Author's accepted manuscript (postprint)

Failure: Perspectives and prospects in marketing and consumption theory

Kjeldgaard, D., Nøjgaard, M., Hartmann, B. J., Bode, M., Lindberg, F., Mossberg, L. & Östberg, J.

Failure.

Perspectives and Prospects in Marketing and Consumption Theory

"Failure is all around us. Failure is pervasive. Failure is everywhere, across time, across place and across different aspects of life. Ninety-nine point nine percent of all biological species which have ever existed are now extinct. [...] On a dramatically shorter timescale, more than 10 percent of all the companies in America disappear each year. Large and small, from corporate giants to the tiniest one-person business, they fail." (Ormerod, Why Most Things Fail, 2005; IX).

"I think, my daughter, she is 16, and really cool. And I am the opposed … And she was digging in my … workbag and we have these stickers of Museum of Failure [...] And she was stealing them from my bag and I was like "come on. What the hell are you doing?" And she was "Everyone at school wants one". And they put it on their phones and computers. I was like "why"? And basically, because they identify themselves as failures. Because they are so force-fed by success all the time in ways us old people have no idea, you know. And she said, "that's our way to say that we are authentic, and I am real person. I also fuck up and fail". (Interview with Samuel West, Creator and Curator of the Museum of Failure, autumn 2017).

Failure is and has always been a pervasive part of life. It is most commonly understood as something going wrong, or a desired event or expectation that does not materialize, and is negatively valorized. Increasingly however, the conventional idea that failing is something negative, bad, and undesirable is being questioned and alternative valorizations of failure emerge where it is celebrated as productive and positive. For example, in business and entrepreneurial culture, failure is frequently celebrated in mantras such as "fail fast, fail often" (Babineaux and Krumboltz 2013;

Donohue 2015; Surowieki 2014). But failure is more than such a mantra. Failure itself has also

become a commodity, sold and consumed in the form of popular management books (e.g., *Failing*

Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success by John C. Maxwell), tv series (e.g.

the Netflix show *Losers*), podcasts (e.g. *Spectacular Failures* or *How To Fail With Elizabeth Day*);

public talks (e.g. as organized by the global movement of *Fuckup Nights*), sheer endless videoed

accounts of things going wrong on social media, and even museum visits (e.g., at the world-touring

Museum of Failure).

The appreciation of failure has also made inroads into academia. In 2016, Princeton Professor

Johannes Haushofer shared his 'CV of Failure' which quickly went viral within the academic

community. The CV documents Haushofer's rejections on papers, failure to attain job positions, and

declined scholarships, showcasing that even seemingly successful scholars often fall short and that

failures remain hidden, lacking representation and articulation. Furthermore, a string of studies that

stress the productivity involved with failure is mushrooming across a variety of areas – from queer

theory to material culture studies to performance studies.

While failure permeates contemporary markets, business lingo, popular culture, and various strands

of academic literature, there is a paucity of research that explicitly addresses failure in and for the

context of marketing theory. In this commentary, we interrogate these discourses around failure and

outline what could be on offer for the marketing and consumption theory disciplines. We begin our

interrogation by synthesizing how failure has hitherto been conceptualized in marketing theory.

Then, we discuss how the recent rethinking of failure in other disciplines can be meaningful for

marketing thought, and propose potential research streams for marketing scholarship.

Failure in Marketing Theory

We begin our review of failure with the question: What counts as a failure in marketing? Ever since the emergence of the marketing concept, marketers and marketing scholars have had more interest in success than its antithesis failure. The incessant focus on 'best practice' in marketing text books and popular management literature bear witness to this. Marketing success is conventionally linked to customer satisfaction with the idea that when a company does marketing well, it succeeds in satisfying customers or society. Conversely, when marketing fails, dissatisfaction ensues. This notion of failure is apparent in two bodies of marketing literature, namely service failure and product failure.

First, the service failure literature is perhaps the most elaborative field that has studied failures in marketing. Here, failure is seen as a mistake that leads to customer dissatisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990) or as customer norm deviance (Fullerton & Punj, 2004) that leads to dysfunctional behavior (Fisk et al., 2010). While not all mistakes during the service encounter may generate dissatisfaction, they tend to only be awarded attention when they do so. Hence, the implied credo is that companies should try to avoid failures or, when that is not possible, recover from them (Spreng, Harrell, & Mackoy, 1995; Fombelle et al., 2019), because failure stands in the way of reaching the ideal of the satisfied consumer (Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993).

To be fair, several studies on service failure have demonstrated that competent recovery from failures can lead to *productive* outcomes (Spreng et al., 1995; Tax & Brown, 1998). However, in these studies, it is not failure itself that leads to a productive outcome, but rather the recovery from failure. Failure thus remains a destructive category and a productivity dimension of failure is only acknowledged when failure is corrected. Failure itself is something to avoid.

Second, the link between failure and dissatisfaction is also evident in studies on product failure. These studies examine how consumers infer the root of product failures and how such inferences influence whether consumers feel negatively about the company behind the failing product. The goal of this research has been to predict when product defects lead to complaints or customer retaliation and thus minimize the damage such defects may cause (Folkes, 1984; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Folkes & Kotsos, 1986).

This conceptualization of failure as negative and value-destroying is, by contrast, contested in other fields such as pedagogy, art, and anthropology (Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, Parkhurst, & Shackelford, 2017; Halberstam, 2011; O'Gorman & Werry, 2012). Here, scholars have emphasized how failure holds productive, generative, creative, or inventive potential. In art, the use of failure has a long tradition, ranging from classical music (John Cage composing unplayable notes to hear musician fail in the performance); working with studio technology failures to develop new sounds (like distortion, feedback or autotune), working with failure as an opportunity of improvisatory exploration in Jazz or defining a whole failure genre like *glitch*, see e.g. Betancourt, 2017). This suggests that the ontological assumption of failure as an exclusively destructive phenomenon may neglect and de-emphasize important aspects of how failure matters to marketing as a productive moment that may create a meaningful difference also in a positive way.

Another tendency in existing marketing literature on failure is that it tends to study failure almost exclusively in the spatial-temporal realm of supplier-customer interactions, e.g. in the service encounter. But again, this runs the risk of leaving out important aspects and subtexts of failure. Those studies that are currently rethinking failure advocate broadening up the study of failure to capture the various "ways in which failure functions *socially*" (Carroll et al., 2017, p. 7). From this perspective, we might ask: Is the social functioning of failure in marketing captured by studying purely how failures materialize in e.g. service situations? We suggest not.

In the following, we sketch out how the marketing discipline might benefit from moving beyond studying failure as a primarily destructive phenomenon that arises predominantly in service encounters.

Perspectives and Prospects of Rethinking Failure

Below we outline three perspectives on failure which we argue hold potential for future conceptual development: i) *a phenomenology of failure*, which aims to elucidate and understand failure as a complex consumption phenomenon appreciating its ambivalence and variety; ii) *the socio-cultural formation of failure,* which seeks to unfold failure beyond the individual consumer, and iii) *failure as critique*, which renders failure as a method for identifying dominant ideals in contemporary society.

 A Phenomenology of Failure

Recent studies on failure have sought to supplement a focus on failure as an etic, analytical category with a focus on failure as a lived, emic phenomenon. Material culture research has recently demonstrated how ethnographic studies of failure may give rise to "local articulations" of failure, which for example are not captured by conventional understandings of failure, such as solely understanding it as the binary opposite of success. Pedagogical studies have also stressed the need to "*anatomize [failure] in all its irreducible complexity, painful ambivalence and variety*" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012, p. 1). To pedagogy scholars O'Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4), to capture this complexity, it does not suffice to explore the emic articulations of failure, but also the affect of failure. As O'Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4) write: *"[Failure] comes laced with shame, anger, despair, abjection, guilt, frustration […] Thinking with failure means making affect an object of our curiosity*".

Following these lines of inquiry, we suggest developing a phenomenology of failure, which would allow us to study failure as something that does not cease to matter as soon as consumers exit the service encounter but rather as something that permeates and variously presents itself in consumers'

life-worlds. In making this suggestion, we note that various marketing studies stress the importance of studying how consumers experience failures, similar to efforts being made in the domain of entrepreneurial failure (e.g. Cope 2011). Hedrick et al. (2007) for example show how the relational bonds between consumers and service providers shape consumers' experience of service failures. Patterson et al. (2006) and McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003) suggest how 'perceptions of justice' impact how consumers make sense of failure. Ringberg et al. (2007) examine the cultural models by which consumers interpret failures. Together, these studies demonstrate that consumers experience failure differently and, thus, begin to illustrate what studying failure as a lived experience would look like. However, these studies also narrowly focus on failure in service encounters. Consequently, they only offer a phenomenological slice of consumption failure.

Zayer et al. (2015) come closer to developing a phenomenology of failure. In their study of failed infertility treatments, they illustrate how service failures can spill beyond the service encounter and into consumers' lives. Failed infertility treatments (a service failure, again) can for example make consumers question their own identities as prospective parents and pursue other life goals than parenthood. This aspect of failure – how failure interacts with consumers' lives and identities – is hardly captured by studying how consumers narrowly experience failure in service encounters. We must size up how failures take shape in consumers' life-worlds in order to better understand the impact of failure.

Zayer et al.'s (2015) study also shows that a phenomenology of failure means treating failure with complete normative openness. In their analysis, failure is not a destructive force per definition. For example, failed infertility treatments may not only lead to dissatisfaction and an abandonment of the service, but also spur consumers to *try harder* or stir them to reflexively re-evaluate and *re-invent* their life trajectories (Zayer et al., 2015). Failure in these cases becomes productive. Failure may motivate, inspire, or unite consumers' efforts to overcome it. Some failure scholars even stress that

failure is *inevitably* productive: *"There is a productive/generative capacity to failure; it is the primordial goo of constant evolutionary invention"* (Carroll et al., 2017, p. 14). Treating failure as a lived experience might allow marketing researcher to embrace this aspect of failure and thus break with the traditional treatment of failure by marketing, which has tended to fixate it as a destructive force (producing dissatisfied, unhappy consumers).

Finally, Zayer et al.'s study (2015) points to the affective ambivalence of failure, and thus serves as a counterforce to the tendency of existing marketing literature to treat 'customer dissatisfaction' as the sole affective companion of failure. As Zayer et al. (2015) suggest, failure might even come laced with positive emotions as well as negative ones. If consumers interpret failed infertility treatments as a statistical normality, consumers might come to think of their failures with optimism. In this case, failure is a 'part of the plan' and merely a stop on the route to success. Thus, a phenomenology of failure must seek to go beyond dissatisfaction and dissect lived failures in their full affective complexity.

The Socio-Cultural Formation of Failure

The recent rethinking of failure in other disciplines also invites the question of *why* consumers experience failures the way they do. For example, the framings through which consumers experience failures do not originate from consumers themselves, at least not entirely. Like any consumption experience, how consumers experience failure is embedded in and shaped by a wider socio-cultural context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Humphreys and Thompson (2014) exemplify this in their study on the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 and the BP Gulf Spill of 2010 and point to the relevance of the mythological framing of failures. In their study, they show how consumers came to understand the failures of Exxon and BP through the development of a societal-wide 'disaster myth' that helped consumers make sense of the oil spills. Thus, studying consumption failure also means studying how

consumers' experiential framings of failure are culturally formed. What are the myths and interpretive strategies that consumers draw on when experiencing and interpreting failures? And, how do certain failure myths acquire institutional stability?

Such questions encourage researchers to move beyond both service encounters and consumers' immediate life-worlds, to instead study failure at the level of society. Interconnected technologies, media and ecosystems increasingly leads to failure at a systems level (Dekker, 2016) and it has been suggested that contemporary capitalism is de-facto feeding off of perpetual failures of entrepreneurship in the Silicon Valley model, and the monetization of failures in the Wall Street financial derivatives model (Appadurai & Alexander, 2019). Furthermore, governmentality regimes of happiness, self-realization and self-performance enhancement (see e.g. Kristensen and Ruckenstein 2018) are directed towards avoiding being a failed consumer. Such regimes may in themselves be generative of an increase in scope and intensity of experienced failures for consumers as such regimes perpetuate and the ideals of the regimes shift. Exploring the affective economies of failure (Ahmed 2004) around such consumer governmentality regimes as a basis for markets can contribute to research on market emergence and market system dynamics (see e.g. the MT special issue on market systems - Giesler and Fischer 2017).

From this perspective, one important task for research looking into the cultural formation of failure is also to explore the increasing public celebration of failure. As noted above, learning about other people's failures has become a commodity in and of itself. Failure is consumed through books, museum visit, podcasts, social media, and public talks. And this recent commodification of failure does not seem to be driven by a Schadenfreudian appetite for watching other people's misfortunes. Rather, consuming other people's failure increasingly involves collectively celebrating failure instead

of ridiculing those who fail. A key question to ask is: where does this new framing of failure come from, and how did it become orchestrated as an object of commerce and consumption?

Failure as Critique

A promising aspect of studying failure lies in its potential for critique. This is an aspect of failure that has been picked up by the writer Halberstam (2011) who argues that failing may be used as a method for identifying dominant ideals in contemporary society. Halberstam argues that a queer strategy can be *choosing* to fail to live up to the expectations of heteronormative ideals and thus live by an alternate set of ideals. For Halberstam (2011), failure crystallizes the dominant ways of evaluating success, making them a potential target for critique and alteration. Failure as a practice thus becomes an epistemic window. As James Fitchett points out any utopian imagery carry with it its dystopian version (Bradshaw, Fitchett and Heitanen 2020). So is success defined against the backdrop of failure. Understanding what is experienced and articulated as failure can provide insights into predominant ideals of contemporary markets and consumer culture.

One may ask, however, as Carroll et al. (2017) have done in commenting upon Halberstam's perspective, "If you want to fail, is it failure if it is achieved?". Isn't failing then simply an alternate way of succeeding? For us, the critical potential of failure lies simply in opening up novel ways of imagining society and not necessarily in redefining success. As O'Gorman and Werry (2012, p. 4) write, the power of thinking with failure lies in

"[f]inding possibility in predicament and embracing the vulnerability of moments of failure that may also be moments of profound discovery in which we remain open to what transpires, rather than measure it against our intentions."

For marketing researchers, failures in marketing become a site where the critical imagination (Murray & Ozanne, 1991) comes alive. A site where new versions of markets and new ways of being a consumer may become thinkable.

The critical potential of failure may manifest itself for the individual consumer. This corresponds to how Halberstam thinks of the failure: individuals may choose to fail and thereby become free to live their life as they want. This may for example be a useful way of thinking about consumers engaging in intentional non-consumption (Cherrier, Black, & Lee, 2011), who, by failing to consume, may resist the societal pressure of satisfying their needs through the market. However, thinking about failure may also provide the resource to think critically about the failure of consumption as a dominant human practice (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), and the dominant means of organizing life and society.

The role of failure as part of the critical marketing imagination has perhaps not been more relevant than under the contemporary crises humanity is facing – The Covid-19 crisis and its macrocosm, the climate change crisis. We are already seeing political discourse of climate change shift from climate change mitigation (e.g. through sustainable consumption and marketing practice) to climate change adaptation. That means learning to live with a failed consumer culture, if you like, and how to live and die (Scranton, 2015) in a climate change consumer culture, a consumer culture "*after the end of nature*" (Giddens, 2003; 2009). We are seeing the contours of the failed consumer culture at a variety of levels as contestation over rights to consume or not, what consumption is justified, and who holds responsibility for the future – from the intergenerational over social class to the geopolitical level.

Conclusion

We propose that exploring the moral, ideological, cultural and market framing of failure, dwelling

on its phenomenological contours and its existential ramifications, may deliver insights for

marketing theory that goes beyond standard concepts such as satisfaction, best practice and non-

contextualized service encounters.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social text*, *22*(2), 117-139.

Appadurai, A. & Alexander N. (2019), *Failure*, Cambridge: Polity.

Askegaard, S., & Linnet, J. T. (2011). Towards an epistemology of consumer culture theory:

Phenomenology and the context of context. *Marketing Theory*, *11*(4), 381–404.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593111418796.

Babineaux, R. & Krumboltz, J. (2013). *Fail Fast, Fail Often: How Losing Can Help You Win*.

NewYork: Penguin.

Betancourt, M. (2017). *Glitch art in theory and practice: critical failures and post-digital*

aesthetics. New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group

Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreault, M. S. (1990). The Service Encounter: Diagnosing

Favorable and Unfavorable Incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, *54*(1), 71–84.

https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299005400105

Bradshaw, A., Fitchett, J., & Hietanen, J. (forthcoming). Dystopia and quarantined markets–an

interview with James Fitchett. *Consumption Markets & Culture*,

https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2020.1823378.

Carroll, T., Jeevendrampillai, D., Parkhurst, A., & Shackelford, J. (Eds.). (2017). *The material*

culture of failure: when things do wrong. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Cherrier, H., Black, I. R., & Lee, M. (2011). Intentional non-consumption for sustainability: Consumer resistance and/or anti-consumption? *European Journal of Marketing*, *45*(11/12), 1757–1767. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561111167397

Cope, J. (2011). Entrepreneurial learning from failure: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. Journal of Business Venturing, 26(6), 604–623. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2010.06.002

Dekker, S. (2016). *Drift into failure: From hunting broken components to understanding complex systems*. CRC Press.

Donohue, J. (2015). Fail Fast, Fail Often, Fail Everywhere. The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/fail-fast-fail-often-fail-everywhere.

Fisk, R., Grove, S., Harris, L., Keeffe, D. A., Daunt, K., Russell-Bennett, R., & Wirtz, J. (2010). Customers behaving badly: a state of the art review, research agenda and implications for practitioners. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 24(6), pp. 417-429.

Folkes, V. S. (1984). Consumer Reactions to Product Failure: An Attributional Approach. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *10*(4), 398. https://doi.org/10.1086/208978

Folkes, V. S., Koletsky, S., & Graham, J. L. (1987). A Field Study of Causal Inferences and Consumer Reaction: The View from the Airport. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *13*(4), 534. https://doi.org/10.1086/209086

Folkes, V. S., & Kotsos, B. (1986). Buyers' and Sellers' Explanations for Product Failure: Who Done It? *Journal of Marketing*, *50*(2), 74. https://doi.org/10.2307/1251601

Paul W. Fombelle, et al. (2019). Customer deviance: A framework, prevention strategies, and opportunities for future research. *Journal of Business Research*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.012

Fullerton, R. A., & Punj, G. (2004). Repercussions of Promoting an Ideology of Consumption:

   Consumer Misbehavior. *Journal of Business Research*, 57(11), pp. 1239- 1249.

Giddens, A. (2009). *Politics of climate change*. Polity.

Giddens, A. (2003). *Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives*. Taylor & Francis.

Giesler, M., & Fischer, E. (2017). "Market system dynamics". *Marketing Theory*, 17-1.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hedrick, N., Beverland, M., & Minahan, S. (2007). An exploration of relational customers'

   response to service failure. *Journal of Services Marketing*, *21*(1), 64–72.

   https://doi.org/10.1108/08876040710726301

Humphreys, A., & Thompson, C. J. (2014). Branding Disaster: Reestablishing Trust through the

   Ideological Containment of Systemic Risk Anxieties. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *41*(4),

   877–910. https://doi.org/10.1086/677905

Kelley, S. W., Hoffman, K. D., & Davis, M. A. (1993). A typology of retail failures and recoveries.

   Journal of Retailing, *69*(4), 429–452. https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-4359(93)90016-C

Kristensen, D. B., & Ruckenstein, M. (2018). Co-evolving with self-tracking technologies. *New

   Media & Society*, *20*(10), 3624-3640.

Mccoll-Kennedy, J. R., & Sparks, B. A. (2003). Application of Fairness Theory to Service Failures

   and Service Recovery. *Journal of Service Research*, *5*(3), 251–266.

   https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670502238918

McCollough, M. A., Berry, L. L., & Yadav, M. S. (2000). An Empirical Investigation of Customer

   Satisfaction after Service Failure and Recovery. *Journal of Service Research*, *3*(2), 121–137.

   https://doi.org/10.1177/109467050032002

Murray, J. B., & Ozanne, J. L. (1991). The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in

   Consumer Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *18*(2), 129–144.

O'Gorman, R., & Werry, M. (2012). On Failure (On Pedagogy): Editorial Introduction.

Performance Research, *17*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2012.651857

Ormerod, Paul (2005), *Why Most Things Fail ... and How to Avoid It.*, London: Faber and Faber.

Patterson, P. G., Cowley, E., & Prasongsukarn, K. (2006). Service failure recovery: The moderating

impact of individual-level cultural value orientation on perceptions of justice. *International*

Journal of Research in Marketing, *23*(3), 263–277.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2006.02.004

Ringberg, T., Odekerken-Schröder, G., & Christensen, G. L. (2007). A Cultural Models Approach

to Service Recovery. *Journal of Marketing*, *71*(3), 194–214.

https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.71.3.194

Scranton, R. (2015). *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*.

City Lights Publishers.

Spreng, R. A., Harrell, G. D., & Mackoy, R. D. (1995). Service recovery: Impact on satisfaction and

intentions. *Journal of Services Marketing*. https://doi.org/10.1108/08876049510079853.

Surowieki, J. (2014). Epic fails of the start-up World. *The New Yorker*,

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/19/epic-fails-of-the-startup-world

Zayer, L. T., Otnes, C. C., & Fischer, E. M. (2015). The Nature and Implications of Consumers'

Experiential Framings of Failure in High-Risk Service Contexts. *Journal of Service*

Research, *18*(3), 303–317. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670514559187