

Thompsons' Rubbish Theory: Exploring the *Practices* of Value Creation

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces Thompson's Rubbish Theory (1979) to interpretive consumer research. The paper suggests the Theory is useful in foregrounding the material dimensions of markets. It also highlights the importance of thinking in terms of movement, flow and circulation in markets. Finally the theory suggests that value emerges through our ways of seeing and placing objects. A key critique of the theory is its neglect of the *practices* of value creation. Thus the paper draws from existing studies in consumer research in exploring three such sets of practices: finding objects, displaying objects, and transforming and re-using objects.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the possible contributions of Thompson's Rubbish Theory to understandings of consumption. As such it might be seen as part of a broader movement within the discipline to centre 'things' more fully in accounts of consumption (Borgerson 2005, Dant 2005, Miller 2005). The focus on Rubbish Theory highlights the fact that much of value creation occurs beyond the first flush purchase of the new in the subsequent (re)uses, display and exchange of objects. Thus it focuses attention away from the moment of purchase and towards the ways in which objects are absorbed into our lives through cycles of (re)use. It also highlights the creativity of social actors in creating the conditions for value to emerge.

In his 2005 book 'Materiality and Society' Dant argues strongly for a closer focus on the 'material stuff of life' and observes that the mundane routine ways in which objects are taken up in everyday lives have been neglected. Of course such an approach regards the meanings of objects not as intrinsic to the objects themselves, but as socially and culturally (re)produced (see for example Miller 1998). Plenty of work in consumer research explores the ways in which goods might act as symbolic resources for lifestyle and identity construction (i.e. Belk 1988), but there is less reflection on the actual practices and activities through which goods become meaningful and valued. McCracken's (1988) work on 'Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods' begins to address this gap. He views advertising and the fashion system as instruments of meaning transfer between the culturally constituted world and consumer goods. He then suggests that a series of consumer rituals operate to transfer meanings from consumer goods to the individual consumer. These rituals include those of possession, exchange, grooming and divestment. The strengths of his argument include a focus on the mobile quality of meaning and some exploration of the instruments through which meaning is transferred. However he is not clear as to the *practices* which constitute these rituals. In addition his contention that 'meaning resides in three locations: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer' (1988: 89) fails to completely capture the complexity and fluidity of meaning movement. There is a linearity to his conceptualisation which misses the constant flux and flow of meanings in markets.

In 'The Social Life of Things' Appadurai (1986) highlights the restlessness of objects arguing that 'from a methodological point of view it is things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.' (1986: 5). Appadurai usefully observes that 'commodities, like persons, have social lives' (1986: 3). He argues that things move in and out of the commodity state throughout their lives, and rather than looking for distinctions between things which are

commodities and things which are not, he focuses on the 'commodity potential' of things. Arguing that 'the commodity situation in the social life of any "thing" be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature' (1986:13). Appadurai further proposes that 'the commodity situation can be disaggregated into: the commodity phase of the social life of any thing, the commodity candidacy of any thing and the commodity context in which any thing may be placed.' (1986: 13). The first of these 'the commodity phase' captures the way in which commodities move in and out of the commodity state throughout their lives. 'things can move in and out of the commodity state, that such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant' (1986: 13). However these movements do appear to be reduced to the opposites of commoditization and singularization, one might ask the question, does anything exist in-between? This is where Thompson's Rubbish Theory comes in.

THOMPSON'S RUBBISH THEORY

Transients, Rubbish and Durables

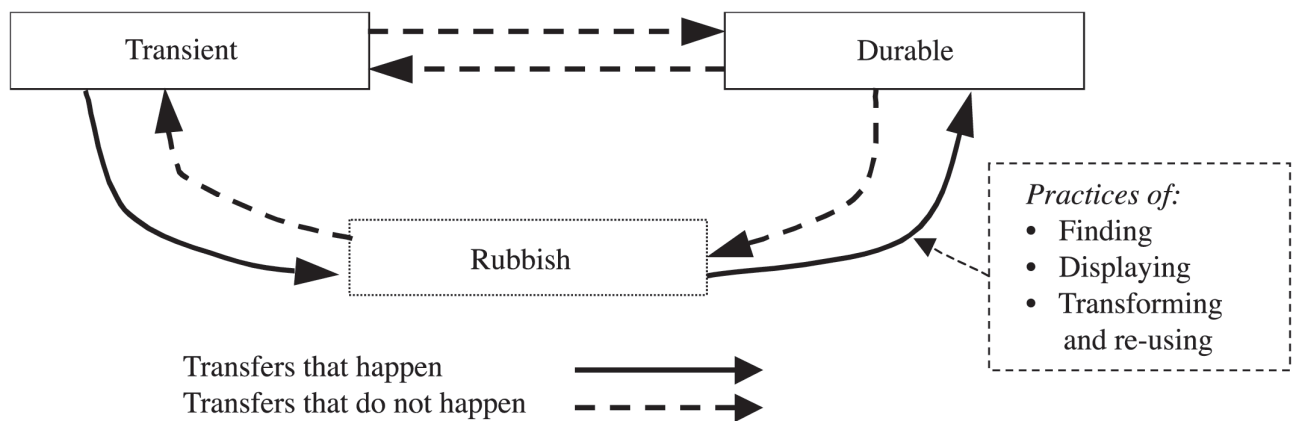
In almost all contemporary debate where the consumption of goods and services is considered it is largely assumed that these possessable objects and experiences are of at least some value, it seems that the category of objects and experiences of no value (rubbish objects and experiences) is largely invisible. Thompson argues that the processes and contradictions involved in recognising rubbish are crucial to social life. He has a particular conception of rubbish, one which rather than seeing it as waste or even as the unwanted, views it as necessary to the wider system of valuation. For Thompson rubbish can only really be understood in relation to the categories of transient and durable. Indeed these two categories represent the visible and valued elements of material culture as opposed to the invisible and unvalued 'rubbish'. It is important to note that these 'categories' ideally represent ways of seeing objects as opposed to substantive containers for them. The transient represents the usual state of commodities as objects which are declining in value and which have finite life spans. Whereas the durable increase in value over time and have (ideally) infinite life spans (1979: 7). Thompson uses the example of a used car as a transient and Queen Anne tallboy as a durable. He further observes that their category membership determines the way we act towards them.

Thompson argues that rubbish represents an important possible 'in-between' category in a 'region of flexibility' which is not subject to the same control mechanisms of the valuable and socially significant categories of transient and durable. Therefore it 'is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability' (1979: 9) he further suggests that 'a transient object gradually declining in value and in expected life-span may slide across into rubbish' (1979: 9) where it has the chance of being re-discovered, brought to light or cherished once again. Figure one demonstrates the possible paths an object may take (from transient to rubbish and from rubbish to durable).

The value of recognising 'rubbish'

There are undoubtedly a number of important dimensions to recognising rubbish. In one sense it represents the residue of a post production society constantly reminding us of our ecological misdemeanours. In another sense it represents a category of objects

FIGURE 1
Thompson's Rubbish Theory



which embody a significant amount of potential for re-emergence through processes of recycling, re-use and re-absorption into everyday lives. Seen as residue it contains a reminder of past ways of living, past fashions, but also past routines and habits. Moran (2004) in considering 'the memory of rubbish' observes the deeply unsettling nature of rubbish objects:

'These objects are disconcerting because they are located at the end of a temporal process which, caught up in the cyclical rhythms of daily habit, we were not even aware was occurring. Amidst the leftover material of daily life, we encounter the unsettling evidence that routines have histories' (2004: 63).

As Thompson observes, by its nature, rubbish is consistently over-looked, bearing no, or in some cases negative, value. Its visibility and presence also results from its placing (see Douglas' 1966 conception of dirt as 'matter out of place'). Thompson comments that we only notice rubbish when it is in the wrong place, and highlights the embarrassment and anxiety that mis-placed rubbish, or rubbish which has found its way in to the wrong place can cause 'Something which has been discarded, but never threatens to intrude, does not worry us at all.' (1979: 92) but rubbish in the wrong place is 'emphatically visible and extremely embarrassing' (1972: 92). In considering practices and conduits of household disposal Gregson et al (forthoming) similarly emphasise the 'placing' of unwanted things. They observe that these placings are about wanting to do something with and to things. Rubbish objects are things that are no longer used or loved or cared for and often no longer seen. Rubbish objects linger on the periphery of our lives, in the back of the drawer, bottom of the wardrobe or cupboard, corner of the garage or garden shed gathering dust.

From the objects point of view then a certain degree of patience is required, they must wait until they are re-discovered or begin what is often a restless journey through a range of sites and spaces, the jumble sale, junk shop or charity shop until they are 'moved on' again. Freund's (1994) story explores the experiences a Chippendale table collects during its lifetime, observing that 'uncertainty plagues the lives of most things' This discussion of the table's career emphasises some of the means by which objects fall

in and out of place during their lives. The table moves from owner to owner and moves in and out of use. At the end of the story the table is gifted to a museum, a place that Freund deems to be relatively stable and secure.

'In the course of its life, the Willing table had been passed down from one uninterested relation to the next. It had moved from the servants quarters, to a box in the dark, dry basement, and finally into the house of a great-great-grandson. Luck brought it there, and kept it polished, and made it appreciated. When Phebe Newhall's Grandson died, the table's future was again uncertain. In the life of a thing there is no safer home than a museum.' (Freund, 1994: 55).

Rubbish is also persistent, it never actually completely goes away, we are never completely able to rid ourselves of it. Munro (1995) and Hetherington (2004) explore this quality of rubbish arguing that it continually exerts an absent presence. Rubbish, it may also be argued, requires a significant amount of work for its management. Like dust in the home it constantly builds up and needs dealing with but all we seem to be able to do is to move it elsewhere. Thompson argues that this persistence causes problems, problems which result from dis-junction between the economic decay and physical decay of things, i.e. they hang around long after they are deemed to have economic value.

'In an ideal world... an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then... disappear into dust. But, in reality, it usually does not do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo, where, at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered' (1979: 8-9)

This focus on the possibility of discovery is important to consumer researchers as it highlights the opportunist nature of some markets. Indeed this is also what makes for some excitement when searching for the elusive discovery, the object that has been 'rubbished' by others but that can be brought to light through the exercise of new or different sets of knowledge. In this sense the

operation of expert (and in many cases specialised) knowledges is central in driving some markets particularly for example for antiques or collectors items.

The Practices of Value Creation: From Rubbish to Durable

The above consideration of rubbish suggests that it is an integral part of social life and a key conduit through which objects may move from the transient to durable category. However, a key critique of Thompson's Rubbish Theory is that he leaves us unsure as to the specific practices which effect this movement of things (and thus creates value). Therefore three such sets of practices are explored below, they include: finding objects, displaying objects and transforming and re-using objects. It is argued that each of these sets of practices changes the way we view an object moving it from being seen as a 'rubbish object' of no value to a 'durable object' of increasing value (see figure 1). In considering each of these sets of practices illustrations are drawn from existing studies in consumer research.

Finding Objects

One key way in which objects may slide from the category of rubbish to durable is through the act of finding. Indeed the concept of 'the find' appears central to much consumption activity in the realm of the non-new. Hunting for bargains at car boot sales, flea markets and in charity shops is all about the prospect of the find (see Sherry 1990a, 1990b, Soiffer and Herrmann 1987, Gregson and Crewe 1997).

Indeed, Gabriel and Lang (1995) include the 'Consumer as Explorer' as one of many possible consumer identities. Their conception of bargain hunting as 'a secret of getting something for nothing in a world where everything has to be paid for' (1995: 67) suggests a degree of 'triumph against the system'. However locating the concept of the find squarely within the marketplace is too limiting for our purposes here. What, then might one mean by 'the find'? Ultimately the find relates to discovery, and suggests that something has been otherwise overlooked, ignored or hidden away. The find may not involve objects which are new to us, it is possible to find some of ones own items if they have been hidden away long enough in an attic and thus made strange to us. The concept of the find also suggests that the found object has some qualities that others (or indeed ourselves) have in the past overlooked, as such it is closely related to 'bringing to light'. The find may be extended to embrace features of objects as well as objects themselves. This directs us to their 'potentialities', objects may have been there all along but we've suddenly found them to be useful, likeable or beautiful. It might be that some aspect of them has simply been brought to our attention. Equally, as discussed below in relation to transforming objects, we may make alterations to objects which bring out their potential. The transition from thing of little or no value (rubbish), to thing of value (durable) can result form a relatively minor shift in the way we see something.

Displaying Objects

Discussion of practices of display needs to be couched within the wider moves within the economy towards the aestheticisation of social relations and increasing emphases on presentation (Bohme 2003, Carr and Hancock, 2003, Featherstone 1991). A range of institutions impact upon and react with 'meanings for and of display' cultural intermediaries such as interior designers and fashion designers play a central role here in directing our ways of seeing (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998, Cronin 2004). However we can also explore the practices of display on a much more localised level. Hurdley (2006) observes the accomplishment of social and moral identities through practices of display within the home

sphere. She finds that families use a range of focal points for the display of objects which narrate family and individual stories, in particular the mantelpiece and the wall space above the mantelpiece. Although she does not deal directly with this in the paper these *placings* of objects have significance for the way in which they are valued. Here we can begin to reflect on the significance of front spaces in the home such as hall ways and sitting rooms in relation to the back spaces of bedrooms, back stairs and cellars. Leach's (2002) work on 'At Home with Art' also explores the home space as a site of display but alerts us to the 'long history of meanings for display in homes which impact upon what gets allowed in and where it is put or what is done with it once it arrives' (2002: 156).

Transforming and Re-using Objects

A focus on the transformation of objects also allows us some purchase on the sorts of practices that may re-enliven rubbish objects. These transformations may involve creating new uses for old things to fit in with contemporary lifestyles for example the use of old bathtubs as garden planters or church pews as dining benches. Transformations may also involve the modification or updating of objects through painting, alteration or repair. Transformations may not only be based around creating new uses but also creating new looks. Fashions (vintage, retro, kitsch) may offer opportunities to re-inscribe objects with value (see Gregson and Crewe 2003). Palmer and Clark's (2005) edited collection 'Old Clothes, New Looks' explores the 'contemporary refashioning' of clothing to create new and unique sets of identities for the owner and wearer. Tranberg-Hansen's work (1999, 2000) which explores used clothing practices in Lusaka' highlights the importance of practices of appropriation in investing objects with meaning. Work by Herrmann (1997) in the context of the U.S. garage sale similarly explores these processes (see also Soiffer and Herrmann 1987). The re-use of objects also creates value for things that otherwise would be allowed to slip away (or slide terminally into the rubbish category). As such re-use is closely related to the practice of 'gleaning' (Maclaran and Meamber 2002). Gleaning suggests an active raking through of objects and thus highlights the work that may go into re-appropriating and re-using objects. But it also emphasises the gathering, scavenging or re-using of items left behind by others (see Hill and Stamey, 1990). The re-use of and creation of new uses for objects of course also has positive ecological implications, ones which the 'slow consumption' movement are at pains to promote (Cooper 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Rubbish Theory attempts a comprehensive theory of value through a focus on the biographies, movements and transformations of objects. This paper has found that the Theory is useful to consumer researchers in three key ways. First it helps us to explore more fully the material dimensions of markets thus contributing to a 'thingly turn' in the study of consumption (Borgerson 2005, Dant 2005, Miller 2005). Second it highlights the importance of thinking in terms of movement, flow and circulation and moves us away from means-end, supply-demand, production-consumption linearities in thinking through the consumption process. Third it suggests that value, rather than being an inbuilt property of an object, emerges through our ways of seeing and placing objects.

We are used to exploring the role of objects as resources in individual's lives, perhaps they way in which they move in and out of our field of vision. But in acknowledging the social life of things we might explore the career of the object as it traverses a universe of people. Further research would trace lives of objects, casting studies of consumption as one moment in the wider life of a thing.

In particular further work might explore the role of institutions in influencing the valuation of a type of object asking how the category boundaries of rubbish and durable are policed in our contemporary culture. Here we might see art critics and dealers, antique dealers, museum curators etc as working hard at the edges of the durable category to keep some objects inside and some firmly outside. There is also more work to be done on the relations between individual and collective valuations-what role is there for individuality (or perhaps eccentric evaluations)?

Acknowledging the centrality of *practice* in the process of value creation moves researchers away from an over emphasis on semiotics and representation. It requires an in-depth exploration of what consumers actually do with objects as they absorb them into their lives. Such a focus acknowledges that the creation and maintenance of value cannot be reduced to the moment of the economic transaction. It also highlights the creativity and resourcefulness of consumers particularly in translating objects from rubbish to durable.

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