Commentary

The value in de-emphasizing structure in liquidity

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Abstract

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 that has mixed results. All three sets of authors have engaged with Bauman’s conceptualization of liquid modernity as well as our conceptualization of liquid consumption and its consequences. 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.

Keywords
Bauman, consumption, liquid consumption, liquid modernity, marketing

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 that 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; Bardhi et al., 2020; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 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 the 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: 68). 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 level 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 et al. (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 (p. 12).” 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 these commentaries.

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 characterize 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 sociohistorical 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 is strongly anchored in the
context of industrial capitalism, like Bourdieu, for example.

Bauman was not an empiricist; rather, he was a thinker who 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 (e.g. *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 toward surveillance and big data society, in
which consumers voluntarily agree to be surveilled by companies or governments in return for
security and safety (e.g. *Liquid Surveillance*, Bauman and Lyon, 2012). He also helped us make
sense of the current retro-nostalgia turn (e.g. *Retrotopia*; Bauman, 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 fol-
lowed 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 consumer culture theory (CCT) scholars.

As noted by the commentaries in this section, Bauman’s ideas are not to be accepted uncriti-
cally. 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 cri-
tiques 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 (1992). However, such eclecticism can also be seen as a
powerful integration of seemingly disparate theory and sociological traditions as well as con-
necting 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: 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 (Elliott, 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). However, 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 et al., 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 retrain 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 coexist (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 sociohistorical 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 CCT, 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 whether 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 Caldwell and Henry’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 Caldwell and Henry 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: 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 (2017) that liquidity is not positive for anyone, and this is reflected overtly in our conceptualization of liquid consumption, particularly in our discussion of precarity. 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 (e.g. Fuat Firat and Venkatesh, 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 United Kingdom 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 aboard 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, Guernici 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 mind-set in the United States, 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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