Mapping consumer power: an integrative framework for marketing and consumer research

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Abstract

Purpose – To help shape a more cohesive research program in marketing and consumer research, this paper presents a systematic effort to integrate current research on consumer empowerment with highly influential theories of power. A conceptual overview of power consisting of three dominant theoretical models is developed onto which is mapped existing consumer empowerment research.

Design/methodology/approach – A synthetic review focuses on three perspectives of consumer power: consumer sovereignty, cultural power and discursive power, drawing from sociological, philosophical and economic literature. These models are then applied to consumer research to illuminate research applications and insights.

Findings – Research of consumer empowerment has grown significantly over the last decade. Yet, researchers drawing from a variety of intellectual and methodological traditions have generated a multitude of heuristic simplifications and mid-level theories of power to inform their empirical and conceptual explorations. This review helps clarify consumer empowerment, and offers a useful map for future research.

Research limitations/implications – Researchers in consumer empowerment need to understand the historical development of power, and to contextualize research within conflicting perspectives on empowerment.

Originality/value – The paper makes several contributions: organizes a currently cluttered field of consumer empowerment research, connects consumer and marketing research to high-level theorizations of power, and outlines specific avenues for future research.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Purchasing power, Modelling, Marketing theory

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Consumer power has become a cliché of modern consumer culture. Marketing practitioners routinely refer to it by pointing to consumers' ability to ignore, resist, and adapt even the sleekest and most costly multi-media assault, invoking such sentiments as "customers are too smart to be fooled" "consumers see through bad marketing" "the customer is king" or "the customer is always right". Maintaining the common-sense notion that the consumer is powerful given his or her ability to exercise free choice (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) is an astute strategy because a free

consumer exculpates marketing from charges of seduction, coercion, and manipulation (Ritzer, 1999). Still, a rich tradition of criticising marketing practice and consumer culture as forms of domination exists (Jacobson and Mazur, 1995; Packard, 1957; Rudmin and Richins, 1992). According to this perspective, consumers are helpless against the seductive power of the want-makers (Clark, 1989; Marcuse, 1991; Packard, 1957). While hardly a monolithic body of thought, the critical position generally posits that marketing is a powerful economic, social, and cultural institution designed to control consumers, thus rejecting any real possibility for free choice and consumer agency.

Despite the centrality of power for the evolution, organization, and legitimacy of marketing practice and theory (see Smith, 1987 for a review), marketers still lack a clear understanding of the various intellectual traditions and theoretical origins that inform discussions of consumer power. In comparison to general claims that consumers are empowered by the internet (Pitt *et al.*, 2002), by increased competition in the marketplace (Moynagh and Worsley, 2002; Nelson, 2002) and by the political implications of consumer choice (Scammel, 2000), the development of conceptual and analytical tools to measure such claims is lacking. This state of affairs is problematic for any research agenda seeking to understand consumer empowerment, because observations linked to whether or not consumers are empowered are irrevocably wedded to the starting definition of power supporting such claims. In most cases these definitions are not clearly detailed and researchers rely on heuristic simplifications and mid-level theories.

As a result, existing writings on consumer power are difficult to compare and reconcile. Hence, a clearly delineated conceptual map of consumer power is needed to guide future research efforts characterized by more theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous approaches. We, therefore, propose a cartography of power that illustrates the term's complex theoretical tradition and contested conceptualizations. Such a map provides marketing and consumer researchers with the tools needed to develop more sophisticated conceptualisations and measurements of consumer power.

It is hardly surprising that the theoretical vagueness and myriad conceptualization of consumer power is reflected in the voluminous, eclectic and diverging formulations on power found in disciplines ranging from physics to social theory to political science. Power has many faces. Depending on the school of thought, it measures kinetic energy and physical strength, defines a malignant and oppressive force or constitutes truth. In addition, to disciplinary differences in the definition of power, everyday language adds to its conceptual elusiveness and makes power difficult to delimit. Because power is riddled with inbuilt contradictions and the formulation of an exact definition is neither desirable, nor analytically viable (Clegg, 1989; Haugaard, 2001; Olsen, 1970; Scott, 2001; Stewart, 2001), we propose a comparative analysis of theories of power and their implications for marketing research. Following Gaille's (cited in Carlson, 1996) suggestion that one needs to recognise that some concepts are essentially contested, we propose to examine competing perspectives of power, not to force convergence but to help marketers appraise various views of power more critically.

The result of our discussion is a conceptual map of power, which provides a historicised and contextualised understanding of the term as well as potential applications in consumer and marketing research. We are not trying to capture the

"true" essence of power, because, as we insinuate above, such a thing does not exist. Rather, by disentangling the connections between political and social theory and existing research in consumer and marketing research, we hope to clarify and conceptually organize theories of power that have been used to analyse and critique consumer power. We suggest that such a cartography provides a valuable resource for marketing and consumer researchers interested in developing more rigorous theoretical expositions and empirical investigations of consumer power.

This paper is divided into two main parts. First, we introduce our conceptual map of power by presenting three dominant explanatory models: sovereign, cultural and discursive. Second, we discuss these models in more detail by highlighting how they have informed existing research on consumer power and how they might inform future research efforts on consumer empowerment. We conclude with a call for more theoretically informed empirical investigations of the manifestations of consumer power.

Cartography of power in consumer and marketing research

The marketing and consumer research literature provides a limited number of systematic discussions of consumer power (Desmond, 2003; Holt, 2002; Merlo *et al.*, 2004). Often, the term emerges more or less loosely during discussions about consumer resistance, sovereignty and agency (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Traditionally, the notion of consumer power has been used to explain the nature and origin of consumer demand and to justify the role of marketing in satisfying it (Smith, 1987). Such an understanding of power often informs analyses of consumers' bargaining power vis-à-vis producers and studies of consumer strategies to alter the components of the marketing mix and the marketing environment (Grønmo and Ölander, 1991; Pitt *et al.*, 2002; Wathieu *et al.*, 2002).

Recently, there has been a notable growth in more culturally grounded and critical analyses of consumer power. The influential philosophy of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1975; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993; Marcuse, 1991) sought to expose the powerless nature of consumers seduced by the pleasures of consumption. Ozanne and Murray (1995), Murray and Ozanne (1991) and Murray *et al.* (1994) have been most vocal about the market's negative influence on the social, political, and cultural imagination of consumers, charging the market with curtailing communicative openness and semiotic diversity by superimposing the all-encompassing code of commodity capitalism onto everyday life. While adherents of the Frankfurt School model see mass consumption and marketing as oppressive, postmodern consumer researchers tend to theorise consumption as a site of resistance and emancipation (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Fiske, 1989; Peñaloza and Price, 1993, Thompson, 2004).

Currently, Desmond (2003) and Holt (2002) provide the most advanced theoretical accounts for understanding consumer power and resistance, respectively. Desmond (2003) highlights the definitional volatility of power by contrasting liberal, reformist and disciplinary power. He explains how, from the liberal perspective, consumers appear as empowered champions of the marketplace while the reformist and disciplinary conceptualization of power portray the consumer as victim of cultural domination. Holt's (2002) historical review shows discourses of resistance as prerequisite to what he calls the dialectics of consumer culture and creative consumers practices of empowered consumers as essential to reproducing a hegemonic market.

Within the study of power, some remedial efforts have produced frameworks to help organise different understandings of, and approaches to power (Clegg, 1989; Haugaard, 2002; Lukes, 1974; Scott, 2001). Here, we borrow Haugaard's (2002) narrative structure and distinctions between social theory and political analytical thought. Broadly, these distinctions are based on the types of objectives pursued. Studies of power conducted within the social tradition, which we link below to the cultural and discursive model, have historically been preoccupied with the societal structures that result in a given appreciation of power, manifested by class struggles and false ideologies as well as stable structures and bureaucracies. Analytical political theory, which we link below to the consumer sovereignty model, in turn has concentrated on the development of more precise and "scientifically" grounded ways of measuring power.

Our conceptual map (Figure 1) includes three models that summarise the main intellectual traditions from which power is analyzed:

(1) the consumer sovereignty model;

(2) the cultural power model; and

(3) the discursive power model.

Given the volumes of writings on power, familial relationships that are presented for each intellectual tradition have to be selective. Other types of maps can be drawn by using different systems of classification. These could be based, for example, on whether or not the definitions of power are conflictive or consensual or pertain to the power-over or power-to types. In addition, to this we do not claim that our review of literature is complete. Not all theorists of power could be included in this map. We also did not include every article ever written mentioning consumer power and empowerment within marketing and consumer related literature. Nevertheless, our review is far-ranging and rather than claiming to provide an all-encompassing genealogy of power, we opted to identity those theorists we feel are particularly useful for an examination of consumer power.

The map, therefore, establishes relationships between theorists of power found in political and social theory and consumer and marketing related literature. Relationships of first order, where researchers have endorsed a definition of power found in social and political thought are identified by the use of bold arrows. This is the case of most of the researchers within the discursive model, who, with the exception of Holt (2002), explicitly reference and draw from Foucault's ideas. The dotted lines mark more implicit, weaker relationships between the main theorists and applications found in the marketing literature. For example, we used a dotted line when a marketing researcher's observations of power appeared similar to definitions and conceptualizations advocated by a given power theorists, but a direct reference to that thinker was missing. This is the case of Abercrombie's (1994) relationship to De Certeau (1984), because Abercrombie's assessment of consumption as a site of resistance against the ascription and commoditisation of meaning closely echoes De Certeau's thesis. Positive and negative weights have been included where appropriate to indicate whether final conclusions of the study fond consumers to be empowered (+) or not (−).

In the following discussion of the sovereign, the cultural, and the discursive models of power, we draw from Desmond, Holt, Foucault and other theorists to:
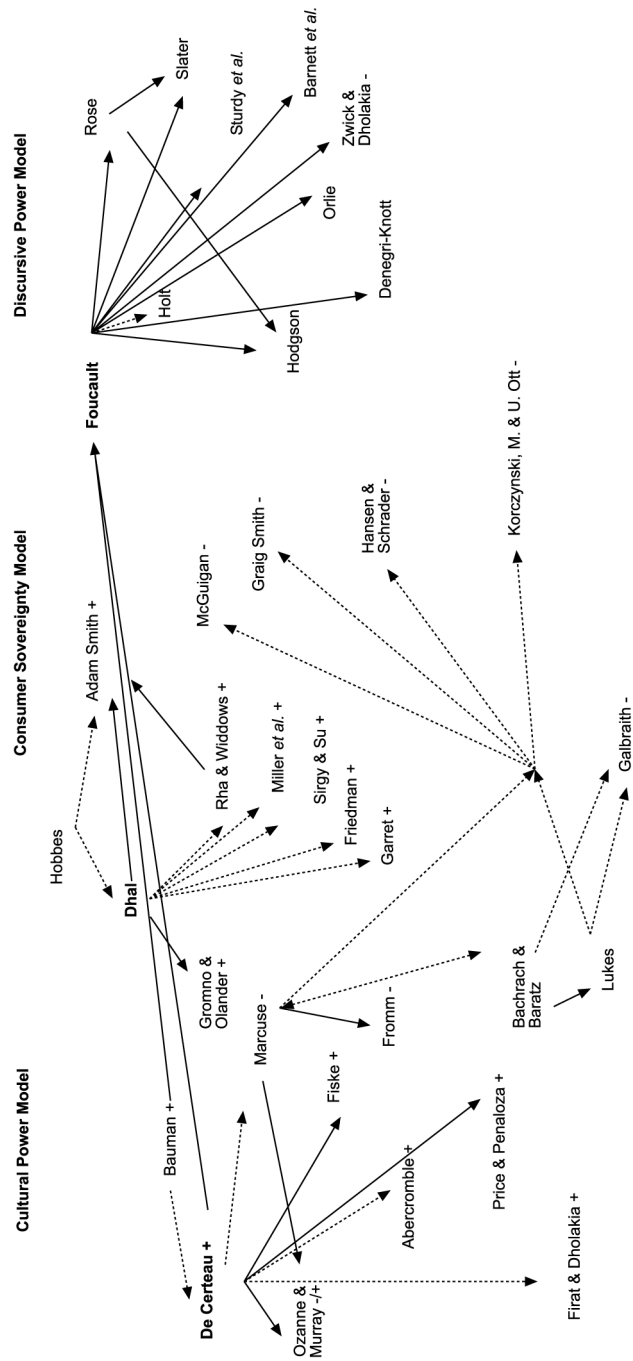
Figure 1.
Conceptual map of power

- explore the notions of power that underpin existing marketing and consumer research; and

- provide concrete theoretical and methodological support for identifying and implementing future research.

The consumer sovereignty model

Consumer sovereignty and empowerment have a long tradition in classical and neoclassical economic theories (Slater, 1997). Adam Smith was among the first to extol the consumer as the hero of modern market societies. According to this model, the self-determined and dispassionate market choices of sovereign consumers are instrumental in directing the market's so-called invisible hand, which results in more efficient production, better and cheaper products, social progress, and increased general welfare. Within this model we situate work examining:

- mechanisms of consumer boycotts (Friedman, 1996; Friedman, 1991; Garrett, 1987; Miller and Sturdivant, 1977; Smith, 1990);

- consumers' ability to maximize utility over cost (Nelson, 2002; Moynagh and Worsley, 2002; Pitt *et al.*, 2002);

- consumers' potential to countervail producer power (Rha and Widdows, 2002);

- the rise and activities of the consumerist movement (Nicoulaud, 1987; Straver, 1977; Swagler, 1994);

- the change in trading conditions (Grønmo and Ölander, 1991); and

- studies looking at the barriers of consumer sovereignty (Sirgy and Su, 2000).

With the exception of Grønmo and Ölander and Pitt *et al.* (2002), who provide some explanation of their concept of power, these studies operate with an implicit and taken-for-granted concept of power as the ability, to paraphrase Friedman and Friedman (1990), of free and rational individuals to choose.

Consumer sovereignty advocates assume that aggregate sums of well informed, autonomous consumer agents possess greater power than individual producers. This notion of power as distributed among all relevant players in a particular field corresponds to a zero sum, quantity capacity definition of power developed within the analytical political tradition. Put differently, power is a divisible entity that is possessed by one agent to the detriment of another (Hindess, 1996). For marketers, consumer researchers, and economists working within the sovereignty paradigm, the emphasis has been on defining what constitutes power and how can it be measured.

The consumer sovereignty perspective constitutes the dominant paradigm in studying power and its epistemological strengths stems from a long intellectual tradition extending back to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Clegg, 1989; Hindess, 1996; Stewart, 2001). Hobbes was the first to outline a model of power as a cumulative entity, arguing in effect that power can be operationalised as the possession of various kinds of skills that help someone accomplish a task against the resistance of others. Specific methodological approaches for conceptualising and measuring such a Hobbesian notion of power were outlined by Dahl (1957, 1968), who defines power as the ability of A to make B do something that B would not otherwise do. Dahl proposed that ownership of power should be assessed in terms of independent and dependent

variables as evidenced by behavioural manifestations and decision making. Therefore, the measurement of power is a combination of the:

> ... magnitude of the power of the C's [controlling unit] with respect to the R's [responsive unit], how this power is distributed in the system and the scope, and domain, of control that different individuals or actors have, exercise or are subject to (Dahl, 1968, p. 407).

Research applications. Research following this line of analysis needs to concentrate on moments of obvious conflict between producers and consumers and determine whose interests prevail during decision making. Since, power is measured in quantifiable behavioural outcomes, determining whether consumers or companies (i.e. producers, marketers) are empowered is a function of assessing who influences whom more. The examination of whether or not consumer or producer interests prevail during key decision-making moments may be usefully separated into micro, individual incidents and macro events which involve collective consumer action. The atomistic position of the individual consumer who is keen to promote his/her self interests over those of a particular company will have some implications with regards to the amount of power exercised. Likewise, the orchestrated action of mobilised consumers will too have repercussions in terms of the muscle exerted in the prevalence of consumer interests. Following Dahlian dictums, collective consumer action would constitute an instance of increased consumer empowerment, based on the premise that there is an aggregate sum of skills and talents. This type of premise has also been noted in boycott studies; for example, John and Klein (2003, p. 1197) write "because individual consumers are typically small relative to the market, their actions are likely to have a negligible impact on producers".

These are key distinctions for the measurement of consumer empowerment that conceptually can build from distinct research traditions within marketing and consumer related literature. For example, obvious moments of conflict between an individual consumer and seller would be evidenced anytime during and after an exchange and these can be studied by drawing from service and relationship marketing where critical incidents have received substantial attention (Keaveney, 1995; Hoffman and Bateson, 1997;Palmer *et al.*, 2000; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Conversely, research could also explore the viability of consumer empowerment by investigating the degrees to which consumers can construct truly sovereign consumer choices (Moynagh and Worsley, 2002; Nelson, 2002; Pitt *et al.*, 2002) or how the world wide web influences consumer knowledge and buyer power (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Macro approaches, where a consumer collective is involved in a class action suit, boycott (Friedman, 1996; Friedman, 1991; Garrett, 1987; Gueterbock, 2004; John and Klein, 2003; Miller and Sturdivant, 1977; Smith, 1990) or manifestation against a particular company (Grønmo and Ölander, 1991; Gueterbock, 2004) will assume a distinctive character in terms of the possession and exercise of consumer power. Both, macro and micro examinations of power can be organised according to Dahl's descriptive (magnitude, distribution, scope and domain) and exploratory characteristics (resources, skill, motivations and cost).

In Dahlian terms, magnitude is defined as the amount of power that C has over R (e.g. how much power an individual consumer has relative to an organisation). Distribution takes into consideration how power is distributed among actors of systems such as the market. This item examines the systemic mechanisms by which

power is awarded to producers and consumers. In comparison with distribution, scope articulates a more contextualised and nuanced understanding of power. By acknowledging that some individuals may be powerful with respect to one kind of activity but not another, power emerges as a sort of "specialist force" rather than a universal concept. For instance, the notion of consumer sovereignty awards consumers with the power and the capacity to choose (e.g. boycott or "buycott"). Yet, the licence and authority granted to consumers in the marketplace may not translate into other domains. Hence, an individual may be empowered as a consumer, but not as an employee. In addition, domain helps the researcher delimit the range of consumer power in a specific consumption context. A consumer may very well be able to get a refund for an unsatisfactory dish he purchased in a restaurant but he cannot storm into a kitchen and cook for himself. Hence, domain can be defined as the number of individuals and the range of actions that a consumer is able to control.

Dahl's explanatory characteristics can be used to develop a more detailed catalogue of the resources and skills available to consumers and marketers in a specific exchange scenario. Accordingly, levels of consumer empowerment could be quantified via an examination of skills (persuasive, technical, organisational, and social) and financial, informational and legal resources amassed by consumers. Intel Corporation's 1994 fraudulent chip incident and consumers' reaction to it, exemplifies how technical and organisational skills can be mobilised to determine the outcome during a key decision making process (Badarraco and Useem, 1997). In that particular incident, the possession of sophisticated technical skills enabled consumers to first identify flaws in the Pentium Chip and utilise the comp.sys.intel news group as a forum to lobby interested parties (consumer groups and the media) of the controversy which, according to Badarraco and Useem led to the final withdrawal of the product. In other scenarios, for instance, in a micro, critical incident, an individual consumer's social prestige and financial resources can be key in the procurement of power over producer interests.

Consumers' ability to orchestrate their resources in a sustained and organised fashion is axiomatic to levels of empowerment exercised against an organisation. Take the sporadic attempts of disgruntled customers who seek compensation from an organisation and whose limited power is met with an endless and sustainable reservoir of corporate resources; not only is the amount of resources limited; but also their ability to persevere. Alternatively Grønmo and Ölander's (1991) empirical examination of a dispute over payment charges between Finnish Banks and consumers whose wages were accredited to banks, illustrates the magnifying benefits of a consumer collective able to organise and consolidate a tight knit front. Successful campaigns tend to congregate different groups around a particular issue and make use of a wide portfolio of skills and resources. For instance the Greenpeace 2001-2003 Stop Esso campaign was fronted by a coalition of high profile celebrities, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and organised consumer groups who wanted to change Exxon's position on climate change. They materialised these intentions through the "don't buy Esso Boycott" campaign, supported by guerrilla marketing tactics, direct communication with petrol payers, a web site and news media. Likewise, other notorious confrontations between consumer groups and organisations like the Free Burma coalition against Pepsico (Danitz and Strobel, 1999) and animal rights advocacy groups against McDonald's inhumane treatment of animals (Zwerdling, 2002) are exemplars of consumer power

over producer interests inasmuch as they were thought to be directive in readdressing corporate policies.

In addition, an assessment of the various types of motivations as well as an understanding of the costs of exercising power should be carried out. Judging whether or not consumers were able to impose their will on a specific choice setting requires an understanding of the motivations driving the exercise of power (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). In the case of the boycotts, consumer manifestations or disgruntled customers who demand money back for an unsatisfying purchase or service encounter, researchers must ask whether there is congruence between the original motivations driving the initial confrontation and the final outcome of their actions. The imposition of consumer power is mediated by the costs incurred by mobilizing resources and deploying skills. For example, an evaluation of the actions of a small consumer group taking on a large, multi-national corporation needs to take into consideration the group's financial, technological, and logistic limitations.

Historical and comparative case study analyses are techniques that combine descriptive and explanatory characteristics to assess final outcomes of consumer action. Such approaches are capable of providing objective measures of consumer empowerment as well as indicate changes of the amount and type of empowerment over time.

The cultural power model
Critiques of consumer culture often theorize the market as a politically oppressive and culturally authoritarian force that threatens to turn active citizens into passive consumers and communal embeddedness into competitive individualism (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Ozanne and Murray, 1995). Recently, consumer researchers and sociologists of consumption have rejected the cultural authority model (Holt, 2002), by illustrating ways in which consumers resist the disciplining power of the market (Denegri-Knott, 2004; Fiske, 1994; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Cultural sociologist De Certeau (1984), 1986) arguably provides the most sophisticated account of consumption as site of resistance, theorizing consumers as creative and playful agents devising ruses and inventing tactics that counteract the strategic manoeuvres of powerful corporate players (Abercrombie, 1994; Fiske, 1989, 2000; Hebdige, 2000; Peñaloza and Price, 1993). Fiske (1989, p. 19) borrows de Certeau's (1984) military metaphor to argue that popular culture is a site of power relations that always bears traces of constant struggle between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it, between military strategy and guerrilla tactics. Similar readings are made by Dholakia, Firat, and Venkatesh's influential postmodern programme in consumer research (Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Firat *et al.*, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) which views consumers as active, creative, and agentic users of commodity signs rather than powerless dupes dominated by the market and manipulated by marketers.

De Certeau (1984) introduces a clear distinction between the concepts of "strategies" and "tactics". Using a geographic metaphor, he argues that while systems may implement strategies to designate particular activities to specific places (such as the market place), individuals devise tactics that offer innumerable ways to evade or transgress this imposed "law of the place" (1984, p. 29). In his view, a strategy is "a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with

an exteriority composed of targets or threats [e.g. consumers] can be managed" (1984, p. 37). De Certeau defines tactics as "a manoeuvre within the enemy's field of vision, as von Bülow put it, and within an enemy territory" (1984, p. 37). Accordingly, consumer tactics are a clever utilization of the resources of time and space that exploit cracks in the strategies enacted by the "surveillance of the proprietary powers" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37), such as corporations' database marketing departments, for example, (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004). For de Certeau devising tactics consists of finding ways around the constraining order of the place. Thus, he believes individuals take a creative approach to everyday life, where they resort to artisan-like inventiveness, trickery and guileful ruse. De Certeau conceives of an individual that thereby introduces play into everyday life, so that s/he may "survive" the strategies enacted by power.

De Certeau's use of military metaphors may appear drastic. Yet, this should not divert our eyes from the usefulness of these concepts to describe the nature of consumer behaviour (i.e. the devising of guileful tactics) in the corporation-controlled, information-intensive marketspaces of the twenty-first century (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004). Consumers increasingly perceive the market as antagonistic networks of power designed to control and manipulate them. From the perspective of the cultural power model, consumer power resides less in the ability of consumers to reject the products of the market, but rather "in the art of using those imposed". Put differently, consumer empowerment is manifested in the creative adaptations and manipulations of the marketer-intended meanings and uses of products and advertisings.

Research applications. The cultural power model considers as effects of power the ability to constitute commercial spaces and marketing strategies that impose onto consumers a specific behavioural and cognitive logic. Researchers interested in exploring consumer empowerment from the cultural perspective could examine the ways in which marketers establish cultural order through the production of commercial messages and design public spaces such as malls and other themed consumption environments to coerce consumers into specific consumption activities as well as consumers' tactics to adapt to and resist the logic of the marketer-designed space and practices (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004). Retail and service spaces would be the preferred sites to conduct research and thus be of particular interest for the retail and services marketing. Theoretically, and methodologically, research examining the politics of space instituted by marketing endeavours to induce a particular type of behaviour can develop alongside more ethnographic studies examining consumer practices. In the former, the rationalisation of processes leading to the restriction and direction of consumer movement within retail and service spaces has been captured in Ritzer and Ovadia's evaluation (Gottdiener, 2000, p. 41) of the McDonaldisation thesis which invariably suggests that "fast food restaurants and other highly rationalised systems have strict codes and practise that constrain the options of the consumer".

Marketing research could build from retail and services marketing literature to provide a reading of power that scrutinises attempts to manage and control consumer movement in given tissue sites by assessing how retail atmospherics are utilised to induce a particular type of behaviour and how the service encounter is managed. Retail atmospherics and the supposed effects of store layout, product display, signage, lighting and music have all in some capacity been linked to changes in behaviour (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Hui *et al.*, 1997; Golden and Zimmerman, 1986; Belizzi *et al.*, 1983). However; against the rationalisation of consumer practices stands

consumers' resistance against management procedures in the shape of the guileful ruse and other creative practices to subvert the law imposed by the place. Studies investigating how consumers face up to, and playfully engage with, marketers' attempts to inculcate behavioural norms through, for example, user manuals, product trials, demonstrations and advertising are also capable of illustrating the presence or absence of consumer power from a culture power model perspective.

Research within the cultural model is less concerned with measuring power in any objective sense. Rather, this perspective is interested in exploring the everyday tactics of consumers in navigating, subverting, manipulating, and utilizing increasingly corporate-controlled and commercially structured spaces (Gottdiener, 1997, 2000; Ritzer, 1999) and advertising content (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Ozanne and Murray, 1995). Consumer tactics escape complete objectification and operationalization by traditional research instruments. Studying cultural consumer power is more likely accomplished through ethnographic and phenomenological research, which are better equipped to detect and document "the popular tactics by which these forces [marketing] are coped with, are evaded or are resisted" (Fiske, 1989, p. 20).

The study of resistance that unfolds in retail and service environments would produce holistic explanations of consumer experiences and practices observed in situ. The emphasis would be in producing rich documentations of consumers' lived experiences in service and retail spaces designed and managed by producers and untangling from these forms of resistance and submission (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004). In examining consumers' ability to engage and negotiate meaning at textual level, researchers could opt for the use of phenomenological approaches, that is, examine consumers' lived experiences. In building a research agenda within this model, the generation of thick descriptions of the natural settings and consumer practices and interpretations could be purveyed through the use of several research methods, such as the collection of material artefacts, photographic evidence, observation and interviews that emphasise the consumer's perspective as "text" (Goulding, 2005 for more thorough explanations of ethnographic and phenomenological methods).

Within the more culturally grounded consumer research streams, there are a number of ethnographies and phenomenological accounts that can be benchmarked (Johnstone and Conroy, 2005; Goulding and Shankar, 2004; Kozinets *et al.*, 2004; Peñaloza, 2000, 2001; Sherry and McGrath, 1982). For example, Kozinets *et al.*'s, 2004 ethnography of ESPN Zone Chicago, employed a combination of participant observation, photography and individual and group interviews to capture ways in which consumers negotiated dialectically with producer led products and spaces. Likewise, Peñaloza's (2001) two year long ethnographic examination of the consumers' cultural production at a cattle trade show produced 210 hours of participant observation, 88 interviews, a collection of material artefacts and photographs that were then used to develop themes of analysis to support her final conclusions.

The discursive power model
More recently the question of consumer power has entered a broader discussion of how the exchanges and interactions between consumers and producers co-create and reproduce the market (Denegri-Knott, 2004; Hodgson, 2000; Holt, 2002; Sturdy *et al.*, 2001). With its focus on the discursive co-production of the market, this perspective rejects the notion of the sovereign consumer and discards the opposition between

powerful marketers and resisting consumers posited by the cultural model (Clegg, 1989; Hindess, 1996). Instead, the discursive model takes power to be a (co)creative force that structures the possible field of (inter)action and exchange of free agents. This more inclusive, less antagonistic view has been more strongly advocated by Holt's (2002, p. 89) post-postmodern dialectics of the market when he concludes that consumer revolutionary acts can be viewed as such "only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles". Likewise, Kozinet and colleagues (2004, p. 671) end their ethnographic study of ludic agency and retail spectacle by stating that "the wills of consumers and producers turn out to be far more overlapping, mutual and interdependent than commonly recognised".

Other projects draw from Foucault's concept of power/knowledge to examine the utilization of power for the discursive constitution of knowledge and consumer subjects. Jarrett (2003), for example, examines the power of affect in virtual communities, Denegri-Knott (2004) historicises discursive practices surrounding the contested nature of peer-to-peer file sharing, and Orlie (2002) offers an ethical examination of freedom as practices of consumption. Hodgson (2000, 2001) demonstrates how Foucault's notions of microphysics of power and governmentality discursively constitute financial services customers in the UK as empowered.

The discursive model of power is concerned with the linguistic strategies that produce truth claims and constitute culturally significant categories of knowledge (Clegg, 1989; Hindess, 1996; Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). Following Foucault the discursive model suggests that behaviour is not moderated by internal standards but by an internalization of an external discourse of normalcy and conduct. Internalization of norms and codes of conduct take place via iterative and co-evolving processes of "objectivisation" where truths are established to effect normalising behaviour, and "subjectivisation" where appropriate practices of the self results in the constitution of a subject as a known, free and empowered agent. Hence, individuals are simultaneously objectivised by institutional discourses and disciplinary power and subjectivised by the practices of the self. In their reciprocal bond and reiterative mutual development these two forces establish "truth games" through which:

> . . . subject and object alike are constituted under certain conditions, but in which they go on changing in relation to another, and thus go on modifying this field of experience [field of action] (Foucault in Gutting, 217-18).

Therefore, an individual never is just a passive, docile automaton subjected and discursively totalised by the practices of disciplinary, institutional (market) power.

Research applications. The discursive model of power provides a conceptual toolbox for undertaking studies of power (see Rose, 1996 for an excellent example). Researchers are encouraged to "think with Foucault" and engage in historicising the present in order to unveil the workings of power, knowledge, and truth that span a field of social relations and give birth to specific consumer subjectivities and representations (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Foucault's genealogical work is best known for illustrating how power produces discourses and creates subjectivities. Genealogical studies of consumption are still the exception. despite the fact that Bauman's (1988) sociogenesis of freedom and consumer ethics, Ewen's (1976) account of the rise of Fordist production and consumption, and Schroeder and Zwick's (2004) art historical

study of the discursive construction of masculinity in advertising provide excellent models for a historical approach. From our perspective, there is an acute need for more studies in marketing and consumer research that provide contextualized and historicized accounts of the discursive strategies and formations that govern consumption and production. In addition, investigations that explore practices of consumer resistance operating within existing discourses and ways in which existing fields of action are reconstituted for the development of new product categories and the legitimization of new consumption practices would be instructive (Denegri-Knott, 2004; Thompson, 2004).

The discursive model encourages researchers to strive for a better understanding of how power operates as a producer of discursive strategies that attempt to define what constitutes "normal" and deviant consumer behaviour within particular consumption contexts. Studies of this kind are able to illustrate how the context of consumption was discursively constructed, what rules and norms were established to discipline consumers, and how consumers develop discursive strategies to justify deviating and deviant practices. Specifically, discursive power research could explore the ways in which managed communications produce desirable consumer subjectivities and how commercial venues operate to discipline consumer behaviour. Examples of questions generated by the discursive power model are:

- What system of differentiation is operating that permits marketers and consumers to act upon the other? Researchers could examine how differences in status, economic differences, juridical, knowledge-based and cultural differences constitute empowered or disempowered consumer subjectivities in a specified field of knowledge.

- What are the instruments and institutional technologies used in bringing power relations into being and to bear on consumers and marketers (e.g. consumer surveillance in shopping malls, threat of boycotting products, rules regulating what consumers can do with products, what kind of products can be produced and how they are marketed)?

- What are the institutional discourses that govern consumer-producer relations and how do they operate? For example, in what ways does the state and non-governmental parties intervene in how consumers and marketers interact with and act on each other?

In addition, to his genealogical work, Foucault's (1984, 1986, 1994a, b) later project on the "care of the self" provides a rich conceptual toolbox for examining how individuals come to recognise themselves as "empowered". While studies in marketing and consumer research have yet to engage with Foucault's later work, Hodgson's (2002) study of the financial services industry draws from Foucault to determine how the operation of a variety of mechanism and discourses encourage the organizational member's attempts to construct a consistent and viable identity through her work. Hodgson's study provides a benchmark for researchers interested in investigating how individuals actively construct subjectivities that are suitable for specific contexts, including work (customer service) and consumption. Studying the practices of the self of consumers reveals the type of "self-regulating work" that consumers do when deliberating whether to consume or not. Barnett *et al.* (2005) and Orlie (2002) show how consumption is constructed as a site for the care of the self, where consumers actualise

capacities of autonomous action through "reflexive monitoring of conduct and the self-fashioning of relationships between selves and others" (Barnett *et al.*, 2005, p. 6). Similar approaches would be able to enrich our understanding of the tensions, desires, and conflicts that consumers need to reconcile when navigating the complex landscape of modern mass markets.

Methodologically, studies operating under this model could use historical documents to observe changes in discourses and normalisation procedures as well as phenomenological approaches to capture how consumers make sense of disciplinary discourses and how these are then adopted or transformed into a practice of life. Recently, Foucauldian tools have begun to be used as lenses to examine the interplay between disciplinary discourses and practices of resistance and freedom. For example, researchers such as Barnett *et al.* (2005, pp. 7-8) have infused the topic of consumer ethics with undertones of subjectivity that presuppose that consumption "is a set of institutionally and technologically mediated activities that practically implicate selves and others in ethical relations prior to any conscious reflection". Likewise, Orlie's concern with the politics of consumption revolves around the constitution of agents as consumers caught up in games of political power.

Within marketing, there is scope to write substantial histories surrounding the emergence of given markets and forms of conducting business and explore through these the capillary-like structure of power in the production of disciplines regulating practices and those agents involved in promoting and resisting its normalising logic. For example, marketing researchers could revisit existing histories which document the emergence of given markets (e.g. woollen textiles, VCRs, videogames) or business models (e.g. online music subscription, eBay) and examine mechanisms that led to their development and the type of norms that regulate the conditions under which a given commodity can be consumed and transacted. Specifically, research could investigate for example, how a non-commodity came to be understood as one, by identifying the legislative, technical and educational processes implicated in the creation and protection of that good's exchange value; specifically evaluating rules instituted to regulate the conditions under which that commodity can be purchased and consumed and identifying the parties benefit from these regulations. Manifestations of consumer resistance could be assessed in dissecting consumer practices aimed at subverting, ignoring and resisting the normalising logic imposed by market driven discourses.

Discussion

A differentiated and comprehensive mapping of theories of power found in the marketing and consumer research literature presents a complicated picture. Consumer empowerment takes on many different guises depending on the intellectual tradition and conceptual lens used to identify, delimit and measure power. From the perspective of the sovereign consumer model, the consumer is empowerment when he or she is free to act as a rational and self-interested agent. Consumer power is magnified when consumers combine resources and skills to make producers do what they would not do otherwise. From the perspective of the cultural model of power, a distinction between consumer resistance and consumer empowerment can be made. Consumer resistance is conceptualized as the consumer's artisan-like inventiveness, trickery and guileful ruse to "make do" within market spaces designed by the power of the marketer.

Consumer empowerment, on the other hand, requires a consumer that is capable of manipulating and even producing these spaces.

The discursive model of power defines power as the ability to construct discourse as a system in which certain knowledge is possible, while other knowledge is not. Discourses determine what is true or false in a particular field. The relationship between power and knowledge is crucial because to claim that a statement is true is also a claim to power since truth can only be produced by power. Hence, empowerment in the discursive model is conceptualized as the ability of the consumer to mobilize discursive strategies to determine what can be known and what actions can be undertaken in any particular field of action (i.e. the market).

Consumer or producer power surfaces in different guises and degrees depending on the conceptual lenses utilised to identify, understand or measure power. Consumer and producer agents will be empowered inasmuch as he machinates as a rational, self-serving agent. His powers will be magnified when he combines his resources and skills with other sovereign agents. Consumer power will materialise in concrete instances where it is able to make producers do what otherwise they would not do. In the cultural power model, resistance, but not empowerment will be expressed in the skilful agility of a creative and clandestine consumer who makes do within the spaces and goods designed by power. A truly powerful consumer would be a maker, and not adapter of spaces and goods. Powerful agents in the discursive power model would be able to establish discourses producing normalised and acceptable forms of engagement, thereby changing a field of action, expanding what is possible to do. However, and despite the calls for consumer emancipation operating in the cultural and discursive power models, measurements of, or allusions to empowerment are self-illusory and contrary to the spirit of social and critical theory. A project to measure empowerment, technically, would need to align itself with quantity capacity readings located here within the consumer sovereignty model. Empowerment expresses a change in the amount of power possessed, thus such terminology and objectives, escape the logic of de Certeau's spatial invocation of power and resistance and Foucault's anti-sovereign discussions on power.

The tracing and categorizing of theories of power contribute to a more contextualised understanding of discussions of consumer power. While we reject the possibility for a universal and generaliseable definition of power, we provide a framework for marketing and consumer researchers to locate specific discussions of power and situate their own work on consumer empowerment within clear theoretical boundaries. We also hope that our categorization encourages researchers that work within a specific model of power to challenge their own theoretical assumptions and to engage with writings from the other traditions.

Implicit in this exercise of categorizing power is the recognition that conceptualizations of power are made much more intelligible when situated within their respective theoretical universes. For example, understanding the constitutive role of power without some familiarity of Foucault's genealogical project is bound to be incomplete. Likewise, we would argue that discussions about whether or not consumers have more power than producers are hugely enriched by engaging with Dahl's causal dictum. Also, the strength of each model is partly a function of its conceptual and methodological limitations. For example, the consumer sovereignty model allows for a positivist definition of power as measurable quantity, but it is

limited by its dependence on a rather abstract notion of sovereignty. Hence, consumer empowerment legitimized by the notion of consumer sovereignty has been criticised as a smokescreen for concealing the real power of producers over consumers (Smith, 1987; Hansen and Schrader, 1997; Galbraith, 1983). A conceptual map that delineates each conceptualization of power against the others emphasizes each model's limitations, assisting the researcher in addressing them.

Finally, we suggest that a more inclusive, boundary-spanning and multi-dimensional view of power may generate a view of consumer empowerment as complementary to marketer power, rather than as antagonistic forces as is often the case. Instead of quantifying levels of power and pondering how the seduced are oppressed, marketing and consumer research should attempt to conceptualize consumer empowerment as generated via the iterative interplay between consumers and producers. For example, the growing body of research in customer participation and co-production of products and services via the "bilateral process of firm-customer interaction across the various stages of new product development" (Joshi and Sharma, 2004, p. 47) could provide interesting new avenues for the theorization of consumer empowerment as the outcome of a collaborative process with the marketer as partner (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003; Joshi and Sharma, 2004; Varki and Wong, 2003). Vargo and Lusch's (2004) state that a world in which consumers become an increasingly important part of value creation processes requires a new dominant logic for marketing. Within that logic marketers no longer claim a monopoly over the definition, production, and delivery of value. Concepts such as value-added and value delivery turn into value co-creation and value propositions (Thomke and von Hippel, 2002). The new dominant logic may already be at work in some industries and business contexts such as the business-to-business information and communication environments. For example, a number of firms, from Salesforce.com and Google to Yahoo produce what is called application program interfaces (or APIs), a set of protocols and tools for building software applications. A good API makes it easier to develop a program by furnishing the developer with all the building blocks needed for creating new applications. By giving their APIs away and allowing developers and customers to embrace and extend these (formerly proprietary) platforms, customers are encouraged to co-create value for all parties in the product/service ecosystem (von Hippel, 2005).

Somewhat nervously, marketing managers in these industries realize that customers are no longer satisfied with receiving a finished, proprietary, and immutable product. Rather buyers expect to be able to extend purchased platforms and applications and, if given the chance, even sell their own, newly customized, solutions to other customers with similar needs as their own. Indeed, as von Hippel (2005) points out, the extensions that are made to a supplier's platform is likely to be disclosed by the buyer, effectively negating ownership of value in the traditional (proprietary) sense. Hence, the notions of value co-creation and especially value proposition are very useful for understanding just why Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, and Salesforce.com are willing, if not eager, to opening up their applications to third party developers and customers. From a managerial perspective, the new logic of marketing implies that the success of a new product may no longer be determined by its value-added, but rather by the range of manipulations it allows the customer to make. It is a transition from a definition of value as enclosed in the product or service to one where value in fact means empowering the customer to customize.

Customer involvement and co-production researchers suggest that providing opportunities for co-production results in higher product performance, increased customer satisfaction, and meaningful relationships between customers and producers (Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Co-production as consumer empowerment is a map that has yet to be drawn.

Conclusions

This paper provides a conceptual map of three influential models of power that impact consumer empowerment research, thus clarifying the role theories of power play in research, providing a richer context for studying consumer power, and offering useful methodological and theoretical directions. Power was classified into three broad domains:

(1) consumer sovereignty;

(2) cultural power; and

(3) discursive power,

by drawing from political and social theory, as well and consumer research and marketing literature. The consumer sovereignty concept – which assumes well-informed, autonomous consumers – emerged from classical economics, has exerted profound influence on interdisciplinary discussions of consumers and power. The cultural power model argues that consumers are caught in political and cultural forces beyond their control, and can mainly resist or struggle within the market. The discursive power model attempts to reconcile these two approaches to consumer power by focusing on how consumers co-create markets, power, and knowledge. We do not propose a universal definition of power; rather, we offer an integrative framework for marketing and consumer researchers to understand power. Finally, we set an agenda for research on consumer empowerment, and urge researchers to question their theoretical assumptions and fruitfully embrace the intellectual heritage of thinking about power.

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