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Marketing and Identity

■ Introduction

This book revolves around two assumptions. The first is that marketing is a cultural activity that is both informed and part of contemporary culture, and the second is that marketing needs to understand the relationship between the individual consumer and the product or experience. This chapter outlines the significance of consumption and how consumption patterns reinforce both our identity and position within society. This chapter also challenges the dominance of certain marketing practices, such as segmentation, in targeting consumers. We all think carefully before we purchase something whether it be a holiday or a meal, we go through a complex decision making process taking into account many different factors. One of the major aspects will be to think about what additional benefits may accrue from purchasing the item, what will family, friends or even strangers think. As such, we try to identify the additional benefits from purchasing the item, for example if I buy a designer coat I will get the benefit of being kept warm, but I may also get the benefit of people thinking I am affluent and on trend, and as such they may look up to me or give me respect. This process also informs the things we drink, the places where we holiday, the events we attend, the wine we choose or the restaurants we eat at. It can be argued that we go through this process every time we purchase an item or experience. Consumption identifies to the rest of the world the type of person we are and the groups, class or tribe we belong to. This chapter examines how we reinforce

or create our identity through consumption and the impact this may have on contemporary marketing practices

■ The restructuring of society and the consumer

As we moved from an economy dominated by industrial production to one dominated by services and experiences, both culture and society adapted with it. The changes in working patterns, and the destruction of regionally dominant industries, such as coal mining or steel production, saw the breakdown of communities and increased migration by workers looking to access the new service industries. The upshot of this, is that the community groups that helped us form our identities and informed our view of the world disappeared and were replaced by more powerful and persuasive media that generated ways of living through cable or satellite television. What is more, the internet and mobile technology has stepped in to grant almost unrestricted access to an innumerable range of virtual communities and consumption and interest groups that allow consumers to interact with, and align with whatever lifestyle or social group they wish. What we have witnessed is a restructuring of society in which workers have become consumers and as such, a society that is dominated by consumerism and has led to a world in which:

...the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and repackaging experiences supplanting 'religion', work, and politics as the mechanism by which social and status distinctions may be established.

(Izberk-Bilgin, 2010)

This is a world in which 'cultural intermediaries', specifically in advertising, the media, the fashion system, product development, broadcasting and entertainment, act as social and cultural brokers (Urry, 2001). They define the way in which consumers view the world, by defining taste, trends and fashions. This group of individuals and their organisations have replaced traditional family and kinship groups in shaping consumers' expectations and desires. However, it should not be forgotten that throughout history certain consumption patterns

have always supported social class (Holt, 1998).

Magazines and television programmes that chart the lives of celebrities, by focusing on their lifestyles, their diets, their leisure time, and their holidays, supported by travel programmes, advertisements and how-to guides, create desire and demand in THEF by providing subject positions, or blueprints to live through/by, and as a result, consumers may emulate the rich and famous or aspirant others. In short, cultural intermediaries are significantly active in the definition of taste and preferences, and in creating subject positions that are made available for consumers as resources through which they can activate and express or develop their identities.

The result of this is that commodities are no longer solely defined by their function or use, or by their market price, but rather by what they signify to both the consumer and his or her peers (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Levy, 1959; Solomon, 1983). Experiences marketing utilises the knowledge and symbolism generated by cultural intermediaries and the manifold meanings located in the broader culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986) to inform their own marketing practice and cultural intermediation. It enables the marketer to tailor and develop products, experiences, and mark out the boundaries of specific fields of consumption or habitus (Arsel & Thompson, 2011) that offer the maximum benefits/value to the consumer by providing them with the means and resources to generate and accumulate various forms of capital, be it cultural, social, symbolic, or even economic (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Drawing on the myriad of symbolic and discursive resources, the language and practice of experiences marketing invites consumers into a plurality of worlds, that allows them to activate and furnish identity projects and to escape from the mundane experience of everyday life, that is, of course, if they are endowed with the required levels of financial and authoritative resources and capabilities (Arnould, 2007). Thus, experiences marketing is more than just a commercial activity, it also defines notions of taste and provides an outlet for consumers through consumption of THEF products to express their own individual taste and preferences.