovanardi (2019: 92) accentuate “relational ontology” for market and consumer research that strives to “challenge the notion of an independent and stable domain of reality”. In this respect, the object of study is placed into its wider surroundings, with a sensibility of cultural fluidity. This connects to a reflexive epistemology found in Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011: 391) touchstone “context of context” discussion in which they call for “adequate attention to social and cultural

context” in the analytical approach of cultural consumer research. Woermann (2017: 151) echoes this stance with “methodological situationism” as an imperative towards fulfilling the “empirical duty of the researcher to show how exactly the macro-social phenomenon is made present and reproduced in local situations”. Hence, the *inquiry about contextual links* can be achieved by mapping the traces between the cultural context and the consumption and market-related phenomena.

Schöps et al. (2019) defined Instagram as a digital market assemblage with aspects of ubiquity, fluidity, and interactivity. This market is discussed as a relational object that consists of varying actors, including consumers, brands, and the algorithmic nature of the platform itself. Concentrating on brands located in this rather new habitat, they investigated how conversations among these actors transform the market. Huff et al. (2021) demonstrated the interactive manner through which product, market, and meta-market are nesting into each other in their explanation regarding the legitimization of the cannabis market in some parts of the United States. Moreover, they presented the culture of consumption as constantly fluctuating due to changing consumption practices and adversary mitigations between the components of entwined nests.

Respective to the referencing sequence (Schöps et al., 2019; Huff et al., 2021), these studies, in line with the complexity tenet of concern here, posit stances that stick multiple analytical layers together: micro (digital brand, contested product), meso (co-created market, legitimizing market), macro (brand-consumer engagement, socio-political transformation). Seeking beyond what the object of research is, and moreover, going after where it is located in the time-space matrix, is a crucial move towards understanding the internal and external plays occurring in and through the consumption and market-related phenomena in relation to greater cultural reality. Efforts of scratching micro-meso-macro connections “emphasizes a shift from permanence to flux, from structure to agency, from scripted social activities to the processes leading to their emergence” (Lucarelli and Giovanardi, 2019: 90). In this vein, for instance, Price and Coulter (2019) offered brands as active subjects, for grasping the culture in the making with an assemblage analysis of decentralized consumer-brand-culture interactions.

2.3. Focus on flow

Giesler and Thompson (2016) reflect on the storyline behind cultural consumer studies that perpetuate attention on the ongoing changes in connection to the researched phenomena through the “process theorization” framework. They articulate the “key implication of process theorization is that structures are constituted through relations” (Giesler and Thompson, 2016: 506). This seamlessly links the analytical appreciation of inter-contextual dynamics by constituting the consumption and market-related phenomena in relation to the cultural sphere, with the final complexity tenet of concern being the *focus on flow*. Each interaction claims a movement, and due to the very nature of the act affecting the

involved parties, these interactions can have impacts of varying extents, triggering events with magnitudes differing from subtle encounters to drastic disruptions. Processes are formed through the consideration of changes among separately assembled realities within an alignment by narrative. These changes may emerge through certain structurally, agentially, or recursively initiated impacts, whose controllability alters in degrees.

Parmentier and Fischer (2015) utilized complexity theories to primarily situate the object of study as brands being assemblages of heterogeneous components. They then discussed an unexpected destabilizing influence driven by consumers over brand identity. Anderson et al. (2017), in studying the death of buildings, shaped their object with the care of the material aspects, such as the historic architectural features, and the cultural associations, like the visitors' mourning for losing buildings they cherished. All of these were attached to the decay of the building. They further situated their object in lieu of the changing priorities of contemporary life and the concurrently transforming urban spaces, in which some buildings are becoming dead in particular ways. Their findings were based on the consumers' impressions reflected on deteriorating buildings' lifespan, regarding the consumers as subjects of cultural shifts.

With the goal in mind focusing on the flow of how the agentic relations would be working in the context of a process of doings, sayings, and happenings, the given examples can be read as follows: recording the disassembling of the study's primary object by a component agent of it and spotlighting the coming together of the object in a different form during the implication of the research (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015), and, underscoring the object's experience in terms of a process of becoming obsolete and constructing linkages to consumers' perception of socio-material changes (Anderson et al., 2017). Thinking in the streams of flow can be a means for signifying an unforeseen occurrence during research as a result of granting agency to the objects of study and constantly looking out for viable inter-contextual clues. Likewise, this processual practice focus can accelerate the evolution of the discussion over the period of the study. Going with the flow helps to modify the research operation and the theoretical take on it because this enables a nonlinear way of seeing.

3. The three-tier cycle

Aside from the examples in the prior section, the ICR and CCT literature generally shows that influential studies intrinsically follow a multidimensional framework, whether or not in terms of complexity tenets. Karababa and Ger (2011) produced one of the pinnacle studies that embraced all three tenets of complexity in a latent manner before complexity theories became prized as an alternating current in consumer culture research. The research initially empirically pivots on the research object, consumer subjects that embody the formation of non-western consumerism by the terms original to it. The analysis is inter-contextual, embedding the object

of research into a historical fabric woven with religious and socio-political threads as shaping this consumer in context. The big-picture theoretical scheme of the study, thereon, focuses on the process of the emergence of this consumer subject. In many other cases, consumer culture researchers incorporate a multidimensional interpretative approach into their research through a tacit cycle.

On the empirical level, for studies adopting a cultural approach to consumption, the orientation of research points towards the object. At this level, researchers set out to define what the object of their study is and differentiate it from what it is not. On the analytical level, the analyzed unit is switched to the unit of analysis, and central to the efforts is the relationality through which the object emerges. Then, researchers ought to dive into where the research object is located in the sense of exploring the wider cultural context of the market or consumer phenomenon. The theoretical level thereon builds with speculation regarding the object-context dynamics. This means that at this level, researchers need to critically reflect on how the interplay between the culture, consumer, market, and consumption enfold. This may include asking why an existing explanation of a similar consumer phenomenon works in a different cultural context and not in the case of the research at hand. Broadly following this outline, the empirical level exploration starts with closely observing the ways in which market or consumer activity is practised. Then, the analytical level proceeds by questioning how the cultural phenomenon is assembled. Thereon, the theoretical level is accomplished through the investigation of which potentials and constraints emerge and why within the circumstances of their related cultural context. However, switching between these dimensions of thinking is certainly no straightforward path; it is, rather, a messy iterative process. There is no doubt that such deliberation requires a strong conceptual background to play on, in addition to rich data to manifest. Thus, the complexity standpoint, as we suggest, can be empowering for taking over this challenge.

The motivation of the three-tier cycle guideline overlaps with the ongoing project of rejuvenating the investigative toolbox in marketing and consumer culture research drawing from re-envisioning different theories (Woodward, 2011; Zajc, 2015; Giesler and Fischer, 2017; Hewer, 2022; Skålen et al., 2022). To serve this project, we read and connect the notions found in postmodern complexity theories. Moreover, we melt those notions in a research operation framework as detachable lenses to offer a more transparent guideline of the rather concealed multidimensional interpretative cycle of cultural consumer research. The “three tiers” phrasing of Huff et al. (2021), which is used for describing their analytical strategy based on assemblage theory, is repurposed here as an encompassing indicator of shifting dimensions of an interpretative cycle which characterizes a complexity standpoint. We propose that a diffractive take on complexity theories can be devoted to the ambitions of the multidimensional research process. This argument is put forward by submitting familiar notions as snap-on explorative lenses to be used for appropriate

research levels corresponding to complementary interpretation tiers. As such, the notions we select to inform each lens, and already discussed in the literature review section to an extent, are practice (Schatzki, 2000; Hui, Schatzki, and Shove, 2017), assemblage (DeLanda, 2006; DeLanda, 2016), and agency (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Bowden, 2014). These notions are customized and drawn together in this section to respond to the empirical, analytical, and theoretical needs of the layered dimensions of consumer culture research.

The revision of the complexity notions in a specific progression for this section (practice, then assemblage, and finally agency) by no means implies a step-by-step usage of them. None of the conceptual papers we mentioned previously encourage strict adherence to a synthetic mechanism to apply the tenets of complexity because these studies are targeting to function within a chaotic understanding of culture. As this is the case with regard to most qualitative research, consumer culture researchers don't simply begin their work at the empirical level, skip to analysis, and finish with theoretical discussion (Belk et al., 2013). It is worth repeating here that we attest to the fact that these levels are extremely messier organic phases than perfectly sanitized steps. This is why it is important to stress that explorative lenses are emphasized to be detachable and interchangeable and arranged within an active interpretive cycle for the requirements of different research levels between which researchers circulate back and forth to reflect iteratively until gradually reaching the study's finale.

3.1. Practice lens

Practice theories track macro and meso influences through micro-scale practice performances (Schatzki, 2000). This aspect of inter-scale relationality in practice theories can be seen under the light of micro-history (Levi, 1992; Ginzburg, 1993); as equally in practice theories, to understand macro scales, it is meaningful to explore how sociality is enfolding, based on lived instances. Drawing on Reckwitz's (2002) take on Schatzki's (2000) theoretical procedure, Warde (2005) denoted that practice theories indeed intersect with the core claims of complexity approaches. It is appropriate to mention here that what is referred to as practice theories do not represent a homogeneous paradigm due to distinctive branches of thinking across practices.

There are two main branches among practice theories (Schatzki, 2000). Firstly, there is an array of practice theories in line with the human-centric approach in mainstream social sciences. There, the human mind is at the core of any practice; meanwhile, research strives to understand human conceptions of their practices, which follows a phenomenological stance. The other branch is a coalesce of practice theories in the posthumanism trail, challenging the asymmetry in the traditional ontology of humans and non-humans. This frontier presents a parallel to the first tenet in cultural consumer studies based on the complexity approach. Schatzki (2000) draws another two veins, in this case, among the practice theorists within the post-humanist stance.

One is practice research that appropriates a stance given due to beyond-human entities and embellishing them with symmetrical agency. But inevitably, humans are still at the centre of knowledge creation in these practices. The other vein is practice theories that centralize not on humans as individual agents but on the collectively arranged practices in their research agenda.

From a Deleuzian complexity standpoint, the individual local phenomenon and the collective global phenomena repetitively mirror each other in differing degrees of reality (Baker, 2009). When the notion of practice is appropriated as an explorative lens for the empirical level of consumer culture research, the issue may arise of how, from the complexity gaze, it is possible to access consumption and market-related phenomena in a cultural context. Woermann (2017: 156) puts it as follows; “[w]e thus find a quintessentially postmodernist move, (...) shifting the basal unit of the social world from individuals and their deeds to practices and their manifestations in routine doings (...) to reformulate every entity, quality, or state as such a doing: doing being old, doing value, doing a brand (...)”. Consistently, humans have the role of a doer within the social phenomenon, yet their singled-out perceptive understandings of their doings are not located at the heart of the research. This means that “[p]ractical understandings, ways of proceeding, and even setups of the material environment represent forms of knowledge (...) propositional knowledge presupposes and depends on them” (Schatzki, 2000: 21). This can be seen as deliberately undermining the dominance of human-based insight from its position as the sole determinant in the empirical level of research. This effort was also previously underlined by Franco et al. (2022).

3.2. Assemblage lens

DeLanda’s (2006; 2016) discussion of an assemblage theory was motivated by an urge to make better use of Deleuzian philosophical advancements for social sciences (Dolphin and Van Der Tuin, 2012). The core argument propagated against the assemblage theory is its fuzziness since, from its gaze, the reality is in constant transformation (Dovey et al., 2018). In alignment with Tsing (2015), assemblages simply can be thought as open-ended organizations. As revealed by Williams (2018: 33-34), assemblage theory puts the emphasis on the doing over the done, on the “flux, contingency and dynamism, and to uncovering the multiple movements that together constitute an effect (...) [where] the process of assembling, rather than the assemblage as a resultant formation is therefore prioritized conceptually”. Soulier (2012) proposed a coalition of Schatzki’s (2011) notion of arrangements in practice theory and DeLanda’s (2006) assemblages. This proposition emphasizes that similar to assemblage theory, in practice theories, social and material things hang together, acting and reacting via nexuses and setting up the stage for action in a flat co-existence (Schatzki, 2016). From this point especially, practice theory can clearly be associated with assemblage theory (Strengers et al., 2014; Antczak and Beaudr, 2019).

The continuous interplay of agency and structure (Rutzou and Elder-Vass, 2019)

is where assemblage emerges. Withal, this unrest can be valuable for flexible thinking if it can be moulded into a methodological strategy. In a reflection on Spinozism, Baker (2009) argues that, according to the laws of motion, while a body is fixed relative to a certain speed and slowness ratio, what emerges is called an individual. Thus, an individual is always more or less a combination of sub-individuals; it is a fluid structure. Importantly, things may vary from the infinitesimal to the gargantuan, while all is regarded as an infinitely complex ‘individual’ of an unlimited sequence of limited compositions. Individuality thereby is a level, a degree, and a scale of being (Baker, 2014b). The very idea of composing here can be found as definitive to the operation through the assemblage lens. The underlying idea claiming that there are links crossing the boundaries of the researcher’s thinking is, rooted in the emphasis on historicity. Accordingly, if things are of things, there are co-requisites of their pasts, presents, and futures, while all are uniquely referring to the same flat reality. This perpetuity can be explored through an assemblage lens on the analytical level, which could bring the interpretation upon the context of context (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

Assembling things, or in other terms, composing ‘individual’ entities as emerging out of relationships with other entities (Elder-Vass, 2007), endows an analytical stance of bracketing reality towards a certain direction. The ‘metropolitan life’ can be an assemblage of many human and non-human components, varying agents with volatile properties and hybrid capacities. A ‘building’ can be considered as an assemblage removed from any role given to humans, focusing on the components made of cement, iron, glass, voltage, door knobs, sewage, and the geographical condition on which it sits. A ‘marble desk’ can be an assemblage of the shape, size, office culture, taste signifiers, colour, position, and a family photo on top; the ‘formation of marble’ can be an assemblage of minerals and thousand years of natural forces of nonlinear pressure (DeLanda, 1997). Meanwhile, ‘making a pot of meal’ can be taken as an assemblage created by a collection of ingredients and chemical reactions in a practice called cooking involving a cook, and it can be mentioned that the way of thinking here works itself out as a hodgepodge. A bodily conspicuous consumption activity can be identified as a social practice (Schatzki, 1996) which can be assembled with culturally coded material components (Schatzki, 2010). It is a matter of analytical scanning, this merging of sociality and materiality (Elder-Vass, 2017), for which the assemblage lens serves to probe boundlessly.

3.3. Agency lens

Bowden (2014: 61) notes, “Agency is inseparable from the different ‘assemblages’ of heterogeneous affective bodies that a given body enters into, where everybody is itself an assemblage of more elementary bodies, and so on”. There are miscellaneous examinations of agency in recent theoretical disputes (Allana and Clark, 2018). Relevant here as a Deleuzian concept, agency is understood as a rather expansive form of relationality, being, thus, the agent’s capacity to impact, involve, transform, to affect both its internalities and externalities. These agents can be considered as signified individuals of a networked reality, as in the

sense of assemblages existing in the form of an ephemeral practice constellation. Nevertheless, important to mention is that individual agents are indispensable components of the assemblages they affect. Reality, as understood in complexity theories, emerges through active relationships between wholes and parts, which can come across in varying qualities and scales. Thus, reality generates the practical (Reckwitz, 2017). Drawing on this view, agency as a lens enables the visibility of the relationality practically at play.

Agents with differing natures and capabilities are formed in a never-ending process of becoming, of which they are all a part (Deleuze, 1990). Capacities are empowered by energizing the links between components in the unique existence of the agent's entity, while effects show themselves in the agency degrees, which it has at a particular point (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2006). This agency, when in a given situation, takes the form of a quasi-causal role (Bowden, 2014). Quasi-causality can be understood as a postmodernist replacement or even a correction of direct causation within the modernist thinking tradition in recognition of the multifinality of the fluctuating world instances. It is necessary to see that at no time in history has reality unfolded in such a planar form, so drawing a straight line from A to B is regarded as the only possible pathway. Consequently, within a culture in flux, social vitality resides in comprehending the manifoldness of the traces of causality (DeLanda, 1997; Baker, 2014b). Withal, any line can still be drawn from A to B. Urry (2005) recites, from the sight of non-linearity, that a fully predictable relationship between causes and effects is unreal, but specific circumstances produce their own emergent influences. Parallel to the already mentioned conversations, the agency lens can show that the agent's relational ties are "certainly 'out there' in their actions such as these interpreted or made sense of by others" (Bowden, 2014: 238).

The agency has for some time been scrutinized in consumer culture research, commonly in the sense that it gives due to materiality and to the agency of consumers in varying topics and considerations (Belk, 1988; Southerton, 2001; Borgerson, 2005; Scott et al., 2014; Fernandez, 2015; Türe and Ger, 2016). Rather recently, the relationality aspect of Deleuzian materialist agency has received special attention (Scott et al., 2014). The particular form of agency, which is of value for the framework being drafted here, draws from this intersection and highlights a research approach in which relations receive central attention (Sandıkcı and Kravets, 2019). Following this line, the agency lens supplies a stimulus for theorizing how the formation of the links through which the inter-contextual interactions occur and understanding of the object under research and its underpinning drives that transform the context while becoming transformed by it. After all, for Deleuze, the agent enables the structure, and structure enables the agent; they are interlinked through quasi-causal relations. This way, cultural consumer researchers can connect the dots in their study and tie it all together within an overarching problematization of how object/subject symbiosis unfolds.

4. Methodological Implications

Table 2. Operational directions of the three-tier cycle.

empirics of the practice lens	analytics of the assemblage lens	theoretics of the agency lens
1) framing the consumer culture research object in terms of practice	1) mapping the research object inductively from the first-hand data analysis	1) speculating over research findings
2) designing the data collection according to its practice nature	2) tracing the links between research object and cultural context deductively from the existing insight	2) discussing possible explanations of the relationality between research object and cultural context

The radical power of complexity theories is hindered by institutional requirements and academic justifications for the theoretical frenzy, obstructing the specific discussions on the importance of the broader notion of agency in the sense of Deleuzian understanding. This creates the problem of underutilization of the critical power that distinguishes the complexity standpoint, through which there is an opportunity to think differently. This thinking can fuel a reflexive push for acknowledging the connections between the components that are united through each of their distinct yet collaborative agencies, as this avails the ground to further scrutinize such relations and multifocal as well as deep-rooted reasons behind their conditions. Therefore, as discussed by Belk and Sobh (2019), the complexity theories themselves are not the magic wand. While so, the creative play that their powers can grant would be relevant as a guiding insight for the projects positioned within the pursuits of consumer culture research.

Accordingly, taking a glance at the project through the practice lens for the empirical level of research can inspire an ontological initiative by 1) framing the object of study as a practice or a constellation of practices and 2) designing the method of data collection in accordance with its lived practice nature. The need is to look at in situ doings, sayings, and happenings to see how a consumption or market-related phenomenon can become an object by looking at it in relation to research. This calls for both the close observation of the socio-material production of the practice in its direct setting and the tracking of the practice's positioning in the indirect cultural setting (Rokka, 2010). Indeed, this lens operates trivially; however, a deliberate move towards grasping the practice nature of consumption performances can drastically prompt the researcher's re-envisioning of the data set towards experimentation with methods, which conventionally consist of consumer interviews (Arsel, 2017). In the study of Venkatraman, Ozanne, and Coslor (2024), how the creative practice of drag provides consumers with an embodied resistance opportunity against the stigmatization of gender performances that are perceived beyond the binary norms was explored. For this pursuit, the body is conceptualized as an agentic corporeal ground fuelled by creativity and sociality

that engenders a play between shame and pride, which is termed within a body-in-practice framework. In line with this approach, researchers benefitted not only from interviewing but also from visual methods in enriching their understanding of the consumers' experience with drag as a performance art. The photographic documentation of drag performers' transformation from their everyday life modes into their glamorous drag queen personas helped brilliantly capture how this practice unfolded on an embodied level. Aiming to grasp a research object conceptualized on a practice level would call for incorporating photography, videography, participatory mapping, and photo-elicitation. Getting knowledgeable about visual methods then becomes imperative (e.g., Cavusoglu and Belk, 2024; Kravets and Karababa, 2022; Atik and Ozdamar Ertekin, 2011).

Thus, investigating practices as performed by heterogeneous agents in the process of entangling is appropriate for an assemblage analysis of practice lens inputs. Adopting the assemblage lens for the analytical level encourages interlinked inductive to deductive phases proceeding by 1) mapping the properties (material components such as commodities, expressive components such as values, etc.) and the capacities (affective potentials like a product's use values, sign values, etc.) of the components (human, non-human, internal, external, etc.) to compose the object within the data, and, 2) tracing how an object locates within the cultural context (narrating the territorializing, deterritorializing, and re-territorializing currents in the research storyline) through the data. This move may seem like another frail twist, yet it has a use beyond the design of an analytical strategy coherently to the interpretative background of a study with a complexity standpoint. An assemblage lens can be useful for experimenting with unexpected levels of data analysis (Canniford and Bajde, 2015). Responding to the calls to increase methodological sensitivity in research (Canniford, 2012; Cheetham *et al.*, 2018) will be helpful for retrieving insights regarding the components of a market or consumption phenomena that a standard coding strategy would otherwise neglect. To this end, in Taştan and Ozdamar Ertekin (2024), an Instagram-based community consisting of Turkish homemaker women, namely the presenters (*sunumcular*), was conceptualized as a self-organized consumer tribe that assembled around the consumer-created practice of presentering (*sunumculuk*). To grasp the emergent ideologies directly or indirectly at play in the enactments of this community, researchers employed netnographic data collection and assemblage analysis. In the first stage of the analysis, the goal was to map the heterogeneous components that composed this tribe. Thus, data were inductively coded by adopting visual-textual content analysis. Then, deductive interpretation of the ideological capacities was achieved with thematic analysis. Accordingly, findings reflected multiple dimensions of ideological entanglements as existing through the interactions of both complying and conflicting components of the tribe in terms of equal recognition of materiality and expressivity, as well as human and non-human agency. Various adaptations of assemblage theory as an enriching analytical strategy can be found in the existing literature of consumer culture research (e.g. Diaz Ruiz *et al.*, 2020; Presi *et al.*, 2016; Canniford and Shankar, 2013).

Hence, it becomes possible to interpret the mappings and tracings of the assemblage lens and speculate on the findings with the purpose of explicating how things work, by whom, with the power of what, through what channels, where, and why at that time becomes possible. From this approach, wearing the agency lens for the theoretical level of the research promotes 1) speculating over the research findings as an extended phase to the data-based analysis and literature dialogue and 2) discussing possible explanations of the relationality (forms of emergent processes) between the object (consumption and market-related phenomena) and the context (culture in flux). Again, appearing as if it is a simple switch; this is a complicated move. To illustrate, the study of Weijo, Martin, and Arnould (2018) worked on the changing facade of the Nordic food culture as initiated by consumers' involvement growing into a collective movement. Their discussion delved into emergent pathways through which consumers' organized efforts triggered the gastronomy market in their related context. Once the complexity of the conditions under which an object of consumer culture research becomes visible to the eye through the assemblage analysis, grasping the processes in which they intertwine with culture and how emergent relationships are established becomes open to scrutiny. When the active agencies (of consumers, marketers, brands, etc.) are resolved through the research of the lived world under de facto conditions (of the political climate, economic crisis, cultural transformation, etc.), discourses on the problems are no longer cul-de-sacs; they also become vulnerable to change. Drawing from this angle, when benefitted in terms of critical theorization especially, complexity theories that are discussed here together within a conversation among practice, assemblage, and agency notions, would help to inquire about "consumption phenomenon as a result from the agency of different actors who interact in dynamic arrangements, under changing conditions and circumstances" (Souza-Leão and Moura, 2022: 1385).

We thus advocate that researchers can engender fresh discussions motivated toward the regeneration of the field in accordance with the fluctuating disposition of culture, not simply by abducting postmodern complexity theories but purposefully working with them. This meant, for the case of this paper, delivering a diffractive take on complexity theories for demonstration of how to operate with them in a cultural consumer research process. Rokka's (2021) directions for future research problematize disruptive and constitutive dynamics in the market and promote complexity theories as an apparatus for questioning their implications on culture and consumer experience. Making evident the multidimensional construction of researching on consumption and market-related phenomena, we suggest that the three-tier cycle can be a significant tool as a methodological guideline for reflecting on the interpretative steps researchers take in consumer culture research in pursuit of grasping complexity and generating well-rounded theoretical insights.

5. Conclusion

Perspective informs the character of a research project (Dolbec et al., 2021). We suggest that this paper can contribute to a particularly important mission of exemplifying novel perspective generation by playing with abstract complexity notions in association with grasping complexity in consumer culture research. We believe it is worthwhile to extend the guideline conceptual discussions in order to improve the accessibility of the current debates related to researching contemporary culture, consumption, and markets. This will help to improve the pedagogy of consumer culture research through custom thought pieces under the umbrella of this niche field of study. With our endeavour, we hope to awaken a nuanced awareness about the intricacies of the consumer culture research process for newcomers in the field, such as early career researchers and PhD students with diverse academic backgrounds. For that, we are providing a language of postmodern complexity theories to provoke an enriched understanding of the interpretative cycle often tacitly at work.

In view of the accumulating insights from the consumer culture research over the culture in flux, we aimed to demonstrate a repeating distinction of the knowledge production patterns of this cluster from the perspective we find most apt. By introducing the three-tier cycle, we hope to bring forward a guideline, a potentially useful tool tailored to the needs of aspiring researchers in consumer culture research. In speaking of the multidimensionality of the three-tier cycle, we are not thinking of three successive phases but the three necessary dimensions of cultural consumer research aiming to grasp complexity. The merit of the interpretative approach, as described in this paper, is the creation of a reference that guides researchers in switching among the micro, meso, and macro dimensions within and beyond their study. This manoeuvring can potentially sharpen the critical edge in upcoming studies of consumer culture. Therefore, the pedagogical feature of the three-tier cycle can help new generation researchers to think reflectively, generate novel problems, and develop interesting explanations. Therefore, this three-tier cycle also contributes to the extension of the theoretical toolbox of consumer culture research by marking out a reproductive perspective rooted in complexity theories, which invites future discussions.

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