

Paradoxes in postmodern consumption

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Short teaser

Postmodernity has brought new consumption trends juxtaposing opposites. This film presents a number of such paradoxes of postmodern consumers, i.e., alone and together, real and virtual, fast and slow, nomadic and sedentary, masculine and feminine, producer and consumer, profane and sacred. We show how a bunch of products and activities have developed around these paradoxes.

1. Introduction

Today's consumers are a puzzle for economists, marketers and brand managers. Far from taking "rational" decisions and behaving predictably, these consumers stray further and further from traditional models and segmentation. The past twenty years have seen the arrival of a chameleon consumer who is omnivorous and insatiable (Aubert, 2005; Decrop, 2011; Sansaloni, 2006). Companies and marketing professionals, at first unsettled by these new postmodern patterns of consumption, have now managed to find ways round them thanks to incredible advances in technology. The film documents a number of paradoxes related to current consumption patterns and analyses them in the light of postmodernity. We aim to show how several firms use these paradoxes to feed their marketing and how a whole series of products and contemporary consumption phenomena have developed around these paradoxes.

2. Postmodernity and consumption

Postmodernity refers to a structural change in the individual and in society. It relates to the end of the industrial age that created modernity, and the coming of the information age that we know today. According to sociologists such as Baudrillard (1970), Lyotard (1979), and Maffesoli (1988, 2006), the postmodern individual arose from the gradual crumbling away of society's institutional, social and spiritual structures and a wish for freedom from dogma and traditional norms and values. This all happened against a background of socio-economic crisis in the 70s and 80s that left many people disillusioned. Since that time, relativism is prevailing in judgements, values and behaviours. Postmodern individuals are free of everything and everyone: they are self-sufficient and fix their own norms; they feel no responsibility towards society or to the traditional groups they used to belong to (family, school, parish etc.). Consumption has become central in such a postmodern context, as it helps individuals to express their identity through what they have, use or consume. This is why authors such as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), Sherry (1983), Belk (1988), Firat and Venkatesh (1993, 1995) have "imported" the postmodern paradigm into marketing and consumer behavior. A number of French authors have also contributed to the investigation of postmodern consumption (i.e., Aubert, 2005; Caru and Cova, 2006; Cova, 1995; Rémy, 2001) and to the emergence of a "neo-marketing" (Badot and Cova, 1992).

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) list five conditions of postmodern consumption: hyperreality, fragmentation, the reversibility of consumption and production, the removal of the subject from the centre, and the juxtaposition of opposites. The first condition, the hyperreal environment in which the consumer is immersed today, makes it possible to "transform what was only initially a simulation into a reality" (Firat et Vankatesh, 1993, p.375). It is a matter of representing a reality that is different from objective reality, resulting in confounding "true" and "false", "good" and "bad" and "sacred" and "profane". Baudrillard (1970)

goes as far as to claim that today, reality has disappeared and that “all is but image, illusion and simulation”. Along with hyperreality, the fragmentation of consumption is another major characteristic of postmodernity. It refers to the number of realities that may underpin the same product or the activity: postmodern individuals are encouraged to change image continuously and must therefore incessantly adopt new roles. The third condition, the reversibility of consumption and production questions the traditional view that requires production to create value while consumption destroys it. For Baudrillard (1970), value originates in the meaning imputed to a product and not in the exchange as such. In this sense, consumers are producers of every consumption experience, their identity being conditioned by the products they use, as long as the latter have a particular significance for them. With the subject no longer in the center as fourth condition, postmodernism highlights the confusion between the subject and the object of consumption and questions agency, i.e. who controls this relationship. Finally, postmodern consumption enables the juxtaposition of opposites. In other words, it enables elements previously considered as antithetic to co-exist without favouring one viewpoint or another. The film precisely focuses on such paradoxes or opposites.

3. A few postmodern paradoxes

It is difficult in 30 minutes to present all the paradoxes that many consumers face today. This film unpicks just a few of them to show how marketing takes advantage of the situation by offering consumers solutions allowing them to reconcile ice and fire. These paradoxes are the following:

- Alone and together
- Masculine and feminine
- Nomadic and sedentary

- Fast and slow (Kronos et Kairos)
- Real and virtual
- Old and New
- Consumer and producer
- Profane and sacred

4. Conclusion

The different paradoxes highlighted in this film can be explained by several dominant trends and theories related to postmodernity, i.e., hedonism (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1970), tribalism (Cova, 1995; Maffesoli, 1988) and nomadism (Maffesoli, 2006). But probably more than any other, the notion of eclecticism is essential for understanding the paradoxes of postmodern consumption: “cunning and smart, independent and living the good life, today’s consumer is like a harlequin who goes through life wearing a mask, hiding what he is up to and escaping from imposed authority” (Sansaloni, 2006, 149). We live in a world where everything and its opposite have become possible, where all tastes, values and styles have the right to exist. Of course we may resist the current relativism but finally, it is only the result of the evolution of social structures: consumption changes because the social field changes. Moreover, we can be pleased that the paradoxes we have mentioned show that consumers are taking things back into their own hands: they no longer allow themselves to be categorised or predicted as easily as before, they do not let themselves be reduced to a simple utility function or a common “homo economicus”. Many psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists underline the growing place of the hedonistic and the symbolic as motives for consumer thoughts and actions. Faced with the uncertainty, abundance and complexity of the world, consumers have become co-producers of their life-style and consumption thereby seeking solid landmarks and references that they know to be unstable elsewhere.



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