



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Assembling Embodiment: Body, Techniques and Things**

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The sensory turn in CCT illuminates the sensuous, affective and skilful nature of embodied consumption experiences. To date however, little is known about how material things feature in the constitution of embodiment. This paper extends assemblage theory to examine the physical and mindful cultivation of skilled embodiment in socio-material relations.

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# The Body and Equipment: Understanding Consumption Through Relationships Between Body and Equipment

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## **Paper #1: Why Do Consumers Put Their Bodies at Risk? A Reflexive Modernist Analysis of CrossFit's Marketplace Culture**

Craig Thompson, University of Madison-Wisconsin, USA  
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## **Paper #2: The Socio- and Material-Temporal Routines of Mothering: Why and How Physical Activity Often Fails to Fit**

Fiona Spotswood, University of Bristol, UK

## **Paper #3: Assembling Embodiment: Body, Techniques and Things**

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## **Paper #4: Extending Flow: How Place, Materials, and Body Create Restorative Consumption in Nature**

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### SESSION OVERVIEW

The body is the primary conduit to consumers' sense and understanding of the world (Canniford et al 2019; Joy and Sherry 2003). The body is a site at which consumers enact self-identity (Roux and Belk 2019; Patterson and Schroeder 2010), reflexivity (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Thompson and Üstüner 2015), as well as pleasure and pain (Goulding et al. 2009; Scott, Cayla, Cova 2017). In all cases, however, the consumer's body is surrounded and augmented with forms of physical and discursive equipment. By equipment, we mean sets of devices used to achieve practical ends (Rabinow 2009). Equipment can span multiple scales, from the apparatus of the individual body (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019), through meso-level assemblages of body and consumption goods (Murphy et al 2018), to technologies that link consumers into large-scale dispositifs (Lupton 2015). In this special session, we extend current understandings of embodiment with new perspectives on the relationships between consumers' bodies and equipment. We explore material and non-material concepts of equipment to ask: What does the relationship between body and equipment reveal about consumption? And more particularly how does considering different facets of equipment enlighten an understanding of embodiment?

The first paper considers how consumers mobilize and shape their bodies in preparation for contingencies and imminent threats through the equipment common to the global phenomenon of CrossFit. Based on a two-year ethnography, this study analyses CrossFit's marketplace culture as a meso-level inflection of reflexive modernization. The study's findings offer an alternative to extant existential and neoliberal explanations of consumer's embodied risk-taking.

The second paper considers the equipment of time, and time as equipment. Through an analysis of diary data and depth interviews with mothers from deprived urban areas, this study illuminates the entangled practices and temporalities of mothering. The resulting configurations shape the (im)possibilities of physical activity and mothering. A body equipped with time is better off, but the equipment of time is both gendered and classed, raising considerations for rising levels of obesity.

In the third paper, the materials necessary for hobby motorcycle repair constitute the equipment for expressing embodied masculin-

ity. This study examines the embodiment of material culture to show how consumers assemble masculinity through an array of socio-material practices. Findings show how the dualistic categories of mind/body and subject/object dissolve in the intricacies of embodied socio-material relations.

The fourth paper considers skill and knowledge as equipment through which consumers effect body practices that have restorative benefits. In an ethnographic study of hobby fly fishing, we contribute an extended theory of flow to show how consumers bodies, the environment, and fishing equipment create restorative experiences.

We use various contexts, theoretical, and methodological approaches to body-equipment relationships to reveal new perspectives on the role of the body in consumer experience, consumer responsibility, and gendered understandings of practices. This session embraces the suggested conference themes of technology (equipment) and obesity. The session is especially relevant for researchers interested in embodiment, temporality, and practice and assemblage theories.

## **Why Do Consumers Put Their Bodies at Risk? A Reflexive Modernist Analysis of CrossFit's Marketplace Culture**

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers and sports sociologists have taken an interest in understanding why consumers choose to literally put their bodies on the line, subjecting themselves to extreme physical stress and pain, and to risk injury (and even death) in the service of autotelic leisure activities (Atkinson 2011; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Dawson 2017; Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017; Saville 2008; Schneider, Butryn, Furst, and Masucci 2007). These studies have been framed by two distinct interpretive frameworks, which we refer to as the existential and neoliberal models, each highlighting a different set of explanatory socio-cultural conditions.

The existential model builds on the work of David Le Breton (2000) and argues that such risk-taking activities provide individuals opportunities for spiritual quests and authenticating experiences that they find lacking in the rationalized flow of modern life and its bureaucratic work orders (Celsi et al. 1993; Scott et al. 2017; also see Arnould and Price 2000; Caillois 2001). In comparison, the neoliberal model maintains that physically challenging activities are part and parcel of a new disciplinary regime of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2008) whereby individuals regard social life as a sphere of cutthroat competition in which only the fittest (and most self-disciplined) can attain success (Cederström and Spicer 2015; Datta and Chakraborty 2017).

Previous examinations of CrossFit's marketplace culture—which affords a communally shared experience of physical challenge, risk taking, and calculated endurance of pain—have rather expectedly followed an existential (Dawson 2017; Herz 2014; Pekkanen, Närvänen and Tuominen 2017) or neoliberal lens (Heywood 2016; James and Gill 2017; Nash 2017). While the narratives of the CrossFit enthusiasts we interviewed exhibit motifs that are compatible with both existential and neoliberal interpretive frames, we propose that there is more to the story than an enactment of neoliberal

responsibilization (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) or a quest to authenticate the self through transcendent experiences (Arnould and Price 1993, 2000).

Another important macro influence on these risk-taking consumption practices is the reflexive modernist orientation that has arisen from the structural imposition of global systemic risks (Beck 1999, 2006; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). According to this framework, systemic, human-generated risks are the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the modernist project and its abiding goals of creating wealth and prosperity. Modern economies produce risks just as they produce economic gains, and these risks are difficult to manage and distribute through probability assessment—as exemplified by climate change, large-scale industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, and outbreaks of infectious diseases. As a cultural response to these conditions, the reflexive modernist ethos comprises of a reflexive awareness of systemic risks, a socially pervasive state of doubt about the ability of experts to accurately predict and control such risks, a profound uncertainty about which authorities to trust, and a paradoxical quest for being prepared for a wide range of imaginable contingencies in hopes that such preparations might prove useful to a certain degree in a time of crisis. When CrossFit practices are analyzed in relation to this reflexive modernist frame, we identify a set of socio-cultural motivations that are ideologically and experientially distinct from those highlighted by the existential and neoliberal models.

Founded in 2000 by former gymnast Greg Glassman, CrossFit hinges on the idea that constantly varied, high intensity, whole body workouts could induce a state of all-round functional fitness unattainable through conventional gyms. With this principle in mind, Glassman developed high-intensity workout routines that integrated movements from gymnastics, calisthenics, and Olympic weightlifting, all involving multiple repetitions in rapid-fire succession. Glassman's unorthodox approach to building functional fitness through maniacal physical exertion attracted an expanding clientele of former athletes seeking to recreate bygone experiences of competitive intensity and, importantly, first responders and military personnel who face a broad spectrum of physical challenges in the conduct of their occupations (Crockett and Butryn 2018). In press interviews, Glassman matter-of-factly discussed latent risks that CrossFitters knowingly take in order to garner the benefits of its hyperintense training regimen: “‘It can kill you,” he said. “I’ve always been completely honest about that”” (Quoted in Cooperman 2005).

Based on a two-year long ethnography of CrossFit's marketplace culture—consisting of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and examinations of media discourses and branded content—we analyze CrossFit as a meso-level articulation of reflexive modernization. We demonstrate that CrossFitters' understanding of embodied risk taking is shaped by the normative goal of preparing oneself for unexpected contingencies and imminent threats. In doing so, we bridge the analytical gap between studies addressing consumers' proactive risk taking and those focusing on the feelings of anxiety and uncertainty induced by the structural imposition of systemic risks. We highlight that such risk-taking challenges can themselves be market-mediated responses to the conditions of reflexive modernization, whereby consumers proactively take calculated bodily risks out of a desire to expand their capacities to effectively respond to the unpredictable manifestations of systemic risks. Finally, we show that the notion of personal responsibility—which has predominantly been studied as a defining feature of neoliberal governmentality by consumer researchers (Giesler and Veresiu 2014)—serves different ideological ends in a reflexive modernist frame. Rather than taking a neoliberal, entrepreneurial orientation as represented in previous

accounts, it manifests an always contingent endeavor for being prepared to effectively respond to challenges and contingencies amidst the radical uncertainty induced by systemic risks.

## **The Socio- and Material-temporal Routines of Mothering: Why and How Physical Activity Often Fails to Fit**

### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The transition to parenthood is a critical transformative experience and an inflection point for obesity (Saxbe et al., 2019). Becoming a parent often leads to reduced physical activity (PA) levels, but this effects mothers more than fathers, both in volume and type (Rhodes et al., 2014). Studies report that whereas some mothers adjust physical activity participation strategies to fit around children (McGannon et al., 2018), many attempt unsatisfactorily to integrate PA into family time (Hamilton and White, 2010). Lower socioeconomic-economic status mothers are the least likely to be active (Bellow-Riecken et al., 2008). Supporting mothers from deprived areas to become and maintain healthy levels of physical activity is therefore an important challenge for social marketers.

Qualitative health research tends to explain mothers' low PA levels as the product of social and cultural discourses which mothers draw on. ‘Mother’ is understood as women's ‘true calling’, with an emphasis on intensive presence and prioritising caring above all else (Molander and Hartmann, 2018). PA is therefore constantly subordinated through daily computations made in the shadow of socially prescribed expectations. Relatedly, mothers' low PA levels is explained by illuminating the limited leisure time afforded to mothers as they assume fuller caring roles than male partners (Hamilton and White, 2010), which compresses and fragments time for themselves. Mothers' ‘free time’ is noted to be highly dependent on the support of others (Wearing, 1990). Time is conceptualised as a resource that mothers have little of.

Existing studies tend to overemphasise the capacity and responsibility of individuals to realise change through resistance to societal expectations (McGannon and Schinke, 2012). Through a novel practice theory lens, this study shifts focus to the mundane experiences of mothering, examining everyday temporalities and mundane yet expertly operated materialities. The connecting theme of ‘time’ emerges as vital for understanding the ‘demands’ of the system of practices that dominates the organisation of mothers' everyday lives and often competes out physical activity.

We undertook and analysed 15 depth interviews with mothers in Bristol. Mothers in lower socio-economic positions were selected because they have less control over how their paid and non-paid time (Southerton, 2006). Half the mothers kept a diary for a week prior to the interviews. Interviews explored everyday household routines, use of material things and explored experiences and reflections of PA. Mothers ranged between 20 and 50 years and the sample included single, adoptive, married and cohabiting mothers and those whose children had special needs. Five participated in regular PA. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis and three key themes were identified.

Mothering can be understood as a multiple integrative practice inseparable from a larger household system of practices involving multiple practitioners: children and fathers but also schools, workplaces and childcare providers. Mothering is highly competitive, even predatory. As one respondent explained, “We don't really do anything [now we have kids]...” PA for all our respondents took a low priority, and the synchronisation of physical activity alongside

mothering practices was found to be highly unsatisfactory and “not really proper exercise”, or impossible.

Three intersecting themes add theoretical power to our understanding of the predatory nature of mothering and how this implicates PA participation. Firstly, mothering practices have a dominant temporal rhythm through their entanglement with external interlocking space-time configurations. For example travel timetables, distances from work and childcare/school opening hours all shaped the rhythm of mothering. These space-time configurations demand skilful use of materials such as managing the weekly wash, which often happened in a prescribed 90 minute slot; or calculating how long a bus journey would take and if there was time for an errand or visit between school hours.

Secondly, cutting across the external space-timescapes are the temporal rhythms of everyday caring. These were dominated for our participants by the need for careful synchronisation of multiple activities and by temporal ‘hot spots’. Mothers were required to orchestrate practices so they occurred in the right order, with the skilled use of particular equipment (like toothbrushes or cooking equipment), at the right time of day and with understood degrees of periodicity. Hot spots occur because many of these practices colonise (Shove, 2012) particular points of the day such as children’s bedtime, and are also intersected by external, institutional spatial-temporal rhythms. PA needs to compete to recruit mothers. As Jane explains, her walk was delayed because “he poo-ed all over the carpet and that takes half an hour out of your day before you can go anywhere”. Mothering practices must often be accomplished in a particular order.

Thirdly, infusing the household system of practice were collective expectations towards ‘time spent’ that shape PA participation. In line with others (Silva 2002), we found an accepted lack of ‘time to yourself’ for mothers and a low prioritisation of PA for mothers but not fathers. The way practices compete and intersect raises questions about value and authenticity. Carrie exemplifies her frustration at the elevated ‘value’ of her partner’s PA in comparison with her own, explaining that “he just takes off and goes cycling”. Later, she admits how difficult the household level expectations about her own PA are to change: “it’s hard-wired as to how our daily structure works... we are just stuck in a daily routine I guess”.

Only when there was compatibility between the external space-time configurations, everyday temporal rhythms of mothering practices and the temporal expectations that infuse the household system of practices did our respondents participate in regular PA. As such, our findings suggest that responsibilising mothers to participate in PA through ‘sporty’ identity creation or resistance is unlikely to succeed and is ethically problematic. Rather, social change relating to mothers’ PA should acknowledge socio-cultural, material and above all temporal characteristics of the practices which both demand and shape the everyday organisation of mothering. In so doing, our analysis contributes to the burgeoning critical social marketing agenda (Gordon, 2011; 2018) which draws on social practice theory to illuminate the socio-cultural shaping of everyday life (Gordon, 2018) as a basis for conceptualising intervention.

### **Assembling Embodiment: Body, Techniques and Things**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

By positioning embodiment to the forefront of enquiry, a nascent corpus of CCT research illuminates the sensuous and affective nature of transformative consumption experiences. Extending analysis beyond the focus on discourse and meaning which preoccupied the ‘interpretive turn’, these studies animate the lived experience of embodiment as it surfaces through intense sensory immer-

sion (Goulding et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2017) and emotive bodily expressions (Hewer and Hamilton, 2010). Recent studies broaden the scope of multi-sensory enquiry, by establishing a basis for consumer research that attends to the olfactory (Canniford et al., 2018) and sonic (Patterson and Larsen, 2018). Notwithstanding these significant contributions, a deep understanding of embodiment cannot be reached through recourse to the senses alone. Embodiment also foregrounds body techniques, habituation, and the social, physical and mindful cultivation of skilful dispositions (Mauss, 1973; Crossley 2007; Murphy et al., 2019). Recent CCT studies illuminate the skilful nature of a host of consumption activities that range from freeskiing and paintballing (Woerman and Rokka, 2015), Cosplay (Seregina and Weijo, 2017), craft beer connoisseurship (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017) and high-speed motorcycling (Murphy and Patterson, 2019). Although consumption objects are clearly central to the performance of these skilful activities, these studies do not foregrounded materiality conceptually, and as a consequence we know little about how things feature in the development of skills and the embodied dispositions that pertain to them. To this end, the present study extends Dant’s (2004) assemblage theory to examine the intricacies of socio-material relations between motorcycle repairers and their motorcycles.

#### *Re-theorizing Assemblage: An Embodied Perspective*

Tim Dant’s extensive work on materiality (1999; 2004a; 2004b) brings the issue of embodiment and its role in the formation of human non-human assemblages into critical light. Dant (2004) argues that the embodied experience of being-in-the-world only makes sense because we have a history of sensory experience. We know how it feels to be in the world, and we intuitively know how to interact in the world because of this experience. This embodied way of being-in-the-world is not something that we are born with, it perpetually develops over time through interaction. This process crystallises as bodily memory and because of this being-in-the-world becomes intelligible (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Throughout our lives we engage further in the material world, embodying new skills and techniques, thereby bringing the material world more and more into our everyday lives (Dant 1999, 2004). By drawing attention to the intricate nature of socio-material relations, assemblage theory invites us to consider how things become active not only in shaping perceptual capacities but also the development of skilful embodied techniques. By examining the case of the repairer/motorcycle assemblage, this research aims to develop a theoretical understanding of how skilful embodied relations with things are formed and also how these relations become constitutive of embodiment.

#### *A Brief Summary of Findings*

The repairer’s ability to relate to the material world of the motorcycle is acquired and strengthened in skill (Borgmann, 1987). As a central socio-material dynamic of assemblage formation, skill development closes the distance between the repairer and the motorcycle. Sharpened skills bring people and things together to the extent that they can assemble as one. This dynamic was exemplified in instances where the participants describe using tools with such ease and dexterity that they become like an extension of hand (Mellström, 2002). Being always takes place in the world, and because of this our capacities for skill development and habituation are inextricably relational (Dant 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Crawford (2010) describes motorcycle repair as a *stochastic art*, which necessitates a disposition that is open and attentive to the machine. To embody this disposition, perception must be trained in relations with the motorcycle. This study illuminates how novices are taught to perceive the motorcycle’s obscurities by developing

an aural appreciation of its rhythms. By mindfully listening to the sounds of engines, the capacity for acoustically informed diagnosis gradually accumulates. Similarly, through immersion in these activities, the body becomes attuned to diagnosing problems by identifying resonant sounds, smells and feels (Mellström, 2003). This pathway to skill development is illustrative of the recursivity of these socio-material relations. The motorcycle demands a finely attuned attentiveness that is receptive to its signals. But the repairer/motorcycle assemblage, also illuminates a recursivity to socio-material relations which complicates any notion of agentic subjects continuously acting upon inanimate objects.

By tuning into the socio-material dynamics of assemblage formation, we see that repairers are oftentimes drawn out of themselves and into an intimate relation with the motorcycle, whereby they are forced to question what it needs. In these instances, 'technology is no longer a means by which our mastery of the world is extended' but rather it becomes 'an affront to our usual self-absorption' (Crawford, 2010: 16). Skilled repairers must be able to see beyond the embodied techniques of their craft, to see how skills can be grounded in relations with the material demands of the situation. It is only with this outward orientation towards fixing things that the repairer can truly understand their nature. It is through these socio-material relations that the repairer incorporates the daily movements and actions of repair culture.

When we segment the world into imaginary categories and hierarchies in order to get things done, we in-effect produce dualisms (Canniford and Shankar, 2015). When we resist dualisms, by altering the ontological assumptions that guide our research, we open new up new pathways to see how previously overlooked elements constitute phenomena. Rather than slipping into the naturalised ontological stance which separates mind/body and subject/object, this paper illuminates the socio-material processes through which mind/body and subject/object assemble to co-constitute embodiment. In the routine, habitual practices of motorcycle repair sensory perceptions and gestural dexterity become mindfully honed to interact with the motorcycle and its world. By illuminating the bodies aptitude for knowledgeability and the material objects capacities to impose demands upon the would-be-subject, these socio-material relations blur the boundary that typically separates mind from body and subject from object. We see cogently that the motorcycle repairer could not come into being without this embodied emplacement in the material world.

### **Extending Flow: How Place, Materials, and Body Create Restorative Consumption in Nature**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Consumer research documents a broad range of consumer experiences that offer restorative benefits. From extraordinary experiences in nature (Arnould and Price 1993; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), to painful (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017), or conflict-laden experiences (Tumbat and Belk 2011), drug-induced nights out (Goulding et al. 2009), pilgrimages for the deeply devoted (Higgins and Hamilton 2019; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), or through natural products (Thompson 2004), such experiences are understood to ameliorate the demands of today's society, the burdens of reflexivity, and the resulting "saturated self" (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017, 24). We draw into question what many of these consumption experiences share in common: they take place in nature. A common trope in consumer research is that nature is imbued with healing qualities (Canniford and Shankar 2013). Consumers who seek out such expe-

riences in nature, using limited leisure time and financial resources, are restored and rejuvenated, able to return 'healed' and better able to deal with life in a time-stricken and ever-connected world (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). While we may know why consumers seek out these experiences, and that they are restored and rejuvenated by them, how such experiences are restorative and rejuvenating remains less well understood.

To answer this question, we use Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of flow as a guiding theory. Flow, characterized as a state of total absorption, diverts people's attention from the mundane to focus on the task at hand (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). As a guiding framework, it sensitizes our work to the experience of temporarily losing a sense of place and time. We also draw upon actor-network theory (Law 1992) to examine how these experiences come together as an assemblage of place, materials (equipment), and body (mind and skills). We engaged in an ethnographic study of fly fishing. Fly fishing offers a unique perspective of consumers who have a deep engagement with the activity—which includes the study of entomology, river conditions, equipment, the skills necessary to cast, and adapt to varying weather conditions. We collected data based on the ethnographic immersion of two authors of this project, participant observation, and phenomenological interviews with 21 fly fishers. In order to more closely capture the in-situ experience, we also engaged in video recording participants who then reflected upon their experiences further in interviews.

Our findings show that the restorative and rejuvenative nature of these experiences relies on a deep engagement with the context, sometimes spanning over a lifetime or decades. We show the process of restorative consumption occurs through an extended model of flow that includes: (1) preparing for flow, (2) flowing, (3) remembering flow. First, preparing for flow involves a ritualized material, embodied, and cognitive practice. Second, flowing is the phenomenological experience in which consumers enter a non-reflexive state where embodied practice prevails. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 229) argues that flow happens in the "here and now"; however, we find that remembering flow is a highly ritualized and integral part of the flow experience. The act of remembering what flow feels like comes to shape consumers' understanding of flow and future experiences of flow.

Our research contributes an understanding of the process by which consumption environments and practices create rejuvenative experiences. First, we show that rejuvenative experiences are fleeting, and difficult to achieve and maintain. Beyond Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) descriptive need for an intersection between skill and challenge, our work captures the phenomenological experience of the entire process of flow. Second, consumer researchers broadly refer to flow as akin to a broad range of experiences—transportation experiences (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010; Wang and Calder 2006), edgework (Canniford and Shankar 2013), immersion (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010), transcendental (Schouten, McAlexander, and Koejin 2007). We bring clarity to distinguish flow from other flow-like experiences that, after Turner (1969), we call flowoid. Third, self-awareness is usually considered a virtue. Literature extols the benefits of the reflexive consumer agentially navigating social class (Thompson, Henry, Bardhi 2018), however, in our study, consumers are involved in a deep engagement to reflexively engage in non-reflexivity. In juxtaposition with extraordinary experiences literature that shows that consumers need an escape to achieve the restorative benefits of flow, we suggest that it is through a deep immersion that consumers reap these benefits. Lastly, we draw to attention the importance of the availability of a place to flow. Sustaining natural en-

vironments that facilitate such flow experiences, and making them readily available to populations is important.

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