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## Exploring Customer Contexts: How a Communitarian Business Model Enables Meaningful Customer Relationships

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## **Exploring Customer Contexts: How a communitarian business model enables meaningful customer relationships**

### **Abstract:**

Broadly this study explores the individual's constructions of identity as situated within historically and locally particular cultural practices. Following this approach facilitates a better understanding of how consumers negotiate the world around them. In turn this provides marketers with valuable insights that better equip them to engage with their customers. The subject matter is the male consumer engaging in bodywork practices to construct a desired body type. The subjects are situated within two discursive regimes: practices of self-presentation and national sport. Moreover, looking across these contexts reveals situational differences that contribute further to managerial decision-making, helping build stronger customer relationships.

### **Introduction:**

There has been considerable consumer research exploring consumers' relationships to their own bodies and to idealised body representations (Askegaard, Cardel Gertsen, and Langer, 2002); (Elliott and Elliott, 2005); (Gulas and McKeage, 2000); (Östberg, 2010); (Patterson and Elliott, 2002); (Richins, 1991); (Schouten, 1991); (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). More particularly, there is a consensus in recent literature conceptualising the male body as an object 'to be manipulated, disciplined, and transformed into a culturally meaningful form by the active subject' (Norman, 2011). Indeed within the two discursive groups explored in this paper (the discourse of grooming practices and the discourse of national sport) evidence of young men transforming their bodies in accordance with available cultural resources supports this

premise. Prescriptive texts in a variety of formats, from lifestyle magazines, blogs and websites to instructive direction from managers and coaches, were drawn upon as these men sought to act upon themselves to be a certain type of subject. As these men subscribe to these prescriptive texts, it becomes a duty-like endeavour to discipline and normalise their bodies (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). However, within different discourses exist different possibilities for individuals to act in a particular context (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder, 2006). And so it is more revealing to look across the discursive regimes to consider young men's engagement with their body projects. Cultural tensions unravel across these social contexts that consequently inform marketers how best to build strong, enduring relationships with, in this case, the male (fashion) consumer.

### **The Theoretical Framework / Research Approach:**

Foucauldian theory is employed to conceptualise men as intertwined within their social environs, the recipients of socio-cultural inscription. Through consideration of the body as produced through discourse as well as disciplinary practices, Foucauldian theory facilitates exploration of the effects of power on the individual. The subject remains discursively and socially conditioned in power relations, yet within this configuration the individual's agency to 'define their own identity, to master their body and desires, and to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self' (Best and Kellner, 1991) is upheld.

Data was collected through the process of qualitative interviews. Each interview transcript is considered in light of the interviewer's knowledge that the data given is the interviewee's individual account of the social world according to them. However the

interview data does not merely reflect people's subjective experience, but rather is considered 'social texts'; that is, 'complex cultural, social and psychological products, which construct a particular version of those experiences' (Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto, 2009). And so each interview text is read with the awareness that the interview is operating within a certain discourse, or 'a certain network of practices of power and constraining institutions' (Foucault, 1988). Furthermore, the interview transcripts are analysed with the understanding that both the interviewer and interviewee participate to 'actively *construct* some version of the world appropriate to what we take to be self-evident about the person to whom we are speaking and the context of the question' (Silverman, 2006). Following this constructionist approach, the data is treated as narratives or stories through which people describe their world (Riessman Kohler, 2008). Akin to Foucauldian thinking, Bruner argues that individuals '*become* the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives' (Bruner, 1987). And so in order to be understood, 'these private constructions of identity must mesh with a community of life stories, or "deep structures" about the nature of life itself in a particular culture'. That is to say, these 'stories must always be considered in context, for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations' (Riessman Kohler, 2008). It is through this consideration of identity in terms of narrative that selves and identities can be seen as embedded in the social world (Lawler, 2008). This focus on narrative replaces the concept of the atomised individual with the concept of 'a person enmeshed in – and produced within – webs of social relations' (Lawler, 2008).

The next section introduces the two discursive contexts selected to explore cultural influences upon men's constructions of identity. As this study took place in Ireland, the discursive practices chosen came down to the analytical reasoning of this researcher, as an Irish citizen with a consciousness of influential communities within Irish culture. As Askegaard and Linnet point out, ultimately the researcher is presented with an infinite range of contexts that could be explored and so an analytical choice eventually has to be made to 'cordon off a part of the analytical field and present it as a contextual domain' (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011).

**The Social Contexts (and the men within):**

The first practice presented is the contextual domain of self-presentation and fashion. Ging proposes that the recent rise in consumerism in Ireland is 'affecting the ways in which we mediate and talk about gender behaviours, identities and relationships in contemporary Ireland' (Ging, 2009). With the recent upsurge of Irish lifestyle and fashion guides for men in the form of magazines (*Irish Tatler for Men*), websites (*www.joe.ie*), style blogs (*www.male-mode.com*), and increasing newspaper column space (see *The Irish Independent Weekend magazine*), it is apparent that a gap in the Irish male consumer market has been identified. Given that fashion consumption practices have traditionally been dominated by women (Ourahmoune, 2009), this domain was identified as an ideal site to explore possible emerging shifts in Irish masculine performances and constructions of identity. The term 'Consumptionisto' is drawn upon to describe men in this discursive regime. Consumptionistos are men who identify with practices of self-presentation (Duffy, 2012).

The second discursive practice selected is one of Ireland's national sports – Gaelic football. This emerged as a logical context in which to consider Irish masculinity. In his essay on sport and the body, (Hargreaves, 1987) explains how emphasis on the sporting body is less about the cultivation of proper values and gait, and more concerned with the regulatory production of identity. Sport in Ireland has long been a centrally important vehicle for the transmission of ideology and identity (Cronin, 1999). From its inception, the Gaelic Athletic Association<sup>1</sup> (GAA) has strategically aligned Irish masculinity with national identity, with the 'GAA man' epitomising the strong, skilful and moral Irishman (Cronin, 2007). The major influence of this sporting organisation within Irish sporting and cultural life, with clubs spread throughout most parishes in the country, made it an attractive field of analysis for this study.

### **Body Literature**

The body itself has become increasingly central to the modern individual's sense of self. The spread of 'industrialisation' and 'modernity' was followed by a reduction in power of community-oriented organisations, leaving individuals unaided to establish values and meaning from their daily lives. While this process of individualisation suggests a 'setting free' of individuals, it in turn requires individuals to actively work 'to resolve the question of how to live in a world of multiple options' (Giddens, 1991).

Coinciding with this decline of community, and privatisation of 'meaning-making', came the rise in consumer culture throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (Binkley,

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<sup>1</sup> The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is an Irish sports organisation founded in 1884. It remains a community-led, wholly amateur sporting association.

2007). In particular, the body became a principal focus as a bearer of symbolic value, being considered as constitutive of the self (Shilling, 2003). Body modifications can be traced back to the early Christian Era and antiquity, yet these were typically carried out through rituals in communal ceremonies. However, in an era when we are expected to be sole decision-makers in ‘controlling’ our bodies, uncertainty can be rife as we search for guidance, or an anchor upon which to consider our selves. In Western society in particular it is this ‘self-constructed’ body that is considered a work in progress, ‘a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual’s* self-identity’ (Shilling, 2003: 4, original emphasis). However, and in keeping with the theoretical framework provided, it should be noted that while society might be increasingly individualistic, the body is still attached to its social milieu and must be considered as both ‘socially constructed and socially experienced’ (Turner, 1984). Individuals are not isolated entities, but exist within a ‘dense field of relations between people and people, people and things, people and events’ (Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde, 2006).

Taking into account how the body is shaped by external societal forces, as a consequence, one’s bodily appearance becomes judged within society; that is, one’s ‘aesthetic outer body (with good shape and appearance) is the moral equivalent of a good person’ (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). Understood as such, one’s identity is ‘spread over the surface of the body, [constructed as] the outward text of the inner ethics of the self’ (Holliday, 1999). Individuals’ responsibility for the disciplining of their bodies renders them morally culpable if they fail (Gill, Henwood, and McClean, 2005). Of course this has

been testified from early antiquity, with Foucault describing the importance of a man's 'Ethos' in Ancient Greek times. However in contemporary culture, with the mobilisation of mediated imagery and messages, this emphasis on the 'valorisation of the trim, taut and terrific body' (Brace-Govan, 2010) becomes omnipresent. To this end, this author proposes both the sport industry and the grooming industry can be singled out as carriers of significant cultural ideals and representations of physically active embodiment (Jackson, Andrews, and Scherer, 2005). It is within these discursive regimes that young men learn how to conduct their behaviour and their bodies according to the dominant narrative.

Much research contends that women over men place greater emphasis on bodily appearance, fashion and consumption as a means for self-definition and self-identity (Gould and Stern, 1989); (Soloman, 1989). However, Boni notes that the male and female spheres of 'presentation of self and body, gestures and postures, fashions and lifestyle habits' are merging (Boni, 2002). Where once women's bodies dominated the media and popular culture, increasingly men's bodies occupy these public spaces (Edwards, 1997); (Grogan and Richards, 2002); (M S Kimmel, 2008); (Kimmel and Messner, 2004); (Mishkind et al., 1987); (Mort, 1996); (Nixon, 1996); (Tasker, 1993). And so this proliferation of media imagery has opened up the 'private sphere' of men, with male bodies now being strategically represented as an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look, as once proposed (Boni, 2002); (Gill, Henwood, and McClean, 2005); (Turner, 2000). Boni (2002) draws upon the Goffmanian dramaturgical model of 'presentation of self' to consider the continuously negotiated performance and



display that male bodies are required to engage in, whereby the body is repeatedly being 'achieved, produced and reproduced' (Boni, 2002: 467).

And so with this evolution of a consumer society, it is proposed that men are increasingly looking upon themselves and their bodies as sites of construction. In an effort to manage their identity men are encouraged to view their actual bodies as products of labour, whereby consumption and the use of consumer goods will produce the acceptable 'look' (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Much literature maintains that contemporary men are turning to consumption practices as they no longer find the meaning and social value they once achieved through their work (Atkinson, 2008); (Bocock, 1993); (Faludi, 1999); (Holt and Thompson, 2004); (Kimmel and Kaufman, 1994). Due to the economy shifting from primarily a culture of production to increasingly a culture of consumption, men find themselves pushed into lower-wage service occupations, lessening their ability to act as provider and protector as traditionally had been their role. Featherstone proposes that this shift towards the consuming male is inevitable in a postmodern society whereby one's social value is more determined by what one looks like, rather than one's production output (Featherstone, 1991). Edwards credits this shift in reconstructions of masculinity as a necessity given the economic climate challenging young men. In particular, with economic recession recurring in the late twentieth century and beyond, a shift to focusing on leisure pursuits and consumption over career and aspirational achievement was necessary (Edwards, 2003).

## **Discussion:**

For the young men (Consumptionistos) constructing their sense of self within the realm of fashionable self-presentation practices, work on the body is fundamental to their life project. Accordingly they prioritise their bodywork and participate intensely in practices to transform their body to encompass a desired form. This ethical work on the self requires the individual to engage actively with stipulated prescriptive texts and succeed in following their directive. Be it emulating a fashionable look or mastering an ideal body type, these men are motivated to succeed as their sense of self is embedded within these consumption practices. As they negotiate the neoliberal workings of modern consumer culture, there is an onus on them to govern their body in such a manner as to ‘make themselves better than they are’ (Rose, 2001). This persistent quest for perfecting their body is exacerbated by the vacillating nature of fashionable self-presentation techniques. By virtue of their being fashionable, the boundaries of such techniques continuously shift and the rules are regularly revised. And so these men seek to affirm their lives and body capacities on an ever-shifting platform.

The fear of ‘letting oneself go’ is palpable in the narrative of Consumptionisto Darren as he discusses his recent endeavour to lose weight. Darren is only 23 years of age, approximately 5feet 11inch in height, of very slim build, with perhaps the slightest evidence of weight around his waist. He is frustrated that he has gained even a couple of pounds and attributes it to having moved in with his fiancée and giving up smoking – ‘those two things combined are a nasty cocktail for fat!’ To combat this marginal weight gain he implements a number of weight-management techniques; he bought Kinect for his Xbox 360 to train at home, he intends to join a gym, and has initiated a radical change in his diet:

**Darren:** ... it's actually frustrating me because I'm so aware of it now. I'm one of these guys that either do something 100% or I don't do it at all ... So I've gone from the eating of fast food only in the past two weeks to eating salads, like, I, every day I have Alpen and a slice of banana, and then for lunch I'm eating a salad and then I'm like, making a conscious effort to reduce the size of portions for dinner, just because, like, to me, one of the worst things is looking at lads with like middle age spread, and I can't stand it, like.

In keeping with Darren's declaration of fitting the description of a 'Consumptionisto', his rationale for his latest dietary endeavours is nothing to do with health – 'I'm not really thinking about health now, I'm only 23' – and everything to do with fashioning his body to fit fashionable clothing. When Foucault discusses 'morality', he refers to the way in which individuals conduct themselves in relation to the prescriptive system (be it explicit or implicit) operative in their culture. Thus for Darren, and likewise Joe (see below), as advocates of self-presentation practices, their understanding of how 'one ought to "conduct oneself"' in reference to 'the prescriptive elements that make up the code' (Foucault, 1984) of a Consumptionisto centre around how one looks, and their ethical work is to transform their bodies to fit this desired look.

**Darren:** So I like ... your man Pete Doherty [English Indie rock singer], the one who is super skinny ... I think his clothes look really cool on him. I think the skinny look makes clothes look better. So the idea for me, if I started growing like a beer belly, I wouldn't be able to get into those kind of shirts and I wouldn't feel comfortable in them at all so ...

**Joe:** Like, I'd go to the gym quite a bit but I'm like, not as industrious as I should be, and, but I do, like, I mean, I would go maybe four or five times a week ... And, but it's very, like, I don't know, yeah, I suppose it's quite actually pointed in that I don't want to get big in any way because then I wouldn't be able to wear the clothes that I'd want to wear ... Well because I just want to be sort of like, slim and, and because I don't think, like, the clothes that I would like to wear, which are like skinny T-shirts and skinny jeans, they don't look good on people who sort of are too well-defined or whatever ... And it also gives me a brilliant excuse to not work out as hard as I should be!

Both Consumptionistos' 'ethical work' on their self/body carries their own 'certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (Foucault, 1984: 11). All the while, the narrative is peppered with props and tools (to include a computer console game, gym membership, fashion trends, a cereal brand name and pop rock singer) borrowed from surrounding popular consumer culture to aid their construction of self.

Their stories suggest fragility in a life project built upon such practices of consumption. The foundation of their identity project is habitually subject to modification as these men subscribe to these fashionable self-presentation techniques. The narrative clearly revealed anxiety among such young men to achieve this ideal male body type, yet paradoxically a determination to persist with engaging in these techniques of the self. Their self-constitution depends on this bodywork and so their ethical work becomes a continuous pursuit. A failure to achieve a fashionable presentation of the self represents incompetence on the young man's part in constructing a fashion-forward, styled and groomed look befitting a Consumptionisto. And so his position within his discursive regime depends on this ongoing bodywork.

Within the sporting community of the second discursive group explored we again see young men dedicatedly sculpting their bodies through weights programmes, fitness regimes, restricted diets and abstinence in order to construct their body into the ideal football player physique. However, this level of dedication is exclusive to those players

committed to their county team<sup>2</sup>, what this author terms the ‘embedded members’. This is the pinnacle of the player hierarchy and so such commitment to their bodywork is highly prioritised by these young men. Yet rather than exclude those other men who cannot construct their body to a peak performance level, the sports organisation facilitates all bodies by offering a range of levels wherein men can participate in the game in accordance with their bodily capabilities. The organisation thus allows an inclusive approach to the club, affording all willing bodies a position in the community. This structured, hierarchal body performance continuum enables young men to construct their identity project within this discursive domain without risking social exclusion for not achieving bodily perfection. While there will undoubtedly be frustration for those men striving to move up the hierarchy and play for their county, or indeed for those who must move down due to injury or age, they are still afforded some position wherein they can legitimately participate within their social group, if they so wish. Here we can see the positive power of Foucault’s technologies of domination in operation. The communitarian model of a highly structured organisation, in this case a sport organisation, provides a more solid foundation wherein men can build their identity projects while affirming and optimising their life and bodily capacities.

### **Contribution**

I identify a communitarian model as an imperative and positive socialising agent for young men in their construction of purposeful identity projects. Community recognition of young males is vital to affirm their sense of belonging and provide an increased sense

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<sup>2</sup> Each of the 32 counties of Ireland have a county team that comprises players selected from the local clubs in that county. To be selected to play for one’s county is a prestigious honour bestowed on the strongest and most skilful players.

of health and well-being (Hall, 2011). This realm of social responsibility need not be left to the domain of the non-profit organisations. As our culture has become progressively more *laissez-faire*, this research suggests that young men thrive in a meaningful and structured environment. It is proposed that corporate organizations (in particular to this research, businesses creating self-presentation solutions) need to reconsider their business model and aim to incorporate a social purpose into their business practices. There is a need to create a community in which a young male consumer can find a sense of heritage, belonging and meaning – an anchor on which to fix his consumption-oriented life project, without risking condemnation or alienation from his peers. At first the concept of developing a sustainable milieu within fashion may appear paradoxical given that this industry follows a business strategy perpetuating continuous change (Fletcher, 2008). Yet Kimmel proposes that giving young men freedom without context leaves them isolated from any sense of community (Kimmel, 2008). And while the vast and seasonal consumptionscape of fashion options offers infinite choice, we have seen how it also creates confusion and risk for the individual consumer. However, should a consumer identify with a brand that advocates support of a worthwhile cause, and that responsibly carries its supportive ethos for this cause throughout its business practices, the young man thus has a substantive hook on which to justify his consumption choices.

There has been much research advocating the benefits to marketers of building brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001); (Muñiz and Schau, 2005) and incorporating social networking practices to further sustain brand communities (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould, 2009). However, reinforcing the 'linking value' perspective proposed by (Cova,

1997) and (Shankar, Whittaker, and Fitchett, 2006), the findings of this paper highlight an opportunity for corporations to create a meaningful community wherein male consumers can participate in meaningful dialogue with brands and thus engage in 'meaningful consumption practices'. The discursive practice of fashion consumption on which young men are currently constructing their identity provides too precarious a foundation on account of its transient nature. Applying a communitarian model to self-presentation products and brands oriented towards the male consumer will facilitate a more inclusive approach for what has been termed in this research study, the Consumptionisto. That is, the male consumer will be able to forge a deeper sense of belonging within his influential community. Aligning fashion and grooming choices with worthwhile causes shifts the focus of fashion and its brands away from precarious, ephemeral associations and into a domain incorporating social purposes for humankind. By taking into consideration the social and cultural context within which identity construction takes place, the marketer is better equipped to reach the male (fashion) consumer and engage in a meaningful (and thus prosperous) customer relationship.

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