

# Working consumers: the next step in marketing theory?

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**Abstract.** *In marketing and consumer research, consumers have been increasingly theorized as producers. However, these theorizations do not take all facets of consumers' productive role into account. This paper mobilizes both post-Marxist economics and post-Maussian socioeconomics to develop the concept of working consumer. This concept depicts consumers who, through their immaterial labour, add cultural and affective value to market offerings. In so doing consumers increase the value of market offerings, although they usually work at the primary level of sociality (interpersonal relationships) and are therefore beyond producers' control. However, given certain conditions, companies capture such a value when it enters the second level of sociality (the market). The concept of the working consumer summarizes and enriches extant approaches to consumer (co)production, while challenging widespread developments, such as the service-dominant (SD) logic of marketing, which try to create/construct an ethereal marketscape in which consumers and producers live in harmony. **Key Words** ● co-creation ● co-production ● double exploitation ● immaterial labour ● primary sociality ● secondary sociality*

## Introduction: the why of this paper

Various signs from the market and the literature reveal that the consumer role is changing. Many terms have been used in an effort to capture the new consumer roles: prosumer, protagonist, post-consumer, consum-actor, etc. However, these terms converge to describe more active and constructive consumers as well as their market experiences and relationships with companies.

While many theories and definitions have been applied to identify the core elements of the evolving consumer, they do not address a key point: consumers are not producers in the full sense of the word. Producers receive the revenue derived from the market, while consumers do not. Besides, although they do not produce in the traditional sense, consumers do work. They are active in the value creation process through immaterial labour and primary (direct) social relationships. This paper therefore proposes the working consumer concept as a way of describing both the sociocultural and the socioeconomic dimensions of contemporary consumers' new role. While it is well documented that consumers contribute to the social construction of reality as well as providing and obtaining cultural, symbolic, and affective benefits from this, they also produce economic value, which is rarely felt in their pockets.

We briefly summarize some of the market trends of this phenomenon and then review related literature streams. Thereafter, we provide theoretical elements that have not yet been considered in the field of consumption studies, but which are valuable for a better understanding of the economic and social determinants of consumers' active role in value creation. Keeping an operative definition of the working consumer concept in mind, we revisit a few empirical studies dealing with productive consumers.

This paper contributes to the debate on the productive consumer by de-emphasizing the sociocultural dimension in favour of the socioeconomic one. This dimension helps to answer questions such as: if consumers are producers, why are they not paid for their labour? If they are not paid, what could the consequences be?

## **Evolutionary aspects of consumption and the consumer–producer relationship**

According to sociological studies, the aestheticization of everyday life and, thus, the aestheticization of consumption are possibly the strongest characteristics of post-modern European societies (Featherstone, 1991). Post-modern individuals are on a never-ending identity quest; a quest to define the meaning of their lives. Consumers go to markets to produce their identity – specifically their self-images (Firat and Dholakia, 1998).

Consumers produce their identities despite a resistant/antagonist stance: they resist the market, may refuse to consume or, at other times, indicate refusal by consuming in a different way. Indeed, this resistance to traditional marketing practices explains consumers' willingness to participate in the market process, even if it is in critical and transformative ways.

However, this willingness to participate would be pointless without creative abilities. In effect, consumers' creative abilities have not only increased due to their growing 'professionalism', but the threshold to creativity has also been lowered by the spread of technologies that ordinary people can employ. While building a car still requires a complex set of competencies that only an organization can possess,



consumers can, conversely, easily manipulate other products and services, thanks to technology. Owing to the internet's specific features, it is an ideal platform for soliciting users' participation in product innovation.

According to the English Marketing Society, recent research has revealed a powerful backlash among consumers in sophisticated markets against the common approach of consumer marketing. What is emerging is a tribal brand culture, where the brands are selected by consumers based on attitude and in-depth, sometimes expert, knowledge about the authenticity of a product, and where these brands become the ultimate expression of self. The allure of these brands is about discovery – consumers express the sense that they 'made' the brand.

Consumers increasingly regard brands as shared cultural property rather than as privately owned intellectual property. Familiarity breeds ownership: brands 'belong to us' and not to the companies that own them.

Communities foster consumers' strength and ability. Consumer resistance to marketing reaches an extreme when consumers congregate around a brand or an activity. If resistance to marketing were the basis of the productive consumer trend, the community would acclaim this. By simply congregating and associating, the group that is formed indicates some hostility towards outsiders and the company.

The factors briefly discussed above converge towards what is termed Generation C, with the C mainly representing 'content' ([www.trendwatching.com](http://www.trendwatching.com)) or (digital) creation such as pictures, movies, blogs, and music. This digital creation is a mainstream trend, one that keeps giving, with millions of consumers uploading their creative endeavours online, and tens of millions of others enjoying the fruits of their creativity. In the online world, user-generated content has grown from a teenage hobby to an almost equal contender of established entities in news, media, entertainment, and craft. And yes, as predicted, Generation C is increasingly rewarded for its output. In fact, with some members of Generation C attracting mass audiences, real money can be made. With (particularly younger) consumers expecting to create anything they want as long as it is digital, and in order to facilitate their customization and personalization of many physical goods, the next frontier will be to digitally design products from scratch before turning them into physical goods. Moreover, observers expect make-it-yourself (MIY) and sell-it-yourself (SIY) ventures to become increasingly sophisticated in the near future ([www.trendwatching.com](http://www.trendwatching.com)).

Many marketing discourses undertaken over the last decade clearly indicate a shift in the relationship between consumers and producers. In the next section, we review the research streams that have addressed this phenomenon from different theoretical perspectives.

## **Theories on working consumers**

Several research streams consider the active role that consumers play in the market, although they often deal with very different aspects of actual consumption practices and are rooted in different theoretical backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> These research streams are:

- 1 consumption experience
- 2 co-production in the service encounter
- 3 consumer resistance
- 4 service-dominant logic of marketing
- 5 collaborative innovation
- 6 consumer empowerment
- 7 consumer agency
- 8 consumer tribes.

## Consumption experience

Research on consumption experiences describes a continuum of consuming experiences (Carù and Cova, 2007). At one extreme are those experiences that are mainly constructed by consumers and which may involve company-provided products or services. Here, consumers are usually responsible for giving real value (cultural, symbolic, and functional) to ordinary objects such as a piece of furniture like a sofa. In the middle range, we find experiences that have been co-developed by companies and consumers. Tourism, adventure packages, and entertainment are part of this approach. At the other extreme, we find experiences that companies have largely developed and in which consumers are immersed in a context that is frequently hyper-real. Sport and fashion brands have, for example, developed complex programmes in which the consumer is integrated as co-producer, user, target, etc. On the whole, consumption is considered an immersion in an experiential context (Firat and Dholakia, 1998).

While Pine and Gilmore (1999) use the notion of consumer involvement in the experience to deal with hyper-real, company-managed experiential consumption, other authors (Filsler, 2002; Ladwein, 2002) suggest that the notion of appropriation should be introduced. Acts of appropriation are the mark of a fundamental psychological system of action that, within the context of experience, transforms and personalizes it. This approach not only tells us that consumers provide competencies in an effort to become the main builders and co-creators of the consumption experience (Holt, 1995), but also that they engage imaginatively, creatively, and constructively with the world around them (Sherry Jr et al., 2007). In this view, as exemplified by the case of the pasta-cooking experience (Dalli and Romani, 2007), consumption is secondary to preparation or production, and immersion and transformation are privileged outcomes of a commercial experience (Arnould, 2007).

## Co-production in the service encounter

End users' role in the development of effective and satisfactory service encounters and experiences has been assessed in terms of personalization (Solomon et al., 1985; Surprenant and Soloman, 1987): the more the customer is involved in the process of service production and delivery, the greater the perceived value and



satisfaction. Further, personal and emotional interaction with salespeople has been proved to affect customer satisfaction in many settings (Bitner et al., 2000; Pugh, 2001; Auh et al., 2007; Ching-Jui et al., 2007; Jayawardhena et al., 2007). Consequently, when consumers are engaged in the 'production' of the service that they wish to purchase, the perceived value of that service increases. Among other explanations for this phenomenon, consumers who are co-opted into the production of (their) services feel involved and develop positive affective evaluations of both the service and the company and, hence, increase their loyalty, willingness to buy, etc.

Such an increase in the perception of service value has also been assessed in terms of customer–customer interactions. The more positive interactions there are between customers, the greater the perceived value of the service as expressed in terms of satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth, etc. (Moore et al., 2005; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). This implies that when consumers are involved in a service production at the collective level by improving the degree of customer-to-customer interaction, this enhances the customer–company collaboration effect. Such effects have been tested in the field of consumer as well as industrial and financial services.

In sum, customers' active role in the service encounter provides value for both them and the service provider. As evidenced by Manolis et al. (2001), such interaction can lead to consumer integration through participation. Consumers (as individuals and as a group of interacting subjects) become partial employees and employees become partial consumers.

## Consumer resistance

Research on consumer resistance has drawn attention to critical aspects of consumption, mass consumerism, and the resulting reactions from consumers (Penaloza and Price, 1993; Ozanne and Murray, 1995; Roux, 2007). Even in less committed forms of resistance, such as creative, nonconformist, post-modern consumption habits (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), consumers are able to develop diverse, new, and original ways of consuming. Consequently, they contribute to companies' marketing and product strategies (Holt, 2002). As subcultures emerge (e.g. in the field of music) they often aim at subverting extant tastes and cultural codes, but – given certain conditions – they are 'pulled' back into the market system as new segments (Heath and Potter, 2005). In this sense, resistant behaviours – even antagonist ones (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006) – can be regarded as 'constructive', as they give rise to new business opportunities and market value. From this perspective, consumer resistance can be considered an integral part of consumption (Fischer, 2001; Holt, 2002) and, more generally, of the market process. Resistant consumers keep their distance from mainstream goods, trends, and companies, serving as an evolutionary, transformative element, which turns into profits for companies investing in it.

Resistant consumers do not, however, necessarily need the support of companies to produce and obtain value on their own. They can recognize and counteract

manipulation, finding their own way towards satisfaction, often by eluding the market and its agents (Hemetsberger, 2006; Cova and Remy, 2007; Kozinets, 2007). In these cases, the product is no longer the company's property: it has been transformed and hijacked, as happened to the Pabst Blue Ribbon beer (Wipperfürth, 2005). Consumers have proved that they can develop their own tools and structures with which to interact with the market and can negotiate the distribution of economic benefits, if any.

### Service-dominant (SD) logic of marketing

According to Lusch and Vargo (2006a), SD logic moves marketing orientation from a 'market to' philosophy, in which customers are promoted, targeted, and captured, to a 'market with' philosophy, in which the customer and supply chain partners are collaborators in the entire marketing process. Lusch and Vargo (2006b) explain that value is generated by customers and suppliers who co-create solutions. In fact, by co-creating the function as well as the meaning of its experience, customers co-construct value for themselves: 'the customer is always a co-creator of value' (Lusch and Vargo, 2006b: 284). For Grönroos (2006a: 324) 'suppliers only create the resources or means to make it possible for customers to create value for themselves. In this sense at least, when suppliers and customers interact, they are engaged in co-creation of value'. SD logic also recognizes customers as resource integrators (as well as suppliers), which is consistent with the co-creation of value concept. 'In conclusion, suppliers do not deliver value to customers; they support customers' value creation in value-generating processes of these customers' (Grönroos, 2006b: 400).

### Collaborative innovation

The literature on the role of end users in the new product development process has specifically developed in the field of innovation management (von Hippel, 1986, 2005). Initially, the focus was on the role of lead users. These users are small groups of subjects whose collaboration companies from various sectors actively sought and exploited, as they are more active and creative, and act as opinion leaders in their respective communities (Franke et al., 2006). Later, a more general approach was developed in which scholars broadened the scope of the analysis towards communities of final users and consumers who collaborate with (often large) companies in developing new products (Franke and Shah, 2003; Sawhney et al., 2005; Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006; Prandelli et al., 2006; Fuller et al., 2007). Examples can be found in the field of consumer products (sport-related communities such as NikeTalk) and professional equipments (electronic music instruments such as the Propellerhead company website).

According to this perspective, consumers can act both as developers and marketers, contributing to the success of new products in terms of functional characteristics and market access, due to their role as opinion leaders and trendsetters.



## Consumer empowerment

Consumer empowerment is a fragmented and diversified research area in which three main explanations can be identified for the empowered role that today's consumers appear increasingly to play (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006: 963): consumers are empowered when they combine their resources and skills to make producers do what they would not otherwise do; from a cultural point of view, consumers are empowered when they can manipulate and even produce special spaces within the market in which they can construct their cultural (consumer) identity; in the discursive perspective, consumers obtain power when they can counteract companies and institutions' communication, thus influencing their credibility. Consumers complain, appropriate and transform, fight and negotiate. In all of these cases, consumers 'create' circumstances to which companies can/must respond. In this sense, an interaction occurs between the company and the customer, in which the latter participates in the marketing process, contributing to the generation of market value.

Empowered consumers exert some control over marketing variables (Wathieu et al., 2002). They can control some elements of the marketing mix and some aspects of the communication process in order to affect the way in which other consumers perceive products, brands, companies, and their meanings (Cova and Pace, 2006; Firat and Dholakia, 2006). In this sense, consumers are empowered when they obtain power vis-a-vis companies, when they can force companies to take actions that they would not otherwise take.

Empowered consumers are not necessarily critical. They strive for maximum enjoyment of the consumption process, and the better companies enable them to do so (empowering the consumers), the greater is their satisfaction (Wright et al., 2006). In this sense, consumers are considered empowered when they are given the means to consume more and better. Contrary to this view, consumer empowerment can be regarded as a process by which consumers increasingly become self-governing subjects (Shankar et al., 2006: 1024) who are responsible for the choices that affect their purchases and their consumption activities. In this perspective, consumers work for themselves; they create a dialectical space in which they challenge companies and institutions' authority. Nevertheless, in so doing, they often create market opportunities that market agents can exploit. Shankar et al. (2006: 1023 ff.) discuss the Apple case in terms of dialectical interaction between the company and the public: customers, fans, independent bloggers, and the like. In sum, when enabled by web tools and technologies, consumers are given the possibility to voice and represent themselves – even in a critical stance. Companies' reactions can be tough and severe, but a dialectical space opens up in which the two parties interact and adapt. Mutual adaptation can be regarded as a form of value creation, as critics and, for example, product flaws reports can be regarded as a base for further product and marketing developments.

## Consumer agency

Arnould (2005, 2007) suggests that consumers deploy narrative frames that re-imagine marketers' value propositions in terms of consumers' own life projects. Narrative reframing introduces active consumer agency to the firm-supplied resource by associating the consumer's self, life project, and goals with firm-provided resources. Consumer experience may therefore be regarded as the outcome of the value extraction processes in which consumers engage.

More specifically, consumers create experiences from commercial contexts and offers through several specific narrative devices, such as filling narrative gaps, re-contextualizing, and imagining. The notion of performance (Deighton, 1992) is thus central to this creation: 'the performance turns the consumer into a producer' (Kozinets et al., 2004: 671). Consequently, consumers are indeed no longer the end of the chain but the beginning (Firat and Dholakia, 1998). Furthermore, marketers' goals can play only a secondary role in respect of agentic persons' intentionality. The hoary notion that motivation is required to achieve psychological balance through need satisfaction is replaced with the proactive, goal-oriented notion of intention. Consequently, this provides space for creation and, indeed, transformation through commercial experience (Arnould, 2007).

In respect of African-style clothing, DeBerry-Spence (2007) recently analysed the irreducible role of the consumer in mediating between the context (e.g., different consumption settings) and the meta-level of meaning influences (ideologies, culture, sub-culture, relevant others, etc.) and thereafter assigning actual value to products in terms of 'contextual product meanings'. The consumer can therefore be regarded as a master of meaning at the micro level, the one that has the responsibility and the capabilities of 'producing' the value of the products he/she owns and uses.

## Consumer tribes

The tribal perspective of consumption holds that people like to gather together in tribes and that these social, proximate communities are more effective and influential regarding people's behaviour than either marketing institutions or other, formal cultural authorities (Cova and Cova, 2002). A consumer community or consumer tribe is a group of people who have a common interest in a specific activity or object and who create a parallel social universe (subculture) ripe with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary, and hierarchy. Consumer tribes develop we-intentions that are of a higher order with respect to the individual or the anomic masses. We-intentions are: '(1) mutual responsiveness among participants to the intentions and actions of others; (2) collective commitment to the joint activity; and (3) commitment to support others involved in the activity' (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006: 1101). We-intentions are therefore the willingness of the community as a whole.

Consumer tribes undertake actions based on their we-intentions. In these communities, consumers enact their passion for an object or a brand just as Star Trek





enthusiasts make and exchange their own Star Trek movies, using digital camcorders and laptop computers (Kozinets, 2007). The same production is to be found in communities of soccer or singer fanatics (Schau and Muniz, 2007). In all these manifestations, consumers are far from uncritical. Enthusiasts, fans, and devotees are engaged, critical, and actively involved in the creation of collective experiences. This leads to an extreme type of communal production: the production of counterculture in order to resist market forces (Goulding and Saren, 2007). However, inside communities, consumers can also work to solve problems related to their shared consumption experiences (Mathwick et al., 2008), or to defend themselves from stigmatization through re-empowerment (Henry and Caldwell, 2006).

Consumer tribes are increasingly capable of collective action and are prepared to interact with the market in an ever more entrepreneurial way. There are many hybridizations between markets and communities. On the one hand, the presence of tribes of impassioned, united, and expert fans of a cult brand, such as Ducati, has led to a re-balancing of power in company–consumer relations. As such, companies can lose part of their control over a brand, which is replaced by the power of a consumer tribe wishing to re-appropriate this brand. On the other hand, certain tribes, such as the Goth tribe, form their own markets and engage with one another in the production and consumption of goods and services. These market transactions are characterized by tribal affiliation and the reconnection of ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ – the very antithesis of globalized, corporatized, and socially distanced relationships that characterize many market relationships. Cova et al. (2007a) significantly claim that consumer tribes will become the new marketers of the 21st century – equal competitors of traditional marketers. These authors regard consumer tribes as the leading edge of a force that will totally obscure the production/consumption divide.

## **Consumers’ work**

Table 1 highlights each research stream’s contribution in terms of what consumers do when they (co-)produce, with whom and for what purposes. Given certain conditions, co-production can occur in collaboration with companies. Consequently, the table suggests what company purpose could be accomplished.

There are differences between these approaches and – more importantly – there are many conditions and context characteristics that affect consumers’ productive activity. However, these approaches and the empirical phenomena they address also have some important elements in common.

First of all, *consumers actually work*: whether or not they are aware of being ‘workers’, they do work. They contribute to the pleasure they feel when consuming in such a way that the value of that experience depends on their contribution. They collaborate with salesmen to customize the service they need. They interact critically with the market in order to transform it into something more valuable for them from an economic–functional as well as a cultural and ideological point of

Table 1

**Research streams on consumer productivity**

Research stream	What are consumers producing?	With whom?	For what consumer purpose?	For what company purpose?
Consumption experience	Their own consumption experience	Alone or with other consumers and company employees	Their immersion/ flow state	Increased consumer involvement, pleasure and loyalty
Co-production in the service encounter	The service	Alone and/or with company employees	Customization of product/service	Increased consumer satisfaction and cost reduction
Consumer resistance	The diversion of the experience or the offering	Alone or with other consumers	(Re-)appropriation of everyday life	New business opportunities
Service-dominant logic	Co-creation of market value	Alone	Providing market (operant) resources with subjective value	Efficiency, effectiveness, reduction of risks, and uncertainty
Collaborative innovation	New ideas, products, concepts, symbolic meaning	Alone or with other consumers and company employees	Recognition, functional benefits (new products, updates), reputation, and career building	Outsourcing of idea generation processes
Consumer empowerment	Negotiating their relation with the company	Alone or with other consumers and company employees	Gaining degrees of autonomy	Increased consumer satisfaction/pleasure
Consumer agency	Their narratives of consumption	Alone or with other consumers	Expressing performance through consumption	Meanings, symbols, and other cultural material for product development and communication
Consumer tribes	Alternative (communal) experiences and offerings	With other consumers	Social interaction and belongingness	Building linking value



view. They use the resources provided by companies to increase the exchange value of these resources. In sum, consumers undertake several activities that, directly or not, increase the market value of whatever companies offer on the market. Positive (co-creation), critical (resistance), tangible (product transformation), and intangible (appropriation) activities provide value to market offerings. Dujarier (2008), a specialist in the sociology of work, maintains that there are three criteria for assessing whether a human activity is work or not. The first is a sociological criterion: work is a social connection; the second is an economic criterion: work creates value for the company and the stakeholders; and the third is an ergonomic criterion: work is an organized activity which has an impact on the *milieu*. In this light, the consumer's production is work.

From the perspective of the working consumer concept, consumers perform various activities that can be labelled immaterial work. This construct derives from (post-)Marxist economics and will be discussed more in detail in a subsequent section.

Second, when producing value, *consumers interact with one another and (often) with company members*. Innovation comes from communities in which individuals work in collaboration with one another and contribute to the social and cultural capital of the community. In some cases, companies provide support, resources, and – given certain circumstances – direct reward. Consumers often aggregate in order to better deal with company power. Critical and political consumption movements are collective actions taken against corporate (mis)behaviours. The process of cultural value creation and consumer agency is based on social interaction and even companies sometimes participate in this process as partners. Consumer tribes can also be regarded as the core context in which the work of consumers gains a collective dimension. In fact, it is only by means of the community that it is possible to produce (and benefit from) linking value, which holds for both consumers and companies.

In these cases, consumers interact directly with one another or by means of enabling technologies. They collaborate with companies and their personnel by means of the same tools.

From the perspective of the working consumer concept, such an interaction can be labelled primary sociality in terms of post-Maussian socioeconomics (see below). Primary sociality is the network of those who are directly in touch with an individual (friends, relatives, neighbours, etc.), but it can be extended to the wider range of relationships that individuals – over time – develop to perform their daily activities.

Third, *consumers pursue personal purposes*, such as satisfaction, pleasure, commitment, social interaction, etc. According to certain post-modern analysis, the desire to be a brand collaborator of some kind may be consumers' response to feeling helpless, uncounted, and disconnected (Walker, 2008) – a part of their 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 2000). Others contend that 'the more the consumer works the more he/she identifies him/herself to his/her production' (Dujarier, 2008: 135) and that such co-creative experiences provide him/her with 'psychological benefits independently of the nature of goods or services created in the proc-

ess' (Etgar, 2008: 103). More specifically, 'the motivations behind individual acts of creativity can be highly idiosyncratic and varied' (Berthon et al., 2008: 9). Based on interviews they conducted with customers who generated ads and placed them online, Berthon et al. (2008) suggest that consumer creation tends to be driven by three main factors: intrinsic enjoyment when individuals create for the sake of creation – what happens to the creation and the effect of the creation are secondary; self promotion when individuals create with the specific goal of self-promotion – here, the creation is a means to an end such as a potential future career; and change perceptions when individuals create because they intend to have a specific effect on a target audience – the goal of the creation is to change hearts and minds, to influence people. *In general, consumers work in order to feel satisfied, gratified (on the personal level) and, sometimes, socially recognized.*

These purposes are not usually measured in strict economic terms, but they are definitely oriented towards an increase in the value of the resources on which consumers work, which are largely goods and services. Consumers work regardless of the relationship with the company that is going to sell these goods and services to them; they work because their very nature (and their role in the market process) is that of producing the value.

Fourth, *companies often participate in the performance of these activities.* Sometimes, they are forced to when consumers (critically) ask for it, while other times they have to in order to increase their competitiveness. Sometimes they can choose not to participate, in which case they reject the value produced by consumers. In the vast majority of cases, companies interact and coordinate with, as well as support, working consumers, thus capturing the market value.<sup>2</sup>

The last point is, from a critical perspective, the very reason for this research: *acknowledging the asymmetry between the degree of value that working consumers bestow on companies and the rare practice of returning at least part of the market value that these consumers have produced.* Extant literature has emphasized the importance of the individual and social rewards that consumers seek when they become involved in co-production. They usually also obtain them: personal gratification, higher satisfaction from their purchases, social recognition, etc.

We believe that this vision reveals an over-socialized view of consumption, which is very important in descriptive and analytic terms. But, simultaneously, this view supports an under-economized view of consumption. We do not want 'economic' theories to be a substitute for cultural theories of consumption. Consequently, we take a critical stance toward optimistic interpretations of consumer production if they do not consider the disparity in the distribution of profits arising from consumers' work. Given consumers' productive role, and given that they contribute to companies' profits through the value of their co-production, why do they not receive any 'economic' reward for their labour? If consumers are 'producers', why are the economic benefits of their production still in the hands of 'producing' companies? If consumers produce goods and services, why do they have to purchase them?

From the point of view of the above-mentioned eight research streams, and in the light of the working consumer concept that will be introduced, productive



consumers increase the value of goods and services, and companies capture this value on the market, but almost none of this is returned to consumers. Furthermore, the more consumers are involved in co-production and design, the more they are willing to pay for the products, as Franke and Piller (2004) demonstrated with the watch toolkit case. In this sense, there is a 'double exploitation of working consumers' (Cova and Dalli, 2007), which was further developed by Zwick et al. (2008):

- First, consumers are not generally paid for the know-how, enthusiasm and social cooperation that they contribute to marketable commodities' manufacturing process.
- Second, customers typically pay what the marketing profession calls a 'price premium' for the fruits of their labour, as the use value provided by co-created commodities is said to be higher than that which can be achieved through standardized production's rationalized systems.

In this respect, we do not want to adopt the universal position that the consumer is or feels to be doubly exploited by companies in all co-creation situations. However, a re-investigation of some of the consumer interviews in certain situations of co-creation, such as the posting of narratives and pictures on the Nutella website (Cova and Pace, 2006) and producing rules and tournaments for the war game Warhammer (Cova et al., 2007b), reveals a kind of double movement. During a first phase, the productive consumer enjoys co-creating and is generally (very) pleased to see his/her production being recognized by the company and other consumers. Then, he/she perfectly sticks to the idyllic model of the contribution revolution inside which 'payment can destroy participation by undermining a sense of collaboration and trust' (Cook, 2008: 68). However, during a second phase, often after a critical incident or a crisis between the consumer and the company which has eroded the sense of trust, he/she states explicitly that the relation is unbalanced. The productive consumer no longer feels recognized, but exploited by the company. Sometimes he/she may feel 'doubly exploited', as in the Warhammer case. The consumers synthesized their general criticism of Games Workshop (the company that owns Warhammer), whose strategy was to blur the boundaries between its consumers and employees while at the same time increasing its prices, accusing it of price gouging by, for example maintaining that Games Workshop's initials (GW) are an abbreviation of 'Gros Woleur' (*gros voleur*, French for 'great thief').

In sum, even if the initial motivation comprises a struggle for recognition, intrinsic enjoyment, self promotion, change perception, and others, there seems to be a mechanism at work that under critical circumstances incites the emergence of a feeling of being doubly exploited. This could happen, for example between a teacher and his/her students when the teacher organizes a very interactive learning process and students are asked to invest in the co-creation of the course contents. The outcome could be a harmonious and far more positive experience than a conventional teaching process, but if problems were to arise (insufficient marks, lack of enjoyment, etc.) or there is a clash due to a struggle for recognition, the students could describe the co-creation as double exploitation: 'We do all the work, while the teacher is not only being paid, but also receives all the praise.'

In order to better understand the complexity of consumers' productivity and double exploitation, the following questions need to be answered:

1. Who is actually responsible for value creation?
2. How is value created, communicated, and transferred to the market?
3. What role do consumption communities play in this process?

In order to answer these questions and develop a working consumer concept, a body of theory from post-Marxist economics and post-Maussian socioeconomics needs to be examined. Post-Marxist economics is important because it addresses and explains immaterial labour's theoretical role and the process through which use value turns into exchange value. Post-Maussian socioeconomics need to be consulted to distinguish between the different social interaction levels (primary, secondary), each of which has different properties in terms of the nature of the exchanges between individuals, groups, and economic agents.

## The working consumer concept

### Immaterial labour and the role of the consumer in the value creation process

As clarified by the literature review, many authors support the idea that consumers 'produce', giving actual value to the goods and services that they consume (Firat and Dholakia, 2006: 138). Consumers contribute to the creation of goods and services by not only reacting, sometimes critically, to companies' modes of providing, but – more fundamentally – by constructing their consumption objects, both physically and culturally (Keat et al., 1994). Consumers develop the primary components of a consumption culture (knowledge, meanings, and affect) and contribute to its development, regardless of the market.

This point is clarified from the perspective of a post-Marxist elaboration of Marx's thoughts, with particular reference to the immaterial labour concept (Lazzarato, 1997).<sup>3</sup> This concept derives directly from Marx's notion of 'living labour' and refers to the idea that individuals are primarily workers, but not only in the sense that they work for someone else. They work in the sense that they actually build the substance and meaning of their daily lives (Marx's notion of general intellect), regardless of their status as employees, self-employed persons, unemployed ones, etc. According to this perspective, the most intimate and essential dimension of human beings is that of their work – in the sense of producing some sort of value for themselves and society. The immaterial labour construct gives us the opportunity to find theoretical and philosophical roots with which to explain the production of value at the individual and communal level of consumption.

In its elementary form, immaterial labour is the activity by which a growing number of contemporary workers contribute to the development of post-Fordist industry. In the field of service, culture/entertainment, software and other digital industries, for example workers do not perform traditional transformations, although they do add value to goods and services in two main forms of immaterial labour (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108):



- The first form is primarily cultural (intellectual or linguistic), such as problem solving, symbolic and analytic tasks, and linguistic expressions. Through these tasks, workers produce ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, etc.
- The second form is affective and is related to both mental and body elements. It is therefore possible to produce or manipulate feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion through affective labour. This can be done directly through personal interactions, or indirectly through mass communication.

Currently, immaterial labour is considered a developmental dimension of employees' traditional labour. However, immaterial labour is not only a fundamental activity of employees, but of any social subject, even – and perhaps most importantly – of consumers (see Cova and Dalli, 2007, for details). Immaterial labour encompasses cultural and affective elements that ordinary people employ – both within and outside the capitalist organization of labour – to produce socio-economic added value that will be distributed throughout society as consumption goods and services.

Consumers work immaterially even if they do not want to (or know that they) do it, as such immaterial work occurs through antagonist movements, critical consumption activists, etc. In one way or another, consumers' activity will produce cultural and affective effects that will give companies the opportunity to sell these effects on the market, or to sell new products and services to other consumers. It is in this sense that we interpret some of the points made by Peñaloza and Venkatesh (2006): the social construction of the market starts with the immaterial labour realized by working consumers.

Many cases analysed from the consumer culture theory perspective can also be regarded from this perspective. A case in point is the one described by Kozinets et al. (2004) in which consumers 'act' and actually produce the show in which they participate (and for which they purchase an entrance ticket). DeBerry-Spence (2007) describes the process of constructing product meanings and, in different settings, assigning these to clothes. Further, Berthon et al. (2008) focus on the role of consumers in 'producing' the content of corporate communication.

If we examine the role of the consumer from the immaterial labour perspective, it is evident that the result of immaterial labour logically precedes capital and the market. As we have seen, the essence of labour, whether employed or not, individual or collective, is the immaterial production of culture and affect. Two recent articles seem to address the same point: Berthon et al. (2008) and Grönroos (2008) have collected empirical and theoretical evidence that supports the need for both researchers and professionals to shift their attention from consumers as customers to consumers as producers, as initiators of the process of market value creation. 'When accepting value-in-use as a foundational value creation concept customers are the value creators. [...] the supplier can become a co-creator of value with its customers' (Grönroos, 2008: 298).

Workers (and consumers) work *immaterially* and produce *immaterial* products



as a precondition that does not imply any interaction with the organization of production. This means that until the consumer produces, there is no interaction, nor conflict with capital(ists). Conflicts arise the moment the results of immaterial labour are appropriated; that is, when the products and services are sold on the market and the profits captured.

In these terms, consumption and resistance to (or through) consumption can be regarded as forms of immaterial labour. Consequently, both active and self-conscious consumers who are either engaged in projects of (reflexive) resistance, or who are less involved, less aware subjects who contribute to the post-modernization of the market in a more creative way, can be regarded as working consumers who produce immaterial value. In this sense, the distinction between resisting and creating, criticizing and deviating, resisting consumption, and resisting through consumption can be regarded in a different light (Goulding and Saren, 2007).

At this point it is possible to answer the first question: it is the (working) consumer who is responsible for market value creation.

### Primary vs secondary sociality and the distribution of value

The connection between the post-Maussian socioeconomy of gift giving and the consumer's productive role is clear (Godbout and Caillé, 1992). Using the classic essay by Marcel Mauss (1923–24) as a starting point, the MAUSS group advances the idea that the obligation to give is the fundamental rule of primary sociality, i.e. of the face-to-face and interpersonal relationships developed within the family, neighbourhood, or in friendships. In short, the obligation to give is crucial in all those types of relations in which people's personalities are more important than their functions. Conversely, the sphere of secondary sociality is the domain of impersonal relationships, the sociality of the market or state in which the efficiency of persons is more important than their personality (Caillé, 2000).

At the primary sociality level, individuals give what they produce, for example services, help, and hospitality (Godbout, 2000), which, according to some evaluations, represent more than a nation's GDP (Insel, 1993). This production at the primary level is not visible and, consequently, economists do not take it into account in their analyses, as they only consider what is produced by producers and exchanged with customers at the secondary level of sociality (Godbout, 2007). However, that which circulates between people through gift exchanges at the primary level (Godbout, 2007) is not a relic of the past (barter), but a building-block of future socioeconomy.

Immaterial labour produces value that is exchanged between consumers at the primary level of sociality. Most of the value created in such a way remains at this primary level and does not turn into an economic outcome. Consumers nevertheless benefit from the symbolic meaning, knowledge, and emotion exchanges that occur inside consumption communities.

However, in some cases, customer-to-company interactions could shift value from the primary to the secondary sociality without an economic exchange occurring. In such cases, symbolic meaning, knowledge, and emotions are transferred





from one level to another. At this level, companies appropriate value from consumers. When companies sell products and services on the market, they obtain the price and actual exploitation occurs.

The answer to the second question is: consumers, communities and economic agents (companies) interact to transfer value to the market. The actual moment in which the transfer is completed lies in the transfer of value from the primary to the secondary sociality.

### The role of consumption communities

A detailed explanation of communities' role in the process of value creation and exchange can be given by returning to examples taken from extant literature and regarding them from the perspective of post-Marxian and post-Maussian approaches. The MyNutella case can be regarded as a company's appropriation of consumer-generated value, while the vintage car market demonstrates communities' role in protecting this value.

Once again, the 'my Nutella the Community' case, which was presented as a consumer empowerment case (Cova and Pace, 2006), is applicable. On rereading it with our new lens, we realize that Ferrero's website, envisaged as 'a complete reversal of the usual brand-consumer relations' is nothing of the kind. Moreover, it appears to be a perfect example of the double exploitation of working consumers. We mentioned that 'with its "my Nutella the Community" site, the brand is taking a step backwards, i.e. leaving the spotlight to consumers who can thereby become the real protagonists and architects of said relationship' and that 'consumers are enabled by Ferrero to (re)shape the meaning of the brand they love' (Cova and Pace, 2006). Indeed, the texts and photos found on 'my Nutella the Community' website show passionate consumers ('nutellari') attributing relatively specific meanings to Nutella and to their experiences with this brand through their real productivity. This is typical of what passionate users acting like working consumers produce and exchange at the primary level of sociality.

However, by displaying these photos and texts on the Nutella website, Ferrero allows this production to enter a secondary level: it increases Nutella's linking value. At this secondary level, the company re-appropriates this production for its branding strategy by stipulating that the site may not be reproduced, whether partially or in full, as it is copyright protected. Consequently, Ferrero becomes the owner of all the material that fans produce on their pages and thus doubly exploits the 'nutellari'.

The laFraise case ([www.lafraise.com](http://www.lafraise.com)), based on Europe's largest t-shirt design competition, which was acquired by SpreadShirt in 2006, is an exemplary counterpoint to the Nutella case. The competition is organized as follows: two to four t-shirt designs are selected by popular vote and a juried panel from the nearly 1000 designs that working consumers submit weekly. The selected designs are subsequently printed in limited editions of 500 shirts and the winning designers receive €1000. Furthermore, laFraise respects working consumers' labour: the creators retain the copyright to each design! Contrary to the Ferrero case, everything is

done to maintain the continuity between the primary and secondary sociality, to avoid the traditional producer/consumer divide and the double exploitation of working consumers.

The vintage cars case (Leigh et al., 2006) is another promising context to describe the implications of the working consumer concept and its related constructs. Vintage cars were once ordinary cars; that is, ordinary products realized by ordinary automotive companies. At a certain point in time, they were considered obsolete and removed from the market. They were 'old' cars and had virtually no value other than for marginal activities such as spare parts retrieval, recycling, etc. At this stage, these objects lost all value at the secondary level of sociality (market) and were consequently eliminated.

After some time, and given special conditions, old cars eventually become vintage cars. Individual consumers' 'immaterial labour' restores these objects' cultural and affective value. In this case, cultural value comprises the competence, knowledge, and technical skills that are required to restore such a car. The affective value is therefore related to the degree of passionate effort that individual consumers employ when working on their cars, to the intensity of their emotional attachment to these cars, and to the importance allocated to the product in the owner's relationship with other people, whether they are interested in the vintage car culture or not.<sup>4</sup>

In order to accomplish the task of restoration, it is often necessary to rely on other subjects that are competent, specialized, and committed to the 'cause'. These subjects interact with one another, forming networks of immediate personal ties. The product has been retrieved from the secondary sociality – from virtual no significance (eliminated) – to the primary level of sociality. It is at this level that the value of the object is recovered and even increased beyond its original value due to individual consumers' immaterial labour (as individuals and in cooperation with one another).

In this process, the community plays a very important role as both the repository of cultural and affective resources and as the collective subject that develops and maintains the rules that have to be followed in the restoring process. The community thus acts as a type of brand curator. This process is not only a technical one related to the material restoring of the car, but the subject also has to perform other ritual and symbolic activities in order to become a member of the community and, hence, obtain access to communal resources (Leigh et al., 2006).

At the end of the process, the individual and the community have restored value (and soul) to the product. The vintage car, once properly restored, is assigned a price. The vintage car market is, however, almost like a second-hand market – there are no companies and/or intermediaries, with the exception of a few small ones. The market is strictly linked to the community, which influences, secures, and legitimates prices by means of a number of tools (journals, forums, meetings, competitions, exhibitions, etc.). There are also small companies that enter the market to assist and support (and even profit from) vintage car owners in the restoring process. However, they do not usually have the power to affect the market process, perhaps because passionate members of this community usually run these



companies. Consequently, through the community, the product is returned to secondary sociality (market) that differs significantly from the original one (the mass market for automobiles) due to social, cultural, and affective norms administered at the community level.

In this case, owing to the community's role in supporting the vintage car market, it is possible for working consumers to protect and actually obtain the value that they produce. They are therefore not exploited.

## Conclusions

In sum, questions introduced in this paper can be answered as follows:

1. Who is actually responsible for value creation?
  - We consider working consumers as the primary source of value and, hence, responsible for value creation.
  - They are not partners, do not co-produce, but perform immaterial work. The result of their work (culture and affect) is a gift to other consumers and, ultimately, to the market.
  - Consumers produce independently of the producer's objectives and strategy. Essentially, immaterial labour is a type of primitive or elementary activity that is not the object of any kind of cultural engineering.
2. How is value created, communicated, and transferred to the market?
  - (Immaterial) value is communicated/transferred between consumers through primary links. Where consumers and companies collaborate, interaction is of a primary nature. At this level, there is no need for monetary exchanges.
  - Even if consumers were to be regarded as producers, they are not usually able to exploit the tangible benefits obtained from their labour.
  - Furthermore, despite the value that they transfer to a product, consumers are willing to pay for it and, in given circumstances, to pay more for the product's personalization (double exploitation).
3. What role do consumption communities play in this process?
  - There are instances when communities of consumers become the repository of value. They protect, control, and even re-distribute tangible benefits, acting at the secondary sociality level.
  - In this sense, communities can perform different roles (protection, security, entrepreneurship, etc.) and prevent consumers from being exploited when transferring the value they have produced from the primary to the secondary level of sociality.

We thus propose the working consumer concept to describe the phenomenon of consumers who, by the means of immaterial labour, add cultural and affective elements to market offerings. Working consumers' contribution increases the market value of these offerings, even if they generally work outside the control of producers. They work individually, but they often interact with other consumers (as individuals and communities) and even with companies' employees. They

engage in immaterial labour activities in order to pursue personal objectives: self-gratification, social recognition, etc. They are generally exploited by market forces unless they succeed in developing protection rules and systems, usually realized through various forms of consumption communities.

Our proposed working consumer concept, with which the productive dimension of today's consumers can be understood, encapsulates the approaches reviewed above with a critical stance. Where, in typical post-modern fashion, the reviewed approaches emphasize the blurring of the boundaries between consumers and producers, in a post-Marxist fashion, the working consumer concept emphasizes that the divide between consumers and producers remains unchanged and, contrary to post-modern visions, could even widen.

This concept challenges all 'angelic' developments, such as the SD logic, which try to create/construct a vision of an idyllic marketscape with consumers and producers living in harmony. The critical stance adopted here is a way to compensate for the extreme optimism of many approaches that regard consumers' production as the ultimate act of liberation (Firat and Dholakia, 2006).

In order to be critical, this paper has emphasized the negative side of consumer production and collaboration; that is, double exploitation. However there is no general law determining when double exploitation occurs. It is likely to occur under specific circumstances, when symbolic and social rewards are no longer sufficient to justify consumers' commitment.

Further research is necessary to investigate how and when double exploitation is most likely to occur. If, as emphasized by many authors, consumers become more critical, empowered, resistant, etc., they will be more ready to feel exploited. Exploitation is not a fact, but a feeling. The very concept of exploitation and double exploitation is a social construct introduced to the social system by post-Marxist writers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who make it happen.

Nevertheless, if the feeling of being (doubly) exploited were to spread among consumers, companies would have to consider how they could avoid this occurring. If companies believe in collaborative marketing and related practices, they should consider the negative side effects (feeling of exploitation) of inappropriate 'market with' approaches.

This is even more relevant if we consider that companies are no longer alone in the market. Companies have to interact and, sometimes, compete with powerful communities of consumers who avoid companies' exploitation by protecting the value produced by their members and, in some cases, market it directly.

## Notes

- 1 The list is not exhaustive, however. We do not, for instance, take into account the IMP Group's developments (Hakansson, 1982; Ford, 1990) regarding interaction between customers and suppliers in the B-to-B realm, nor the consumer creativity literature (Hirschman, 1980, 1983). Moreover, many approaches to consumer behaviour and culture show some form of consideration for consumers' active roles in value creation and it is not possible to accurately review all of them.



- 2 There are cases where companies share their profits with those who collaborated with them to generate market value, but this is very rare. In certain cases, as in the Open Source movement, individuals are rewarded from a professional point of view (better career opportunities), but this is heavily dependent on the role played by the community to which they belong. As will be clarified in the following discussion, communities may support working consumers to create and, more importantly, capture market value.
- 3 Adam Arvidsson (2005, 2006a, 2006b) has employed this literature in the field of consumption studies for a critical appraisal of marketing and, within it, of branding.
- 4 In this case, even material labour is important, as the community of vintage cars fans expects the owner to be the one who actually restores and, thus, drives the car (Leigh et al., 2006).

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