

The Dialectical Relationship Between Consumer Lifestyles and Marketplace Cultures

Corben Young

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution materialism has emerged as a defining characteristic of society. This materialism has led to increased consumption patterns which stress resources and cause immense damage to the environment. The worst offenders are the “Consumer Class” or people who live off of more than \$7,500 per year. This group of people includes most of the industrialized world – about 20% of the world’s population – but is responsible for 80% of the world’s consumption. At current consumption rates the world’s citizens would need 1 ½ Earths to continue uncurbed, but if everyone on the planet lived like the “Consumer Class” close to 5 Earth’s would be needed. Compounding this issue is the fact that 2.5 billion more people will be born before the year 2050, and increasingly more of them will desire a life similar to those in the “Consumer Class”. The bottom line is that current levels of consumption at current efficiencies will not be able to provide the world’s citizens with the products they desire – which presents a fantastic opportunity for marketers.

Consumer behavior has been identified as one of the changes that will play an important role in the response to climate change and other sustainability issues. However, up to this point in time, the approach to sustainability marketing has largely been fragmented. Issues like “greenwashing” and “astroturfing” have undermined all green marketing claims and have caused immense consumer skepticism in green products.

Green marketing has largely been modeled after the classical marketing theory. This theory assumes that consumers are rational, decision-making individuals who can decipher between all possible products and select a combination that will provide them with the best possible utility. Classical marketing theory alleges that consumers go through a step by step process for every purchase decision. This rationality is founded in current techniques like third party certification. Green products with these third party certification require that consumers locate the logo on the package, understand what the logo means, decipher the perceived meaning the third party certification is trying to convey, and finally make the decision to purchase the good.

Methods

As opposed to trying to market to the rational thinking consumer, marketers should focus on consumer lifestyles. A consumer lifestyle can be broadly defined as the relationship that a consumer has with the objects that he or she purchases. Consumption lifestyles are directly linked to a person’s socialization, which is a deep learning in which a person is learning throughout their life experiences. This is what determines the types of behaviors and other aspects of culture a person considers “normal”. People share similar consumption lifestyles and therefore marketplaces can be designed to attempt to attract a certain kind of these lifestyles – this is done through semiotics.

Semiotics is the science that describes the relation between signs and thought or logic. A sign has two different parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the form that the sign takes – what you see, hear, or a number of other sign vehicles – and the signified is the meaning derived from the sign. For example, the word “tree” is the signifier and the mental image of a tree is the signified. Networks of signifiers in context create a code that will be interpreted by the individual. This symbolism can create connotations and conceptualize meaning in products. For example:

- Color – white suggests lightweight
- Materials – glass suggests fragility
- Shape – sleek and forward leaning suggest quickness

These principles will be taken from product design and applied to marketplace design. My theory is based on the assumption that by carefully selecting a system of codes, with relevant signs a marketplace culture can be designed to promote a certain type of consumer behavior – specifically increased sustainable purchases.

Current Practices

In order to examine what local marketplaces were doing in terms of semiotics and marketplace design in regards to sustainability I visited three local stores:

Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market

- Used the color green as the stores main theme
- Shelving units made to look like wood
- Displays that look like baskets holding fruit
- No order between sustainable/normal goods



Marvin’s IGA

- No attempt at sustainable semiotics
- No attempt to separate sustainable/ordinary goods
- One third of one aisle housed organic offerings alongside frozen dinners



Harps

- Produce placed in round bins
- Natural lighting in produce section
- “Health and Natural” section of the store containing environmentally friendly goods
- No order between sustainable/ordinary goods on shelves

Results

I divided the shopping process into three sections: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase, theorizing on ways in which the marketplace could be designed to promote a more “green” lifestyle.

Pre-Purchase

The consumer has to be thinking differently before they ever get to the store – this is achieved through an app. Signs and QR Codes would promote the app at the entrance to stores providing instant acquisition for anyone willing to try. GPS would recognize the store a consumer shops at and put together a “memory” of popular marketplaces. The app works like a shopping list so when a consumer checks items off of the list the GPS recognizes where items are within the store. After a predefined number of trips the app would piece together a map of the store. Further, the app would be embedded with the ability to offer coupons for green products (to encourage trial). Then in tandem with the virtual map that the app has created, green icons would appear on any aisle a consumer would be traveling down indicating that a coupon for a sustainable product exists on that aisle. Because one of the biggest barriers to sustainable goods is their price, the “deep discount” strategy of couponing would be used offering sustainable goods at equal or lower prices to their ordinary counterparts at several times a year.

Purchase

Shelving

By creating a shelving unit that has a vertical section of shelving blocked off for green products, consumers who want to shop green can have a designated area on every aisle in which they know where to find sustainable goods. This cuts down on the clutter that consumers trying to shop in an environmentally friendly manner currently face. The goods on this shelf are backed by an un-objective third party helping to eliminate the skepticism currently felt by shoppers. By literally having this shelf be the color green it will distinguish itself from other shelves and imply the goods being sold from this shelf are natural, environmentally friendly, associated with the Earth, etc. Other shelving options in the store could be made from wood implying the same ideals.

Store Layout

Individual marketplaces would designate a specific area of the store for which only sustainable goods would be sold. This option essentially creates a store within a store for sustainable goods. Like the shelving option, all products would be verified by a third party to eliminate skepticism. The area would be signified with signs like green tiles on the floor to attract attention and make clear that environmentally friendly goods are sold here. Shelving units would be made of natural materials like wood and items would be held in baskets. The packaging would be different from that of normal products, full of earth tones, reclaimed or reused materials, recyclable packaging, etc. Finally, the higher prices in the section would imply quality to consumers.

Post-Purchase

This phase begins immediately after checkout. Upon receiving a receipt that on the back contains a graph reflecting the purchases they just made. Each product listed on the front of the receipt would have sustainable metrics verified by a third party embedded into their barcodes. When scanned a cumulative report on the sustainability of the current trip is calculated into a bar graph comparing a customer to their own past trips, and to that of the average consumer in a designated area. This provides a metric that consumers can try to improve upon, almost becoming a game. It also allows comparison between consumers, giving a behavioral incentive for the customer to try and be better than their peers. This data is uploaded to an online account and can be accessed at anytime.