

# The identity construction and symbolic consumption marketing essay

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



Consumer culture is considered as a form of material culture, but it is distinctive in a particular way, namely, that it is a culture in which the consumer emerges as an identifiable subject, and a 'master category of collective and individual identity' (Trentmann, 2006, cited in Lury, 2011: 30). With the growth of neo-liberal economic configuration and expansion of 'free market' in the world since the second half of the twentieth century, it has been made possible for international firms to enter into the other part of the world. The emerging of global consumer culture is driven by the global market and business (Smart, 2010). As Mazzarella (2004: 355) put it, Global consumer culture is 'at one and the same time, ideology and social process, as something continuously made and remade through constantly shifting relations, practices, and technologies' of market mediation. For Douglas and Isherwood (1979), the utility of goods is always framed by a cultural context, that even the use of the most mundane and ordinary of objects in daily life has cultural meaning. From this anthropological perspective, material goods are not only used to do things, but they also have a meaning, and act as meaningful markets of social relations. It is in acquiring, using the exchanging things that individuals come to have social lives. Leiss (1976) argues that modern Euro-American societies are characterized by the growth of, what he terms, a high-intensity market setting in which individuals are trained to act as consumers. Helga Dittmar (1992) argues that modern Euro-American consumer culture is characterized by the strongly rooted belief that 'to have is to be'. In other words, people are said to be coming to define themselves and others in terms of what they possess. In this perspective, consumer culture is tied to the development of what is sometimes called the

possessive individual, that is, it has contributed to a conception of the ideal individual as the owner, not only of accumulated property and goods, but also as owner of his or her self. From this point of view, consumer culture is a source of the contemporary belief that self-identity is a kind of cultural resource, asset or possession (cited in Lury, 2011: 26).

## **Identity Construction and Symbolic Consumption**

Douglas and Isherwood (1978, cited in Hu, 2011) demonstrate that identity is constructed by the symbolic consumption. Individuals construct their identities in relation to the particular goods. As Douglas and Isherwood put it, in the book *The World of Goods*, the consuming activities of material goods not only for functional benefits, but also as a means for individuals to represent the symbolic values and create their identities (Jackson, 2005; Dilley, 2009: 2). According to Levy (1959), when consumers purchase objects they not only take into consideration the functional and practical value but also focus on its symbolic value. That is to say, the purchase decision was driven by the consumers' emotions and feelings towards the products, instead of the functional use-value of the goods. So for retailers, to figure out what consumers desire becomes significantly important, comparing to what they need (Levy, 1959). Slater has stated that the modern consumption choices reflect an individual's identity, tastes and social position (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Slater, 1997). Piacentini and Mailer (2004) further noted that 'symbolic consumption' means individuals use products to create, develop and maintain their identities. Besides, Dittmar (1992) presented that the symbolic meanings of possessions conveyed the identity to both the owner and others, which can be understood as a 'symbolic-

communicational'. Ger and Belk (1996: 295) added that consumption is defined as a 'communicative act crucial to the constitution of self'. Hence, the symbolic meanings of products are used not only to express one's own identity, but also in evaluating the identity of others (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992, cited in Hu, 2011).

## **E-retailing**

### **Understand the consumer**

As Molenaar (2010, p. 9) emphasises, ' buying has become a personal experience, a personal choice with personal motivation'. To look into the on-going transformation the internet brings to the retail industry, first of all, it is necessary to understand the consumer and their buying processes in the Web 2. 0 era. Polling over 27, 000 Internet users in 55 markets from Asia Pacific, Europe, Middle East, North America and South America, Nielsen's 2010 Global Trends in Online Shopping survey[1]looked at how consumers shop online, including what they intend to buy, how they use different sites, the impact of social media and other influential factors on their money spending decisions. The report shows that books and clothing will continue to top Global online consumers' list for planned online purchases in the next six months, which follows the trend reported in a 2009 Nielsen survey where 46 percent of global consumers said they purchased books in the past three months and 41 percent bought clothing online (see Appendix 1). The report also found that online consumers considered one of the great benefits of online shopping is the ability to read others' reviews of a product. These opinions are most important when it comes to purchasing consumer

electronics: 57 per cent of online respondents consider reviews prior to buying. Online reviews and peer recommendations also played a key role for shoppers researching future purchases of consumer electronics, cars and travel, and 40 percent of online shoppers indicate they would not even buy electronics without consulting online reviews first. While most online consumers (59%) said that they are not more likely to share a negative product experience online via Twitter or writing a review, 41 per cent would. In his book *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler (2006) argues that the Internet functions as an eco-system of public spheres, facilitating the development of counterpublics and enabling them to influence power through public reason or more direct tactics (cited Matias, 2011)[2]. With regard to customers' reviews, Molenaar (2010: 105) points out that sometimes customers can speak emotionally about their preferred brands or shops, but this is related to some other issues. The customer may feel a bond with a brand because: the customer has loyalty because of the range of goods and services, the shopkeeper or the staff or the perception of the brand in social circles. The customer wants to have this commitment confirmed by recognition, appreciation and a sense of friendship. Dennis, Fenech and Merrilees (2004, p. 245) has identified a potential e-consumers buying decision process that follows 'the established stages of need recognition, information search, information evaluation, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour'. Molenaar (2010, p. 59) compares the traditional buying process with internet-based process: in terms of orientation, traditionally, people tend to go into a physical process, such as talking and discussing with friends, looking around different shops, or looking at advertisement leaflets on the

newspaper; while new style shoppers take advantage of the internet, checking out weblogs, or participating in discussions on social network sites. As to seeking and gathering information of the goods or services they want to buy, classic buyers would take advertisements on mass media, including television, radio and print publications, or what they hear from the sales staff, for example. Different to the classic buyers, people with an internet based shopping style get their information from channels like subscribed newsletters or referrals on other sites. To make a buying decision, people who like to shop physically take very different processes to those who base their shopping on the internet. Physical shoppers often ask sales staff specific questions and they might prefer to be able to view and try the products they wish to buy. Besides, they would like to know as much about the product as possible from catalogues, brochures or showrooms. Finally, when they decide to make a purchase, they often do it in the shop or the neighbourhood of the shop. Sometimes they would do it at home, after evaluating all the information they have grasped, then they would go to the shop and finish the buying process on the basis of personal preference and buying motives. In comparison, new style shoppers' purchase decisions are made after they read through information they find on the internet, such as weblogs, specific sites, comparison sites, reviews and opinions from other users. The decision is normally to be made at home, at the computer screen, on the basis of all the evaluation mentioned above. Finally, when they reach the buying stage, they often do it directly in an online shop. It does not mean they would not buy goods from the physical shops, but when they choose to do that, they base their decision highly on personal preferences. In addition

to what and how the consumer buys, the 'why' is another vital question for retailers to understand, which is closely associated with consumers' loyalty that all retailers are fighting for. For e-shopping specifically, consumers' motives are summarised into 'socializing, enjoyment, usefulness, ease of use, convenience, navigation, knowledge and ability to make a purchase, and influence of friends and family' (Parsons, 2002; Dennis and Papamatthaiou, 2003, cited in Dennis, Fenech and Merrilees, 2004, p. 85). Consumers make rational purchases as well as emotional ones, as Molenaar (2010) states, loyalty on emotional grounds is, however, stronger than that on pricing. He perceives consumers' loyalty stays in three aspects: the financial connection (price), a social bond to a particular group, and a structural bond arising through routine and habits.

## **From Retailing to E-retailing**

The business of e-retail has been defined by Harris and Dennis (2002) as the sale of goods and services via Internet or other electronic channels to consumers, for personal or household use. They indicate that online retailing benefits from the global reach and the international trading opportunities brought by the internet. Other advantages of e-retailing include the 24/7 trade, lower overheads (i. e. staff and space), and more personalised customer experiences, products and relationships (p. 58). In studying the attitudes of internet users in Britain towards e-Commerce, Oxford Internet Survey[3](OxIS, 2011) reported that confidence in the Internet and the commercial services that it offers has remained high, comparing to the past two years. 85% of internet users agreed that it was easy to order products

online. 81% thought that the choice of goods from the online shops was wider, and 76% agreed the internet offered lower prices. However, users continue to find it difficult to assess product quality, with agreements from 56% of the interviewees. The other downsides people faced in online shopping was that they found goods were difficult to return (33%) and the lack of face-to-face contact made them feel uncomfortable (36%).

## **Fashion Retailing Online**

The online fashion industry has been driven by the rise in internet penetration, according to the Mintel 2010 report. With H&M, Gap and Zara launching their UK transactional sites, the online high street in the UK is moving close to completion. 2010 saw the growth slow to 8%, taking the market to £4. 27 billion though, Mintel predicts a bounce-back to 15% in 2011, taking the market to £4. 91 billion. In addition, Mintel (2010: 8) reported that online customer experience had been improved further: If operators can encourage customers to 'step through the door' by visiting their site in order to look for trend advice, then they are already part of the way towards encouraging these browsers to buy. Then next is about how the operators are going to 'encourage' their customers to click on them – the marketing tool.

## **Web 2. 0**

Since the mid-1990s the Internet has been showing a remarkable and profound impact on every aspect of the society, seeing the rise of near instant communication by email, instant messaging, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) 'phone calls', two-way interactive video calls (Mattes and



Emmerson, 2003). In his analysis 'How the web went world wide' Ward (2006)[4] provides the historic context of the internet growth, and indicates that with new tools like discussion forums, blogs, social networking sites in development, the web is just starting to go worldwide. In *The Second Media Age*, Poster (1995) made a distinction between the first and the second media age: the first was the age of mass media where few speak to many, while the second media age (digital media age) was based on two way communication. 10 years later, Holmes (2005: 10) gave a similar classification to the two media age, with the second one featuring 'individuality' and 'interactivity'. Though the second media age might still prevail, Levinson (2009) sees it necessary to highlight the significance of the social media by calling it the 'new' new media. In tune with Jenkins' (2006) 'participatory culture' he emphasizes the paradigmatic change that the opportunity to create and share content means to the media and consequently its impact on the society (cited in Lifvergren, 2011). Tim O'Reilly (2004) also used the term 'the architecture of participation' to describe the nature of systems that were designed for user contribution, which is considered as the core of the new media age.[5] Now, people believe the Internet has arrived at the second generation – the Web 2.0. The definition of Web 2.0 is still arguable among scholars, researchers, and technologists. However, the term, often associated with Tim O'Reilly (2005, in Mandiberg, 2012), is derived from O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004, which Mandiberg (2012, p. 4) summarises as 'an upgraded computer-programming model that has enabled a set of participatory websites built on lightweight server-based applications that move rich data across platforms'.

Web 2. 0, loosely defined as developments in technology employed online that enable interactive capabilities in an environment characterized by user control, freedom, and dialogue, brings a new degree of interactivity and consumer involvement to advertising applications. (Tuten, 2008) Gauntlett (2011, p. 5) sees it as ‘ a particular kind of ethos and approach’ rather than simply a kind of technology or a business model. By comparing Web 2. 0 to the so-called ‘ Web 1. 0’ on which websites were often one-way oriented and separate from each other, he points out that Web 2. 0 is ‘ like a collective allotment’ where users ‘ work collaboratively in a shared space’.

## **The Definition and Characteristics of Social Media**

Social media refers to online communities that are participatory, conversational, and fluid, where members are able to produce, publish, control, critique, rank, and interact with online content (Tuten, 2008). Solis and Breakenridge (2009, p. VII) perceive social media as ‘ the democratization of content and the shift in the role people play in the process of reading and disseminating information (and thus creating and sharing content)’. The phrase is an umbrella phrase for all sites that integrate technology, social interaction and user-generated content, including social networking sites, virtual worlds, social news and bookmarking sites, wikis, and forums and opinion sites (Tuten, 2008; Siapera, 2012). In definitions of social media, researchers variously prioritize their communicative aspects (Boyd, 2008), their openness and participatory elements (Mayfield, 2007) and their connectivity and community – creation (Smith, Borash, Getoor and Lauw, 2008; Mayfield, 2007). The popularity of

social media is undoubted. A 2009 study by Nielsen reported that two thirds of people who are online visit social media sites, which makes this activity the fourth most popular online activity, ahead of emailing – searching is the most popular activity. Nielsen estimates that about 10% of all time spent online is spent on social media, while Facebook statistics reports that its users exceed 400 million – if this were a country, it would be more populous than the USA, overtaken only by China and India. Moreover, social media are still rising in terms both of their popularity as well as the volume of contents and information exchanged. In 2009, Twitter grew 577% and Facebook 188.6% (Liss, 2010), while by mid-2010 they still hadn't reached a plateau. (Siapera, 2012, p. 203)The latest Nielsen insights[6]provide some answers on exactly how powerful this influence is on consumer behaviour, both online and off. In the U. S., social networks and blogs reach nearly 80 per cent of active U. S. Internet users and represent the majority of Americans' time online.

## **Twitter**

Twitter is an online social networking service and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, known as ' tweets' (Thoring, 2011). Communications range from personal mini-diaries of daily activities to business applications (Miller 2009). It was created in March 2006 by Jack Dorsey and launched that July. It has been described as ' status update service' and ' the SMS of the Internet'. (Greer and Ferguson, 2011; Thoring, 2011)Twitter not only creates new networks around interests and – most importantly – expertise, but also represents

existent offline social networks (Thoring, 2011). Basically, Twitter enables users to share information by posting Tweets (tweeting) and subscribing to the Tweets of other users (following). Tweets are messages limited to 140 characters which are posted on Twitter either directly on the webpage or indirectly from a mobile phone via SMS or through third-party Internet and mobile applications. Normal tweeting and following only allow for demand for such options, Twitter has incorporated specific types of Tweets and messages, such as Replies and Retweets, as official features. Apart from the Tweets there is only little information that refers to the owner of the account. Altogether, Twitter achieves simplicity by hosting no content other than Tweets directly on the website; simultaneously, the integration of third-party applications overrides restrictions and allows for diverse forms of access, interaction and content sharing (Newson, Houghton, & Patten, 2009).

## **General Use**

Twitter became popular very quickly in the first half of 2009 and now has more than 140 million active users as of 2012, generating over 340 million tweets daily and handling over 1.6 billion search queries per day. It is the most popular microblogging site worldwide and also ranks third among the most frequented social networking sites where it was outranked only by Facebook and MySpace (Abbott, 2009; Eley & Tilley, 2009). However, on a closer examination these statistics have flaws: the bounce rate, that is the percentage of visits to the Twitter website that consist of a single pageview, has settled at a relatively high rate of about 37% in 2010 (Alexa Internet, 2010), and Twitter's churn rate is remarkably high, too, with ' only 40% of

users remain more than one month'. In addition, in an eMarketer 2009 report, 75% of all Twitter activity comes from just 5% of users, and 94% of Twitter users have fewer than 100 followers. Similarly, 'experts believe that 80% of tweets are generated by only 10% of users, and that the median number of tweet readers per tweet is 1 (most Tweepers tweet to one follower)' (Laudon & Traver, 2010). Certainly, information provided by popular individuals, organizations and companies a better chance of being noticed, but still the level of noise is incredibly high and constitutes a challenge to marketers when utilizing Twitter as social media marketing instrument (Thoring, 2011). One factor that distinguishes Twitter from other popular social network systems is the age of its users. Traditionally, younger populations tend to drive the growth of an innovation (Miller, 2009). Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al., 2010) found that 73% of 12 to 17-year-olds use social networks, compared to 40% of people age 30 and older. However, when it comes to Twitter, the same report noted that 19% of adults 18 and older use the platform, compared to only 8% of 12 to 17-year-olds. The fact that Twitter attracts adults might be due to the system being information-based rather than a conversation with acquaintances, which is characteristic of social networks used by young people (Miller, 2009). Studies also found that women use Twitter more than men (Fox et al., 2009; Heil & Piskorski, 2009).

## **Using Twitter for Marketing**

Seen from Nielsen 2011 social media report, the value of the time consumers spend online and on social networks and blogs continues to grow, most

visible through the influence on purchase decisions. For instance, 60 per cent of people who use three or more digital means of research for product purchases learned about a specific brand or retailer from a social networking site. 48 per cent of these consumers responded to a retailer's offer posted on Facebook or Twitter. Consumers frequently trust the recommendations of their peers, making social media an ideal platform for influencers to spread their ideas and purchase power. Research by NM Incite shows that 60 per cent of social media users create reviews of products and services. In fact, consumer-created reviews/ratings are the preferred source for information about product/service value, price and product quality. As the influence of social media - and those using social media - continues to grow, it's crucial for traditional media, retailers, brands and advertisers to understand how different consumer segments use and share content. Social media marketing is considered as ' a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through' (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006, p. 30) a set of Internet-based applications that enable interaction, communication, collaboration of user-generated content and hence, sharing of information such as ideas, thoughts, content, and relationships. By engaging in online communities, business companies can network and get new clients online. Using Facebook as case study, Newson, Houghton, and Pattern (2009, pp. 62 -63) point out that opportunities social media present to businesses are the ' ability to network with fellow - professionals and potential clients, and the possibility to raise the business profile through advertising'. In terms to the reason why social media marketing is useful, the engagement with social media is ' about the social placing of your institution

and the friendliness of your approach and tone of voice' (Ellis, 2011, p. 121).

In respect to the popularity of social media, especially social networking sites, Ellis (2011) also states 'social media is where audience is'. For adapting social media marketing, he came up with a 'five-step approach' (pp. 127 - 135): 1) Listen and learn; 2) Define your audience; 3) Plan: determine some outcomes, and work out resource and budget limitations; 4) Develop an editorial calendar; and 5) Engage and refine. As Laudon and Traver noted (2009), because of its main assets - user attention and audience size - businesses value Twitter mainly as a communication instrument for marketing. However, in terms of market research, 'the database of tweets that contains the comments, observations, and opinions of the audience, and the search engine that mines those tweets for patterns' are also important. Apart from this, Twitter as a participatory communication instrument can stimulate discussion within networks, teams, companies and markets (Bryant, 2009, in Newson, Houghton, & Patten (eds), 2009). Its conversational orientation also provides corporations and customers with an opportunity to engage in a two-way dialogue, thereby supporting mutual information exchange, which can be beneficial for both parties.

Consequently, Twitter as a marketing instrument lends itself particularly to the following purposes: 1) market research and feedback generation; 2) publicity, branding and reputation management; 3) business networking, and 4) customer service and customer relationship management (Laudon, K. C. & Traver, C. G. 'E-Commerce: Business, Technology, Society', 5th Edition, Pearson International Edition, Prentice Hall 2010).

## **The Use of Images**

In the study of images used in social media marketing[7], Charlie (2012) suggested that people only noticed a tiny fraction of information presented on a daily basis. He continued to state there were two important points to remember: One is that our brains are more likely to pay attention to stimuli that provokes an emotional reaction. Secondly, we are then more likely to continue paying attention if the thing we've noticed fits with our existing opinions and interests. He then gave three advices to grab attention from customers: firstly, know your social networks, which means on Twitter for example, due to the limit of length per tweet, you should think about how you publicise the content to maximise the benefits – raising your brand and for site traffic/SEO purposes. The second advice from Charlie was to know your customers, in so doing, you should pepper your content with different images in order to have more to choose from when it's time to publicise. The last one Charlie suggested was to use original images. Furthermore, he noted that the different attributes of images that grab people's attention in the busy, fast-moving social media stream were cute, bright, nostalgic, funny, quirky or just plain beautiful. He introduced a phenomenon known as the Cocktail Party Effect, which covers things we have an established emotional connection with will jump out from the background. Once you've identified your customer profiles and which social networks they'll be using, you can pinpoint exactly what kind of image will trigger this.



## **Interactivity on Twitter**

Rafaeli (1988: 111) defined interactivity as ‘ a given series of communication exchanges’. Based on the extent of the exchange, he came up with three levels of interactivity: with low interactivity individuals might simply exchange messages between each other; in reactivity, people respond to others; and finally, the interactive level occurs when people connect content to earlier ones (in Greer and Ferguson, 2011). Duncan and Moriarty (1998: 8) noted that interactivity between the organisation and customer was a ‘ hallmark of the paradigm shift in both marketing and communication’. An increase in interactivity, as they argued, would make communication ‘ an even more valuable element of marketing’. Burton and Soboleva (2011) observed that Twitter has been increasing the scope for interactive communication by organisations with their customers, with its potential for personalised communication with people who have chosen to follow an organisation’s Twitter feed. Two contrasting interpretations of interactivity have been identified (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Sicilia et al., 2005; Song and Zinkhan, 2008; Burton and Soboleva, 2011). Burton and Soboleva (2011) summarised that the first interpretation of interactivity considers it as involving communication between individuals and/or organisations with a continuum of interactivity ranging from non-interactive, one way communications, television for example, reactive communications when messages reply to or refer to previous ones, and fully interactive communications, when communications incorporate preceding messages, in a process described as ‘ related or threaded manner’ (Rafaeli, 1988; Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Sundar et al., 2003) According to Burton and Soboleva

(2011), the second view of interactivity is based on ‘ the structure of the medium’, typically ascribed to Steuer (1992: 84), who defined interactivity as ‘ the extent to which users can participate in modifying the messages they receive’. Hoffman and Novak (1996) summarised this perception as ‘ machine interactivity’. Macias’s study (2003) into websites has suggested increased interactivity is associated with higher comprehension, more information processing, higher favourability. Other studies have also suggested the level of interactivity has connected to the level of flow state (Sicilia et al., 2005), and the attitude of user response to the subject of the website (Sundar et al., 2003). Twitter enables both types of interactivity. It can provide ‘ interpersonal interactivity’ through exchange of information between an organisation and individual, and by retweeting/referencing others’ messages. It also allows ‘ machine interactivity’, what we simplified as ‘ connectivity’ in this study, through the use of embedded hyperlinks, which give access to extra information (Burton and Soboleva, 2011). Therefore, tweets collected from Topshop’s official feed can be classified as reflecting different types and levels of interactivity, as described in the following Methodology section (see 3. 2. 3).

## **Twitter and Topshop**

Topshop has certainly left no stone unturned with its use of Twitter. Apart from the official London based Topshop account, it makes official presence on Twitter with other non-English accounts targeting global markets, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, and Russia[8]. The on-going papers refer to the London based Topshop account only, where they claim as

' a great place to talk about everything Topshop'[9]. Under the lists Topshop created, there are 6 groups of people whose tweets Topshop can view exclusively, including 3 PR Friends, 2 London Fashion Week, 12 Topshop's Friends, 11 Designers, 20 Press, and 499 Topshop Loves[10]. According to the latest report by eDigitalResearch (2012), Topshop claim back the top spot from ASOS in the Twitter Social Media league table having added more new followers than any other retailer since 2010, with 303, 788 followers counted till March 2012 (now 387, 566, 30/07/2012). More generally, the report monitored the engagement levels of top retailers across key social networks to understand more about how top performing retailers manage their social media campaign. Results show that the majority of retailers in the top half of the table are posting at least twice a day. Some of the biggest account growers this wave are also taking on the same strategy. On average, Topshop posted 12 tweets per day. Perhaps more surprising is the lack of brand activity over weekend periods. Results show that retailers are more likely to post on a Wednesday or Friday, with either little or no activity on Saturday or Sunday. To improve, it is imperative that retailers research and understand social media interaction and daily use in order to gain as much social media coverage as possible.