Internal Marketing and the Enactment of Sexual Identity

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Internal marketing and the enactment of sexual identity

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ABSTRACT

Queer theory may help marketers gain a deeper understanding of invisible and marginalised communities based upon sexual identity. ‘Queering’ the gender research agenda better reflects contemporary postmodern society and the fluidity of identities that are sought and communicated by consumption wider than through consumer goods and services.

This article argues for a link to be made between an individual’s identity (as defined by the individual themselves), their consumption (creating, maintaining and communicating the identity), and their status as internal customers (particularly in front-line service jobs) which in turn feeds into debates on emotional labour and internal marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Issues surrounding gender, marketing and consumption have been paid increasing attention by the marketing academy in recent years. However, there is a very limited body of literature focusing on lesbian, gay and bisexual consumers. Moreover, although the extant service marketing literature acknowledges the importance of employees as internal customers of business organisations and their role in delivering satisfaction to external customers, there is nothing to be found in this body of literature specifically relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual employees as internal customers.

Although this is unsurprising given the marketing academy’s tendency to shy away from such marginalised topics as sexuality, ethnicity and disability, it is somewhat remarkable given that the academy almost universally acknowledges the importance to consumption of the role played by a person’s self-concept and identity.

This conceptual article therefore aims to widen the debate into gender, marketing and consumption by exploring issues surrounding the enactment (or ‘performativity’ to use a phrase more familiar to marketers) of a lesbian, gay or bisexual person’s sexual identity and their role as an internal customer of mainstream service organisations.

GENDER, MARKETING AND CONSUMPTION

Beetles and Harris (2005) offer a recent overview of gendered research in marketing from which they identify seven main themes in this body of literature, namely: Gender and consumer behaviour; gender and decision making; a nascent body of work into e-feminisation that studies on-line activity and exchange; gender and sales; the feminisation of marketing practice and job roles; and finally a recognition of the feminisation of the marketing discourse that examines gendered language in marketing, and the
evolution of marketing theory that tends towards a portrayal of the consumer as feminine and the marketer as masculine. Beetles and Harris (2005) recognise that broader and deeper perspectives on gender based research have been called for and are evidenced at conferences such as that run by the Association for Consumer Research, but that the body of work is currently dominated by articles approached from a feminist perspective. Catterall, Macclaran, and Stevens (2005) also recognise the dominance of the feminist perspective in the marketing literature on gender research.

However, these authors also find that although an understanding of gender can facilitate greater understanding of the consumer, this understanding is limited in both theory and practice. One of the reasons proposed for this may be found in an understanding of the accepted definitions of the terms used by gender researchers.

“Whilst the term gender has no single and universally agreed meaning, most consumer researchers in the Consumer Culture Theory tradition accept that sex refers to the biology of a person, whether the person is a man or a woman. Gender, by contrast, is a socio-cultural category referring to the ways that men and women are socialised into male and female roles” (Catterall et al. 2005).

This ‘sex-stereotyping’ may be seen as particularly unproductive when attempting to understand a fragmented postmodern society that embraces multiculturalism and pluralism. In a postmodern society, personal identity is often sought and reinforced through consumption, and identity is no longer governed by a hegemonic meta-
narrative that polarises identities into binary categories, like ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’.

GENDER, CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY

The concept of personal identity as a driver of consumer behaviour emerged from Sigmund Freud’s work into personality theory at the start of the twentieth century (Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott 2002). Recent developments in the marketing literature have focused on the manner in which consumers construct identities through the symbolic consumption of goods and services. However, this literature focuses on consumption by a business organisation’s external customers, and, in the main, fails to address any issues of consumption and identity by that organisation’s internal customers – its employees. Catterall et al. (2005) have also identified the gap in the gender literature that overlooks “the three-way relationship between production, consumption and gender”, noting that, in service organisations at least, the workforce is dominated by women.

Moreover, the marketing literature on identity is dominated by issues surrounding consumption of goods and service, yet, as Wenger (1998, cited in Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott 2002) notes, “who we are lies in the way we live from day to day, not just in what we think or say about ourselves”, and certainly not just in what goods and services we consume.

Bauman (1998) has argued that there has been a gradual move within society from a work ethic based around notions of moral superiority, to work as a way to accumulate ever increasing amounts of wealth, shifting human motivations and the drive for freedom into the sphere of consumption. Della Porta and Diani (1999) see this increased focus on
consumption as an element in reinforcing identities based on ‘lifestyles’. They argue that ‘cultural consumption’, whether in terms of eating habits or as ways of organizing social or emotional life, represent persuasive elements in categorising identities. The danger of such analyses however, is that the importance of work to individuals’ lives and identities may be passed over or dismissed. The ‘decentring of work’ in individuals’ lives has been mooted as one key reason for the focus on consumption patterns in recent years, yet recent studies have shown the continued centrality of work in people’s lives and, in some cases, that work activities are intruding more into leisure time and home activities (Bradley et al. 2000).

Traditional perspectives in marketing are based within the categorisation of individuals into groups along established lines (Burton 2002). However, in a postmodern society where individual identities may be considered more fluid it becomes increasingly important to consider and give voice to previously under-represented communities. A relatively unfruitful search for a body of work that address the worlds’ of these groups from a marketing perspective highlights that the marketing academy has exhibited a tendency to shy away from research into marginalised communities such as those built around sexual identity, disability and ethnicity, yet almost universally acknowledges the importance to consumption of the role played by a person’s self-concept and identity. In this respect, studies from other disciplines may also have something to offer the debate in this area.

GENDER, IDENTITY AND OTHER PERSPECTIVES

In the reclamation of the word ‘queer’ from its history as a term of abuse, academics and activists alike have drawn heavily on the work of the French post-structuralist Michel Foucault (1979), arguing for the ‘performance of self’ as the route to freedom for the expression of an individual’s identity (Butler 1998; Spargo 1999). Writing specifically about gender roles, Judith Butler (1990) has become a key voice calling for a performance-driven view of personal identity, arguing that gender should be dynamic and fluid within each interaction, to meet the exigencies of each unique situation (Rapley, Kiernan, and Antaki 1998). In Butler’s (1990) own words: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990, 25).

Jagose (1996) describes the term ‘queer’ as the interconnections between biological sex, gender and sexual desire, whilst resisting the stability and dominance of both traditional gender definitions and heterosexuality. Yet whilst these interconnections are important this description does not explain how the queer identity is ‘managed’. The question for queer theorists becomes not whether gender or any other element of ones’ identity should be performed, either singly or in combination, but what form the performance should and does take, at any given time. In essence, the gendered performance is about ‘what you do’ at different times, not a universal ‘who you are’; a place where identity becomes the effect of the gendered performance, not the cause of actions.

Two interconnected benefits, for our purposes, develop out of such an analysis. Firstly, queer theory is universally applicable; as Jagose (1996) has argued queer as a term is unaligned with any particular category so can be applied to any context. This also overcomes the problems concerning definitions of terms identified by Catterall et al. (2005). Secondly, and
crucially for this piece, Butler’s attention to the connections between gender and compulsory sexuality bring into the light questions of the performativity (or enactment) of fluid sexual as well as gendered identities.

In addition, it has been noted that queer theory aligns well with postmodernism, as both perspectives reject modernist approaches to “the classic Cartesian notion of the centred subject” (Kates, 1999). These perspectives therefore aid studies that seek to understand and theorise the fluid nature of sexual identity in a postmodern world. This world is characterised by “hyperreality, fragmentation, reversals of production and consumption, decentring of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites), and loss of commitment” (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh, 1995) to the dominant themes of the modernist world.

In their consideration of consumption within subcultures, Goulding, Saren and Follett (2002) examined contemporary ‘Goth’ culture and noted its tolerance of diversity with regard to both gender and sexuality. Much has been written in the marketing literature about identity and consumption (Schofield and Schmidt 2005, for example) and even some concerning marketing to minority groups generally (Macciette and Roy 1994). Little has been written about sexual minorities in the marketing literature, and that which is evident pertains mostly to the power of the ‘pink pound’ and lesbian and gay people as consumers (Fugate 1993; Haslop, Hill, and Schmidt 1998) or the lesbian and gay community as consumers of services (Atton 1994; Boon and Howard 2004; Malina and Schmidt 1997). Some work has been undertaken by Kates, who has studied the relevance of queer theory to advertising research (1999) and who has also conducted ethnographic research into the subculture of gay consumers (2002).

Kates (2002) notes that “despite the extensive work on subcultures in and out of the consumer research discipline, the internal diversity of consumption meanings and practices remains largely untheorized”. Therefore he has sought to forward consumer theory by considering subcultural consumption that is characterised by “individualized differentiation, negotiation, and choice”. Kates (2002) concludes that it is the shared meanings within the subculture that differentiate its members from the “dominant heterosexual mainstream”, with one of these shared meanings identified as “gender flexibility”.

Warren (1977) argues that research into stigmatised and marginalised groups is crucial to their acceptance by mainstream culture. The more knowledge the public has about these groups, Warren argues, the more comfortable they will become with their inclusion in mainstream life.

The literature on gender and services marketing is similarly limited, and in the main is focused on gendered perceptions of front-line service staff. There is recognition that the appearance of front-line staff has an effect on service customers (Foster 2002). There is also a recognition that the practice of employing ‘aesthetic labour’ is not just prevalent in recruitment to certain service marketing employment, but also is considered to be acceptable to consumers (Dennis and Binns 2002).

IDENTITY AND THE INTERNAL CUSTOMER

In service organisations designed to meet the needs of marginalised communities, such as those within the hospitality sector in
Manchester’s ‘gay village’ for example, entire servicescapes are designed and positioned as ‘gay spaces’, and therefore ‘safe spaces’ where members of this particular subculture may express their collective and individual identities (Haslop et al. 1998). Here we can evidence the marginalised customers’ acceptance of a certain ‘aesthetic labour’, with organisational advantage being gained from customers being served by front-line staff who look like themselves (Foster 2002). The issue of ‘acceptability’ is undoubtedly clouded when considering the employment of front-line staff from marginalised communities within in mainstream service organisations. What is considered ‘acceptable’ is then set by the mainstream customer and the mainstream organisation. Yet problems can arise if the employee wishes to create and communicate a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity through, for example, wearing certain clothing as a “marker of gayness” (Schofield and Schmidt 2005).

Although historically perceiving organisational success to rest upon meeting the needs of the external customer, there has been a recent paradigm shift that views the importance of employees as internal customers (Mudie 2003). This involves reconceptualising the organisation as “as a chain of exchanges, activities and actions transacted by internal suppliers and customers” (Enos, Cullinane and Skinner 2002). Marketing to internal customers therefore becomes as important as the marketing activities an organisation undertakes externally, recognising that the ability to satisfy internal customers is an integral part of satisfying external customers (Barnes and Morris 2000). The service marketing literature also recognises that organisations using an internal marketing approach tend to have a higher than usual market orientation, second they tend to adopt a service orientation and third, these organisations often demonstrate a higher than usual empowerment of employees (Enos et al. 2002).

Although not universally agreeing the benefits to an organisation brought by empowering employees, many authors do agree that empowerment “involves allowing employees to exercise discretion during service encounters” (Sood and Lings 2002). Results of recent empirical research found that if empowering internal customers is not necessary to keep external customers happy, and that staff can not cope with empowerment, then “empowerment can work in an adverse manner and cause an increase in role stress and job dissatisfaction, ultimately resulting in poor service delivery” (Sood and Lings 2002). This, to some extent, contradicts findings of other previous research. However, the authors also found that “managers need to understand that contact employees also have to be committed to maintaining and improving their service delivery and so need to fulfil their employees demands” (Sood and Lings 2002). These authors also suggest that further research could include the effects of demographics (including gender) on empowerment.

**EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND IDENTITY**

One of the central tenets of emotional labour research is that certain social, managerial and professional control systems exist which require certain groups of workers to create and maintain ‘acceptable’ public emotional displays for the ends of the organisation. What is deemed ‘acceptable’ in terms of these required emotional displays is circumscribed and dictated by normative hegemonic social, professional, educational and managerial forces. Morris and Feldman (1996) argue that one of the key aspects to
Define emotional labour is that it has involved the shift from individuals’ expressing of emotion for their own personal ends to emotion being treated as a ‘marketplace commodity’. It therefore becomes an implicit extension of the ‘psychological contract’ of employment. This market place commodification of emotion relies upon standardised ‘display rules’ (Ekman 1973, cited in Enos et al. 2002) i.e. social rules about what is appropriate for certain occupational groups. For example, receptionists and flight attendants are expected to be friendly and cheerful; funeral directors are supposed to appear sombre and reserved (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). These display rules are at the base of the assumption that all emotional displays in the workplace that are ‘required’ are in some way exploitative because there is a tendency to assume that all such displays result in emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance is the term used to label the phenomenon in which emotional displays are circumscribed by display rules that run counter to the true emotions felt by a worker (Enos et al. 2002).

Often, organisations attempt to build such perceptions by controlling or scripting the interaction between employees and customers. Traditionally such interactions were influenced by the organisation’s approach to the types of employees that are put into the ‘front lines’ and these policies and procedures still have a place in encouraging desirable employee behaviours. However, the effort involved in adopting ‘appropriate’ emotions, in matching display rules or in accepting emotional dissonance takes and effort for employees for which customer satisfaction and organisational efficiency, productivity and profitability are insufficient incentives in and of themselves.

Empowered employees are therefore more likely to invest their ‘whole self’ in their task rather than some managerially circumscribed superficial self due to the revision of their role and increases in the scope and requirement for them to invest an emotional as well as a physical or intellectual component in their labour power. In addition, the empowerment of the collective group of people called employees is associated with HRM ‘fit’. The emotional labour content is evident here if organisations endeavour to only recruit and develop those employees who are ‘empowered’ because of their propensity to accept the organisation’s internal marketing approach. In this situation, only those employees open to cooption because they have the ‘right’ disposition and the greatest openness to the organisation will prosper or find a place within the organisation. As cooption of this kind is ultimately measured by the degree of identification the employee demonstrates towards, and the general pride and loyalty the employee has, in the organisation and its brands, products and services. A core part of any assessment as to the disposition of employees will be the degree of emotional labour they voluntarily render when required.

**INTERNAL MARKETING AND THE ENACTMENT OF SEXUAL IDENTITY**

It is in the combination of symbolic power (in relation to control of the ‘unacceptability’ of certain emotional behaviours within the workplace context) and sexual power (in terms of the dominance of heterosexuality within the wider context of the organisational power relationships) that Bradley (1999) identifies, can be seen to dominate the regulations of both gender and sexual orientation within the working environment. Organisations are socially situated constructions that cannot be divorced from
their context of social, economic and cultural relations or considered as ‘depersonalised systems’. Halford, Savage and Witz (1997) argue that organisations have both a formal and informal structure; the informal structure relating to the ways in which the personal, the sexual and the feminine are excluded from any definition of workplace ‘rationality’. Drawing on Acker’s work (1990, cited in Ledwith and Colgan 1996) highlighting the existence of organisational ‘silence on sexuality’, female sexuality is viewed as the unwelcome intruder in masculine-controlled employment. In the same way, organisational ‘archives of heterosexuality’ (Harding 1992; Hearn et al. 1989) construct heterosexuality as the dominant frame for sexual orientation (Rich 1993; Whelahan 1995) and thus, following Butler (1990), the masculine/feminine binary for gender. Acker argues that lesbians and gay men within organisations are expected to conform to this hegemonic discourse, requiring them to curtail any expression of their ‘disruptive’ (homo)sexuality within the organisation, a situation she termed ‘organisational celibacy’ (1990, cited in Ledwith and Colgan 1996).

The ‘invisibility’ of lesbian and gay workers enforced by the organisational ‘silence on sexuality’ has obvious parallels with Goffman’s (1963) consideration of the ‘discredibility’ of non-visible disabilities. For Goffman, any visible sign of ‘difference’ automatically categorise individuals’ identities as ‘discredited’, in societal terms. For those individuals whose identities are invisible, such as lesbian, gay or bisexual workers, he suggests that their identities are ‘discreditable’ as there is not yet stigma attached to their ‘non-normal’ identity form. The overriding issues for individuals with ‘discreditable’ identities then become whether to risk being ‘discredited’ by disclosing their identity, or to attempt to pass for ‘normal’ and try to conceal the discreditable identity altogether (Joachim and Acorn 2000). The stress involved in a strategy of ‘passing’ can be inferred when conversations with those not aware of the individual’s identity are considered. It is in opposition to such pressures to invisibility and ‘celibacy’ that ‘queer’ can be located. For Hennessey (1994), promoting ‘queerness’ is a gesture of rebellion against heterosexuality’s pressure to be heterosexual or invisible; that is, either ‘normal’ or to use Hennessey’s words “shamefully, quietly queer”.

Research conducted in recent years has confirmed that for lesbians and gay men, the world of employment has the potential to be a most unpleasant and unforgiving experience (Greasley 1986; Rees, 1996; Stonewall 1999; Taylor 1986). Palmer’s study (1993) highlights evidence of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in organisations, with thirty-seven percent of respondents reporting direct discrimination because of their sexual orientation and an additional eight percent of respondents having been dismissed from their positions for the same reason. In the same survey, forty-eight percent of respondents had experienced some degree of harassment at work, ranging from unwanted jokes, innuendo and loaded comments to more serious reactions in the form of abusive phonecalls, blackmail, violence and even death threats. Such reports draw further attention to the extent of heterosexuality’s entrenchment within organisations and the very real ‘dangers’ for individuals who challenge the hetero-normative hegemony by allowing themselves to be ‘discreditable’, in Goffman’s terms. Yet, this ‘symbolism’ is embedded not only in workplace interaction, but also in more indirect forms of discrimination, rooted in the organisation’s culture. The occurrence of unequal pay, in
the form of non-applicable pensions and other partner benefits, and with particular reference to dependant’s payments for partners and children of lesbian and gay couples was identified by Palmer’s respondents as a considerable cause for concern. Added to ‘personal’ benefits only available to heterosexual couples, such as health care provision, access to bereavement leave, company car use and access to other corporate services (LAGER, 1993), this ‘subconscious’ denial of non-heterosexual identities within the workplace further supports Acker’s assertion of the dominance of heterosexual ‘norms’. In order to protect themselves from direct discrimination and harassment over sixty percent of respondents, in both Palmers’ study (1993) and a similar study carried out by the Social and Community Planning Research group (Snape et al. 1995), admitted that they concealed their sexual orientation from some or all of their work colleagues.

Although expressed by some as ‘living a lie’ (Taylor 1986), individuals ‘in the closet’ can be seen to be fulfilling their expected role as ‘organisational celibates’, by suppressing their sexuality within the workplace. This strategy is only effective because, as Kronenberger (1991) argues, a gay person’s minority status is not obvious. The introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexuality) Regulations in 2003 and the arrival of the Civil Partnerships Act 2005 may have addressed the worst of these effects, but neither piece of legislation can directly address the tensions between the requirements for individuals to ‘perform’ in certain ways and roles at the workplace, potentially in direct opposition to their own chosen identity ‘performances’. It is for this reason that this article calls for a ‘queering’ of the gender agenda for internal consumers.

CONCLUSION

Although there is a growing body of literature concerning gender in marketing the literature continues to be dominated by studies undertaken from a feminist perspective (Beetles and Harris 2005; Catterall et al. 2005). Moreover, the accepted definitions of the terms used by gender researchers tend to focus their work into ‘sex-stereotyping’, based upon a society’s acceptance of gendered roles (Catterall et al. 2005), rather than considering an individual’s own claim to their identity which may be made upon other lines than those traditionally defined as ‘masculine or feminine’.

The marketing academy does accept the importance of an individual consumer’s own pursuit of identity as a key driver of consumption, but there have been very few studies into the effects on consumption of new, fluid, postmodern concepts of identity. Those studies that exist do acknowledge that the creation, maintenance and communication of these identities may need to be hidden to a large extent during a person’s daily life, only being freely expressed when that individual is in a ‘safe space’ with others from a particular subculture or marginalised community (Goulding et al. 2002; Haslop et al. 1998).

Catterall et al. (2005) argue that much gender research, while acknowledging the importance of gender and consumption, ignores the notion of production. This is an important gap in the literature when considering the dominance of certain sexes in various industries (e.g. the prevalence of women in low-level jobs in service industries).

Postmodern researchers recognise that individual identities are often sought through
consumption wider than consumer goods and services, and many have indeed paid attention to the decentring of work in individual’s lives. The academy has also paid attention to the employee as an internal customer, particularly in the service marketing literature, but again, these concepts have not been addressed by gender researchers.

This article has argued that a link needs to be made between an individual’s identity (as defined by the individual themselves), their consumption (that can create, maintain and communicate this identity), and their status as internal customers (particularly when employed in front-line service jobs).

The service marketing literature does start to examine this by understanding the notion of ‘aesthetic labour’ (Dennis and Binns 2002), and the acceptability of the appearance and actions of service industry employees (Foster 2002). However, when these employees are from subcultures or marginalised communities, acceptability is more easily aligned to an individual identity when in a ‘safe space’ that serves customers from the same subculture or marginalised community. It is therefore evident that for certain less visible minorities such as lesbian, gay and bisexual employees (Kronenberger 1991), the acceptability of their sexual identity does not appear to fit when serving mainstream customers of mainstream organisations.

It is here that the article argues that perspectives such as queer theory may help marketers. This perspective is gaining acceptance by other disciplines as being able to offer a new approach more in keeping with an understanding of fluid postmodern identities (Jagose 1996).

Due to its link with HRM research, other new perspectives may also offer a deeper understanding into the internal customer that include the notions of empowerment and emotional labour. Internal marketing is seen as a powerful tool that facilitates the co-option by the organisation of appropriate emotions by the service employees (Enos et al. 2002). However, for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees this can also include the regulation of sexual orientation within the working environment (Acker 1990; Bradley 1999). Such employees therefore often conceal their sexual identity from colleagues (Snape et al. 1995). The potential for stigmatisation and harassment which characterises lesbian and gay existence presents not only complications for those charged with employee welfare, HR professionals, given the effort and control required to express organisationally-desirable emotions during every personal transaction (Morris and Feldman 1996), but also for marketers. Acting out desired emotions, particularly when the act is only superficial rather than generated from within the employee, “conflicts with customer expectations of honest behaviour and may be interpreted by customers as ‘cheating’” (Grandey 2003, cited in Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, and Groth 2005).

We therefore call for a “queering” of the gender research agenda that may help better reflect not only postmodern society in general, but also better reflect issues of production and consumption affecting the de-centred subject who exists in an invisible and marginalised community based upon sexual identity. As with any individual living in a postmodern world, these subjects are more concerned with form than substance, their fragmented world is defined through consumption, yet each may be forced to choose between enacting their own choice of sexual identity and exacting a sexual identity that ‘fits’ with an employing organisation. That is unless we widen the debate to include...
a consideration not only of these individuals’ status as internal customers, but also to include a consideration of their status as producers within a service-dominated economy. We believe that this approach better reflects contemporary postmodern society and the fluidity of identities that are sought and communicated by consumption.

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