New Consumption Communities: Resisting The Hegemony Of The Marketing Process

Stream 23: Critical Marketing Visibility, Inclusivity, Captivity

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Introduction

The visibility of the consumer in the marketing process has many implications. One has been the continuance of inclusivity on the basis of exchange. The exchange system could be described as one of captivity for the consumer dependent on the hegemony of the dominant marketing process (Gramsci, 1998). Despite the rhetoric of relationship marketing being consumer centric, power remains in the hands of the supplier in this exchange relationship (Szmigin, 2003), while the process of cultural alienation ensures that the only inclusion available is one based on exchange. Importantly the marketing process has also alienated the consumer from production. Industrial capitalism has meant that people are estranged from one another and from the creation of goods. The end of the last century, however, saw a greater interest by some in the nature of the production of consumer goods and in turn this has led to the development of a range of behaviours including downshifting (Shor, 1998) and boycotting behaviour, where people rejected goods for a variety of reasons but often related to the mode and nature of their production. Typically such consumer behaviour and especially boycotting has been seen as anti-marketing (Voight, 2000; Garett, 1987) yet from a consumer research perspective it can be viewed as a fundamental re-enabling of the consumer. Rather than characterising boycotters or others as being outside the mainstream and therefore ‘flawed consumers’ (Bauman, 1998), it is more appropriate to examine the conceptual development of the consumer in relation to both marketing and the exchange system where alternative consumer behaviours may be seen as part of the development. It is our contention that, at least in part, this enabling process stems from a desired reconnection with the nature of production over a need to consume.

Shifting from consumption to production

In many ways the twentieth century may be viewed as a time when consumption overtook production. We were busy consuming goods and what they stood for, responding to brands and using them for the development of our self-identity (Holt, 2002). Branding was and probably still is the dominant image creator; consumers were given the opportunity to distinguish them selves from one another through the brands they bought. As the century wore on, however, a number of issues arose that made, at least some consumers, refocus on how the things they consumed were being produced. Issues such as BSE, genetic
modification and the dominant role of multiple retailers in the supply chain, dictating the terms of production across the globe, became public issues of production as well as consumption. Increasingly we were required to be involved in the production process while being excluded from any real control in it. Self-service started with supermarkets and petrol stations but now we also assemble our own furniture from IKEA, collect our money from ATM machines and even issue our own books in libraries. But are we barely aware of what we are doing? Slater suggests that the central issue is about how we relate to things in modern life and that once we lose the connection and control of that connection we move into a state of alienation and distance (Slater, 1997). Of course there are examples to show that the process of production is considered an attribute. The BodyShop has for long traded on three key values, the non-exploitation of animals in product testing; the payment of fair wages with provision of good working conditions in manufacture and environmental responsibility through recycling packaging. Similarly the growing market for organic produce has as well as a concern for the consumption quality of the food in terms of taste and product safety, a production concern to do with the planet’s genetic diversity if genetic modification is pursued.

The production consumption balance

A reconnection with the mode and means of production inevitably brings us to Marx as a key informant. In Fine’s (1984) review of Marx’s Das Capital, he made clear that Marx viewed the need to produce and consume as integral to human nature. This is still very much the case in the twenty first century, and as such there is nothing ‘wrong’ with either production or consumption. But what Marx wanted was the revealing and explanation of social relations and organization of production and as Fine puts it ‘To distinguish people’s possible relations with the physical world from those induced with it and other people’ (1984:18). A renewed interest and understanding of existing and potential relations within production processes and their impact on labour value and consumer value is as necessary now as it was in the nineteenth century; more so even as the impact of structures, relations and choices are affecting people across continents, within their own lands and across generations. Importantly Marx believed that production was more than a means to life but rather contained the potential for self-realization and advancement (Lee, 1993), ‘As individuals express their life, so they are, what they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce’ (Marx and Engels, 1974: 42). As Lee has suggested, this production has a ‘metaphysical kernel’ an essence of its creation and its social and historical context (1993:5) and of course central to Marx’s view of production under capitalism was the objectification of value resulting in an impoverished realization of human activity. With one or two exceptions as noted above, the Western
consumer has for some time effectively been alienated from all aspects of the metaphysical kernel of production; today’s exchange values having failed to signal any ethically and culturally relevant attributes which may inform true use value.

It might be argued that the recent increase in concerns of over the risks in consumption (Schlosser, 2001) coupled with a rise in ethical considerations in purchasing (Klein, 2000) represents a fundamental re-orientation in the relationship between the buyer and supplier and production and consumption. However, producers are quick to capitalize on consumers’ anxieties; they are only too aware of new attributes that can be used to enhance their brands and if they have identified that consumers are concerned with production attributes they will build this into the profile of their brands. One only needs to look at the proliferation of organic goods in the multiple retailers to see how well they have understood this. It is also significant that again supermarkets are muscling in on these alternative consumption communities by holding farmers’ markets in their car parks and foyers (La Trobe, 2001).

Whether consumers can and will take action to reclaim production is a point argued in a number of areas. On the one hand there are those who believe that consumer knowledge and power will drive the behaviour of the retailers and regulators (Kahn and McAllister, 1997) while others question the extent of consumer knowledge, power and indeed interest (Holt, 2002, Fine and Leopold, 1993). Cook et. al. (1998) have argued against the ‘blunt dichotomy between either a knowledgeable, and hence powerful, or ignorant and hence manipulated, consumer’ (1998: 166), rather they say there is evidence for both positions. But what does this mean in reality? Consumers have attempted to work both within and without the dominant marketing process. It has perhaps been inevitable that concern for the production process has often been expressed by middle class, income rich, time poor individuals; they may be well placed to afford supermarket organic produce and least best placed to spend time sourcing goods from a range of suppliers. There has been criticism with regard to the constancy of ethical consumption. Strong (1997) for example, has expressed concern over almost inevitable inconsistencies, for example, that those who buy ethically traded coffee may be paying for it from a purse produced by an exploited Third World Workforce. The problem with this argument is that it presupposes people can immediately work outside the bounds of the existing system and with perfect information; it is a na"ive assertion. Consistency is not necessarily a feature of a re-enabled consumer, captive for so long to the dominant marketing process, it would be more surprising to find total commitment. Having said that, there are groups and individuals who are proactively moving the enabling process forward. Some clearly have vested interests to pursue, the Farmers Market Movement is both allowing local
producers to operate outside of the supermarket supply chain and potentially increasing profits, but also they are re-engaging consumers with the nature of production in terms of how, when and where their food is produced. Previous research has suggested that important attributes for consumers of such markets include; the enjoyable experience of getting to know the stallholders, availability of information on the products, opportunities to taste prior to purchase and that by using the market support is being given to the local producers (Young and Holden, 2002).

Re-enabling the consumer

We believe the time is now right to begin to try to conceptualise what is happening in terms of a movement away from the dominant exchange process to new and alternative ways of re-engaging production and consumption. While we do not envisage an overthrow of that exchange process, we do believe that an important shift is taking place which may have significant implications for both producers and consumers and for the hegemonic position of marketing and particularly branding. Essential to this is the development of alternative communities that reveal the inadequacies of the existing system as well as offering alternative modes of consumption and thinking to a diverse range of people.

We present a ‘timeline’ as a first stage in conceptualising the development of this re-enabling process. We suggest that a movement is in train leading to the development of new consumption communities which undermine ‘the tyranny of the normal’ (Bowring 2000) and the dominance of marketing values. As a first stab at visualising this we present a continuum of progress from the dominant branding position through the resistance of boycotting and anti-branding producing a re-enabling of consumers in some form of community mode.

Branding ___ Boycotting ___ Anti-Branding ___ Community ___

New Consumption Communities

This continuum does not represent a shift from one position to another per se; branding, for example remains the dominant paradigm of the market. Rather it is organic and should be seen as each element developing out of what has come before. Also the continuum reveals the shifting balances in power between the consumer and supplier.
A Closer Look at the continuum

Branding

In a world where use-value has effectively been replaced by sign value, the rise and rise of the brand has hardly been surprising. Holt (2002) presented the development of branding as establishing the legitimacy of marketing as it presented a value proposition to the consumer. Interestingly, he also suggests that another principle was at work at the same time, what he refers to as ‘P.T. Barnum hucksterism’ (2002:80), which saw consumers as dupes who would buy inflated claims. Now branding is used by consumers, he says, as a ‘cultural resource’ allowing a form of expressive culture, implying that consumers are using brands rather than vice versa. This approach is supported by others who suggest that it is consumers who are the final arbiters and if they don’t like the brand it will wither and die (Economist, 2001). This is far too simple an idea; brands are not about a one-to-one relationship of equal parity but rather about mass marketing an idea that will allow us to feel we are expressing ourselves, even if we are only doing the same as thousands of others. Mass marketing relies on the unlikelihood that consumers can be bothered and are able to investigate, discriminate and indeed resist the lure of the brand. This is why we have to accept that the normal distribution curve of consumers will reveal a vast central body that are probably happy or at least not dissatisfied with the status quo.

Boycotting

Boycotting, the term dating back to an Irish estate manager whose employees refused to harvest crops when offered a fraction of the regular wage, focuses on achieving certain objectives through urging consumers to refrain from selective purchase (Friedman, 1999). Boycotting is often aimed directly at the company and less directly at its high profile brands and indeed is often concerned with issues external to the marketplace such as human and animal rights and the environment. Boycotting behaviour has always had a degree of selectivity; it has tended to be specific to certain areas of activity and is primarily focused on the whole company. It is less about enabling consumers and more about disabling companies, as a central plank of action is withdrawing support for the company through taking away patronage. There is however, an important community aspect to the action, as a rationale for boycotting put forward by Garrett (2001) is that while large companies may ignore the complaints of individuals a collective voice is harder to dismiss.
Anti-branding

The anti-branding movement which at least partly developed from the ‘NoLogo’ (Klein, 2000) phenomenon was, we suggest, more generally damaging to the hegemony of marketing than boycotting, in that it was highly visible and also came at a time when the internet had developed into a useful basis of conversation between people with similar concerns. Partly as a result of the impact of the internet these conversations also helped develop communities of like-minded people less limited by age, geography, economic or social status. We recognise that use of the Internet has an economic dimension although access has become more generally available in public places such as libraries. The internet has been particularly important as a source of information transfer and it is significant that it generated a range of different types of site and information exchange from consumer advice on how to complain (www.howtocomplain.com, www.complainer.co.uk etc) to dedicated sites reviewing and revealing the behaviours of a range of corporations (e.g. www.corporatewatch.org.uk). Much of the Internet activity can be termed anti-branding, although it is not essentially anti-consumption. Corporate Watch’s ‘What’s wrong with supermarkets?’ while attacking the large multiple retailers also positively campaigns for example, for incentives to localise food production and retailing including covered food markets, through directed funding from Regional Development Agencies and tax incentives to small local traders and trading schemes. Similarly, Wyecycle, a community business in the southeast of Britain, attacks supermarkets in its list of ‘10 ways to create a better world’ but its primary focus is on the reduction of waste through a range of initiatives based around recycling and re-reusing. By pointing out and exploring alternatives to the status quo this anti-branding movement gave the incentive to groups to begin to consider more fully alternatives that might work for them. They effectively paved the way for communities that were based on a positive buying decision that we have termed ‘New Consumption Communities’.

New Consumption Communities

It is important to remember that people do have the ability to operate in a co-operative manner thus making them a creative species. Importantly Marx suggested that alienation is not the only route for humans but that it is the result of the economic, social and political institutions which are part of capitalism (Bocock, 1993). The alienation of modern consumer capitalism has been well documented; branding, while ostensibly allowing people to express their identity may be viewed as little more than a temporary opiate. We should also consider ways in which such alienation might change or lessen in light of consumers’ responses to the
experience of such estrangement. Here we consider two theoretical classifications that may help in thinking firstly about how we may view the response of forming new consumption communities and secondly the nature of those communities.

Conceptual Frameworks for Understanding New Consumption Communities

The development of new consumption communities may be compared to the classification developed by Hirschman (1970) as categories of consumer response to corporate behaviour. He suggested three potential responses: exit (refusal), voice (complaint) and loyalty (patronage in the hope of change). We have refined this for the 21st century into the following to reflect the ‘timeline’ developed above:

- exit – the refusal to consume, or actively boycott particular brands
- voice – complaint through lobbying, demonstration or the support of particular consumerist groups
- positive choice – patronage of alternatives in the hope of change; the decision to seek alternatives to traditional consumption, for example, buying bulk non-branded goods; farmers markets; credit unions; Fairtrade products.

An explanation of community as expressed through consumption has been developed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). While their notion of brand community is wedded to well known consumer brands, we have not rejected the contribution it makes. They suggest the notion of a brand community as being those supporters and endorsers of particular consumer brands. In particular they refer to a ‘consciousness of kind’ evident in the brand communities they investigated, citing Cova (1997) they say that ‘ the link is more important than the thing’. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) suggest there is a shared component among those in brand communities which includes:

a) A consciousness of kind – a collective sense of connection to the brand but more importantly to one another
b) Shared rituals and traditions – that come about through shared consumption experiences and help to form and maintain the culture of the community
c) A sense of moral responsibility – this is a sense of duty to the community and to the members of that community; it helps with the cohesion of the group.

While Muniz and O’Guinn were looking specifically at mainstream brands, their findings particularly in relation to how consumption can bring people together to form ‘this consciousness of kind’ seems particularly relevant to small consumer communities.
New Consumption Communities in Practice

We will now review two new consumption communities, Garstang Fairtrade town, the first designated fair trade town in the UK and Ithaca Hours, a US based community-trading system. As researchers we have experience of both these communities, with Garstang through visiting and talking with the local community both shopkeepers and consumers and with Ithaca hours through an Internet conversation with a number of key people in the community.

Ithaca Hours

The principle behind Ithaca hours is particularly important to the notion of exchange as Ithaca hours is a form of currency directly relates to use value in terms of the direct labour an hour is worth. Started in 1991, the people of Ithaca issued their own paper currency, Ithaca Hours. The value of each hour was comparable to an average hourly wage of the area. The founder, Paul Glover saw this process as reclaiming commodification because generally work would be worth the same amount of Hours regardless of what the work was. Residents list the goods or services they have to offer in a catalogue. The return to local people may vary; while for some the system provides an important source of financial support for others it is primarily a way of meeting others in the community. Importantly, people find that their spending is inevitably redirected locally. The kinds of services bought include plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, childcare, food and so on. Restaurants and entertainment venues take them as well as stores and farmers markets. Community suppliers thrive and feel less threatened but Glover argues that this does not produce an isolationist community:

'We replace dependence on imports. Yet our greater self-reliance, rather than isolating Ithaca, gives us more potential to reach outward with ecological export industry. We can provide the capital for new businesses with loans of our own cash. HOUR loans are made without interest charges.’ (www.geocities.com/rainforets/7813/ccs-ithi.htm)

There is also an important resistance aspect to the Ithaca HOURS concept in terms of opposition to supremacy of the dollar in exchange systems.

'We printed our own money because we watched Federal dollars come to town, shake a few hands, then leave to buy rainforest lumber and to fight wars. Ithaca HOURS, by contrast, stay in our region to help us hire each other. While dollars make us increasingly dependent on multinational corporations and bankers, HOURS reinforce community
trade and expand commerce that is more responsive to our concern for ecology and social justice.’ (www.geocities.com/rainforets/7813/ccs-ithi.htm)

In our email discussion with Ithaca participants we found this feeling supported by users:

‘I loved going to locally owned businesses and exchanging the money and knowing the money would keep circulating locally, meaning that we would all be supporting each other’ (Laurie)

While some were more sceptical about how much HOURS had actually helped the community come together there were benefits in relation to managing consumption.

‘I have given my children Ithaca HOURS to use to purchase snacks, assured that the HOURS would neither be stolen at school nor could my children use the Hours for purchases other than snacks at the local bakery (can’t be used at McDonalds’ etc.’ (ERB)

It is important, however, to temper the enthusiasm of participants with the realism that the barter system is a small part of most of the communities business and other respondents pointed this out.

‘Since our national currency is still our prominent source of exchange, being in the HOURS community has not strengthened us as consumers in this community. That is, aside from a goodwill feeling about supporting community endeavours’ (Manager for Housing Solutions)

Indeed this respondent went on to say that she did not believe that the HOURS were widely accepted within the community and purchase opportunities were very limited.

Others complained about the notion of an hourly wage at $10, such that a babysitter might be relatively over compensated while a dentist was allowed to charge double rate per hour because in a normal exchange system they would be charging something closer to this rate. As such the norms of the usual exchange system can be seen to continue to exert their power on this community.

There is a history of similar local exchange trading systems (LETS) in Britain with varying degrees of success. For our purposes a significant facet of such systems is their strategy of disengagement from the hegemony of the formal market system (Pacione, 1997) but as Dobson (1993) has indicated the realistic community economic goal of such systems is probably best described as one of self-reliance rather than
self-sufficiency accepting that in the developed world removal from the market system is an unlikely attainable goal.

**Garstang Fair Trade Town**

Garstang is a small (population over 4,000) historic market town between Preston and Lancaster in England. At a Public Town Meeting in 2000 the people of the town voted for Garstang to become the world’s first Fairtrade Town. Since then there have been over 17 more designated as Fairtrade towns, together with schools, universities and churches. The activists involved in this community originated from the Garstang Oxfam Group but they quickly identified a way of getting the local community involved through chocolate. To persuade churches, schools and traders to use and/or sell Fairtrade products the Oxfam Group invited people to a special meal featuring a chocolate and banana Fairtrade pancake. Alliances were also built up with local farmers and organisations that agreed to sell or use Fairtrade goods would display a special window sticker. While to a certain extent different towns will represent different communities and priorities, a major success of Garstang has been its continued ability to attract attention to a range of community consumption issues. During Fairtrade fortnight 2002 they developed the theme of bringing the producer and consumer closer together with an event ‘Garstang and Ghana – why do their farmers get a raw deal?’ Garstang has built up strong links with Ghana and the town is twinned with Ne Koforidua. In this way Garstang are trying to educate and develop a broader understanding of the fate of small communities and small producers across the globe not only within their own locality, which again highlights a reconnection with production especially in relation to chocolate and coffee production and consumption. As more Fairtrade products become available, it is likely that more towns will develop links and indeed more retailers will stock their products.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have outlined some features of the existing hegemonic marketing exchange processes. Returning to Marx as a key informant on the structure of the market we have questioned the continued existence of the exchange process and why it has prevailed. Branding remains a dominant paradigm of twenty first century marketing offering as it does an ephemeral but still significant sign value in the process of exchange in mass markets. More recently, the unquestioned dominance of the market place in its current form has come under attack, with groups not only reconceptualising the exchange process but also developing alternative modes of exchange and consumption. We have presented this in a continuum showing the development from boycotting through to what we have termed new consumption communities. These communities are
varied in nature and philosophy and we do not suggest that there is any consistency in their approach, indeed we would argue that this is a positive benefit coming as it does as a reaction to the notion of mass marketing. These communities are all, however, questioning the supremacy of marketing and business more generally as represented by large brands and multinational corporations; they are localised and concerned with their communities and with others that may be affected by our consumption. They tend therefore, not to be inward looking but concerned about others, the environment and the developing world. Some of course will argue that this is little more than just tokenism and realistically no small community based activity is likely to threaten the existing power of major retailers and indeed the global marketing system. Clearly the exchange process and indeed branding appear still safe as new generations grow up to sample the joys of creating their identity through shopping. Having said this, the new consumption communities are making contributions both in themselves and in the effect that they are having on the existing status quo. We have already mentioned the impact of organic goods and the resistance to genetically modified food. Recycling is finally becoming a mainstream activity in Britain as more and more councils recognise that they have a duty to consider the long-term effects of waste disposal, and multiple retailers are stocking Fairtrade products. This assimilation into the mainstream may not be what is ultimately required to undermine the existing marketing process but it may be a sign to indicate the impact that new consumption communities can have. The bigger picture, however, is to do with how sustainable and useable these communities can become, how inclusive and available to all, how accessible both geographically and economically. Their purpose is not to replace the scale and scope of marketing but to form a credible choice.

References