

2005-01-01

Biking, Buying and Belonging: An Exploration of how an Irish Subculture of Consumption's Socialisation Process Equips its Members to Critically Filter Marketing Messages

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Recommended Citation

Sherlock, R., Weller, G.: Biking, Buying and Belonging: An Exploration of how an Irish Subculture of Consumption's Socialisation Process Equips its Members to Critically Filter Marketing Messages. Academy of Marketing Conference, Dublin, Ireland, July 2005.

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Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2005

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Biking, buying and belonging: An exploration of how an Irish subculture of consumption's socialisation process equips its members to critically filter marketing messages.

Abstract

This paper identifies how members of an Irish biker subculture of consumption critically decode marketing messages, brands and products using a subcultural filter (peculiar to the subculture) learnt through localised socialisation. This critical filter develops through prolonged subcultural immersion and is influenced by the word-of-mouth purchase advice and product judgement of other members of the subculture of consumption; with a parallel between its development and use, and the development of the subcultural identity, from experimentation, to identification and conformity, to mastery and internalisation of both filter and identity (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). It is internally utilised by the members to allow them to achieve a personally harmonious and socially acceptable subcultural identity at a local group level. The findings suggest that marketers' attempts to encode their offerings with appropriate symbolic meanings and messages are distorted due to the decoding process being arbitrated by the subculture's members, closely guarded from the influence of those deemed to be non-members and utilised by the members in purchase decisions linked to the subculture.

Introduction

Unlike many other subcultures of consumption, where access to the objects and activities of the subculture is relatively straightforward, becoming a biker in Ireland needs prolonged commitment. Not for the sturdy Irish biker the simple pleasure of attending a rave (Goulding et al, 2002), donning a pair of Spock ears and promenading at a Star Trek convention (Kozinets, 2001), or dashing up and down a mountain in moccasins (Belk and Costa, 1998); instead full immersion is a slow process only achieved after years of learner plates, tests and low powered riding. This prolonged initiation into the subculture does however result in a camaraderie that rivals that found in Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) ethnography of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. As one biker expressed it during this research, they share "...the same pain and the same pleasure".

The Irish biker subculture also shares those characteristics identified by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), as being inherent in the Harley-Davidson enthusiast community, in that it is "a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.43). In further defining these subcultures they add that "Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.43). And, like so many other subcultures of consumption, Harley-Davidson enthusiasts (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), Star Trek fans (Kozinets, 2001), gay men and women (Kates, 2002; Weston, 1993), goths and punks

(Fox, 1987; Hebdige, 1979), fundamentalist Christians (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989), and mountain men (Belk and Costa, 1998), the Irish biker subculture shapes all of these things in its own unique way.

This paper draws on research into how the Irish biker subculture's members use word-of-mouth and shared personal product judgements as a major component in their consumption behaviour. The product judgements and advice given by other members of the subculture seem to act as resistance to the extremely limited marketing efforts of motorcycle dealers in Ireland. The result is members learning through prolonged socialisation an internalised subcultural filter, through which they judge the marketing efforts of the motorcycle industry, so that they are able to give meaning to those products and services as worthy or unworthy. Through this process they are able to be accepted as adequately socialised members of the subculture by its other, more experienced members. In turn the effect for the individual is to have their identity as a biker ratified, rather than vilified. These individuals when making subcultural purchase decisions decode marketing messages using their subculture of consumption as a critical looking glass. They literally judge things through their helmet visors, using meanings that are peculiar to their subculture.

The Irish biker subculture of consumption: "...the same pain and the same pleasure."

The modern motorcycling community in Ireland is a fluid spatial and temporal meeting place for those individuals who have understood its consumption behaviour and have aligned theirs to achieve membership. It offers the individual the opportunity to achieve positive emotional experiences and a space to construct a positive new facet of identity (while reconstructing their self-concept) within a "particular interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts and objects" (Kozinets, 2001, p.68); in this case motorcycle related.

The particular nature of the subculture that allows the individual to physically reconstruct themselves (through helmet and leathers) also allows them to psychologically reconstruct themselves (Wattanasuwan, 2005). The members of the subculture achieve this through the taking on of the role of biker, which they have constructed through their consumption. For them the costume that Maffesoli (1996) describes being worn in the "*theatrum mundi*" of postmodernity is made up of motorcycle, clothing and accessories (Maffesoli, 1996, p76). The modern Irish biker is a member of one of Maffesoli's (1996) "wandering mass tribes", which has in this case solidified to some degree around the commercial productions of the motorcycle industry. The result is a subculture of consumption made up of individuals who share social meanings and practices, and that cuts across the major sociological categories of age, class, gender and ethnicity. Inseparable from the reconstruction of identity is the motorcycle itself. It is through the symbiotic relationship, between man or woman and machine that the reconstruction of identity is reinforced. Each time the rider sets off on the machine, the role of biker is reconstructed and renewed.

The reconstruction of identity is structured through a process of socialisation into the subculture's symbolic meanings and practices (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p.182); the individual learns the symbolic meanings of objects and activities and is able to make decisions as to how they wish to symbolise their membership in the subculture (for example choosing a cruiser over a sportsbike, a classic leather jacket with tassels over

full race leathers). This learning process is facilitated by the social linking value of the motorcycle, accessories and events which provide a base for a relationship between members of the subculture and those who wish to be members. Building on the work of Maffesoli (1996), Cova and Cova (2002) contend that individuals are searching for these social links, with society now resembling a network of societal micro-groups, in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture and a vision of life (Cova and Cova, 2002, p.599). Each individual may belong to many “tribes” at once, each supporting the fragments of their identity that they have both consciously and subconsciously worked to knit together. The consumption of subcultural products and activities elicits and maintains that social link with others. It is during these social links, in social settings such as shows, charity events, ride outs, through the internet, etc. that the biker is socialised into the subculture’s symbolic meanings, learning through the sharing of enthusiasm, experiences and localised values (e.g. support for a biker who has broken down) the biker subculture’s ethos, its hierarchy and the boundary between members and non-members.

The individual uses this socialisation to construct an appropriately symbolised identity and through correct behaviour (consumption and values-led) attempts to achieve a positive social link with other members of the subculture. This is underlined in how bikers use word of mouth, the advice of trusted members of the subculture, in their consumption decisions and in their socialisation of others into the subculture. Without this the construction of the biker identity may be flawed, if the individual misunderstands the symbolic meanings of the purchases s/he makes (for example wearing full race leathers on a custom bike). Without the social linking value of the subculture’s consumption objects this vital socialisation would not take place, resulting in the failure of the subculture to pass on its symbolic meanings and perhaps the failure of the subculture.

The Irish biker appropriates the symbolic meanings of the subculture of consumption to assist in their self-identity project, in order to create the (biker) self, to take part in the biker lifestyle and to connect to others (McCracken, 1988). Kates (2002) identifies how “... consumer- and minority-orientated subcultures are valued for the semiotic resources that help cultivate individuated identity, in an era when high cultural capital consumers must negotiate the contradiction of producing subjectively distinct meanings from mass-marketed, branded commodities.”(Kates, 2002, p.397). The biker uses the semiotic resource, the discourses, objects and activities peculiar to the biking subculture, their bike, their helmet and leathers, their choice of t-shirt, to tell stories about who they are and with whom they identify, outwardly symbolising, as they inwardly assist in their self-identity project (Wattanasuwan, 2005); their volitional consumption carrying conscious or unconscious, idiosyncratic or commonly shared, symbolic meanings (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

Methodology

The research involved phenomenological interviews with seven respondents, members of the biker community in Dublin, Ireland. Existential-phenomenology blends the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology, as presented by Thompson et al (1989), as “... a contextually based, holistic psychology that views human beings in non-dualistic terms and seeks to attain a first-person description of experience (Giorgi, 1983, cited in Thompson et al, 1989, p.133)

The central concepts of existential-phenomenology are intentionality, emergent dialogue and hermeneutic endeavour (Thompson et al, 1990, p.347). The concept of intentionality refers to the phenomenological belief that experience and the object of experience are a co-constituting unity (Thompson et al, 1990, p.347). For the researcher this means that they must position their conceptual categories as secondary to the participant's experiential ones. The lived experience must be interpreted by the researcher through the life-world from which it emerges, and not bounded by standard societal conceptions. Rather than taking as a guide pre-specified questions, the interviewer's questions are formulated "in concert" with participant descriptions (Thompson et al, 1990, p.347). The interviewer attempts to identify common patterns, referred to as *themes* (Thompson et al, 1990). These themes must be supported by reference to the respondents' descriptions.

The research themes are set out here in case study form, to highlight the progression of the development of both individual identity and the subcultural filter. The evolution of the filter paralleling the evolution of identity, as illustrated by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) in their study: (1) experimentation with the identity, illustrated by the example of new biker Jackie; (2) identification and conformity, illustrated through the experiences of more experienced bikers, George and Ryan; and (3) mastery and internalisation, illustrated through the example of long-term bikers Michael and Stephen.

Case studies: The bikers

The individuals interviewed are immersed to varying levels in the Irish biker subculture. The four "bikers" chosen here highlight the effect length and depth of immersion in a subculture of consumption can have on identity and symbolic consumption decision-making. The first respondent, Jackie, is at the beginning of the socialisation process; using Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) terminology, she is experimenting with the identity. When interviewed she seemed aware that the experimentation was taking place and wanted more access to other bikers (her ultimate aim being to join a club) from whom she could gain advice and sociality. Her experimentation was being assisted by an experienced biker, who helped her both purchase her motorcycle and learn to ride. Respondents Ryan and George have significant immersion (over 6 and 14 years with breaks, respectively) in the subculture. They are both involved in riding with friends. Their consumption behaviour is heavily influenced by the groups they ride with, identification and conformity, being important to their symbolic choices (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Stephen and Michael are extremely experienced bikers (riding without break for 30 and 13 years respectively), who have both mastered and internalised their biker identities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), to the point that those who meet them are instantly aware that they are bikers; Stephen has a rat-tail hairstyle, tattoos and wears biker boots; Michael wears biker paraphernalia, leather jacket, t-shirts and small items such as belt buckles as part of his daily make-up.

Learning to bike, learning to buy

Jackie is a 57 year old woman with a 125cc Yamaha cruiser. She openly aspires to the American Harley-Davidson dream, of cruising open highways with like-minded individuals. She has been heavily influenced by her visits to the USA. She is

experimenting, as an aspirant, trying on the concept of “biker” before becoming a full member of the subculture. This is taking place through her purchasing of an entry level motorcycle, a helmet, gloves and motorcycle magazines; she has also had some involvement with more experienced bikers in America and during the purchase and repair of her motorcycle. Her purchases highlight how her subcultural filter is at an early stage of evolution, due to her extremely limited socialisation into the subculture. She has purchased a motorcycle with the assistance of a long-term motorcyclist. She wears the appropriate leisure clothing relevant to the subculture, and did so prior to the purchase of her motorcycle:

“I love going to the dealerships. I do buy the t-shirts. I do love the shirts and I do love looking around. This is before I ever had a bike I was in the bike stores. I suppose it was in the back of my head.”

Her helmet purchase involved advice from the dealer, from whom she purchased it. The choice of protective equipment is particularly enlightening as Jackie chose her jacket (normally chosen on the basis of safety and durability) because of its look:

“I have a jacket with all the fringes on it. It was nothing to do with a bike that I bought it. We were in Denver, in a country and western shop, and I bought the leather jacket. I said that will look cool on a bike.”

This purchase highlights that she had not evolved her subcultural filter appropriately to distinguish the negative effect such a purchase could have upon her identity as a biker; the choice of a non-protective, non-weatherproof garment highlighting her inexperience as a biker.

Buying into the biker gang

Ryan and George have been riding motorcycles for a number of years on and off, have internalised the socialisation they have experienced and exhibit their identities in the choice of equipment they own, the motorcycles (mid-range sports tourers) they ride and the groups they ride with. Their purchase decisions are influenced by the judgement of their peers and by the “word of mouth” advice they are given by those individuals they deem to be members of the subculture of consumption; they identify with their groups through those purchase decisions, aiming to conform to the group’s standards. Despite reading magazines and being aware of marketing materials, when asked what influences his purchase of safety equipment, Ryan identified the advice given by his peers:

“I bought this [motorcycle jacket] because two of the other lads wear Alpinestars and they’ve both come off and the jacket’s worked well. Both at the track, but fast, and right into the gravel. They swear by them... Nothing beats a testimonial from someone who’s slid on their back across tarmac and gravel. The gloves are the same, they’re Dainese, worth the extra to stop them picking gravel out of my knuckles.”

Ryan, is not only consciously aware that his consumption choices are affected by the group he regularly rides out with, but has experiences of his choices influencing others in the group:

“I’ll have a look at the gear the others have. I’ll guarantee you that at least one of the guys will arrive with a jacket like mine this weekend. I remember going and buying a few crash bungs for the bike, coloured ones. A week later every single one of them had them too.”

George, is a returnee to biking, who regularly rides out with the same group. He describes how word of mouth advice is sought on purchasing decisions:

“Yeah, I mean, if somebody gets a new lid, you know, if it’s a certain type of one you haven’t had experience of yourself, you’ll say how do you find it. Is it comfortable, or is it noisy, you know. You trade information like that all the time, because it’s something you might want to use yourself.”

But, it is not only the local group, those he rides out with, to whom he looks for consumption advice; George is also influenced by a virtual community, on the internet:

“None of my friends had Honda Blackbirds so I’d nobody, in a sense, that I could talk to. There was a couple of guys who don’t live in Dublin, they live down in the country, but we’ve internet chat and I spoke to a couple of guys about it. Looked up the kind of bike I was interested in on the internet and a huge amount of information, websites all over the world about it. And discussed, not so much the specific bike, but the category of sports tourer with other people who rode sports tourers and just got a feel for it.”

Both Ryan and George exhibit the need to identify with the groups they ride with through their consumption behaviour; using the subcultural filter to conform through those purchases to the group norm and to the wider norm associated with the particular type of group they belong to, in both cases sports/sports tourer riders.

Customised bike(r)

Stephen has been riding motorcycles for 30 years; he is now 44 years old, owns a Moto Guzzi and a Triumph. His immersion into the subculture of motorcycling is such that he has internalised its discourses and chooses to represent himself through his choice of a Moto Guzzi motorcycle:

“It’s a reflection of how I view life, I think, big, crude, pragmatic. It’s a reflection of how I look at my values in life. I don’t like overly complex things for the sake of complexity. I don’t like sophistry taken to an extreme. I like things basic and to the point. I like straightforwardness.”

He repairs the motorcycle himself, rather than allow a mechanic to do the job for him. His motivation is not simply economic, but rather it is an expression of his mastery of his biker identity, through his mastery of the motorcycle. Stephen’s consumption of his motorcycle underlines his mastery of the subcultural filter, with his choice being based upon his own judgement, his biker “values”; this is further highlighted in his choice of biker clothing, which he admits makes him look like “a hillwalker or rambler”, but because he is not looking to others to ratify his choices the consequences are immaterial to him.

Michael not only rides out with his biker friends (in two separate groups), but also passes on his knowledge of motorcycling as a part-time instructor. Like Stephen he has mastered and internalised his biker identity. His consumption choices, based upon his mastery of the subcultural filter, are carefully considered to link him with other bikers:

“If I was away on holidays I would tend to wear motorcycle related t-shirts. And if I am going out I do tend to wear a motorcycle jacket a lot of the time.”

Equally his mastery of the subcultural filter allows him to identify and translate subtle symbols of subcultural belonging; to spot other members of the subculture of consumption, no matter how obscure the symbol:

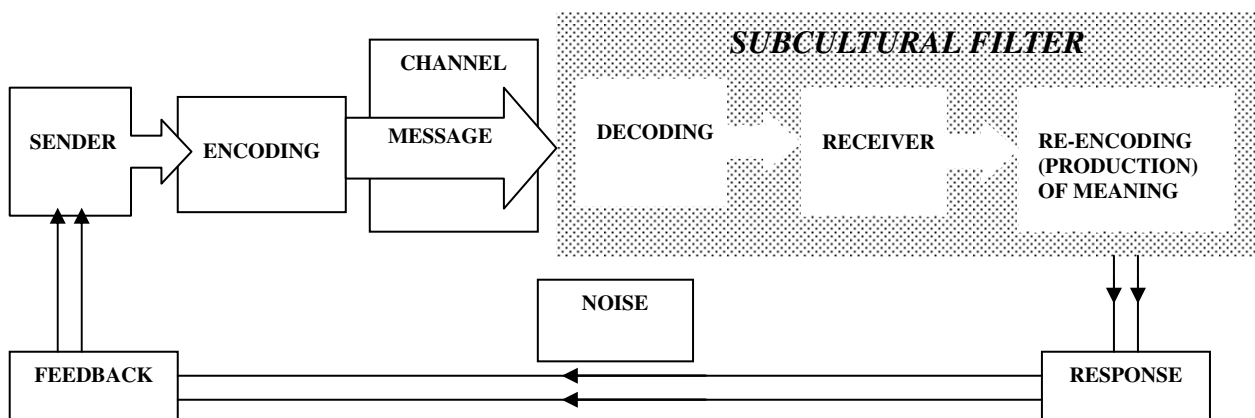
“It can be generally subtle things. Somebody doesn’t have to be wearing bike gear. They might be wearing a t-shirt, or a belt buckle, or a badge, or some sort of emblem that you would recognise. Then there are some traditional, not so much motorcyclist but biker characteristics, the shaved head, the trident beard, tattoos.”

This awareness of symbolic consumption patterns, suggests that the subcultural filter is not only used for those objects and activities that are central to the subculture (motorcycles, helmets, leathers, riding out) but also those that may be considered peripheral (badges, t-shirts, hairstyles).

Biking, bonding and buying: the subcultural filter in practice

The traditional model of the process of communication is expressed as a circulation loop or circuit (Hall, 1980). Using this model it is possible to conceptualise in fairly straightforward terms how the subcultural filter is used in purchase decisions.

Diagram 1: The effect of the subcultural filter on the communication process



Hall (1980) concludes that the ‘object’ of the process of communication is meanings and messages; the “apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue, at a certain moment (the moment of ‘production/circulation’) in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of ‘language’” (Hall, 1980, p.128). The consumer

then receives these discursive forms, the marketing messages, and it is through these, according to Hall (1980) that the circulation of the product takes place, distributed as discourse to its different audiences. The discourse is then translated into social practices, as 'meaning' is taken, without which consumption of the product could not occur (Hall, 1980, p.128).

The marketer (Source/sender) encodes the created discourse with a message or messages and makes a choice as to the channels that it will be delivered by, with the aim that the decoding by the targeted consumer is appropriately aligned to achieve the desired consumption behaviour. In the case of members of the Irish biker subculture (the receivers) this decoding of the discourses takes place using the Irish biker subcultural filter; the message is decoded through a mesh formed by socialisation, which ascribes particular signs, symbols and meanings to products, services and activities which Appadurai (1986) found are related to the social context, in this case the context of the subculture of consumption. It is at the point of constructing this meaning, as the member of the subculture decodes the message, that the individual uses the subcultural filter to judge the original encoding and so affects the response of the individual to the product, service or activity; in short, whether it has acceptable purchasable qualities.

The receiver not only decodes the message using the subcultural filter, but also re-encodes the message, producing a new meaning that is shaped by their immersion in the subculture of consumption. The receiver uses the signs, symbols and meanings peculiar to the subculture to judge the message and acts upon the message, positively or negatively, using word of mouth to disperse those judgements into the wider biking community.

From pedestrian to pocket rocket jockey: developing the subcultural filter

The development of the subcultural filter is not an instantaneous process. It takes place over time, as the individual undertakes the process of transformation from non-member to experienced member of the subculture of consumption. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe this process of transformation as being similar to a reconstruction of identity experienced by consumers of cosmetic surgery (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.55). The authors outline the initial step as an experiment where the aspirant tries on the concept of "biker" before becoming a member of the subculture. It is at this point that the subcultural filter begins to evolve. The development of the subcultural filter occurs in parallel with the development of the biker identity, as it must, being an arbitrator of acceptable consumption behaviour in this creative process.

The first phase of the transformation, experimentation with the identity, also requires experimentation with the subcultural filter's fluid parameters, as the individual enters into a learning process; learning their new identity and learning how to achieve that identity through acceptable consumption decisions. The second phase, identification and conformity, takes place over time as the individual gains experience of the subculture's norms of acceptable consumption through interaction with other members of the subculture, is able to navigate them effectively, and also act a judge of others' purchase decisions. The final phase, mastery and internalisation of identity, is then paralleled by and accessed through mastery and internalisation of the subcultural filter; the individual is able to master the subcultural filter to the point that they may

distort the consumption norms of the community, without affecting their status or undermining their identity project. As members of subcultures of consumption move higher in status both Kates (2002) and Schouten and McAlexander (1995) observe how they move from conformity to liberty to deviate from established or stereotypical styles of dress and to create individual styles (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.56; Kates, 2002, p.392). They are able to master the subcultural filter and may choose to deviate from its fluid restrictions, because they are the arbitrators of its boundaries; the most experienced members of the subculture of consumption set the standards for those who aim to develop their identities in order to be accepted into the community

The research undertaken here suggests that the subcultural filter's meanings, signs and symbols are passed from member to member through "word of mouth" advice; judgement calls, comparisons, descriptions etc. that socialise the individual as to what is acceptable. The "word of mouth" does not need to be 'geographically' localised, it may be communicated in magazines, internet sites and at events; the key is that the communicator is considered to be a valid member of the subculture, with the interests of the subculture at the heart of their decision-making and judgemental processes. In reviewing other ethnographies of consumption-based subcultures the subcultural filter is discernable, alongside the transformation of the individual. Kates (2002) describes how the conformity to subcultural codes in the gay community leads to a change in spending habits and an emphasis on appearance and wardrobe; this is paralleled by the development of "gaydar", an interpretive framework based upon consumption behaviour, widely used to discern another's sexual orientation (Kates, 2002, p.389). Schouten and McAlexander (1995) also identify the development of a subcultural filter, in their description of how experienced Harley-Davidson bikers will purchase stereotypical biker equipment, to "perpetuate the look of the status quo" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p.56); having mastered and internalised their identities, they use their understanding of the subcultural filter to perpetuate the norms of the biker culture.

Marketing through the helmet visor: implications for marketing to subcultures of consumption

The nature of motorcycling in Ireland means that there is a symbiotic relationship between motorcycle and motorcycle accessories manufacturers and riders (just as Schouten and McAlexander (1995) found in the Harley-Davidson subculture in the US). The manufacturers have access to the subculture, yet are at the same time on the periphery; this research suggests subcultural members view sellers' motives as being mercantile in nature and are therefore distrustful of their messages. The marketers, at present, expect the biker to want a relationship with the manufacturer, or dealer, or brand, when the research undertaken here suggests that they want a relationship with their motorcycle, with the experience of riding, and with those who share that experience and enthusiasm – in other words a relationship with those individuals that they consider to be members of their subculture. As such Cova and Cova's (2002) arguments for the use of tribal marketing seem appropriate to consider.

The primary task of tribal marketing is to consider the product or service from the angle of its social linking rather than its use value (Cova, 2002). It is more important for the company to understand how the products can be used to support the tribe rather than how they can deliver their offers to bikers. Cova and Cova (2002) in their examination of the company side of tribal marketing use the example of Salomon,

which became a successful snowboard and in-line skating company due to its use of tribal marketing (Cova and Cova, 2002, p.611). Its tribal marketing formula may equally be applied by motorcycle companies in Ireland, or any other subculture of consumption, with some adaptations.

By marketing products and services, using tribal marketing, the marketer is able to comprehend products and activities from the perspective of the members of the subculture of consumption. Ethnographic studies of the subculture of consumption allow the marketer to overlay the community's subcultural filter on their own perspective of their products and services. The subcultural filter can be effectively utilised by the marketer in the co-designing of products with members of the community – again seeing the product's symbolic meanings through the filter of the subculture. The sharing of values, promotion and creation of events and a shared passion gives access to the subculture of consumption, to the members and to a view through the subcultural filter, allowing the marketer to shape the messages so that the product or service is appropriately positioned and considered acceptable to the members of the subculture.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the findings of this research offer an insight into how subcultures of consumption offer their members a subcultural filter to judge marketing efforts and purchasing decisions, and an insight into how that critical faculty develops over time. The development of a critical faculty in consumption behaviour is by no means unique to subcultures of consumption, as we all develop critical faculties through experience. What is suggested here is that the critical faculty learnt from social immersion in a subculture of consumption, the subcultural filter, overlays the individual's previously developed critical faculties with a new layer of critique, depending for its activation upon the context in which the purchase may be used and most importantly where it will be judged and by whom.

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