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Consumers

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“Consumerism is the one thing that gives us our sense of values. Consumerism is honest, and teaches us that everything good has a barcode.”

J.G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (2006)

Understanding the thoughts and practices of contemporary consumers is at the heart of what marketing practitioners and researchers do. The following pages briefly chart the historical development of the consumer, and introduce academic debates over consumer culture and identity, before looking at several manifestations of consumer power in contemporary marketing practice: crowdsourcing, blogs, and viral marketing. We'll conclude with a look into what makes consumers truly happy.

Introduction

In the academic world, extended forays into etymology can often deflect serious scholarship, but the historical development of the word 'consumer' offers a striking and perhaps surprising perspective from which to initiate the somewhat critical agenda of this chapter. You may have seen the word 'consumption' used as a synonym for tuberculosis, and this is derived from the earliest definitions of resources being used up, wasted or squandered. Here, the disease wastes the mental and physical resources of the body. These negative associations went right to the top, with several centuries of pre-modern European and American governments explicitly regulating the ways in which their citizens consumed. 'Sumptuary' laws restricted gifts of cutlery in 16th century Italy, while women were jailed for wearing scarves in 18th century Germany (Trentmann, 2016). Although such laws would be laughable in modern-day Europe, the thinking behind them seems remarkably contemporary: money spent on fancy foreign goods was money lost from local producers and, in turn, local treasuries.

Over the next two hundred years, the negative connotations of consumption were gradually shifted through various arguments developed in science, theology, and philosophy, in which the pursuits of newness and luxury were reconfigured as divinely inspired and the mark of civilised nations. Economics provided a significant push in William Stanley Jevons's *Theory of Political Economy* (1879), in which Jevons argued that it was consumer wants that determined the value of an object, rather than the materials and work that produced it. Jevons (1879: 40) observed that "[e]very manufacturer knows and feels how closely he must anticipate the tastes and needs of his customers: his whole success depends upon it; and, in like manner, the theory of Economics must begin with a correct theory of consumption." These observations may also sound remarkably modern to the marketing scholar familiar with the work of Vargo and Lusch (2004) into Service-Dominant Logic and the co-creation of value.

Any investigation into the history of the consumer, however brief, must surely acknowledge the role of the slave trade in increasing the availability of luxury goods such as cotton, sugar, rum, and tobacco from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s. These consumer goods originated in often British and Dutch-owned plantations in the Americas, where people (largely forcibly removed from Africa) were enslaved, sold as goods, and suffered brutal violence and unimaginable loss of life in order to satiate growing consumer demands (Cain & Hopkins, 1986). While slavery is now officially illegal across the world, the slave trade continues in various forms, such as human trafficking, forced marriage, and child labour. This returns us to the negative physical connotations of consumption, and highlights the growing need for transparency in supply chains, in order that the consumer can be informed of the conditions under which their goods are produced.

Fast-forwarding to the early twentieth century, the ability to more efficiently extract and store energy in the form of fossil fuels spurred the production of a dizzying array of commercial consumer goods. Consumer demand for luxury in the decades following the relative austerity of the First and Second World Wars saw the rise of consumerism in earnest across the UK and USA. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to tread further into the historical landscape of politics, revolution, and counter-revolution against which the contemporary 'consumer' is formed, a definition of consumerism will prove useful to the discussions that follow. Sklair (2010: 136) defines:

"the culture-ideology of consumerism [as] a set of beliefs and values, integral but not exclusive to the system of capitalist globalization, intended to make people

believe that human worth is best ensured and happiness is best achieved in terms of our consumption and possessions.”

We shall return to the question of happiness at the end of the chapter. For now, let us take a look at how technological developments in twenty-first century consumer culture have offered empowerment to individuals, and what this empowerment means for marketing.

How the power has moved into our hands

Marketing to consumers has traditionally been something of a prescriptive process, in which consumers passively buy what the market offers. The marketing firm would make use of the available forms of mass media to promote prefabricated goods to a carefully researched segment of the population at a fixed price point. Consumer choice in this scenario is limited: To buy or not to buy? Although this represents an oversimplification, the wide spread of Internet access and connected devices has created and normalised significant alternatives to this process. Now with access to an incredible volume of information, the consumer is thus empowered with a new and ever-changing set of decisions and choices prior even to engaging with a company. Which site do we trust to offer quality products? Which channels do we know that host advertising from companies aligned with our personal values? Is it better to buy online or head to the shops? Which customisation options have been suggested to offer the best performance?

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether this really represents empowerment, Wathieu et al. (2002) discuss the following abilities now available to the consumer in making their choices:

- **Control over the composition of the choice set:** the ability of the consumer to specify and adjust the choice context.
- **Progress cues:** the ability of the consumer to repeatedly assess progress during the overall process of choice.
- **Information about other consumers:** the ability of the consumer to learn how other consumers have approached the same choice, and the outcomes of their decision.

In disputing the traditional conception of empowerment, Shankar et al. (2006: 1025) note that “[e]mpowering consumers is often equated in practice to giving people more and more choice”, with the idea that “consumers can be, should be or even need to be empowered appear[ing], at least at face