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The value in de-emphasizing structure in liquidity

In the set of commentaries on liquidity entitled “The continuing significance of social structure in liquid modernity,” three sets of authors set out to examine the relationship between liquidity and structure, value and distinction. In doing so, they attempt to marry theories which argue against sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s central thesis that societal structures are shifting with his seminal construct of liquidity, an exercise which has mixed results. All three sets of authors have engaged with Bauman’s conceptualization of liquid modernity (2000, 2007) as well as our conceptualization of liquid consumption and its consequences (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Bardhi, Eckhardt and Samsioe 2020). In this response to the commentaries, we clarify how we understand Bauman and how we have used his ideas in our theorizing, engage with the three sets of author’s advocacy for emphasizing the continuing relevance of structure within liquidity, and finally sum up how de-emphasizing structure has and can continue to lead to important new insights in marketing theory.

In our work on liquid consumption, we use Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity as an enabling theory, not an applied theory. That is, we use the notion of liquidity as a way which enables us to think differently, not in an inflexible and faithful way. Thus, we have used liquidity as a metaphor for challenging orthodoxies in consumer and marketing research in light of contemporary phenomenon, rather than rigidly applying Bauman’s ideas in an essentialized way. This can be seen clearly in how we conceptualize liquidity as a spectrum, from liquid to solid, a departure from Bauman that helps us understand dynamics of contemporary consumption.

Indeed, Bauman himself uses liquidity as a metaphor and an idea to think with rather than a literal representation of the world around him. Bauman's ideas are an intellectual device, not a 'thing' in the world (Beilharz 2010, 58). For Bauman, and for us, categories are liquid not rigid. Ritzer and Rey (2016) point out that Bauman's acknowledged legacy is a language and a logic. His vocabulary of liquidity is useful in understanding concepts, and in particular how dualities no longer exist. Solid concepts that frame the way we are used to thinking in marketing, such as producer and consumers, are not as illuminating about the way market exchange takes place today, in comparison to liquid concepts such as prosumption (Ritzer and Rey 2016). Bauman's vocabulary works well on both the conceptual and the empirical level: It helps us to recognize phenomena and also to structure our descriptions of those phenomena (Ritzer and Rey 2016, 165).

As Dolbec, Fisher and Canniford (2020) point out, enabling theories can be deployed as sensemaking devices, with the goal of facilitating original research questions. They can reveal questions and contexts that challenge current understandings. In discussing how theories enable sensemaking, Dolbec et al (2020) describe how Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) use liquid modernity to reconceptualize core marketing concepts "...at a time when extant theory does not adequately describe relations between human subjects and objects of consumption." Enabling theories offer productive avenues to create original contributions; in particular, to make a new 'turn,' and explore how contemporary phenomenon may challenge the literature (Dolbec et al 2020). It is a researcher's willingness to combine, apply, and invent using theoretical concepts which makes enabling theories valuable. Enabling theories offer a new perspective on how to know about the world (Dolbec et al 2020). The value that these authors describe in using an enabling theory accurately sums up how we use Bauman's ideas to push our field forward, beyond what is currently known. For example, the field of marketing knows a lot about how class structures affect consumption, and our goal is to

facilitate original research questions beyond this. Additionally, the use of Bauman's theory as an enabling lens helped us develop new concepts and tools to examine contemporary consumption and encourage debate, as reflected in this issue.

Bauman (2000, 2007) is widely recognized as one of the most innovative and influential thinkers of the past century. Similar to other contemporary sociologists like Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Richard Sennett and Cornelius Castoriadis, Bauman examined the nature of contemporary society with a focus on globalization, consumer society and individualization. For Bauman, modern people are similar to liquid matter in their vulnerability and fluidity, unable to maintain the same identity for a long time, which reinforces this temporary state of social relations. Bauman identified the metaphor of the "liquid" to characterise the ever-changing nature of modernity and its institutions rather than argue for their disappearance, as is assumed by the three papers in this commentary. The notion of liquidity emphasizes their shifting form, and in such shifting, that they become even more difficult to escape. The notion of liquid modernity characterizes a particular phase of late modernity, which has resulted from the end of industrial society in the West combined with the dominance of neoliberalism as the main political ideology. This socio-historical context is important to keep in mind as scholars such as the authors of the commentaries in this section mix and contrast Bauman's ideas with those of thinkers whose theorizing are strongly anchored in the context of industrial capitalism, like Bourdieu for example.

Bauman was not an empiricist; rather he was a thinker that helped us make sense of our contemporary world. As his ideas of liquid modernity became popular, he started to apply and extend the metaphor to various aspects of contemporary life, including the changing nature of intimate relationships (eg, *Liquid Love*, Bauman 2003), in which he predicted the ephemeral and often instrumental nature of relationships that have now become common in the Tinder world of dating. Similarly, he helped us make sense of the drive towards

surveillance and big data society, in which consumers voluntarily agree to be surveilled by companies or governments in return for security and safety (eg, *Liquid Surveillance*, Bauman and Lyon 2012). He also helped us make sense of the current retro-nostalgia turn (eg, *Retrotopia* 2017). Applying his ideas on liquidity to contemporary phenomenon was a hallmark of his scholarship, which we try and continue in our work applying his ideas to luxury and status and distinction, for example.

Bauman, unlike his contemporaries, published his ideas about liquidity outside of academic institutions and publishing structures, after he retired from his academic position in sociology at University of Leeds. This was a result of his effort to avoid political persecution which had followed him during his academic life as a critic of the Soviet state in Poland, and later during his immigration to Israel as a social critic of Israeli state politics (Davis and Campbell 2017). Bauman felt the freedom to explore liquidity as an explanatory device for late modernity only after he left academia. His unconventional career path may be one of the reasons why his work has been more open to criticism than his other contemporaries such as Anthony Giddens, whose work also explores late modernity and the process of individualization (Giddens 1991), and has been more readily accepted among CCT scholars.

As noted by the commentaries in this section, Bauman's ideas are not to be accepted uncritically. Because our goal was to introduce a liquid perspective to the field of marketing, and due to length constraints and review team recommendations, we were not able to include the many critiques of Bauman in our papers on liquid consumption. One of the main critiques of Bauman's work has been that he engages in sociological eclecticism, cross-referencing and mobilizing disparate theoretical orientations and concepts to bolster the theory of liquid modernity, such as the ideas of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1982) (Elliott 2007). However, such eclecticism can also be seen as a powerful integration of seemingly disparate theory and sociological traditions, as well as connecting abstract social theory to concrete contemporary

issues and concerns. In our view, this has contributed to the power of Bauman's sociological theory as a form of unstructured systematic analysis of modernity that highlights the "significance of the demise of the 'long-term', as liquidation in contemporary social processes" (Elliott 2007, p. 52). We took inspiration from exactly this point in his theorization in how we see consumption shifting in liquid modernity.

A second point is that Bauman's work is based on his analysis of the social changes in Western consumer societies (Elliot 2007), whereas we see liquidity as being a global condition, and argue that it can have varying manifestations in consumption. While liquidity is clearly a characteristic of life in global cities, some consumers, like the urban, millennial generation, have been able to navigate liquidity (Cumming 2015; McWilliams 2015). Whereas others within similar spaces are thrown into liquidity against their will, such as the unemployed, divorced parents, or older consumers faced with fast-paced changes (Thompson, Henry and Bardhi 2018), or indigines who feel threatened by immigration into their villages (Luedicke 2015). In small town USA we can see this with the male working class who face the challenge of unemployment in an economy dominated by services and the erosion of industrial modernity. Faced with the need to re-train on how to be light and flexible in the new job market that they face, many of them do not succeed in doing so (cf. Hochschild 2018)

Our theorization differs from Bauman's thesis in that we recognize the ability of consumers to manage and resist the liquid through the mediating role of consumption. That is, consumers can manage liquid modernity by solidifying part of their consumption; in other words liquid and solid consumption can co-exist (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Our aim has always been to explicate a new theoretical perspective of consumption rather than a societal critique. This is another point of difference from Bauman, who uses his ideas about liquidity to critique contemporary society. While his focus is at the macro level, to develop a theory of

modernity and society, our focus is on consumption phenomena that have emerged or have been transformed because of these macro changes. The solid, which encompasses structure, still exists, something we acknowledge in all of our writings on liquidity. We see liquid modernity as constituting a particular socio-historical context that raises important questions and challenges to existing assumptions and conceptualizations about foundational constructs within marketing such as ownership, brand relationships, ethics, and consumer identities.

All three of the commentaries included in this special section are steeped in the idea that class is the main explanatory variable for consumer behavior. The field of marketing and in particular consumer culture theory knows a lot about how class affects consumption. The idea of Bauman and us is to introduce a new logic that goes beyond this. There are other sources of power in contemporary modernity, as argued by Bauman and us. Caldwell and Henry (2020) engage in an exercise to see if they can combine Bourdieu's structural thinking with Bauman's liquidity. As Dolbec et al (2020) point out, the risk with trying to combine theoretical lenses is that they are often incommensurable. Caldwell and Henry (2020) argue that much of what we know in consumer research, which has come out of a Bourdieuan tradition of understanding consumption through a lens of social classes which are relatively rigid, still applies today. We (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020) have written that hierarchies within liquid society still exist, and in many ways are more evident than ever. But, those hierarchies can come from other sources than social class. In other words, while Bourdieu's insights can still be relevant, there are other insights which can be relevant as well.

There is no doubt that some consumers are better able to cope with liquidity due to the resources that they have access to – Bauman highlights this as do we. Those resources can, but do not always, come from solid resources offered by class. Also, counter to Henry and Caldwell's critique that Bauman and his ideas relate only to phenomena that impacts global elites or the millennial generation, the breakdown of solidity is felt by consumers from all

social and national backgrounds. For example, Ulver and Ostberg (2014) examine the impact of liquidity on the Swedish middle classes, and demonstrate that as social structures are being renegotiated, consumers embark on an existential project of being an individual in liquid modernity and embracing a different form of consumption, if they can.

Another point of reflection concerns the assumption of the rigidity of the notion of habitus that underlines the Henry and Caldwell as well as the other two commentaries. Their arguments do not allow for the potentiality of the habitus to evolve via second order socializations as Bourdieu advanced (see Allen 2002). In addition to someone's primary socialization anchored on one's family background, habitus also evolves via second order socialization, which can happen via education, social networks, international travel/living abroad experiences, and professional experience. In other words, Bourdieu acknowledges the potential for upward or downward social mobility; consumers are not necessarily working class, for example, without question. Finally, Blackshaw (2005, p 90) outlines how "Bauman's sociology suggests that [Bourdieu's] concept of habitus is of limited efficacy for understanding individual identity formation in liquid modernity because it fails to recognize that social actors today are hardly ever inhibited in their pursuit of their individual freedom."

Thompson and Kumar (2020) claim that we (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) have a more optimistic view of liquidity than Bauman. This is not the case. Bauman's theory is underlined by a social critique of the condition he outlines as liquid modernity. While we had a different agenda/focus in our research project, we acknowledge his critique and are inspired by it in several of our future research directions (see Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Furthermore, we agree with Bauman that liquidity is not positive for anyone, and this is reflected overtly in our conceptualization of liquid consumption; particularly in our discussion of precarity (2017). The theory of liquid modernity expands upon the social and individual consequences of individualization and the acceleration of changing logics of distinction.

The liquid perspective is not an agency story about the liberatory power of declining structure, as with the postmodernists (eg, Firat and Fuat 1995), nor is it a story of consumer resistance. However, we and in some ways, Bauman, see the potential in the liquidification of social structures and traditions to create spaces of individual freedom and potential for social mobilities. A person's agency within this space depends on how well the individual manages the challenges of liquidity, and we argue consumption plays a role here. Thompson and Kumar (2020) summarize Sherman's (2017) contention that the elite treat those lower than them in the social hierarchy as peers to mask their privilege, and say this is a different motive to engage in inconspicuous consumption than what we discuss in our 2020 paper. We agree that there can be a variety of motives for engaging in inconspicuous consumption, including masking privilege. As pointed out by Eckhardt et al (2015), for example, inconspicuous consumption can be used to mask one's privilege by consuming in a way that cannot be identified as elite to avoid being accused of corruption by the government in China.

Finally, Parsons and Cappellini (2020) ask the important question of who accrues value in liquid modernity, and examine this in the context of mothering. These authors make the point that middle class mothers in the UK are better able to succeed and accrue value in liquidity in comparison to working class mothers. However, similar to the other two commentaries, these authors miss the potential for social mobility that can be created by liquidity. For example, in our study of global nomads (Bardhi et al 2012), we found that some of our working class participants benefited from free university education, including free EU Erasmus travel/study abroad programs, that helped them land international jobs when they graduated, jump starting their careers. Global mobilities and higher education facilitated over time an upwardly mobile lifestyle, to the point where these global nomads are now considered part of an elite transnational professional class, regardless of their background. While we have not explicitly engaged with class in our research, we have suggested that

global mobilities and the sharing economy (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012) have the potential to create spaces of social movement, which can allow for consumers to gain and lose status outside of class structures.

In sum, the liquidity perspective that we advocate (ephemerality, access and dematerialization), which de-emphasizes structure, has already brought new ideas, theorizations and insights to the marketing literature. These other, liquid forms of power beyond class, and how they impact marketing activities, have been evidenced in empirical work within our field, such as de Kervenoael et al's (2018) introduction to a special issue on liquid retailing, which chronicles how the breakdown of structure and boundaries has profoundly impacted our understanding of retailing. Similarly, Guercini and Cova (2018) outline how liquidity has led to a different, unconventional form of entrepreneurship, arguing that as life becomes more precarious as it becomes less structured, consumers turn to passionate entrepreneurship as they search for meaning. In this vein, Biraghi et al (2018) describe liquid consumer entrepreneurship as a business model built on ephemerality, access based ties and dematerialization.

Similarly, Price et al (2018) theorize a fresh start mindset in the US, wherein people feel they can start their lives over via consumption, as stemming out of contemporary liquid times, with the breakdown of structure, that Americans live in now. We have also seen liquid modernity and liquid consumption pave the way for important breakthroughs in knowledge surrounding materiality (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2020) and consumer spirituality (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), and provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the sharing economy (Eckhardt et al 2019). As Kozinets (2019) documents, liquid consumption “demonstrates how, and explains why, our increasing involvement with information and communications technologies is having such profound and potentially deleterious effects on many areas of consumption and culture” (p 623). There are many fruitful paths to go down in

understanding contemporary consumption from taking a theoretical path which does not privilege structure; we look forward to reading them in the future.

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