



Desire, Choice, Freedom and Power:
An Analysis of Consumer Agency
in an Experience Economy Framework

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Abstract

This thesis examines the question of consumer agency and explores central facets of the dynamic and complex interactions and relations between marketers and consumers in the contemporary marketplace. More specifically, the thesis sets out to examine the extent to which consumers are considered active agents in seminal marketing texts and current marketing communications in relation to notions of consumer empowerment and governmentality and look into how aspects of consumer agency relate to predominant experience economy theory.

Answers are sought through three analytical steps: First, an analysis of Philip Kotler's classic textbook *Marketing Management*; second, an examination of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's influential work *The Experience Economy*; and third, an analysis of the online communications efforts of the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company. The thesis assumes a social constructionist stance and employs a qualitative research approach based upon a critical discourse analytical framework. The study adopts the concept of *governmentality* as a theoretical lens; developed by the social theorist Michel Foucault, this concept is based upon conceptions of power and government as closely related to discursive and social practices. Government in this sense entails attempts at 'the conduct of conduct', at shaping aspects of human behavior for particular ends by working through the capacities and desires of individuals and collectives. The theory of *the experience economy* is another central conceptual model, introduced to describe current marketing trends directed by a focus on experiences as a distinct source of value, and so is *the co-creation paradigm*, an approach to marketing focused on the role played by active, empowered consumers in addition to that of marketers today.

The analysis shows that Kotler's marketing text has moved from a treatment of consumers as primarily passive, predictable targets to increasingly active agents. While this indicates that the rules of marketing are changing, Kotler's approach remains distinctly company-centric. Pine and Gilmore's theoretical model focuses on the 'staging' of experiences and the marketer as experience stager and value provider, which presents the agency of the consumer as a matter of secondary importance. Active consumer engagement, in contrast, appears as a primary concern in the analysis of Starbucks and Disney's communications where consumers figure as involved participants, able and enabled to choose, customize, and create a valuable offering and experience. The analysis also illustrates that on the one hand, the consumer is constituted as a free, self-directed actor, empowered by the mechanism of choice

and interactive technologies; on the other, it is illustrated how marketers may seek to shape consumer agency by subtly directing acts of consumption.

The conceptual framework of the thesis both enables and suggests an interpretation of consumers as active agents, at once free and governed, influencers and influenced, and the study concludes with a number of central insights. A conception of power as dynamic and relational is proposed. The traditional opposition between freedom and power is challenged, and an uncritical equation of choice with consumer empowerment is questioned. Following on from this, it is suggested that consumer empowerment be conceptualized as generated through the interplay between consumers and marketers. As to the question of consumer agency and the creation of experiences, the study points to distinct differences in focus between theoretical and practical approaches; the former is characterized by an explicit focus on the experience-directing marketer and the latter by a concern with the active involvement of the experience-seeking consumer. The co-creation paradigm is proposed as a potential means of bridging this divide, of integrating interaction as a central aspect and incorporating the perspectives of both marketer and consumer.

Finally, avenues for further research are suggested. Drawing upon the governmentality literature as a theoretical framework and taking consumer movements and blogs as empirical starting points, research could consider the issue of consumer resistance as a relevant contribution to studies on marketing and governmentality, just as it would be useful to supplement the textually-oriented analysis of the present study with further investigations into the creation and consumption of commercial experiences.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Field of interest

“It has been widely argued that the new consumer is active, knowledgeable, demanding, channel-hopping, and, above all, experience-seeking” (Stuart-Menteth, Wilson & Baker 2006, 415). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it, furthermore, appears to be a commonplace assumption that we are currently “in the midst of a shift in power” from marketers to consumers (Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford 2006, 1013). Such assumptions imply that a view of consumers as passive recipients of corporate messages, consumer products, and marketed services is being altered and superseded by a conception of consumers as active participants, interpreters, and communicators. Hence the “smartest marketers today bow to the empowered, entrepreneurial, and free consumer who ... now rules the digital, globally networked marketplaces in search of open-ended value propositions” (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008, 184).

The wider contextual framework of the present study is thus characterized by “a shifting macro-marketing environment, one that has moved from being production-driven to consumption-led” (Stuart-Menteth et al. 2006, 415). Consumption is a key contemporary theme (Hodgson 2002, 318), and the consumer has been the focus of discussions in a diverse range of realms in recent years, as a significant social agent debated by sociologists, politicians, corporate managers, marketing executives, policymakers, economists, and environmentalists. By the same token, the concept of the consumer has come to assume center-stage in academic debates and scholarly research (Gabriel & Lang 2006, 1).

On the one hand, it is argued that a “specter is haunting contemporary marketers – the specter of the ‘Free Consumer’” (Zwick et al. 2008, 164). The idea of the consumer as an autonomous actor on the contemporary stage of consumption is epitomized in notions of *consumer empowerment* (Denegri-Knott, Zwick & Schroeder 2006; Shankar et al. 2006; Hodgson 2001), *consumer sovereignty* (Hodgson 2002; Holt 2000), and *the New Consumer* (Baker 2003), spurred by trends such as unprecedented levels of competition among businesses and marketers, rising consumer expectations and altered consumption patterns, and major advances in information and communication technologies. Consumers are increasingly regarded as active, empowered, informed, and connected (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 6) – “stepping out from their traditional passive audience roles to become co-creators and consumers of value”, in essence active players (Stuart-Menteth et al. 2006, 419).

Other scholars challenge the ideas and assumptions presented thus far and voice more critical views as regards consumer empowerment and the meaning of marketing and “its never-ending presence in our (post)modern environment” (Skålen, Fougère & Felleson 2008, 3). One approach to assessing critically issues of consumer agency and the social influence of marketing is informed by the thinking of the French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault, specifically his concept of *governmentality*. Defined by Foucault as the study of “the conduct of conduct” (1983), this perspective integrates aspects of power, agency, and government, wherein the latter should be dissociated from the institution of the state. Rather, government in this sense relates to the ways in which the conduct of individuals and collectives might be directed (Foucault 1983, 221). It entails attempts at the shaping of conduct, aspects of behavior, or possible fields of action – through discourse and practices which seek to simultaneously mold and work through the desires, choices, wants, and lifestyles of individuals (Dean 2010, 20).

The critical position generally considers marketing a powerful economic, social, and cultural institution, partially designed to influence, manage, or control consumers, thereby also influencing the exercise of consumer agency and freedom (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 951). Marketing discourse and practices have been found to actively constitute and modify consumer needs, wants, and lifestyles (Knights & Sturdy 1997), construct and project particular images of the consumer (Hodgson 2002), shape the agency of consumers and the space within which consumer choice is to be exercised (Arvidsson 2005), and aim at generating particular forms of life centered on consumption (Cova & Cova 2012). So, despite popular accounts of the active and free consumer, this camp of critically inclined scholars argue that marketers continue to strive for control over consumption practices and persistently redefine strategic actions towards this particular end (Zwick et al. 2008, 176-177).

At the same time, intangible, experiential dimensions of consumption have become an issue of increasing interest among academics and practitioners during the past decades. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore’s theory of *the experience economy*, first introduced in the late nineties, appears as one of the most evident manifestations thereof. In response to trends such as the ones outlined above, these scholars argue that “We’re now demassified, informationalized, digitized, and, yes, even mass customized ... Every business competing for the future is customer-centric, customer-driven, customer-focused, customer-yadda-yadda-yadda. So what’s new?” (1999, ix). Their reply to the rhetorical question posed is prompt: *Experiences* are. “From now on, leading-edge companies ... will find that the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences” (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 97-98). Recognition

of experiences as a distinct economic offering is thus key to success in an increasingly competitive marketplace, the argument goes.

Others also point to the emergence of experience as an increasingly important source of value, but focus on the aspect of *co-creation* and the central role played by consumers today in developing a marketing framework to account for and respond to changing consumer demands and market conditions. Rather than seeing value as created solely by the company and delivered to consumers, scholars C. K Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy suggest that consumers increasingly engage in the definition and creation of value, a viewpoint which challenges the conventional company-centric approach to marketing (2004b, 10).

1.2 Research focus

1.2.1 Research question

Inspired by the apparent paradox of the empowered consumer and the trends within the corporate arena and contemporary society introduced above, this thesis proposes to examine aspects of and unite currents of thought relating to consumer agency, marketing discourse and practice, and the experience economy. In more specific terms, it sets out to answer the following research question:

To what extent are consumers considered active agents in seminal marketing texts and current marketing communications in relation to notions of consumer empowerment and governmentality, and how do aspects of consumer agency relate to predominant experience economy theory?

The analysis takes its empirical point of departure in influential marketing literature and the marketing communications of the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company. In order to study the topic of interest in depth and provide a comprehensive answer to the question posed above, the analysis is guided by the following sub-questions:

- *Which basic assumptions seem to underlie representations of consumers and marketers in seminal marketing textbooks?*
- *Which basic assumptions seem to underlie representations of consumers and marketers in Pine and Gilmore's theory of the experience economy?*
- *How do the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company construe consumers in the communication with these?*

The study is based upon an in-depth analysis within a hitherto relatively unexplored framework. Dependent upon the findings, the study may contribute to generating a more developed and nuanced understanding of consumer empowerment, or at least offer useful theoretical directions for doing so. Integrating the governmentality perspective with its alternative view of power relations with current research on a topical issue can help to assess the potential contribution of this theoretical perspective as a conceptual lens to be applied in social research. Incorporating experience economy thinking into the present context helps to raise the issue of consumer agency in relation to marketing theory and practice in this particular area, apparently a neglected matter (Snel 2011; Boswijk, Thijssen & Peelen 2007). Altogether, the study should generate valuable insights into the central areas of marketing theory and practice outlined above, which could open new perspectives in marketing and consumer research, thereby encouraging further research in the areas examined and proposing specific focus areas and routes for this to take.

1.2.2 Delimitation

The present study thus takes the form of a conceptual and empirical exploration, and the choices made as to empirical starting points and illustrative cases are accounted for in what follows. In the first part of the analysis, I am interested in examining seminal marketing literature for which reason I wish to direct my attention to “particularly influential sites” within the field (Hackley 2003, 1330). A certain “centre of influence” has been discerned in the realm of marketing discourse (ibid.), and the work of one scholar in particular may serve the present purpose: that of American Professor Philip Kotler. Kotler is “arguably *the* foremost figure” within the field (Brown 2002, 130), “author of the world’s top-selling marketing textbooks”, and identified as the greatest of the many eminent thinkers who “have bestrode the scholarly stage” of the academic discipline of marketing (ibid. 129). Defined as nothing less than “the world’s leading authority on marketing” (Carol 1998 in Brown 2002, 129) and a “contemporary marketing icon” (Zwick et al. 2008, 170), Kotler is widely acknowledged as the scholar who gathered the normative ideas emerging in marketing and management writing in the 1950s and 1960s and crafted them into “the (still) quintessential marketing management text” (Hackley 2003, 1330). His influence throughout the field remains unmatched, it is argued, and the first analytical section is, therefore, based upon the central work of this “leading guru” (ibid. 1336).

The second part examines the work of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore. While others have drawn attention to the significance of intangible aspects of marketing and consumption, these scholars took

their theory concerning the importance of experiences a step further and introduced and popularized the concept of the experience economy. Pine and Gilmore are widely regarded as the pioneers, possibly even the founding fathers, of experience economy theorizing (Boswijk, Peelen & Olthof 2012; Poulsson & Kale 2004), and their work, therefore, appears to constitute a valuable point of departure for an analytical examination of the predominant theory within this area of marketing.

As the third step, the study looks into the practical approaches of the two corporations Starbucks and Disney. Pine and Gilmore introduce the coffee bean as an illustrative example of their theory of the experience economy in general and the progression of economic value in particular (1999, 1). While this example will be explained in depth in Section 3, here, it can be mentioned that the basic idea is that an “item as mundane as coffee has been turned into an experience by the likes of Starbucks”, so that today, the act of consuming coffee comes to entail much more than beans and brewing (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 269-270). In that sense, the Starbucks Corporation can be taken to embody the experience economy concept. Pine and Gilmore, furthermore, trace the beginnings of the “experience expansion to one man and the company he founded: Walt Disney” (1999, 2), and they accordingly refer to the Walt Disney Company as the “experience-economy pioneer” and the “premier company of the experience economy” (1998, 99-100). The cases chosen should help to integrate the different currents of thought and theory which inspire and underlie the study, relating to marketing, consumer agency, and the experience economy. Finally, pragmatic reasons play in. Starbucks and Disney are both global American corporations, which means that all texts and materials are readily available in English, the language of the study program which this thesis concludes and the language in which the thesis is written.

1.3 Structure of thesis

The thesis is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodological considerations underlying the study, while Section 3 establishes the conceptual framework of the thesis. Section 4 analyzes academic marketing discourse as articulated by Kotler in his central marketing text; Section 5 considers Pine and Gilmore’s interpretation of current marketing trends in their theory of the experience economy; and Section 6 examines the marketing communications and approaches of Starbucks and Disney. Section 7, then, discusses and reflects upon the findings of the analyses in relation to the concepts and models drawn upon throughout, as defined by the research question guiding the study, and Section 8 gathers the threads, concludes on the overall findings of the study, and proposes potential avenues for further research.

2. Methodology

Section 2 outlines the methodological considerations underlying the thesis, that is, the philosophy of science, research approach and design, and the data set of the present study. In so doing, it deals with the basic tenets of social constructionism, qualitative research methodology, and the main principles of Critical Discourse Analysis and presents the data which form the empirical basis of the study.

2.1 Philosophy of science

The thesis assumes a *social constructionist* position. Within social constructionism, the social world is perceived to be socially constructed.¹ Social phenomena, entities, and categories and their meanings are regarded as “social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors” (Bryman 2012, 32). The constructionist perspective thus acknowledges the active role and involvement of individuals in the social construction of social reality (ibid. 34).² Accordingly, a view of language use as a form of social action and an emphasis on social practices and interactions between individuals in society are central defining features of social constructionism (Burr 2003, 16).

It could be argued that questions of *relativism* are inherent in constructionist premises (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002, 176), for which reason one issue which may be raised relates to the *realism* versus *relativism* debate. While realism asserts that an external world exists independently of our representations of it, including perceptions, thoughts, language, and images, relativism argues that even if such a reality exists, it remains inaccessible to us. The basic tenets of social constructionism would seem to lead naturally to a primarily relativist position; yet, some social constructionists have maintained some concept of a reality existing independently of language and discourse (Burr 2003, 22-23). This is also the ontological standpoint adopted in this thesis, which could, therefore, be classified as a *moderate* constructionist position. In this view, reality cannot be reduced to our knowledge of reality, since the latter is contingent and partial (Fairclough 2003, 14). The social world is a socially, and partially discursively, constructed world, “but at any point in time people are confronted with a pre-

¹ The perspective referred to as social constructionism in this thesis has been labeled *social constructivism* elsewhere. While the two terms appear to be applied interchangeably in research within the humanities and social sciences, following authors such as Bryman (2012), Burr (2003), and Phillips & Jorgensen (2002), I shall apply the term *constructionism* throughout, thereby avoiding any confusion with Piagetian constructivist theory (Burr 2003, 19). It has also been suggested that constructivism proposes that each individual mentally constructs the world of experience, whereas social constructionism has a social, rather than an individual, focus (Andrews 2012, 39).

² The ideas of Berger and Luckmann, expressed in their classic treatise *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), are generally acknowledged to have influenced the development of social constructionism (Andrews 2012, 39). In view of the scope of the thesis, Section 2 will, however, not discuss this particular treatise, but rather focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the constructionist perspective as they relate to the present study.

structured world which has real properties and a real structure which cannot be reduced to, and are not unconditionally subject to, people's knowledge of it, beliefs about it or projects for changing it, the representations and discourses these are cast in, or properties or outcomes of interaction" (Fairclough 2005, 916). This means that while the socially constructed character of the social world is recognized, the existence of an objective, material reality is acknowledged (Bryman 2012, 34).

The key premises of social constructionism have roots in *poststructuralist* theory and its rejection of totalizing theories and the search for absolute meaning (Phillips & Jorgensen 2003, 6).³ Poststructuralist perspectives focus on the operation of language, the creation of meaning, and the ways in which knowledge and power combine to generate taken-for-granted forms of knowledge and social practices (Fawcett 2008, 666). Theorists such as Foucault and Derrida are argued to have been particularly influential in shaping poststructuralist thinking, even though neither of the two theorists might have applied the term to their work (ibid.). Foucault's conception of power serves as an example: While structuralist views of power focus on the hierarchical operation of institutional power, Foucault developed a relational view of the concept, considering social relations and discursive contexts (ibid. 667) – an understanding of power which will be explained in much more detail in Section 3.

2.2 Research approach and methodology

2.2.1 Qualitative research approach

Social research conducted within the constructionist paradigm is generally characterized by a special focus on language, a move towards qualitative and interpretative research approaches, and an emphasis on exploration and insight rather than measurement and hypothesis testing (Hackley 2001, 61), all of which holds true for the present study. The thesis takes the form of a qualitative research study based upon case study methodology. This approach has been chosen as it should allow for a detailed level of understanding to be developed in the "investigation of a contemporary, dynamic phenomenon and its emerging body of knowledge" (Stokes & Perry 2007, 138). The rationales for choosing the particular cases were presented in the introduction; for the reasons given, the cases chosen are expected to provide "apt contexts" for the treatment of the research questions posed, and they may be characterized as *exemplifying* cases (Bryman 2012, 70), which should contribute to shedding light on central aspects of consumer agency. With this study, I intend to generate an intensive examination and analysis of

³ Poststructuralism refers to a set of reflections on and extensions of *structuralism*, which is associated mainly with the linguistics of Saussure and the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss.

particular instances of marketing discourse, texts, and communications, in relation to which I engage in theoretical analysis (ibid. 71). The study takes as its point of departure a set of theoretical ideas and conceptual models which then guide the collection and analysis of data and direct the orientation to the subject matter, thereby adopting a *deductive* approach to the relationship between theory and research (ibid. 24). I shall undertake empirical and conceptual exploration of representation, signification, and communication within a particular professional and social field, drawing from marketing literature and consumer research as well as social theory, also relating marketing and consumer research to “high-level theorizations of power” (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 950).

As the constitutive role of language is a principal assumption of social constructionism, analysis of language is central to research conducted within this framework. The importance attached to the social meaning of discourse, accounts, and representations is argued to lead logically to the use of qualitative research methodology, as argued above, and *discourse analysis* in particular (Burr 2003, 24). This is also the case here, and the discourse analytical framework applied – that of *Critical Discourse Analysis* – is explained below. Using this framework should facilitate close examination of discursive representations and help to identify underlying assumptions about the roles and relations of and between consumers and marketers.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

2.3.1 Principles and assumptions

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) represents a broad theoretical and methodological framework for the empirical study of language use – of the relations between discourse and social and cultural phenomena and developments in different social domains (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002, 60). CDA refers to a combination of approaches to the detailed analysis of written text and spoken language founded in linguistics, which facilitates the analysis of lexical and grammatical features, discursive structures, and communicative choices within different kinds of text. The main point of reference within existing literature is *Systemic Functional Linguistics* (SFL), a linguistic theory and related analytical methods associated with the work of Michael Halliday (1994) in particular. To Halliday, language represents a semiotic system, structured to express three key strands of meaning, namely *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* meanings. Through these three metafunctions of language, texts are seen to simultaneously represent aspects of the world; enact social relations between participants and express attitudes towards the subject matter; and organize information given and connect parts of text. Halliday defines the three

functions as “clause as representation” where a central concept is that of transitivity (1994, 106); “clause as exchange” which has to do with speech roles, mood, and modality (ibid. 68); and “clause as message” which relates to clause structure (ibid. 37). While the approach of SFL will not be directing the analysis in the present study as such, Halliday’s theory of language is acknowledged as a valuable resource in developing the analytical framework of CDA (cf. Fairclough 2003, 5), and it might help to distinguish the different linguistic features analyzed and the discursive effects achieved by their use. The main principles and purposes of CDA are accounted for below. Here, the work of Norman Fairclough will be particularly central, since he is argued to have developed the most sophisticated framework for analysis of the relationship between language use and societal practices – “for research in communication, culture and society” (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002, 89; 61).

CDA may be regarded as a form of social analysis of spoken and written language (Fairclough 2003, 1). A couple of key points can be emphasized. Firstly, within the CDA framework, discourse, language use in speech and writing, is viewed as a form of *social practice* (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, 258). Such a conceptualization of discourse suggests that a dialectical relationship exists between a particular discursive event and the situations, institutions, and social structures which surround it. Chiapello and Fairclough regard a social practice as an articulation of diverse social elements in a particular configuration, and every practice may include elements such as activities, subjects and the social relations of these, instruments, values, and discourse (2012, 194). A dialectical relationship is described as a two-way relationship, which entails that a discursive event is shaped by other social practices, institutions, and social structures, but also shapes these. In other words, another fundamental assumption held by CDA scholars is that discourse is *socially constitutive* as well as *socially constituted* (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, 258). Discourse thus simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society. Fairclough and Wodak, further, make the case that it is useful to distinguish three broad domains of social life which may be constituted discursively: representations of the world, social relations between people, and people’s social identities (1997, 273).

It is argued that the theories of Foucault in particular, and poststructuralist theory in general, have been central in establishing the concept of *discourse* in social research (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, 28). Foucault (1972) suggests that discourses are “practices which form the objects of which they speak” (cited in Burr 2003, 64). Discourses can be understood to be comprised of ideas, values, kinds of participants, goals, and behaviors (Machin & Mayr 2012, 21). As suggested above, discourses are

socially embedded; they are closely connected to social and institutional practices which influence profoundly how we as individuals or social actors live our lives; discourses, therefore, have implications for how we can and should act, it is argued (Burr 2003, 75).

2.3.2 CDA as framework

Fairclough argues that CDA should be seen as a realist approach, one that claims that there is a real world, including the social world, which exists irrespective of whether we know it. In other words, “the natural and social worlds differ in that the latter but not the former depends upon human action for its existence and is ‘socially constructed’” (Fairclough 2010, 4). Fairclough thus suggests that CDA be seen as a moderate form of social constructionism (ibid. 5), a notion which is consistent with the position taken in this thesis, as explained above.

CDA is a *critical* approach because it disputes a view of language as a transparent vehicle. Through language, certain ideas, practices, values, and identities are promoted and naturalized, that is, made to appear natural and commonsensical. A critical study of language, then, denotes processes of *denaturalizing* language so as to reveal the main views, underlying assumptions, and implicit meanings in texts (Machin & Mayr 2012, 5). It aims to explore relationships between discourse and society, between discursive practices and texts and wider social structures and processes, also with regard to relations of power and domination (Fairclough 2010, 93). Again, CDA stands as a form of social analysis, combining micro- and macro-level analysis, making connections between socio-cultural phenomena on the one hand and the linguistic properties of texts on the other (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, 277).

2.3.3 Analytical focus

Hence CDA is an approach to *textually-oriented* analysis, an approach which anchors its analytical claims in close analysis of texts (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, 152). It follows from the points made thus far that language is regarded as a set of resources from which actors make active choices (Machin & Mayr 2012, 15). Some of the central discursive features and linguistic categories to consider when conducting this form of in-depth textual analysis include lexical choice, representational strategies, transitivity, mood, and pronominal usage. The choices made as regards the analytical focus are guided by the overall research focus on aspects of agency in the context of marketing and consumption.

The representation of social actors in texts involves a number of choices, and these choices can be socially significant with respect to the representation of agency (Fairclough 2003, 155). Van Leeuwen

has developed a comprehensive framework for analysis of the discursive representation of social actors, for investigating which discursive options are chosen in particular contexts and what purposes achieved (Van Leeuwen 1996, 43). His dimension concerning *role allocation* appears to be of particular interest. This considers the roles that social actors are given to play in representations, a basic assumption being that representations can endow actors with either *active* or *passive* roles. *Activation* occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity and *passivation* when actors are represented as undergoing the activity or as being “at the receiving end of it” (ibid. 43-44).

These aspects also relate to the notion of *transitivity*, a linguistic principle which essentially has to do with who does what to whom and how.⁴ When analyzing agency in this sense, three components of meaning are central: participants, processes, and circumstances (Halliday 1994, 107). Halliday distinguishes six process types as construed by the transitivity system, each of which has associated with it certain functional participant roles (ibid. 106-107). For present purposes, it is significant that material processes, which are processes of ‘doing’, are characterized by having two key participants, *Actor* and *Goal*. The actor is the constituent that does the deed or performs the action, while the goal is the participant at whom the process is directed, the “one to which the process is extended” (ibid. 109-110). It follows that if one part is acting, the other acted upon, transitivity can play a key role in representations in particular and meaning-making in general, and as mentioned, transitivity falls under the category of ideational meaning. In terms of ideational meaning, lexical choice will be considered where relevant to the analytical agenda, as the words chosen to characterize agents and actions clearly produce distinct representations of these and build upon certain assumptions and evoke certain connotations.

Theme and focus are not only determined by choice of words, but also through *thematic structure*. The item placed in initial position in a clause has thematic status; it becomes the *theme* – that with which the clause is concerned, and a clause is taken to consist of a theme accompanied by a *rheme*, the part in which the theme is developed (ibid. 37). Through clause structure, different constituents, agents, or objects can then be either *foregrounded* or *backgrounded* (Fairclough 2003, 137). This dimension of textual organization expresses textual meaning.

⁴ Based upon the seminal work of Halliday, this model of transitivity transcends traditional grammatical approaches which distinguish between *transitive* verbs, i.e. verbs that take objects, and *intransitive* verbs which do not (Simpson & Mayr 2010, 65).

The grammatical dimensions of *mood* and *modality* may also prove relevant. Grammatical mood relates to speech function or speech acts (ibid. 115). Three major types of clause can be distinguished in this context: In essence, declarative clauses take the form of statements and interrogative clauses the form of questions, while imperative clauses generally express a demand (ibid. 117), although the link between form and function is not always this direct.⁵ Modality refers to the ways in which varying degrees of certainty or doubt, possibility, factuality, necessity, and obligation can be signaled (Fairclough 2003, 165). It has to do with commitments, judgments, and stances, and the archetypical markers of modality are modal verbs, such as *can* and *may* (ibid. 166; 168). Mood and modality express interpersonal meanings. The latter are also expressed through the use of personal pronouns. Particular pronouns may be used to establish address between author and reader (Mautner 2008, 43), to signal inclusion or exclusion (Fairclough 2003, 150), or to achieve a conversational style and create a sense of dialog (Machin & Mayr 2012, 44).

2.4 Positioning and limitations

At this point, it is appropriate to consider my positioning as a researcher. I am aware that my perspective as a student and researcher is influenced by the social and cultural context in which I am situated. I acknowledge that my work is interpretive and that my understanding of the subject matter can never be entirely objective. While I seek to distance myself from the material, I thus recognize my role in the research process and the generation of knowledge on the topic. It has been pointed out that textual analysis is “inevitably selective” (Fairclough 2003, 14). In any such analysis, one chooses to ask certain questions about texts and surrounding social practices and phenomena, the point being that there are always particular motivations for asking certain questions rather than others (ibid.). What one infers from a text is dependent upon the perspective from which one approaches it, including the particular social issues in focus, and the conceptual frameworks upon which one draws (ibid. 16). The social constructionist perspective would, in fact, consider complete objectivity an unattainable goal: Every individual encounters the world from some perspective or other, and the questions which one comes to ask about the world must also arise from the assumptions embedded in one’s perspective (Burr 2003, 152).

⁵ The category of mood covers the distinction between the indicative, the subjunctive, and the imperative. Clauses in the indicative mood are either declarative or interrogative, and the subjunctive is used to express hypothesis or desirability (Preisler 1997, 84).

These points naturally lead us to address some of the potential limitations of the research approach of the present study. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach of study can be seen to entail certain limitations with regard to subjectivity and generalizability. Criticisms which may be raised are that findings are more easily influenced by the views of the researcher, in comparison with quantitative research findings, and that the scope of the findings of qualitative inquiry is limited (Bryman 2012, 405-406). The fact that the analysis takes as its empirical point of departure the works and theories of a limited number of scholars and just two corporations can be argued to have a bearing on the degree of generalizability of my findings. It is my belief that the cases chosen are both relevant and illustrative, but at no point do I claim that the assumptions and approaches to which the analyses point are typical of any marketing scholar or practitioner in any context. A key point could be that the findings of social research such as those of the present study are to generalize to theory rather than to populations; in that sense, it is “the cogency of the theoretical reasoning” which is decisive in the assessment of generalizability (Mitchell 1983 in Bryman 2012, 406).

The CDA approach has been accused of being too selective and partial, as findings are claimed to be based upon the subjective assessment of the analyst (Machin & Mayr 2012, 208). I shall attempt to avoid such accusations by providing ample text examples and supporting points raised and arguments made through reference to relevant scholarly theory and research, hopefully leaving readers with the impression that the analysis has been carried out systematically and that the interpretation is soundly argued (Burr 2003, 159). One counter to the idea that CDA is too selective and itself ideologically driven would be that all research is conducted with some conceptualization of what phenomena and matters are important and relevant to investigate, of why certain matters rather than others should be subject to research (Machin & Mayr 2012, 214), as was elaborated above. That being said, the potential limitations of the approach chosen are accepted and taken into account.

2.5 Data presentation

Finally, this subsection presents the data and material that form the basis of the study. The first analytical section is based upon the central work of marketing scholar Philip Kotler, the textbook *Marketing Management*, specifically the first edition published in 1967 and the 14th edition published in 2012. Analysis of the landmark edition as well as the most recent edition of what is defined as “the marketing bible” (Romano 1996, 19) should provide useful insights into the views of “the leading light” of the marketing discipline (Brown 2002, 129) as to the roles of consumers and marketers in marketing

then and now. The analysis focuses on chapters defining marketing and dealing with consumer behavior since these are expected to be the sections most significant and relevant to an examination of central representations of consumers and marketers. Guided by the same focus, the analysis of predominant experience economy theory as constituted by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore is based upon their article “Welcome to the Experience Economy” published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1998 and their bestselling book *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* published the following year, as these works are considered central in introducing and developing their theory of the experience economy. The third and last part of the analysis takes as its point of departure the marketing communications of the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company. The main focus will be on the communications efforts of Starbucks, the analysis of which is then supplemented with an examination of the approach of Disney in order to further illuminate how marketers today may consider and approach consumers – in these cases, those in search of experiences. The analysis looks at communication material and platforms available and accessible via the company websites. Consumer empowerment is generally considered to be associated with and partly facilitated by the ongoing evolution of the IT landscape and interactive channels (Prahalad et al. 2000) and the Internet seen to be defined by a “consumer-centric culture” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2002, 3). In view of the research agenda of the thesis, such online data, therefore, seem to be highly relevant empirical sources.⁶

⁶ Copies of the material analyzed are enclosed in either print or digital form. Appendices are labeled sequentially as Appendix A, B, C, etc., and a list of appendices is provided at the beginning of the section. As to the inclusion of quotations in the text, it can be noted that quoted passages from the text material analyzed are consistently put in single quotation marks, whereas quotations from secondary academic sources used to illustrate and substantiate points made are placed within double quotation marks throughout the report.

3. Conceptual framework

Section 3 establishes the conceptual framework of the thesis. In defining the concepts and theories which will form the conceptual basis for the study, it introduces the concept of governmentality, the theory of the experience economy, the value co-creation paradigm, and the idea of a postmodern consumer society.

3.1 Governmentality

3.1.1 Freedom and agency, power and control

As indicated above, views seem to differ among scholars and practitioners on the role and meaning of marketing and consumption in contemporary society. While postmodern researchers theorize consumption as a site of liberation and view consumers as active and “agentic” participants (Firat & Venkatesh 1995), academic work guided by a more critical stance points to connections between consumption and corporate control and power. Much of this debate is said to hinge upon issues concerning the societal influence of marketing and the degree of agency assigned to today’s consumers at points of exchange and interaction between marketers and consumers (Hodgson 2001, 120).

The present study adopts the concept of *governmentality*, developed by the French social theorist and philosopher Michel Foucault, in order to provide a theoretically founded framework for dealing with different aspects of consumer agency and delving deeper into the apparent paradox of the simultaneous empowerment and manipulation of consumers.⁷ In developing an understanding of the concept of governmentality, it appears appropriate to take Foucault’s ideas of *power* and *government* as our point of departure, since the former can be seen as contingent upon the latter (Skålen et al. 2008, 4).

3.1.2 Power

Power is generally claimed to have many faces, characterized by significant definitional differences between disciplines and schools of thought (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 951). It can, for instance, be used as a measurement of physical strength or be defined as a malign, oppressive force (ibid.). While power may be difficult to delimit, it should be evident that a positivist definition of power as an easily measurable, tangible quantity is neither possible nor useful in the present context. So, how does Foucault understand power? To Foucault, power is essentially embedded or “inscribed in discourses and language

⁷ One scholar in particular has interpreted and elaborated the notion of governmentality, namely Mitchell Dean (Dean 2010, 1999), and his work will be a central source, in addition to Foucault’s original works, in the endeavor to delineate Foucault’s theories and concepts in a clear and comprehensible manner.

structures, operating through all our social practices, producing subjects” – consumers in the present case (Shankar et al. 2006, 1014). That power is considered to be inscribed in social practices indicates that power does not “emanate from somewhere”, as it were, but is distributed throughout society (ibid. 1016). It is dispersed throughout a myriad of interconnecting discourses as a “multiple and mobile field of force relations” (Foucault 1980 in Shankar et al. 2006, 1025).

In his later work, Foucault conceives of power as a property of *relations* (Hodgson 2000, 45) – complex relations in which the human subject is placed (Foucault 1983, 209). One might thus argue that Foucault adopts a relational or interactional approach to power, perhaps illustrating how his conceptions of sovereign and disciplinary power evolved into a more sophisticated understanding of the “fluidity of power relations”, as suggested by Shankar et al. (2006, 1014).⁸ According to Foucault, the concept of power designates relationships between agents, and these power relations are rooted in systems of social networks and interactions (1983, 217; 224). But the exercise of power is not merely based upon a relationship between agents; it represents a way in which certain actions may modify others, and in that sense, the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct (Foucault 1983, 219). Foucault argues that basically, “power is less a confrontation between two adversaries than a question of government” (ibid. 221). It is essential to emphasize here that ‘government’ is not coterminous with ‘the State’ (Hodgson 2001, 123). That is, government should not be understood as a form of political authority or an institutional structure in its most basic sense; rather, the term should be allowed to assume a broader meaning, namely as “the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed.” ‘To govern’ in this sense is “to structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault 1983, 221).

According to what Denegri-Knott et al. label “the discursive power model”, a model greatly influenced by the conceptual thinking of Foucault, power is taken to be “a (co)creative force that structures the possible field of (inter)action and exchange of free agents” (2006, 961). This definition succinctly encapsulates some of the most central points of Foucauldian ideas of power, government, and governmentality. It, moreover, draws attention to a significant aspect of Foucault’s theory of power: Recognition of the centrality of the free individual. His view is that power “is exercised only over free

⁸ *Sovereign* power is exercised through the juridical and executive arms of the state; its characteristic mechanisms include laws and constitutions, and its object is the exercise of authority over the subjects of the state within a definite territory. The object of *disciplinary* power is the regulation and ordering of the numbers of people within that territory through the imposition of orders and rules. *Discipline* has diverse origins in monastic, military, and educational practices (Foucault 1977 in Dean 2010, 29).

subjects,” taken to mean “individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized” (Foucault 1983, 221). One may argue that the notion of *choice* becomes central here – a notion which has been defined as the “consumerist mantra” of our age (Gabriel & Lang 2006, 1). In his work, carrying the noteworthy title *Powers of Freedom*, Rose makes the case that all aspects of social behavior are now re-conceptualized along economic lines, as actions undertaken through the “human faculty of choice” (1999b, 141), as individuals today are to understand and enact their lives through acts of choice in the worlds of goods and services (ibid. 87). To Foucault, then, power is always a way of acting upon *acting* subjects “by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (Foucault 1983, 220).

3.1.3 Government

Foucault defines the term *government* by the phrase “the conduct of conduct” (1983). This definition plays on several senses of the word *conduct*: First, ‘to conduct’ means to lead, to direct, or to guide, in a more or less deliberate manner (Dean 2010, 17). One may also consider the reflexive form of the verb in ‘to conduct oneself’ where one is concerned with attention to the form of self-direction appropriate to particular situations. With the second ‘conduct’, the nominal form, Foucault refers to behaviors, thoughts, actions, and our “comportment”, i.e. our articulated set of behaviors (ibid.) – which become the object of government. When joining together these senses of ‘conduct’, government has to do with “any attempt to shape with some degree of deliberation aspects of our behavior according to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends” (ibid. 18).

Following Dean, it is possible to expand the brief definition of government as ‘the conduct of conduct’ into the following definition: “Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors, for definite but shifting ends” (ibid.). This notion of government presupposes that the one “governed” is an actor. That is to say, government concerns the shaping of human conduct and “acts on the governed as a locus of action and freedom” (ibid. 23). Government as ‘the conduct of conduct’ thus entails the idea of individuals who are capable of acting, as explained above, and in relation to the present context, this is obviously the case when “the governed” are required to act as consumers in a market (ibid. 22).

3.1.4 'Govern-mentality'

The concept of governmentality unites the ideas and conceptions suggested thus far. 'Governmentality' can be considered to be derived from the terms 'government' and 'mentality' (Skålen et al. 2008, 4). Similarly, Shankar et al. point to 'governmentality' as a link between the French terms 'gouverner', meaning governing, and 'mentalité', i.e. modes of thought (2006, 1018). The spelling of the term chosen by Zwick et al. (2008) is noteworthy in this respect: These scholars refer to "the new marketing *govern-mentality*", a hyphenation which can be seen to underline the meaning and purpose of governing the mentalities or ways of thinking and consequently ways of acting of consumer subjects.⁹ In the words of Foucault himself, governmentality relates to "the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very special albeit complex form of power which has its target population" (Foucault 2000, 219-220). This ensemble of elements is also referred to as *apparatus* or *techniques of government* (Foucault 1980, 194). In the case of marketing, the subject population can be said to be made up by the potential market (Hodgson 2002, 322). Accordingly, with governmentality, there is a focus on those modes of governing which seek "to work through the freedom or capacities of the governed" (Dean 2010, 23).

In a societal context, the concept of governmentality is seen to relate to particular modes of government which have emerged in line with liberal and neo-liberal discourses (Hodgson 2002, 321), based upon liberal principles such as individual liberty and freedom of choice (Hodgson 2001, 131), and associated with the rise of a "consumer culture" (Holt 2000, 67) and a "market-based universe" (Du Gay 1996, 80).

3.1.5 Subject positions

To analyze government in this sense is thus to analyze "those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups" (Dean 2010, 20). The organized practices through which individuals may be governed are referred to as *regimes of government* (Dean 2010, 28) or *regimes of power* (Skålen 2009, 797), and marketing has been identified and researched as an example of such a regime (ibid.). Since a Foucauldian conception of government entails not only relations of power and influence, but also issues of self and identity (Dean 2010, 27), a central dimension concerns *subjectification* or subject formations – the roles, subjectivities, or subject positions that a particular discourse or regime of power articulates or envisions.¹⁰ Foucault argues that a strong relationship exists between discourse and subjectivity

⁹ Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Modes and processes of subjectification are also sometimes referred to as *subjection* (e.g. Skålen et al. 2008).

(Fougère & Skålen 2013, 16). According to Foucault, subjectivity is formed in relation to discourse. Central to this argument is that regimes of power *subjectify* actors in the sense that they provide subject positions, that is, “ways of being and acting in the social world” (ibid.). In this view, different regimes of power are seen to “elicit, promote, facilitate, foster and attribute various capacities, qualities and statuses to particular agents” (Dean 2010, 43-44).¹¹ Analysis informed by a Foucauldian framework such as the one proposed here may help to explicate which subject positions are ascribed to individuals by the discursive practices promoted by various types of regimes of power, including academic regimes such as marketing (Skålen 2009, 797); “to pinpoint the subjectivity that marketing discourse envisions” (Skålen et al. 2006, 276); and to expose discourses and strategic practices “which give birth to specific consumer subjectivities and representations” (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 961).

It should perhaps be mentioned that it is always possible for actors to challenge the subject positions constructed and articulated by discursive practices, as expressed by the Foucauldian axiom that where there is power, there is always the possibility of resistance, or in the words of the theorist himself: “There are no relations of power without resistances” (Foucault 1980, 142). This also relates to the points made previously regarding individuals as acting subjects. In the present context, this implies that it is possible for consumers to act in ways other than those envisioned or intended by marketers. For various reasons, consumers may resist or fail to conform to the consumer behavior expected, “no matter how sophisticated and scientific the segmentation and market research” (Knights & Sturdy 1997, 179).

As argued by Hodgson, it is here, over issues of choice, freedom, agency, and control that notions of government and governmentality intersect with the study of consumption, the “enhanced role of the marketing function”, and the role of the consumer in contemporary society (2002, 321; 2001, 124). Research on governmentality in a marketing context is still limited, but growing, and a review of relevant research is presented in what follows as a way of illustrating how this conceptual framework has been drawn upon by others in marketing and consumer research.

3.1.6 Governmentality and marketing: a review

While the influence of Foucault’s work has been felt across the social sciences, and his work has been used to examine discourse within streams of management and organizational studies, his work and ideas have not frequently been drawn upon in marketing research (Skålen et al. 2006, 276). The recent decade

¹¹ The present study focuses on texts rather than actions; focus will thus be on which subject positions marketing texts of various sorts elicit to consuming subjects, the roles envisioned for these, without drawing any final conclusions as to what their identities end up being, as pointed out by Fougère and Skålen (2013, 16).

has, however, witnessed an emergence of studies on marketing and consumption guided by a Foucauldian perspective, mirroring the rise of critical inquiry and an “interpretative turn” in marketing and consumer research (Skålen et al. 2008; Shankar et al. 2006, 1013).

Knights and Sturdy (1997) and Hodgson (2002, 2001, 2000) take the financial services sector as their point of departure for a study of marketing discourse and practice from a governmentality perspective. Knights and Sturdy look into the impact of marketing techniques in transforming individuals into particular kinds of consumer subjects (1997, 159), for instance, through the discursive formation of the “individualised subject” (ibid. 161). They focus on market segmentation in particular, its potential in governing the consumer and as an example of practices of government whereby subjects may be managed (ibid. 178). They refer to “capturing the consumer through marketing”, and a key point made is that “marketing does not merely respond to individual needs or lifestyles, but is proactive in constituting and modifying them” (ibid. 169; 171).

The central concern for Hodgson is to draw insights from the literature on governmentality to develop an understanding of the increasing social role of marketing. The concept is adopted to examine the relationship between marketing and the changing nature of consumerism, and the latter is found to be, at once, liberating and manipulative (Hodgson 2002, 319). The marketing discipline is analyzed as a regime of power, and Hodgson points to the increased sophistication of marketing efforts in constructing and projecting particular images of the consumer (ibid. 320). According to Hodgson, the construction of the consumer “as an object to be governed depends upon technologies which enable the objectification and also the subjection of the consumer”, that is, the means by which an individual is tied to his or her own identity as a “consumer” of particular goods and services (ibid. 322). In exercising choice in consumption, he argues, individuals are at the same time implicated in mechanisms which both predict and direct their choice as a means of manipulation (2001, 125).

Shankar, Cherrier & Canniford (2006) find that choice “as a manifestation of people’s ability to exercise free-will, thereby demonstrating their autonomy and self-determination, has become normalized” (2006, 1015). In keeping with this, they point out how identities of individuals as consumers have been defined by the “neo-liberal project” and the discursive practices of marketing (ibid. 1017). Shankar et al. conclude their discussion on consumer empowerment by casting doubt on the shift in power relations “towards truly self-constituting subjects”, inclined to the alternative view that such formations may themselves be regarded as “products of the totalizing power of the market” (ibid. 1026).

Skålen, Felleson, and Fougère (2006) join this group of scholars in their endeavor to reflect upon the nature of marketing in contemporary society. The project of these scholars differs from that of others examined here, in that it assumes an intra-organizational focus and looks at organizational members rather than consumers. The authors identify and analyze three periods of marketing thought – “early marketing thought” (c. 1900-1960), “marketing management” (c. 1950-1985), and “service management” (c. 1975-present), and based upon this, they argue that “customer orientation” has become the “dominant governmental discursive practice” (2006, 275).¹²

Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008) draw upon the notion of governmentality in a critical assessment of the emerging marketing theory of value co-creation in particular, a paradigm which is based upon the “active participation of formerly passive(ied) consumers.”¹³ These scholars remain skeptic of the “latest business buzz” defined by an orientation towards the newly empowered and liberated consumer subject (2008, 164-165), and they claim that corporate strategies rely on Foucault’s notion of government as a means of framing and partially anticipating the agency of consumers. From this perspective, the vision of the free consumer never truly threatened the “control needs” of corporations, as continued corporate control and sustained competitiveness require a free consumer subject (ibid. 167-68). Zwick et al., furthermore, include a consideration of consumers as value co-creators in a very concrete sense of the term, as they bring in the examples of LEGO and Build-a-Bear as corporations which make use of consumer involvement in innovation and production processes (ibid. 180-81). The arguments made lead Zwick et al. to conclude that the main challenge of the “new marketing govern-mentality” lies in ensuring that “consumer freedom evolves in the ‘right’ way” (ibid. 184), that is, the way intended by marketers.

Finally, two recent studies deserve mentioning. Cova and Cova (2012) identify three central marketing approaches which have contributed significantly to marketing thinking in recent years, namely relationship marketing, experiential marketing, and collaborative marketing, and the particular “consumer faces” associated with each of these approaches (2012, 151) – or rather, constructed by these dominant marketing discourses (ibid. 157). The construction and representation of particular consumer subjects is linked with the alleged rise in “consumer competency” (ibid. 163). Yet, in this, individuals

¹² Skålen, Fougère, and Felleson elaborate their deconstruction of marketing discourse in a work published two years later, entitled *Marketing Discourse: A Critical Perspective*. References are also made to this book in the thesis.

¹³ The aspect of co-creation was briefly presented in the introduction to the thesis, and this approach to marketing will be defined in more detail in Section 3.3.

are given “an impetus to define themselves more and more within a consumer framework” and their acts shaped by marketing discourses (ibid. 159), it is argued.

While the majority of the studies which have incorporated the governmentality framework into analyses of marketing tend to remain primarily theoretical in nature, Beckett (2012) bases his research on a case study of the British retailer Tesco and their loyalty card scheme. This loyalty program, a form of customer relationship marketing, is analyzed as an example of a “technology of consumption” – a means of influencing and shaping consumer behavior and consumption patterns or simply “governing the consumer” (2012, 3). Such loyalty schemes are found to influence the possible field of actions of consumers, to fabricate subjects, and to seek to place these within relations of power, demonstrating how consumer agency is “used to tie the identities and aspirations of consumers to the strategic imperatives of producers” (ibid. 16).

Common to the academic studies reviewed above is that in dealing with the socio-cultural significance of marketing and consumption, they invoke a Foucauldian framework and adopt a perspective which disregards a positivist view of marketing, instead approaching marketing as “a performative discourse” (Skålen et al. 2008, 6). As indicated in the preceding pages, critical scholarly inquiry within the marketing field inspired by Foucauldian work examines the role of marketing discourse and practice in shaping the desires and freedom of individuals, framing, anticipating, or pre-structuring the agency of consumer subjects, constructing and projecting particular images of the consumer, and constituting wants and consumer lifestyles which may then be offered back as part of the offering – in an attempt to *govern* acts of consumption.

As the next step, Section 3.2 considers central trends in the realms of marketing and consumption explained by the theory of the experience economy.

3.2 The experience economy

3.2.1 Origins

In 1998, the two scholars and marketing consultants Pine and Gilmore introduced readers of the *Harvard Business Review* to their vision of an emerging *experience economy*. One year later, they elaborated this theory in the seminal and best-selling work *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. According to Pine and Gilmore, “goods and services are no longer enough” (1999, 11). Consumers today “unquestionably” desire and demand experiences, and more and more companies are and should be responding by explicitly designing and promoting these (1998, 97). Pine and Gilmore see experiences as a distinct and increasingly significant source of value, and recognition thereof will provide the key to future economic growth (1999, x). Accordingly, a focus on experiences represents trends and development in business and society of which corporate actors must be aware and to which they should adapt in order to stay relevant, differentiate their offerings, and prosper in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

3.2.2 Intangible value

It is argued that during the past half-century, consumption has progressively disengaged from its “essentially utilitarian conception” (Carù & Cova 2007, 4). While Pine and Gilmore are generally considered the pioneers of experience economy thought and theory, other scholars have concerned themselves with the growing significance of intangible value and experience in marketing and consumption. A couple of the leading authors on the subject are mentioned in what follows.

In 1970, Toffler wrote: “Today under more affluent conditions, we are reorganizing the economy to deal with a new level of human needs. From a system designed to provide material satisfaction, we are rapidly creating an economy geared to the provision of psychic gratification” (220). Illuminating the world of tomorrow, Toffler describes a dematerialization of the economy and the emergence of a “post-service economy” – in a chapter entitled *The Experience Makers* (ibid. 219-220). Holbrook and Hirschman have also focused their work on experiential facets of consumer behavior, first in 1982, in an article describing subjectively-based experiential aspects of consumption as fantasies, feelings, and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). In a similar vein, Jensen emphasizes the story behind the product and intangible benefits in contemporary practices of consumption in the “Dream Society”, the successor to the “Information Society” (1999, vii), and argues that practically no line of business today remains unaffected by experiential aspects of consumption (2006, 24). Echoing the outlook of Pine and Gilmore,

Jensen contends that the experience economy is here to stay (ibid. 14-15) – exemplified by the revised edition of his 1999 bestseller *Dream Society* which carries the subtitle *Step into the Experience Economy* (Jensen 2006). Related works refer to “the entertainment economy” (Wolf 1999); “the attention economy” (Davenport & Beck 2001); and deal with emotional needs translated into markets of identity, meaning, and authenticity (Piët 2002). Hence notions of intangible value and experience in marketing and consumption appear as topics of increasing interest among scholars within the field.

3.2.3 The progression of economic value

How, then, do Pine and Gilmore explain their theory of the experience economy? As mentioned above, their thesis builds upon the idea of experiences as an emerging source of value. They thus explore the implications of the idea of the experience-seeking consumer introduced in the opening lines of the thesis. In the experience economy, “we will increasingly pay companies to stage experiences for us, just as we now pay companies for services we once delivered ourselves, goods we once made ourselves, and commodities we once extracted ourselves” (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 67). Why now, one may ask. Pine and Gilmore point to rising affluence and changed consumption patterns as central factors as well as technological advance and increased competitive intensity which drives the search for differentiation, but place emphasis on the nature of economic value and its natural progression from commodities to goods to services and then to experiences (ibid. 5).

They illustrate their thesis of the progression of economic value, and with that, the emergence and relevance of the experience economy, by means of two examples, the coffee bean and the birthday party. In order to understand fully the underlying reasoning of Pine and Gilmore’s theory, it seems sensible to follow suit, beginning with the coffee bean: Companies that trade coffee receive a little more than 75 cents per pound which translates into one or two cents per cup. When a manufacturer roasts, grinds, packages, and sells those coffee beans in a grocery store, thereby turning them into goods, the price for a consumer will be between five and 25 cents per cup, depending upon brand and package size. If the same ground beans are brewed and served in a diner or cafeteria, that coffee-making service will sell for 50 cents to a dollar per cup. Coffee can, therefore, be any of three economic offerings, each valued differently. Finally, if the same coffee is served in a coffeehouse such as Starbucks or a five-star restaurant – “where the ordering, creation, and consumption of the cup embodies a heightened ambience or sense of theatre” – then consumers willingly pay from two to five dollars for each cup. Companies that ascend to this forth level of value creation are argued to establish a distinctive *experience* which

envelops the purchase of coffee, significantly increasing its value for consumers (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 1).

The evolution of the birthday party is provided as another illustrative case: At birthday parties in the past, mothers would prepare the birthday cake by mixing commodities such as butter, flour, and sugar. These commodities became less relevant to consumers as most of the necessary ingredients were packaged into cake mixes and canned frostings. Later, in the service economy, many parents began to order the birthday cake from a bakery or confectioner, specifying the type of cake and frosting desired. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become common to “outsource” the birthday party to outlets and entertainment centers where companies then stage a birthday *experience* for family and friends (ibid. 20-21). The progression of value as defined by Pine and Gilmore and exemplified by these cases is depicted in Figure 3.1 below.

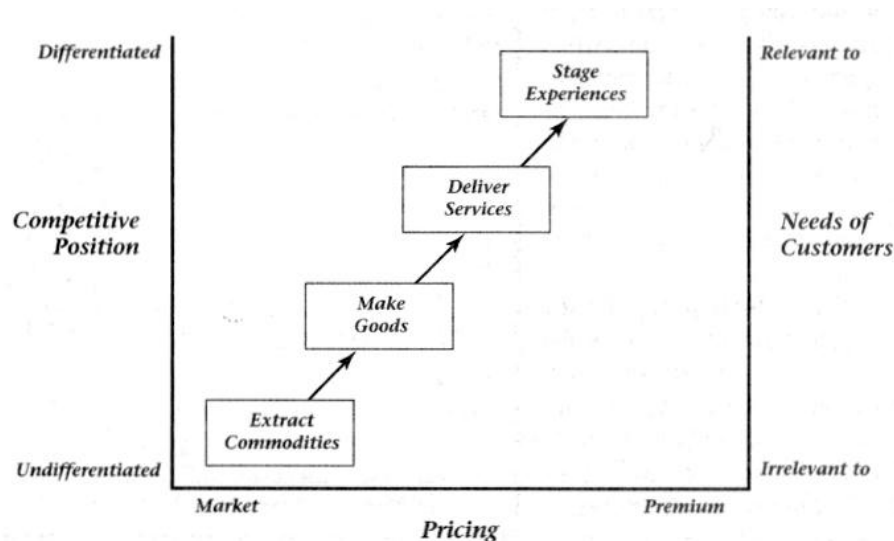


Figure 3.1: The progression of economic value.¹⁴

3.2.4 The experience phenomenon

Commodities are defined as fungible materials extracted from the natural world and sold into largely nameless markets, goods are tangible products which companies produce and standardize and sell to largely anonymous consumers, and services are characterized as intangible activities and operations performed for a particular client (ibid. 6-11). In defining the concept of commercial experiences so fundamental to their theory, Pine and Gilmore write: “Companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, connecting with them in a personal, memorable way” (1999, 3) and “The newly

¹⁴ Source: Pine & Gilmore 1999, 22.

identified offering of experiences occurs whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual” (1999, 11).

An examination of Pine and Gilmore’s central work seems to suggest that this is the closest one comes to an attempt at articulating a succinct conceptualization of the term. While they make a point of emphasizing that experiences constitute a distinct economic offering, as illustrated above, a point of criticism which could be raised concerns this somewhat vague definition of the experience concept. Especially so since they argue that experiences represent a “previously *unarticulated* genre of economic output” (Pine & Gilmore 1999, ix), compared to, for instance, products and services with which readers could be assumed to be more familiar.¹⁵ It appears, however, that Pine and Gilmore are not alone in this definitional shortcoming. Poulsson and Kale find that a careful review of extant literature reveals that no attempt has been made “to systematically define what exactly constitutes an experience” (2004, 268). In order to make up for this apparent shortcoming, some of the defining characteristics of experiences as understood in the context of the experience economy and related marketing and consumer research are outlined below.

First, it seems to be a central assumption that experiences provide emotional, cognitive, sensory, behavioral, and relational values that supplement or substitute functional features (Stuart-Menteth et al. 2006, 420). Experiences are also distinguished by the consumption phase itself being “the main product”, for which reason some talk of an “intensified consumption phase” (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 271). The added cost of, for instance, purchasing and enjoying a cup of coffee at Starbucks compared to brewing it at home – the experience involved – should translate into increased value for the consumer, which is why an experience constitutes an offering for which a premium can be charged (Boswijk et al. 2012, 5). Adopting a classic approach to the task of definition, Boswijk et al. provide the following dictionary definition of the noun *experience*: “a sensation or feeling; the act of encountering or undergoing something”, and they argue that this is the definition generally implied in the literature on the experience economy (2007, 11). In addition, it is suggested that the central construct within the experience economy paradigm be understood as “an immediate, relatively isolated event with a complex of emotions that leave an impression and represent a certain value for the individual within the context of a specific situation” (Boswijk et al. 2012, 61). Poulsson and Kale also set out to provide an operational definition of the experience phenomenon which they describe as “an engaging act of co-

¹⁵ Emphasis added.

creation between a provider and a consumer wherein the consumer perceives value in the encounter and in the subsequent memory of that encounter” (2004, 270). In focusing on the aspect of co-creation, the latter definition might, however, diverge somewhat from the view of experience creation underlying Pine and Gilmore’s conceptual model.¹⁶

Pine and Gilmore characterize experiences in terms of four experiential realms, depicted in Figure 3.2 below (1999, 30). One dimension of this model relates to *guest participation* which ranges from *passive* participation at one end of the spectrum, where consumers do not “directly affect or influence the performance”, to *active* participation at the other, in which consumers “personally affect the performance or event that yields the experience” (ibid.).¹⁷ Another dimension of experience describes the consumer’s connection with the experience, the activity or environment, ranging from *absorption* to *immersion*. The spectra of the two dimensions define the four realms of experience identified, namely *entertainment*, *education*, *escape*, and *esthetics* (ibid. 31). Entertainment is passively absorbed through the senses; with educational experiences, the guest absorbs the events unfolding before him while actively participating; guests of escapist experiences participate actively in an immersive environment; and finally, with esthetic experiences, individuals immerse themselves, but remain passive (ibid. 31-35).¹⁸

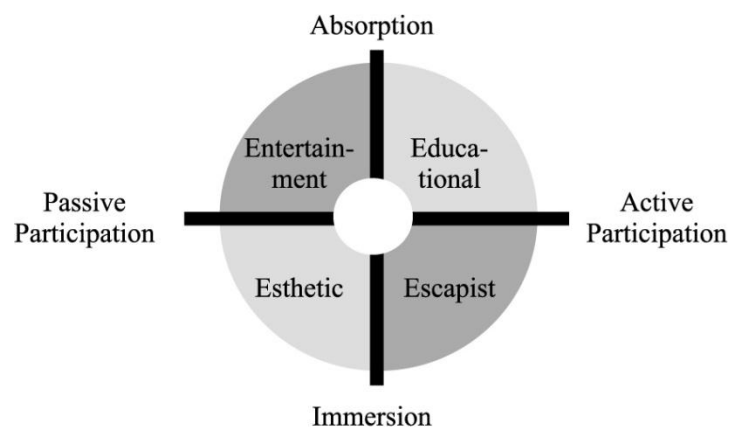


Figure 3.2: The experiential realms.¹⁹

¹⁶ As mentioned, the co-creation perspective will be discussed in the following subsection.

¹⁷ In the description of this conceptual model, I comply with the terminology applied by Pine and Gilmore and refer to consumers as *guests*. The analysis in Section 6 will deal with this representation of the consumer in detail.

¹⁸ In view of the focus of the present study, the analysis will not look into the different realms of experience as such; the dimension of participation could, however, be of interest as regards the issue of consumer agency.

¹⁹ Source: Pine & Gilmore 1999, 30.

3.2.5 Every business is a stage

While Pine and Gilmore trace the beginnings of the “experience expansion” to the Walt Disney Company (1999, 2-3), it should be underlined that a key argument of their thesis remains that today, the concept of offering and promoting an experience is taking root in fields far removed from theatres and amusement parks (1998, 99). British Airways is suggested as an example of a company that has realized the business potential of a focus on experiences, that is, of moving beyond the mindset “that a business is merely performing a function – in our case, transporting people from A to B on time and at the lowest possible price”, as put by the former British Airways chairman (cited in Pine & Gilmore 1999, 4). This airline is argued to be competing on the basis of providing an experience, using its basic service, the travel itself, as a stage for a “distinctive en route experience” (ibid.). Others point out how the experiential dimension now even permeates the consumer durables sector as they ask: “When did you last see a car commercial that did not highlight the ‘driving experience’?” (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 268-269). Automakers focusing on enhancing the driving experience are said to be *experientializing* their offering, emphasizing the experience which consumers can have surrounding the purchase, use, or ownership of a product (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 16-17).

In the words of the experience pioneers, “The Experience Economy liberates theatre from the area behind the arched proscenium.” That is to say, the “staged performances” of theme parks, theatres, and studios will face rising competition from unexpected sources, not only from cafés, restaurants, and virtual worlds, but also from hotel chains, airline companies, retailers, and the insurance sector – “for every business is a stage” (Pine & Gilmore 1999, 162). Hence the notion of theatre is not meant as a metaphor but a business model (ibid. 104). In that sense, it may be worth mentioning that Pine and Gilmore’s ideas of the experience economy move beyond the notion of *experiential marketing* – marketing commonly associated with the use of, for instance, special events in addition to more traditional media as a means of connecting companies and consumers.

Pine and Gilmore embrace the idea of the “full-fledged Experience Economy” (1999, 67), but others make more hesitant observations in that regard. Shopping at discount retailers is given as an example of a consumption context in which factors such as time and convenience are of essence. The case made is that not all consumers seek engaging experiences in all transactions. While consumers may occasionally want to experience the ambience of a Starbucks, daily coffee cravings can be perfectly well-served by fast-food places or their own coffee machine (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 275). These scholars conclude that

marketers offering “solid functional value” will continue to prosper alongside those offering “more ersatz hedonic experiences” (ibid. 276). As one might expect, Pine and Gilmore argue differently. They are of the view that “businesses that relegate themselves to the diminishing world of goods and services will be rendered irrelevant.” To avoid this fate, corporate actors must learn to stage compelling experiences (1999, 25).

Other scholars theorize about the significance of experiences in marketing and consumption, while focusing on the active role of the consumer in the creation of value. This perspective on marketing is introduced in the following subsection.

3.3 Value co-creation

3.3.1 A new frame of reference

Scholars C. K. Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy identify experiences as an increasingly important source of value. They write: “Companies spent the 20th century managing efficiencies. They must spend the 21st century managing experiences” (2002, 1). Since value is now centered in the experiences of consumers, they believe that approaches and tools consistent with an experience-based view of economic theory will eventually emerge (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 12). Thus far, this line of thought is clearly consistent with that of Pine and Gilmore delineated above. Prahalad and Ramaswamy, nevertheless, focus on a particular “fundamental and revolutionary transformation” in the commercial world, namely the transformation of the role of consumers – from that of passive audience to active players (Prahalad, Ramaswamy & Krishnan 2000, 67).

Their model of marketing consequently centers on the concept of *value co-creation*. According to this model, the meaning of value and the process of value creation is shifting from a company- and product-centric view to “personalized consumer experiences” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 5). Within this logic, marketers will no longer be able to claim monopoly of the definition and delivery of value. Prahalad and Ramaswamy refer to a paradox of the twenty-first century economy to explain the need for an alteration of approaches to marketing: Consumers are faced with more choices that yield less satisfaction, while marketers are faced with more strategic options that yield less value. This emerging reality is compelling scholars and practitioners to revise the traditional system of value creation – i.e. the company-centric, efficiency-driven view which has defined the business system over the past hundred years, the argument goes (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004b, 2). A new frame of reference is thus deemed necessary.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy take the concept of the market as their starting point in explaining how this new premise differs from the conventional view of and approach to marketing. This concept is argued to invoke to particular images. First, the market represents “an aggregation of consumers.” Second, it constitutes the “locus of exchange” in which a company trades its goods and services with the consumer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 6). It is argued that implicit in such conceptualizations lies the assumption that corporate actors can operate autonomously – design products, control sales and communication channels, and craft marketing messages – with little or no interference from consumers. The popular marketing concept of the *value chain* (Porter 1980) is suggested as an exemplification of

the unilateral role traditionally assigned to the company in the generation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 6).

3.3.2 Active, empowered consumers

Both of these images of the market are challenged by the emergence of active, empowered, informed, and connected consumers (ibid.). As indicated above, the traditional model of marketing activity assigns companies and consumers explicitly distinct roles of production and consumption; products and services contain value, and this value is exchanged in the market. In line with this thinking, communication also flows from company to consumer (ibid.). With their model of co-creation, the two scholars point to a convergence of roles, of marketer and consumer, institution and individual, and a move towards a system in which value becomes the outcome of an “an implicit negotiation” between the company and the individual consumer (ibid. 7). Using a noteworthy turn of phrase, they argue that “[s]purred by the consumer-centric culture of the Internet”, with its emphasis on individuality and interactivity, “*the balance of power in value creation is tipping in favor of consumers*” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2002, 3; 1).²⁰ This leads Prahalad and Ramaswamy to invoke a revised image of the market, namely that of the market as a *forum* (2004a, 11): Supply and demand are viewed as less distinct, separate factors and the roles of marketer and consumer as less distinct and predetermined along a conventional value chain, as the market turns into a forum for interaction and communication, not only from company to consumer, but also from consumer to company and from consumer to consumer (ibid. 12).

3.3.3 Dialog and engagement

Views of consumers as co-creators and the market as a forum indicate that *dialog* is a fundamental element of this model. The assumption is that consumers increasingly engage in active and explicit dialog with companies (Prahalad et al. 2000, 67), facilitated by the emergence of new intermediaries and multiple channels of communication (ibid. 70). Since consumers are empowered, informed, and connected on a scale as never before (Ramaswamy 2008, 9), it is all “about facilitating dialogue and consumer engagement among dynamic consumer communities and heterogeneous individuals” (Prahalad et al. 2000, 74). One means of continuous interaction with consumers is online *engagement platforms* (Ramaswamy 2008, 9). These platforms open up the possibility for consumers to share ideas, make their opinions heard, and potentially involve themselves in the value-creation process (ibid.). Important elements such as interactivity, engagement, connectivity, access, transparency, and forums in

²⁰ Emphasis added.

which a form of dialog can occur (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2002, 9-10) are clearly facilitated by technological advance – a crucial factor in making possible this “de-centering of the basis of value” (Ramaswamy 2008, 13). The points made, moreover, indicate that this model of corporate activity is founded upon an “individual-centered” approach (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004b, 12), for which reason notions of customization and personalization are central. In relation to the focus of the thesis, it is relevant to point out that proponents of the co-creation perspective construe consumers as “fully fledged subjects”, “capable of agency in their consumption and in the marketplace” (Cova & Cova 2012, 156). The significance of the active role of the consumer in the co-creation of personalized value and meaningful experiences thus remains the central concern for Prahalad and Ramaswamy in developing a model of marketing theory and practice to meet the conditions, challenges, and opportunities which define the marketing landscape at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The following subsection deals with the idea of contemporary society as a postmodern consumer society. This subsection also concludes the treatment of the conceptual framework of the thesis.

3.4 Postmodern consumer society

Questions of the role of marketing, the meaning of consumption, the agency of consumers, and experiential aspects of consumption all seem to merge in ideas associated with *postmodernism* and “postmodern conditions” (Firat, Dholakia & Venkatesh 1995, 41). Section 3.4 outlines some of the central ideas and assumptions underlying postmodernism as a theoretical perspective as they relate to the present context, assumptions which are consistent with the social constructionist standpoint, the theoretical framework, and the discourse analytical frame of the thesis.

3.4.1 Postmodernism

As indicated by the prefix *post*-, postmodernity and postmodernism represent a form of movement from *modernity* and *modernism*.²¹ The philosophical ideas and social conditions marking the latter period include the rule of reason, the rise of science, rationalism, and the emergence of industrial capitalism (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 240). As suggested in the opening line, theories of marketing and consumption are central to postmodern thinking. Postmodernity has been defined as “the age of marketing” (Firat & Venkatesh 1993), and postmodern scholars argue that marketing can be considered the “ultimate social practice” of postmodern consumer culture (ibid. 227). Recognition of the growing significance of marketing as a socio-cultural institution thus manifests itself in postmodern thinking and writing (ibid. 239). This idea appears to be very much in keeping with the view expressed by marketing scholars who concern themselves with the governmentality concept introduced previously.

3.4.2 Consumption and the consumer

Postmodern analysts refer to a reversal of production and consumption, with production “losing its privileged status”, as consumption is increasingly understood as a productive, goal-oriented, and purposeful process (Baudrillard 1988 in Firat et al. 1995, 52). This also means that as an agent, the consumer is liberated from the sole role of consumer to also becoming a producer (Firat et al. 1995, 50). Within postmodern discourse, postmodern conditions in general and processes of consumption in particular are considered to have “liberatory potential” (Firat & Venkatesh 1993, 250), a potential of agency which is elaborated below.

²¹ Modernity refers to the period in Western history from the late sixteenth century, leading up to the current postmodern era, while modernism relates to the social and cultural conditions and ideas associated with this period (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 240). The same distinction applies to postmodernity and postmodernism, for which reason the latter of these two terms is the one emphasized here.

The consumption phenomenon is seen to assume such a significant position in contemporary society that scholars have pointed to the substitution of the citizen by the consumer: “Indeed, on the overall social plane, we are witnessing the eclipse of the *citizen* ... and the rise in its place of the *consumer* – boundaryless, mercurial, hedonic, whimsical, simulation-loving and experience-seeking” (Firat et al. 1995, 51-52). Hence today, freedom, power, and independence emanate not from civil rights, but from individual choices and acts of consumption exercised in a market-based universe (Du Gay 1996, 77). As a consumer, one makes choices, exercises freedom, fulfills needs and wants, satisfies desires, meets aspirations, and shapes one’s identity and lifestyle – in quest of pleasure, excitement, experience, happiness, meaning, recognition, or self-definition, -expression, and -fulfillment. Within this discourse, “consumers are constituted as autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors seeking to maximize their ‘quality of life’... by assembling a lifestyle, or lifestyles, through personalized acts of choice” (ibid.). As the potential for choice among brands, images, and lifestyles expands and explodes, the consumer can no longer be regarded simply as a target; rather, he or she becomes “an active link in the continual production and reproduction” of meaning and value (Firat et al. 1995, 53). The “customizing consumer” also emerges with postmodernism – a consumer who “takes elements of market offerings and crafts a customized consumption experience” (Moyers 1989 in Firat et al. 1995, 50). This point illustrates the connection between basic assumptions of postmodern thinking and those underlying the co-creation paradigm. The attentive reader may also have noticed the description of the postmodern consumer as *experience-seeking*, providing us with another conceptual link.

While consumption is perceived as a significant value-creating act, the conceptualization of consumption within postmodern scholarship appears to remain rather abstract. Barnett and co-writers suggest a definition which seems to be relevant and operational in the present context, as they describe consumption as a process “whereby agents engage in appropriation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (2005, 29).²²

²² As is probably already clear to the reader, these agents will be referred to as *consumers* consistently throughout the thesis. Compared to the term *customer*, the notion of the consumer is found to be the more pertinent term – in view of the focus on *consumer* agency and empowerment and consumption in the realm of experiences. Yet, as others have argued, the terms are frequently used interchangeably (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004a, 6), and the term ‘customer’ will appear in quotes from other sources included in the thesis.

3.4.3 Conceptual context

A closely related terminology to modernism and postmodernism is that of *structuralism* and *poststructuralism* (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 240), and postmodernism and poststructuralism have overlapping meanings, it is argued (ibid.). The idea of the *subject* is said to be at the heart of postmodern thinking (ibid. 254), and as a central poststructuralist theorist, Foucault claims that precisely the subject constitutes the “general theme” of his research (1983, 209).²³ The subject in question here is obviously the consumer – the agent around which the different parts of the analysis will revolve.

Finally, there is a sense in which postmodern scholarship displays concurrence with both sides of the debate concerning consumer agency. On the one hand, there is a focus on the freedom and power of the consumer, on the consumer as a producer of meaning, value, and identity – a belief that the consumer can realize his or her “liberatory potential in subverting the market rather than being seduced by it” (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 251). On the other, marketing is defined as the “conscious and planned practice of signification and representation, the paramount processes of life according to postmodern sensibility” (Firat & Venkatesh 1993, 246). These are notions which point to the constitutive role played by marketing in contemporary society and life as it is to be lived herein, that is, what governmentality-inspired scholars would consider the powerful influence of marketing and marketers in directing acts of consumption.

3.5 Summary

The purpose of Section 3 was to establish the conceptual framework of the thesis by explaining and defining the main theories and concepts drawn upon throughout. The main points and premises of these are recapitulated below.

Foucault’s concept of governmentality is based upon a particular understanding of power and government, both of which are perceived to be embedded in discourses and social practices. Government is defined as ‘the conduct of conduct’, and in this sense, it concerns the shaping of human conduct or the possible fields of action of others for particular ends. Hence the governmentality concept relates to modes of governing that seek to work through the capacities, desires, and freedom of individuals, and analysis inspired by this theoretical perspective examines discourses and practices which seek to simultaneously shape and work through the choices, aspirations, wants, and lifestyles of

²³ Foucault adds that yes, he did become “quite involved with the question of power” (1983, 209) – which is probably the main issue with which scholars and students associate his work.

individuals and collectives. In the present case, marketing is clearly the discourse and practice – or regime of power – under scrutiny and consumers the agents whose behavior and consciousness may be shaped.

The second conceptual model is that of the experience economy, a theory developed by Pine and Gilmore which focuses on experiences as a distinct and hitherto largely unarticulated economic offering. The experience economy is seen to supersede the service economy, and experiences are identified as the foundation for future economic growth, illustrating the progression of economic value from a focus on commodities to goods to services and then to experiences. Today, every business is a stage, Pine and Gilmore argue, and companies must learn to stage compelling experiences so as to stay relevant and competitive, to prosper and survive.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy share the view of experiences as an increasingly important source of value, but believe that the consumer should be placed at the very center of the business universe – as an active participant and co-creator of value. The co-creation paradigm is said to challenge the conventional view of marketing, and the meaning of value is seen to be shifting from a company- and product-centric view to personalized consumer experiences. Consumers are regarded as active, empowered, and connected, and dialog and engagement consequently become important parameters in this approach to marketing.

Finally, the section looked into the dialectics between the meaning of marketing and consumption and contemporary society, expressed by the notion of a postmodern consumer society. The associated discourse essentially constitutes the consumer as an autonomous agent who exercises freedom, creates meaning, makes choices, satisfies needs and desires, and seeks experiences through personalized acts of consumption. At the same time, marketing is acknowledged as a significant socio-cultural practice and institution, playing a constitutive role in society today.

The concepts, theories, and models considered in Section 3 help to shed light on different central facets of marketing and consumption and the roles of marketers and consumers in these processes. Having laid the conceptual groundwork, the study now delves deeper into the issues and analytical aspects of these phenomena which constitute the research agenda of the thesis.

4.-6. Analysis

4. Academic marketing discourse

4.1 Representations and assumptions in 1967

It is argued that “every marketer ... tries to construct a representation of consumers and attribute a role to them” (Marion 2004 in Cova & Cova 2012, 157). The ways in which this is done by different marketing actors in different marketing sources and contexts are central to the analyses presented in Sections 4 to 6. As the first analytical step, Section 4 looks into how consumers and marketers are represented in influential academic marketing literature, as the analysis sets out to examine which basic assumptions seem to underlie representations of these agents and their roles in Kotler’s classic marketing text *Marketing Management*, as expressed in the first edition published in 1967 and the most recent edition published in 2012.²⁴

4.1.1 Marketing defined

Most marketing textbooks contain a section which has as its purpose to define marketing as a business function, discipline, or philosophy. Since definitions are said to “carry silent but constitutive presumptions” (Hackley 2001, 67), such definitions of marketing may provide an apt point of departure, as they can reveal underlying explicit or implicit assumptions about the actors involved and their roles.

Kotler takes the meaning of the ‘powerful’ marketing concept as his starting point in the opening chapter of the first edition of his textbook. He states: ‘Marketing’s short-run task may be to adjust customers’ wants to existing goods, but its long-run task is to adjust the goods to customers’ wants’ (Kotler 1967, 3). Kotler continues: ‘This last point ... is embodied in the new marketing concept that is revolutionizing the approach of businessmen to the problems of achieving viable business growth’ (p. 3). The marketing concept is contrasted with an ‘obsolete’ understanding of marketing, as Kotler refers to the latest official definition suggested by the American Marketing Association to illustrate what, to his mind, has become an inadequate view. Here, marketing is defined as ‘The performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer or user’ (p. 5). This definition depicts marketing as a unidirectional, transactional process, and one can virtually see the arrows going from left to right, as marketing is envisioned as a process having a clear start and end, a set of goods and their sale, with the marketer as consignor and the consumer as recipient. How does

²⁴ Please refer to Appendix A to find quotations incorporated in the text in their full length and original context.

Kotler's concept break with this view in ways which are interesting from the viewpoint of this study? The key distinction is that a 'customer-oriented focus' is given as a primary pillar of the new marketing concept (p. 6). Accordingly, 'the customer is at the top of the organization chart' (p. 6), and it is proposed that 'all company functions operate on a customer logic' (p. 9).

Kotler concludes this line of reasoning with the following statement: 'A customer orientation is the logical basis for profit planning in *a consumer-sovereign economy*' (p. 11).²⁵ The marketing guru thus devotes the introductory pages of his seminal work arguing in favor of placing the consumer at the center of company activity. This would appear to be all grist for the mill of scholars and practitioners arguing for consumer sovereignty, cf. the quote above. If this was the view advocated more than four decades ago, then the case made for high levels of consumer power in the new millennium seems rather strong. Yet, for the critical analyst, the question arises as to how such claims translate into assumptions regarding consumer agency. Kotler's own definition of marketing might give us an idea thereof. The point of view of the book is that 'Marketing is the analyzing, organizing, planning, and controlling of the firm's customer-impinging resources, policies, and activities with a view to satisfying the needs and wants of chosen customer groups at a profit' (p. 12).²⁶ While less simplistic and explicitly unidirectional than the definition criticized, the definition proposed by Kotler does not seem to leave much room for consumers as active agents either. The noun 'marketing' serves as the grammatical subject of the clause, representing the functions undertaken by marketers. Consumers are mentioned only in the adjectival modifier in 'customer-impinging resources' and as an entity chosen by marketers. In a terminology consistent with the conceptual framework of the thesis, "the subject position of the customer is not rearticulated" (Skålen et al. 2008, 109), it seems.

4.1.2 The significance of 'buyer behavior'

Kotler introduces the notion of 'buyer behavior' through an account of 'the buying process' (Kotler 1967, 67). In this, 'The customer is seen as going from a felt need to prepurchase activity to a purchase decision to use behavior to postpurchase feelings' (p. 67). Marketers, on the other hand, 'must comprehend the whole process ... in order to do an effective job of meeting customer wants' (p. 67). One notices that a passive construction is used to describe the consumer's movement, that he or she is

²⁵ Emphasis added.

²⁶ With this particular definition of marketing, one notices the link to the subtitle of Kotler's work – something to which I shall return at a later point in the analysis.

seen as undergoing the activity or process (Van Leeuwen 1996, 44), whereas the marketer is represented as a *doer* in terms of agency (Simpson & Mayr 2010, 66).

As one might expect, taking into account the intended audience – ‘today’s and tomorrow’s marketing executives’ (Kotler 1967, Preface) – the book assumes a clear company perspective, focusing on the role of the marketer. To illustrate, Kotler repetitively applies the phrase ‘the significance for the marketer’ after making a central point about buyer behavior. Examples from the text are: ‘The significance of felt needs for the marketer is to ...’ (p. 68); ‘The significance of prepurchase activity for the marketer is ...’ (p. 70); ‘For the marketer the significance of the purchase decision is that ...’ (p. 72); and ‘The significance of use behavior for the marketer is to ...’ (p. 73). The marketer is thus prepared to take action in the different stages through which the consumer is seen to pass. A model is included to help marketers further in that respect, a ‘customer decision model’ composed of four elements: information, filtration, disposition changes, and outcome. Kotler writes: ‘The input stimuli consists [sic] of information about competing products and their varying attributes ... This information *is carried to the prospective customer* through [various] sources’ (p. 77).²⁷ It is noteworthy that the consumer is represented as a passive recipient of information, and this representation immediately brings to mind the much discussed transmission model of communication, developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949), with its functionalistic view of communication as a message carried from sender to receiver through a certain channel. In the example above, the consumer is represented as the party at the receiving end of the activity, as an instance of passivation (Van Leeuwen 1996, 43-44). The model acknowledges that ‘The information is subject to selection and distortion by the individual buyer’ (p. 77) – that an act of ‘information processing’ takes place with the consumer as the active actor: ‘He filters it in a unique way based on his constellation of attitudes and prior information’ (p. 77). Yet, a certain pattern emerges as regards clause structure, as illustrated in: ‘The information is subject to selection and distortion by the individual buyer’; ‘The filtered information, along with other factors, affect the disposition of the prospective buyer toward the product’; and ‘The outcome of this information processing by the prospective buyer may take one of three forms’ (p. 77). While the consumer is the agent in this process, this aspect is *backgrounded* (Van Leeuwen 1996, 39). The grammatical subjects are the noun phrases ‘the information’, ‘the filtered information ...’, and ‘the outcome ...’ respectively, all located in initial position, while the consumer is only mentioned in the three prepositional phrases functioning as post-

²⁷ Emphasis added.

modifiers in noun phrases. Hence focus is on what these factors mean to the marketer, and the consumer does not figure explicitly as agent, as explained by Halliday's principles of textual meaning and thematic structure.

Kotler concludes the chapter with the following words: 'It turns out that the 'black box' of the buyer's mind, although complicated, is not so black after all. Light is thrown in various corners by these models. Yet no one has succeeded in putting all these pieces of truth together into one coherent instrument for behavioral analysis. This, of course, is the goal of behavioral science' (pp. 94-95). Statements such as these and the assumptions upon which they build seem "to make consumers appear predictable and amenable to typologies of marketing efforts" (Gabriel & Lang 2008, 33). This might, in turn, presuppose that consumers can rather easily be "aggregated into meaningful segments" as passive target markets (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 6). Kotler's initial description of the consumer as 'the ultimate unit in the market place' (1967, Preface) could be seen to encapsulate the picture painted in the preceding pages, a description which is repeated in the introduction: 'Chapter 4, 'Buyer Behavior', carries the analysis of the market to its ultimate unit, the individual buyer ...' (p. 1).

4.1.3 By free choice?

Some of the researchers who have connected marketing to mechanisms of governmentality argue that marketers exercise control over consumers through the active constitution of needs and wants (see e.g. Knights & Sturdy 1997). How does Kotler's work relate to this matter? The text, in fact, explicitly deals with this issue: Kotler points out that the starting point of the buying process is a 'felt need' (p. 68). A couple of lines down, he states: 'It may be a need that arose spontaneously, or was created by social or business processes.'²⁸ Further below is where it becomes truly interesting from the present perspective, as illustrated by the following quotes: 'Marketers do not pass judgment on wants. Rather, they consider it their responsibility to satisfy them insofar as they are able. Admittedly, they go beyond this and stimulate new, specific wants' (p. 68). He continues: 'Some quarrel with the philosophical implications of wants that business stimulates ... but the persuasion powers of business are not absolute, and in a free economy, the consumer, rather than someone else, selects the wants that he will satisfy' (p. 68). Several points can be made: First, Kotler acknowledges the influence of marketers in the constitution of wants to

²⁸ A distinction is usually made between *needs* and *wants*: Needs are basic human requirements, such as those for air, water, and food – and for recreation, education, and entertainment. Such needs become wants when directed towards specific objects which may satisfy the need (Kotler et al. 2012, 14). In this case, Kotler argues: 'Needs have also been called wants, wishes, motives, urges, drives; distinctions between these terms are not worth making here. What they all have in common is that they represent a state of tension' (1967, 68).

a certain extent. Yet, in the clauses that follow, this degree of agency is somewhat blurred by the use of the *abstract noun* ‘business’ (Van Leeuwen 1996, 59). The latter part of the quote positions the consumer as an autonomous, self-directed agent. The consumer is granted agency, directed by ‘his’ free will and the ability to make a deliberate choice of consumption in the marketplace. Yet, from a critical stance, constituting the consumer in this manner can be seen merely as a way to free the marketer from responsibility, refuting the image of a powerless consumer swayed by the powerful marketer. This is done implicitly through the representational choice of abstraction and explicitly by emphasizing how business, i.e. marketers as a collective, does not hold absolute power over the – free – consumer. It could, therefore, serve as an illustration of how maintaining “the common-sense notion that the consumer is powerful given his or her ability to exercise free choice is an astute strategy because a free consumer exculpates marketing from charges of seduction, coercion, and manipulation” (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 950-951).

4.2 Representations and assumptions in 2012

4.2.1 Four decades later: Marketing defined

No less than 45 years have passed between the two editions of *Marketing Management* analyzed. The title of a text is clearly a prominent feature, and the two textbooks differ in this respect: While the 1967 edition carries the full title *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control*, in 2012, the text is simply entitled *Marketing Management*. On the face of it, the decision to disregard the subtitle could imply recognition of marketing as a less straightforward, directly controllable process, possibly reflecting that contemporary marketers are faced with markets of consumers that are “less amenable to categorization, management, and direction” (Zwick et al. 2008, 171). This reading, might, however, merely be an over-interpretation by an avid analyst. Whatever the case may be, the analysis continues with an examination of the discursive representations of consumers and marketers in the most recently published edition of Kotler’s marketing text.

On the first page of his introduction to marketing, Kotler argues: ‘The role of marketing is always to think customer’ (p. 5), and in answering the question ‘What is marketing?’, he includes the following definition:

‘Marketing is a *customer focus* that permeates organizational functions and processes and is geared towards making promises through value propositions, enabling the fulfillment of individual expectations created by such promises and fulfilling such expectations through support to

*customers' value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation in the firm's as well as its customers' and other stakeholders' processes' (p. 8).*²⁹

One notices that customer orientation still constitutes a key subject in Kotler's melody of marketing. This observation is emphasized by his treatment of the marketing concept which is introduced as a 'customer-centered philosophy' (p. 30). Or: 'In simple terms, 'the customer is king'' (p. 28). For this very reason, 'The customers' needs, wants and satisfaction should always be foremost in every manager's and employee's mind' (p. 28). Considering both editions of the textbook, my findings in this regard, therefore, seem to support those made by Skålen et al. in their study of the governmentality of marketing discourse: That customer orientation has become "the dominant discursive managerial theme in marketing discourse" (2006, 289) or "the dominant governmental discursive practice in marketing" (ibid. 275). Compared to the definition suggested four decades ago, the definition above could also be seen to indicate a view of consumers as potentially playing a more active role in the creation of value. This aspect is explored further in the following pages.

4.2.2 Consumer empowerment

A theme which emerges from the text is that markets, and thereby current marketing landscapes, are changing. Kotler applies the label 'buyers' markets' and makes frequent use of adverbials such as *now* and *today* to indicate that the current state of affairs is different from 'the sellers' markets of yesteryear' (p. xxix). This picture is painted already in the preface: 'The paradigm change to and towards buyers' markets calls for marketers to provide customers with what they want ...' (p. xxix), and the term is used throughout, for instance: 'in current buyers' markets' (p. 395); 'in contemporary buyers' markets' (p. 422); and 'in the buyers' markets of today' (p. 432). This classification appears to imply that power rests with buyers rather than sellers, that is, with consumers. This aspect is reflected in notions of 'new consumer capabilities' (p. 25), to which a subsection in the introductory chapter is devoted. Kotler refers to 'consumer sophistication', and consumers are described as 'marketing-savvy', 'technologically savvy', 'interactive', and 'intelligent' (p. 26), just as the Internet and related technologies 'increase the power of the consumer' (p. 27). He also mentions the idea of *co-creation* in this subsection – 'where the consumer and the company combine to define, create and shape their experience of the product or service' (p. 28).³⁰

²⁹ Emphasis added.

³⁰ The reader might recall that this perspective was introduced in Section 3.3 as an approach emphasizing the central role played by consumers in marketing today.

Kotler goes beyond implying the increasing power of consumers; in Part 3 of his text, on the subject of *Connecting with customers*, he states: ‘Customer empowerment has become a way of life for many companies that have had to adjust to a shift in the importance of their customer relationships’ (p. 436). He includes a quote from a speech held by the chairman of Procter & Gamble, ‘often seen as the flag bearer for marketing best practices’, who proclaimed: ‘The power is with the consumer’ and ‘We need to learn to let go.’ This speech is, furthermore, described as having ‘created shock waves for marketers’ (p. 436). The representation of the consumer as ‘empowered’ is also articulated explicitly (p. 452). Dealing with the process of ‘marketing to the empowered consumer’, Kotler suggests: ‘As consumers take up the new technologies that give them fingertip control of how, when and if they want to be marketed to, marketers should seriously reconsider the traditional 4P mantra, and engage customers on their own terms’ (p. 453).³¹ It is interesting to note that the marketer-to-be is advised not only to act, as was primarily the case in the analysis above, but also to *react*. The latter perhaps more or less willingly, as seen in ‘have had to adjust to’ above, a verb phrase containing the marginal modal *have to*, a case of *deontic modality*, modality of obligation and necessity (Fairclough 2003, 219). It could also be worth noting in this context that Kotler repeatedly applies the expression ‘seek to’ to describe the acts of marketers in the sections analyzed. Examples include: ‘Wise companies seek to discover what their customers want’ (p. 452); ‘... as firms seek to meet customer-perceived value requirements’ (p. xxix); and ‘marketers are now seeking to achieve customer engagement’ (p. 455). ‘Seek to’ has a semantic meaning similar to ‘try to’ or ‘attempt to’ (Hornby & Turnbull 2010), and the points made may indicate that the task of marketers in managing and controlling “protean and agentic consumers” is becoming increasingly difficult (Zwick et al. 2008, 171).

The discursive representations discussed above and the subject positions available within them would appear to be empowering for consumers. The text also notes: ‘Paradoxically, and reflecting the past sellers’ market conditions, much of the literature on consumer empowerment focuses on consumers’ efforts to regain control of their consumption processes from providers. However, many suppliers now set out to achieve success by seeking to empower consumers’ (p. 452). Yet, this particular representation of current marketing practice is precisely what scholars such as Zwick et al. contest with their critical interrogation of marketing through a governmentality lens. They argue that “continued corporate control and sustained competitiveness require a free consumer subject”, and they thus remain skeptical of the

³¹ The 4 Ps of the traditional marketing mix originally referred to product, price, place, and promotion (Kotler et al. 2012, 973).

“active participation of formerly passive(ied) consumers” (2008, 168; 164-165). In this view, the emergence of such new “consumer faces”, discursively constructed by marketing discourses, does not prevent marketers from pursuing “the Holy Grail of control” (Gabriel & Lang 2008, 334), for which reason the discourse of consumer power is considered “only superficially liberating” (Cova & Cova 2012, 160).

4.2.3 Emergent versus dominant views

The co-creation perspective is mentioned again in this chapter. In explaining the thesis of the two co-creation proponents, Kotler writes that ‘according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy’, ‘the world of business is moving away from a company- and product-centric view of value creation towards an experience-centric view of the co-creation of customer-perceived value’ (p. 450). The inclusion of this perspective might indicate that such theories are making their way into dominant academic marketing discourse and theory. Kotler recognizes that today, the concept of value is ‘heavily influenced by buyers’ – so that ‘the concept of *customer-perceived value* has become a vital concern for marketers’ and ‘a matter of increasing concern in the marketing literature’ (p. 422). It, however, appears that there is still some way to go before consumers are considered fully “agentive participants” (Van Leeuwen 1996, 40) and central value-co-creating agents in Kotler’s marketing bible.

Different points and arguments made seem to point to underlying assumptions that continue to take the marketer as the ultimate provider of value. Kotler presumably repeats this particular turn of phrase to make a point of consumer centrality, but in a way, he ends up maintaining the position of the marketer as the primary agent: ‘While it was Mahatma Ghandi who was the first to coin the phrase ‘The customer is king’, today most marketers recognise its truth. The concept of customer-perceived value should be interpreted as a task to provide the right customer value package all the time’ (p. 435). A model included to represent the idea of ‘perfect positioning’ might exemplify this point. The figure displaying this ideal ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ marketing situation is shown below. Here, ‘The right market offering is being placed on the market’ (p. 410). Two ‘happy faces’ depict this idea in a highly simplified model. One face belongs to ‘the seller’, the agent who ‘supplies the right market offering’, and another smile is placed on the face of the buyer, the one who ‘finds the right offering’ (p. 410) – a representation which leaves one with an impression of the marketer as the ultimate value provider and the consumer as a recipient of the value exchanged in the marketing encounter.

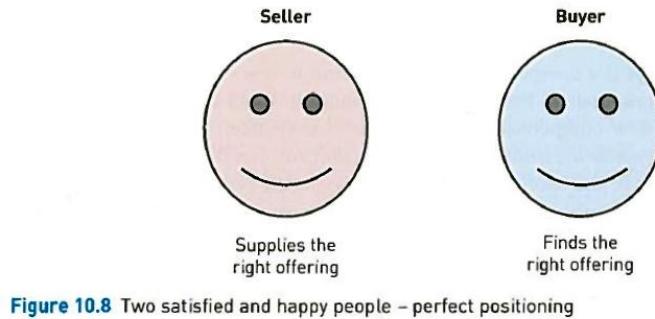


Figure 4.1: Perfect positioning.³²

In certain cases, Kotler refers explicitly to the views and works of other scholars in the field. The reference to Prahalad and Ramaswamy's vision of co-creation mentioned above serves as a case in point, and another illustrative example is: 'Wind and Rangaswamy see a movement towards 'customerising' the firm. ... Customerisation combines operationally driven mass customisation with customised marketing in a way that empowers consumers to design the customer-perceived value offering of their choice' (p. 373). Hence, while such perspectives on marketing, with their views of consumers as empowered agents, are included in Kotler's text, they are neither fully incorporated into nor dominant in his account of and approach to marketing. It might be the case that co-creation and associated assumptions are still considered too strong "a radicalization of the customer-centricity that is a cornerstone of the 'Kotlerite' doctrine of marketing thought" (Zwick et al. 2008, 172).

4.2.4 The conduct of conduct

Another significant theme relates to the core marketing concepts of needs, wants, and demands, also dealt with above. In defining these concepts, Kotler states: 'These distinctions shed light on the frequent criticism that 'marketers create needs' (p. 14), after which the "master marketer" (Romano 1996, 19) firmly asserts: 'Marketers do not create needs: needs pre-exist marketers' (p. 14). For Kotler, it seems, there is no doubt about the truth of his proposition, and one senses a strong wish to rectify an erroneous assumption about the manipulative influence of marketers and their practice. He accepts that 'Marketers, along with other societal factors, influence wants', but then underlines his points in: 'They *might* promote the idea that a Mercedes would satisfy a person's need for social status. They *do not*, however, create the need for social status' (p. 14).³³ In the first clause, Kotler applies the past-tense modal verb *might* to denote *remote possibility* (Preisler 1997, 119). At the level of interpersonal meaning, Kotler

³² Source: Kotler et al. 2012, 410.

³³ Emphasis added.

thus hesitantly opens up the possibility that marketers could play a role in this. In ‘Marketers do not create needs’ and ‘They do not ... create the need’, his statements, on the other hand, take the form of denials (Fairclough 2003, 169), as a categorical rejection of the accusation of marketers as exercising power in this sense.

This line of argumentation is continued as follows: ‘Some customers have needs of which they are not fully conscious or that they cannot articulate.’ So, ‘companies must *help* consumers *learn* what they want’ (p. 14).³⁴ These points are significant from the perspective of the present study: First, the verb *help* almost implies that marketers are doing consumers a favor, assisting them in their consumption quandary. Second, when one part is engaged in a process of ‘learning’, the other is often engaged in an act of ‘teaching’, and teaching could be regarded as an influential way of exercising influence. Inspired by the theoretical lens of the thesis, Kotler’s words bring to mind Foucault’s notion of government, as defined in Section 3.1.2. The link between theory and analysis becomes clear if we recall how government in this sense relates to the more or less deliberate and subtle direction of conduct, a form of governing through the desires and capacities of individuals, or as articulated by Foucault himself, simply ‘the conduct of conduct’. Challenging the point which Kotler endeavors to make, a governmentality-informed reading would suggest that the assumptions which seem to come to the fore in his text demonstrate how marketing may be seen as a practice which attempts to both shape and work through the choices, needs, wants, and desires of individuals.

4.3 Conclusion

The analysis shows that a central discursive theme in both editions of Kotler’s marketing text is that of customer orientation. In the 1967 edition, customer orientation is introduced as the central pillar of the marketing concept. But while a focus on the consumer and his or her wants is represented as key to this concept, Kotler’s conceptualizations of marketing and consumer behavior do not seem to truly consider consumers as active agents. Focus is on the role of the marketer, while consumers essentially constitute target markets, an entity chosen and targeted, the ultimate unit of analysis. The most recent edition acknowledges that changes are occurring in the contemporary marketing landscape, and that these are developments to which marketers must find ways to respond. Consumers appear clearly as agentic individuals; changes are reflected in the notion of buyers’ markets, and consumer empowerment is explicitly dealt with as an aspect of current corporate reality. In terms of assumptions concerning

³⁴ Emphasis added.

agency, consumers are thus recognized as increasingly active players in the definition of value and the market overall. It is, however, possible to make a distinction between emergent and dominant views in Kotler's account. While consumers are no longer assumed to be passive, predictable targets, the discourse remains distinctly company-centric, and the proclaimed shift in the relative balance of power between marketer and the individual consumer does not seem to be fully embraced just yet in Kotler's discursive and conceptual framework.

Kotler, furthermore, deals explicitly with the issue of consumer needs and wants and the sources of these in both editions. It is significant that in this context, the consumer is constituted as a free actor – a self-directed agent in a position to exercise choice in the marketplace. Yet, while Kotler rejects charges of the manipulative powers of marketing and marketers, others would find that certain points and representations in his work exemplify how marketing practice can be perceived to entail attempts at the conduct of conduct, generating consumer subjects who “are free and yet governed” (Beckett 2012, 10).

5. Experience economy theory

As the next step in the analysis, Section 5 considers predominant experience economy theory, guided by a focus on representations of consumers and marketers and the assumptions concerning the roles of these actors which seem to underlie such representations. As previously mentioned, Section 5 takes as its point of departure the work of marketing scholars and practitioners Pine and Gilmore, namely their seminal book *The Experience Economy* (1999) and the journal article “Welcome to the Experience Economy” (1998), through which they introduced the academic business community to their theory of an emerging experience economy.³⁵

5.1 Experience staging

Pine and Gilmore’s book carries the subtitle *Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. The model and principles of the world of theatre constitute the guiding theme of the book, and a particular theatrical terminology is applied consistently throughout. A glance at the table of contents illustrates this point: Chapters carry titles such as ‘Setting the Stage’, ‘Get Your Act Together’, ‘Performing to Form’, ‘Now Act Your Part’, and ‘Exit, Stage Right’ (Pine & Gilmore 1999, p. vii). The three main sections into which the book is divided are even titled ‘Preview’, ‘Intermission’, and ‘Encore’ (p. vii). The central definition of experiences proposed by the two authors is also relevant and quite illustrative, as Pine and Gilmore write: ‘The newly identified offering of experiences occurs whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual’ (p. 11).

Hence the principles of theatre appear as the central premise and model upon which their theoretical framework builds. The discursive representations of the social actors of interest to the present study are no exception. The analysis is again concerned with two main categories of agents – consumers who desire experiences and companies, or marketers, that design and promote these experiences (Pine & Gilmore 1998, 97). First, a set of lexical items centered on terms such as *stage*, *performance*, and *props* appears to assume implicitly an actor or actors and an audience, generally playing primarily active and passive roles respectively. The definition above could be argued to support this point, as the company is represented as the active – or *acting* – party. Also, a table displaying distinctions between the four economic offerings, commodities, goods, services, and experiences, is included in both this introductory chapter and the article: In the case of experiences, the ‘seller’ is defined as a ‘stager’ and the ‘buyer’ is conceptualized as a ‘guest’ (Pine & Gilmore 1999, p. 6). The two agents are thus represented as having

³⁵ Please refer to Appendix A to find quotations incorporated in the text in their full length and original context.

clearly defined, distinct roles, and the basic assumption seems to be that experiences are staged *by* the marketer, *for* the consumer – ‘as in a theatrical play’ (p. 2). As to clause structure and participant roles, one notices a pattern in the definitions given, as illustrated in: ‘Companies stage an experience when they engage customers in a memorable way’ (p. 4), where companies stand as subjects in main and subordinate clause, while ‘customers’ serves as the object in the sub-clause. Semantically, and consistent with Halliday’s transitivity terminology, the company is the actor, the one that does the deed, and the consumer the goal (1994, 109). Thus far, there appears to be no doubt as to which of the two social agents is assumed to play the active role. To illustrate, adherents of the co-creation view of experiential value, in contrast, argue that “an experience is a result of the interaction between a subject (the customer) and an object (the experience provider) and the act of co-creation between the two” (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 271), a definition in which one notes a reversal of roles compared to the analysis above.

5.2 Participation

A model was introduced in Section 3.2.4, depicting the four experiential realms defined by Pine and Gilmore; since one dimension of experience explicitly relates to guest *participation*, it seems relevant to take a closer look at this particular model.³⁶ Defining the dimension of participation in each realm, the authors explain that ‘education involves the active participation of the individual’ (p. 32), and that the educational aspect of an experience is ‘essentially active’ (p. 40). A quote is included which states that ‘the active focus will shift from the provider to the user’ and ‘in the new learning marketplace, customers ... are active learners’ (p. 32). Similarly, ‘The guest of an escapist experience is completely immersed in it, an actively involved participant’ (p. 33), and ‘Rather than playing the passive role of couch potato, watching others act, the individual becomes an actor’ (p. 33). Guests, however, ‘remain passive’ in entertainment and esthetic experiences (p. 35). That is, the model considers, and the two scholars thus recognize, varying degrees of guest participation, or consumer involvement, acknowledging that consumers may play an active, participatory role in the conception of experiences. This is also manifested linguistically. In this subsection, experience-consuming subjects stand as grammatical subjects, and subjects such as ‘people’ (p. 31), ‘guests’ (p. 34), and ‘individuals’ (p. 35) occur as alternatives to ‘companies’, ‘businesses’, ‘enterprises’, and ‘marketers’, the actors that dominate the rest of the book. Yet, although representations of the consumer as an active, involved participant appears to echo the central assumptions of Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s co-creation

³⁶ The four realms identified are entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic experiences (see p. 27).

paradigm, to Pine and Gilmore, marketers remain the agents who design the experience (p. 39) and ‘set the stage’ (p. 40).

5.3 Customization

Another significant concept in Pine and Gilmore’s work is that of *customization* – a term which would per definition imply some degree of consumer influence. The authors advise marketers to turn to customization ‘to create *customer-unique value*, the portal through which experiences reach individual consumers’ (p. 70). In order to confer customer-unique value, an economic offering should ideally be ‘specific to individual customers’, ‘particular in its characteristics’, and ‘singular in its purpose to benefit this customer’ (p. 70), descriptions which appear to assign the individual consuming subject a prominent position in the process. The more prominent position, nevertheless, seems to be held by the marketer; Pine and Gilmore’s emphasis on *Mass Customization* specifically, capitalized and italicized, could illustrate this point.

They argue that ‘Mass Customization means efficiently serving customers uniquely’ (p. 72). First, some might point to an inherent contradiction between the modifier *mass*, commonly associated with *mass* markets and *mass* production, and the true meaning of *unique*. Second, one notices the adverb *efficiently*. The agent undertaking the act of customization is defined as a ‘mass customizer’, and the reader is told that the mass customizer’s ‘interaction with each individual provides the means for *efficient*, *effective*, and (as much as possible) *effortless* determination of customer needs’ (p. 76).³⁷ Companies ‘should then bring that information about a customer’s desires directly into operations for efficient, on-demand production or provisioning, effectively turning the old supply chain into a demand chain’ (p. 76). On the one hand, Pine and Gilmore’s idea of a *demand* chain seems to be in agreement with Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s suggestion that the conventional value chain be disregarded and marketing guided by a demand-side rather than supply-side perspective. On the other, efficiency and effectiveness are represented as central concerns in Pine and Gilmore’s model – obviously significant parameters from a company perspective. These parameters do not figure in the co-creation model which is envisioned to replace precisely the company-centric and efficiency-driven approach to marketing. It is noteworthy that the two experience pioneers maintain their emphasis on customizing ‘effectively’ (p. 78). Might this be an implicit means of convincing skeptic marketers of the benefits of their business logic? The adjective *effortless* emphasized in the quote above would seem to support this reading.

³⁷ Emphasis added.

5.4 Value: Deliverable or mutually determined

In the article introducing their thesis of the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore state that ‘Excellent design, marketing, and delivery will be every bit as crucial for experiences as they are for goods and services’ (1998, p. 101). Are consumers, then, imagined as active agents in these activities? The authors point out that experiences ‘have to be deliverable’ and that ‘experiences derive from an iterative process of exploration, scripting, and staging – capabilities that aspiring experience merchants will need to master’ (p. 102). In this, the marketer is represented as a provider of experiential value, the acting agent in the creation of the experience to be delivered, and the reply to the question raised appears to be a ‘no’. Such representations, moreover, treat experiences as “manageable economic offerings” (Snel 2011, 32), offerings managed by the marketer. Pine and Gilmore’s principle of charging an admission fee exemplifies this point. They write: In ‘selling’ and ‘staging an economic experience’, ‘you’ should charge consumers for using that particular offering – ‘in a place you control’ (p. 62). As argued by Boswijk et al., “‘Staging’ and ‘scripting’ continue to be attractive alternatives since they allow marketers to remain in control” (2007, 201-202).

Certain points made by the two authors might, however, indicate that one should perhaps not immediately deem their theory an entirely one-sided perspective, based upon a view of the consumer as nothing but a passive goal for corporate action. Towards the end of the chapter dealing with customization, they suggest: ‘Every time a provider interacts with a customer, both parties have the opportunity to learn. Eventually, one party changes his behavior as a result of that learning. Unfortunately, all too often that’s the customer’ (p. 80). Does this mean that the individual consumer should be assigned more power in the relationship between marketer and consumer? Earlier in the chapter, Pine and Gilmore make the case that mass customizing relates to ‘doing only and exactly what each customer wants, when he wants it’ (p. 76), an argument which could signify an empowered consumer subject. They refer to ‘one-to-one marketing’ (p. 84), “the pinnacle of customer-centricity” (Zwick et al. 2008, 182), and the axiom that ‘Each customer is unique’ (p. 86) and then move on to discuss four approaches to customization, of which one is particularly interesting in its conception. This approach is defined as *collaborative customization* and is a process in which consumer and customizer ‘mutually determine the value to be created’ (p. 88). This also means that ‘The customizer relinquishes some control of the process, allowing the buyer to participate directly in decision-making ...’ (p. 88).

As an approach distinguished by features such as ‘customized offerings’, ‘mutually determined value’, ‘direct interaction’, and ‘conversation’ (p. 94), collaborative customization appears to share a number of common characteristics with the co-creation approach to marketing practice. Nevertheless, since the key concern for Prahalad and Ramaswamy remains the increasingly active, empowered consumer and the part played by the consumer in the game of marketing today, they might not be convinced by Pine and Gilmore’s account: Just below a table outlining their approaches to customization, Pine and Gilmore pose the rhetorical question ‘why choose to customize at all?’ The answer is apparently ‘very simple’: ‘*Customizers stage fundamentally different experiences for customers*’ (p. 94).³⁸ That is, the marketer is the agent directing the experience, and Pine and Gilmore’s conceptual model reverts to the company as experience stager, with the marketer as actor and the consumer as goal to a greater or lesser extent.

Inspired by the findings above, one could ask who and how Pine and Gilmore consider their audience. The authors identify their intended readership in the preface to their book which was written ‘for those searching for new ways to add value to their enterprises’ (p. ix). Two discursive features found in Pine and Gilmore’s work may be particularly central in this respect: The imperative, one of the three major mood categories, is generally used to express a form of directive. While the imperative clause usually does not contain an explicit subject, the implicit subject is always the addressee (Preisler 1997, 64). Examples from the text are: ‘To enter the Experience Economy, first customize your goods and services’ (p. 71), ‘Set the stage by ...’ (p. 40), and ‘Theme the experience’ (p. 46). A related feature is the use of the second-person personal pronoun *you*, as seen in: ‘When designing your experience, you should consider ...’ and ‘To design a rich experience ... you want to use the experiential framework as a set of prompts that help you to creatively explore the aspects of each realm that might enhance the particular experience you wish to stage’ (p. 39). Both of these devices are used by writers to explicitly address and involve their audiences (Hyland 2005, 53), and the inclusion of these features is significant here because it contributes to constructing the text as a form of how-to guide to marketers. The latter are encouraged to take a particular action and provided with insights and principles for staging experiences and adding value to their commercial offerings. This, in turn, becomes relevant with regard to agency, since it can be taken to underline the primary role that marketers are assumed to take on and play – a reading that is also reflected in the remark with which Pine and Gilmore end their preface: ‘... we hope you personally find the tools to begin staging compelling experiences ... for your customers, present and future’ (p. xii).

³⁸ Emphasis added.

5.5 Conclusion

As illustrated, Pine and Gilmore operate with two central discursive representations of marketer and consumer, that of experience stager and guest. The analysis suggests that their conceptual model and these representations are associated with clearly designated roles. When delving deeper into their work, one finds that the two scholars consider factors such as participation and customization and notions of a demand chain and customer-unique value, all dimensions which would involve at least some degree of active consumer agency. Even so, their work, and with that, their framework overall, is characterized by a clear company focus and guided by a supply-side perspective. Pine and Gilmore theorize about the experience economy from a company-centric perspective, and their theory assumes the centrality of the marketer. Their theoretical framework revolves around the idea of the marketer as experience stager and value creator whose performance should engage the consumer, which means that consumers are represented less as agents of their consumption and more as the parties affected by corporate performances. The perspective provided is that of the offering party, and to some extent, it seems that one is faced with a manual of experience-staging principles. In that sense, Poulsson and Kale seem to have put it well in describing the dominant theory of experiential value in marketing as one based upon the assumption of experience as the foundation for future economic growth with *The Experience Economy* “as the playbook from which managers can begin to direct new performances” (2004, 267).

These aspects will be discussed further in Section 7 which draws together the different conceptual threads. Before that, the analysis considers the marketing communications and approaches of two global marketers and experience enterprises.

6. Marketing communications

6.1 The Starbucks experience

Having looked into academic marketing discourse and experience economy theory, the study turns to an analysis of marketing in practice. As the third and final analytical step, Section 6 examines how the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company construe and approach consumers as reflected in the communication with these. It analyses the online communication of the two corporate players to explore whether consumers are considered primarily passive recipients and targets of corporate messages and commercial offerings or active participants in the (co-)creation of both. The analysis begins with an in-depth examination of Starbucks' communications efforts before considering the approach adopted by Disney.³⁹

As mentioned above, Pine and Gilmore explain their theory of the experience economy using the example of the coffee bean. As a prefatory note, turning an analytical eye to the texts on the Starbucks website appears to confirm their thesis: Starbucks is envisioned as 'a place for conversation and a sense of community.' The vision entails an aspiration to bring to life 'an exceptional experience' with every cup⁴⁰ – consumed in 'a vibrant and inviting space' where coffee seems to take on a life of its own: 'Our coffee brings people together.'⁴¹ Under the caption 'Never be without great coffee', the text suggests: 'Tear open a pack of Starbucks VIA[®] coffee and you're halfway to the magical moment that only a great cup of coffee can create.'⁴² In the same way, a 'smooth and balanced' coffee is 'a friendly constant throughout the day, reminding you that things are right just the way they are.'⁴³ Quite an achievement for a cup of coffee, one might argue. What these examples so clearly show is that the texts center on intangible value and experiential consumption; at Starbucks, consuming coffee is about much more than beans, blends, and brewing.

6.1.1 Participant relationships

The text examples also illustrate the use of significant discursive features. These and others are discussed in what follows, and here, the analysis is concerned with the interpersonal component, focusing on participant relationships, between writer and reader, marketer and consumer.

³⁹ The two corporations and their businesses are briefly introduced in Appendix B.

⁴⁰ <http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/our-heritage>

⁴¹ App. C.

⁴² App. D.

⁴³ Ibid.

The texts on the website are characterized by a particular pronominal usage – the use of the personal pronouns *you* and *we* and the related possessives *your* and *our*. The prominent use of the second-person pronoun *you* to refer to consumers is significant, since this functions to directly address and closely involve readers as participants in an unfolding interaction (Hyland 2005, 83), as was touched upon above. Examples from the texts are many, such as: ‘Use the bar above to browse coffees with the intensity and flavor that’s perfect for *you*.’⁴⁴ Text examples that mention both agents include: ‘We hope to see you soon’⁴⁵ and ‘We invite you to explore a cup.’⁴⁶ This particular pronoun use constructs a sense of direct, individualized, and personalized address, although with more than 18,000 Starbucks stores in 62 countries,⁴⁷ as a reader, one is well aware that the texts are instances of mass communication. The plural pronoun *we*, moreover, represents the company as a collective subject, and one that is more human and approachable than the image conveyed if the texts had applied subjects such as ‘Starbucks’ or ‘the company’ followed by a singular verb, presenting the company as an impersonal corporate entity. Another example is: ‘One of the things we enjoy most about the work we do is bringing you great coffees from around the world.’⁴⁸ The inclusion of these pronouns thus personalizes institution and individual, marketer and consumer, and mimics a personal relationship – a central aspect which will be elaborated below.

The main section ‘Coffee’ is headlined by the question ‘How do you like your coffee?’ which is a very explicit way to bring in the consumer from the outset.⁴⁹ Other examples are: ‘Do you have a special request?’ and ‘Not sure what to try?’⁵⁰ Questions represent a clear dialogic feature as they “explicitly seek to draw the reader into the discourse as a participant in a dialogue” (Hyland 2005, 82). The use of the imperative mood is also noteworthy. As mentioned, the basic illocutionary act of an imperative clause is that of expressing command. Yet, the imperative clauses in the present context are not used in the typical sense, but rather as “a friendly, direct call for action” (Askehave 2007, 736). By encouraging some thought or action, imperatives help to involve addressees (Hyland 2005, 54), and the use of imperatives is a salient feature of the texts; while some function primarily to get consumers to explore the website, others encourage them to take action in a more concrete sense. Some examples are: ‘Join us

⁴⁴ App. D. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ App. E.

⁴⁶ App. F.

⁴⁷ App. B.

⁴⁸ App. F.

⁴⁹ App. D.

⁵⁰ App. I.

for a 3 p.m. Wake Up Call', 'Eat on the Patio', 'Search Compare Buy',⁵¹ and 'Chat, connect and get involved.'⁵² In the case of longer text pieces, structured more in the style of a narrative, the website visitor is still discursively brought into the text, as seen in: 'You see, most coffee is lightly roasted ...' and 'Some we present as single-origin coffees ... – we'll talk about those in a moment. The rest we use to create amazing blends, and that's what we'll discuss here.'⁵³ Such use of asides and interjections highlights the presence of readers in the text (Hyland 2005, 53) and illustrates how the text is built up as a form of dialog between Starbucks and the coffee-curious consumer.

The reference to the individual consumer is consistent throughout. For instance, one heading reads 'The Flavors in Your Cup'⁵⁴ – where the same meaning could have been expressed by a heading such as 'The Starbucks Roast', with the first being more consumer-centric than its company- or product-centric alternative. The text examples given and the points made paint a picture of a communicative approach which serves to stress the centrality of each consumer, and this particular matter or company focus seems to be reinforced by the Starbucks mission statement which reads: 'Our mission: to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.'⁵⁵ The Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz is also quoted for claiming that "We're not in the coffee business serving people, we're in the people business serving coffee" (Lincoln & Thomassen 2007, 153).

Following on from this, a highly relevant aspect is the tone which defines the material analyzed. First, the discursive features dealt with thus far create a very engaging tone overall. The texts, moreover, take on a rather informal and colloquial tone. An example would be: 'We're bringing the most interesting stuff on the web right to your comfy chair',⁵⁶ where one notes both lexical choice and the use of contractions, generally associated with an informal, conversational style of writing. A sense of community is created, an image of an interaction between equals, which is accentuated by the discursive constitution of a form of personal relationship, based upon notions of sharing and involvement. Examples are: 'We love coffee and everything that goes with it. Good books. Great music. And what's more, we love sharing it with you',⁵⁷ and 'We'll let you in on a little secret ...'⁵⁸ Altogether, the texts on

⁵¹ App. G.

⁵² App. C.

⁵³ App. F.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ <http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information/mission-statement>

⁵⁶ App. C.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ <http://www.starbucks.com/coffee/learn/four-fundamentals>

the Starbucks website are characterized by an engaging and informal tone and “an interactive and verbal style” (Hyland 2005, 104), suggesting “the personal, direct and involved communication of face-to-face conversation” (ibid. 177).

A couple of important points may be raised regarding such “pseudo-conversational interaction” (ibid.), that is, regarding the discursive positioning of the consumer as an active participant and the construction of a personal relationship between marketer and consumer, since such discursive moves “are clearly not innocent of rhetorical intention” (Hyland 2001, 562). Fairclough proposes the concept of “synthetic personalization” to describe current trends towards the *informalization* and *conversationalization* of public discourse (1993, 140). The notion of simulation is central to this concept. He argues that “The personalization of both institution (*we*) and addressees (*you*) and the individualized address ... *simulate* a conversational and therefore relatively personal, informal, solidary and equal relationship” between participants (Fairclough 2003, 147).⁵⁹ In this perspective, the use of questions, asides, and imperatives, together with the manipulation of pronoun reference, would thus represent cases “of the manipulation of interpersonal meaning for strategic, instrumental effect”, directed by promotional objectives (ibid. 99). Since the present analysis is concerned with external corporate communications, it is also the case here that the texts analyzed are implicitly defined and guided by promotional intent. In view of the points raised, the following subsection examines whether the interaction with and active involvement of consumers seem to go beyond the communicative resources dealt with above.

6.1.2 Interaction and involvement

Starbucks appears to have embraced fully the interactivity of the Internet. There are ample ways for consumers and company to connect, share, and interact, and the online community and interactive and social media seem to be absolutely central to Starbucks’ approach to and communication with consumers.⁶⁰ A separate domain has been created for a consumer network called ‘My Starbucks Idea’, and this channel would seem to be of particular relevance to the present analysis. In and through this forum, consumers are encouraged to share, discuss, comment, see, connect, and vote: ‘Share your ideas, tell us what you think of other people’s ideas and join the discussion.’⁶¹ As illustrated in Figure 6.1, similar direct encouragements are found around



Figure 6.1: My Starbucks Idea.

⁵⁹ Emphasis added.

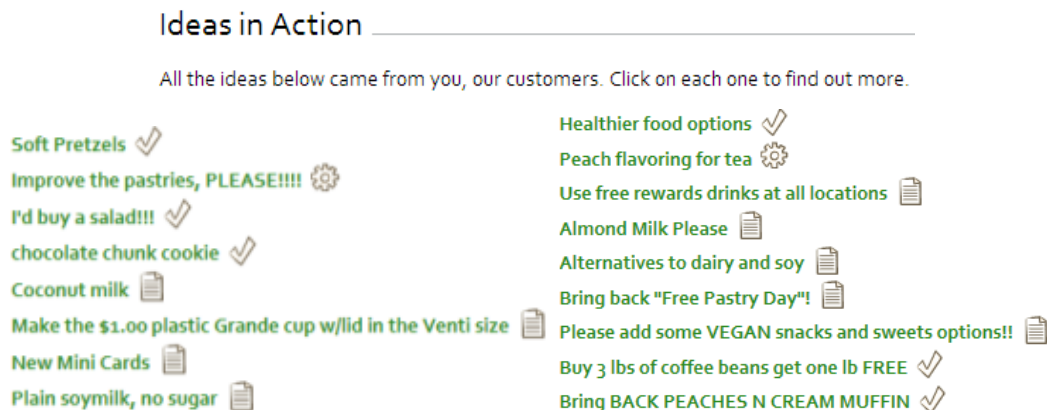
⁶⁰ See App. C for an illustration.

⁶¹ App. H.

the website.⁶² The consumer is thus explicitly asked to assume an active, participatory role.

An interesting element of ‘My Starbucks Idea’ is that of ‘Starbucks Idea Partners’ who are Starbucks employees that are online to listen, ask questions, and tell consumers what goes on ‘behind the scenes’.⁶³ Hence these partners should facilitate continuous interaction and foster dialog between company and consumer. The use of the term ‘partner’ is noteworthy in this respect, as this could signify that a form of collaborative relation is envisioned. The following text example may substantiate this reading: ‘You know better than anyone else what you want from Starbucks. So tell us. What’s your Starbucks Idea? ... Let’s get started.’⁶⁴ The use of the imperative ‘let us’, here in its contracted form, is significant – a grammatical form expressing an offer which is always inclusive of the addressee, a form of suggestion (Halliday & Mattisen 2004, 139).⁶⁵ This inclusive form is argued to make the shared interests of writer and reader transparent (Hyland 2005, 83), and a sense of shared purpose is constructed, the shared purpose of enhancing the consumer’s Starbucks experience.

‘My Starbucks Idea’ provides consumers with a space in which to share thoughts and experiences, through interaction with other consumers and the company, and not least, to make their ideas and opinions heard. It seems that the initiative represents more than a sophisticated marketing drive and empty corporate talk. For instance, a certain system is applied to signal the status of ideas, whether ideas are under review, have been reviewed, are in the works, or have been launched already. This indicates that the voice of consumers is listened to and steps taken accordingly. The system of ‘Starbucks Ideas in Action’ is shown below.



⁶² See also App. I.

⁶³ App. H.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ This type of imperative is also referred to as the jussive (Halliday 1994, 87).



Figure 6.2: 'Ideas in Action'.⁶⁶

Everything considered, 'My Starbucks Idea' appears as a prime example of an *engagement platform* (Ramaswamy 2008, 9). It is an engagement space – a consumer community and platform for interaction – in which consumers can become active players, and where consumer input can provide marketers with “a goldmine of ideas”, helping them to identify and act upon innovation and value-creation opportunities (ibid. 9; 12). It has been pointed out that in a consumer-centric world, marketing challenges arise which relate to building platforms “for ongoing, active, multiple-party dialogue” and keeping consumers “participative and actively engaged” (Prahalad et al. 2000, 77). If 'My Starbucks Idea' is perceived as having potential as a space for “co-creative interactions” (Ramaswamy 2008, 11), then Starbucks' marketers might have found part of the solution to such challenges. Readers may recognize the names of the scholars quoted, namely the main originators of the co-creation paradigm. Does this conceptual link imply that Starbucks construes consumers as active, empowered, connected agents – the view at the heart of this perspective? The analysis thus far indicates that this question should be answered in the affirmative. In that sense, the consumer is not only discursively constituted as an involved participant through particular communicative devices, but he or she also becomes an active agent in the conception of the coffee-consumption experience.

6.1.3 Consumer choice

The discussion in Section 3.1.2 identified the question of choice as a central parameter arising at the intersection of matters of agency, desire, freedom, and power. Choice is characterized as the “core value of consumerism” (Gabriel & Lang 2008, 324); consumers are argued to “embody the right to choose” (ibid.), and consumer empowerment is commonly equated with the power to exercise choice (Shankar et al. 2006, 1014). How might the aspect of consumer choice figure in the texts under scrutiny? The explicitly direct address through the question 'How do you like your coffee?' was mentioned above – a device which invites the consumer to *choose* between different profiles as an entry into the virtual coffee universe. Other text examples include: 'The perfect cup of coffee and a wholesome, delicious snack can make your day. So we make sure everything *you choose* is of the finest quality'⁶⁷ and 'We've got the

⁶⁶ <http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/>

⁶⁷ App. I. Emphasis added.

tools and data you need ... so you can *make the choices* that work for you.’⁶⁸ Consumer choice also involves customization: ‘Our baristas will help you customize your drink and create exactly what you’re craving.’⁶⁹ On the one hand, then, a conception emerges of the consumer as an agent whose wants and choices should be catered for (Hodgson 2001, 119), and consumers seem to be constituted more or less as “self-actualizing individual actors seeking to maximize their ‘quality of life’ ... by assembling a lifestyle or lifestyles through personalized acts of choice” (Du Gay 1996, 77).

6.1.4 ... and lifestyles

The issue to which Du Gay draws attention in the quote included above is a matter of great relevance to the present study, as certain scholars would assume an alternative position on “the neo-liberal axiom that choice equals freedom and therefore empowerment” (Shankar et al. 2006, 1020). Guided by the governmentality perspective, these scholars claim that while consumers might be granted agency, marketers seek to frame consumer agency and channel consumer behavior in particular desirable directions, based upon “a form of power aimed at generating particular forms of consumer life” (Zwick et al. 2008, 163). This specific form of power relates to Foucauldian conceptions of power and government. In this context, it is significant that to Foucault, power always represents a way of acting upon an acting subject (cf. p. 17). While the consumer represents a free subject of need, desire, interests, and choice (Dean 2010, 193), the argument is that choice “can be made calculable and manipulated” by shaping the space or context in which it is exercised (ibid. 186).

Does one find any support of such claims in the case of Starbucks? The introduction of the new concept ‘Starbucks Evenings’ could be significant here. With this, ‘The place you love during the day now has more reasons for you to love it at night.’⁷⁰ The text reads: ‘We’ve always been your neighborhood spot where you can take a moment to unwind, grab a well-deserved treat, and meet up with friends. But sometimes, you just want a glass of wine and a delicious bite to eat without going to a bar or making restaurant reservations.’ In this case, the text can be seen to make presumptions on behalf of consumers, to anticipate and frame their wants and preferences, consistent with the viewpoint introduced above. The introduction of ‘Starbucks Evenings’ is continued as follows: ‘Say hello to a new way to enjoy Starbucks after 4 p.m. Drop in after work, with friends, after yoga, by yourself, after a long day or after a

⁶⁸ App. I. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ App. E.

great day.’⁷¹ Different scenarios of the everyday life of a given consumer are thus imagined, to which an evening at Starbucks is represented as the perfect end. In response to projected consumer preferences, nightly visitors to Starbucks will ‘experience a more mellow, less hurried atmosphere perfect for winding down and having casual conversations.’⁷² These examples could be taken to illustrate the efforts of marketers in the constitution of particular consumption contexts and associated lifestyles – as illustrations of how marketers may define the contours of a form of life to be acted out by consumers (Arvidsson 2005, 245).

The coffeehouse experience and Starbucks’ products are made to blend seamlessly into everyday life and ways of life, as illustrated by the following examples: ‘It is not unusual to see people coming to Starbucks to chat, meet up or even work. We’re a neighborhood gathering place, a part of the daily routine ...’⁷³ and ‘Warm days, long nights and epic adventures await – and so does the new Caramel Ribbon Crunch Frappuccino’,⁷⁴ perhaps implicitly representing the Starbucks model of (consumer) life as it should be, resembling “the postmodern version of the ‘good life’, in which one pursues enhanced experiences and multiple lifestyles” (Holt 2000, 65). As regards lifestyle choices, it is also noteworthy that the material taps into current health and fitness trends. The text, for instance, states that ‘Eating well is as important as living well’ and ‘whether you’re counting calories, watching your fat and sugar intake, or looking for more fiber or protein, we can help you make the choices that work.’⁷⁵ With this aim in mind, lists are provided of ‘Delicious Drinks under 200 Calories’ and ‘Favorite Foods under 350 Calories’.⁷⁶ The latter list is introduced by reference to a common consumer quandary, ‘a dilemma that has vexed many great minds: how can one be expected to eat sensibly when confronted with so many wonderful temptations?’ Starbucks can, luckily, help consumers make the *right* choices. ‘Fortunately, we have the answer ...’: ‘You have a lot of smart choices in our food case.’⁷⁷ In this, the verb *expect* could be seen to refer to the expectations of living up to ideals of a healthy self and a fit body prevalent in many societies today, and taken together, the points made can be argued to illustrate the complex, dialectical relationship between discursive practices and formations and wider socio-cultural contexts, a key assumption of CDA scholars and postmodern theorists.

⁷¹ App. E.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ <http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information>

⁷⁴ <http://www.starbucks.com/menu/drinks>

⁷⁵ App. I.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

6.2 The world of Disney

In order to further examine and illustrate some of the central points raised thus far, the analysis in Section 6.2 looks into how Disney, the proclaimed premier company of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1998), considers its experience-seeking consumers.⁷⁸

6.2.1 Personalization

Continuing the analytical pursuit initiated above, a conspicuous element of the Disney website is ‘My Disney Experience’ which is defined as ‘Your personalized guide to an ideal Walt Disney World vacation.’⁷⁹ The possessive pronoun in ‘My Disney Experience’ signals that the experience created will be particular to each individual consumer, and concepts of customization and personalization are prominent. Illustrative text examples include: ‘Personalize Your Plans’ and ‘Make It Yours’.⁸⁰ The incentive behind ‘My Disney Experience’ goes: ‘Now, Take Your Walt Disney World Experience to a Whole New Level’,⁸¹ which could suggest that a personalized experience is an enhanced experience. Today, experiencing the world of Disney does thus not necessarily begin with “the simple acceptance of a prepackaged offer” (Carù & Cova 2007, 11). Instead, planning is ‘made easy’ for the consumer.⁸² The first step in the planning process is creating a Disney account, and the email received upon creation is worth noting: Here, one is ensured that ‘Creating a personalized dream Disney vacation has never been easier.’ All ‘you’ have to do is to sign in and ‘Then, you can manage your profile ... and your customizable vacation, right at My Disney Experience.’⁸³ In relation to this, Pine and Gilmore note how Disney applies its “experiential expertise” to create and stage extraordinary and unique experiences for every guest (1999, 3; 1998, 101). It seems, however, that ‘for’ may be substituted by ‘with’, at least to some extent, as the consumer is enabled to play an active role in the creation of these – as an active participant involved in the planning and managing of his or her Disney vacation, that is, his or her tailor-made Disney experience.

⁷⁸ As regards communicative approach and central discursive features, a pattern emerges from the texts on the Disney website which is similar to that of Starbucks. One notes a consistent, prominent use of personal pronouns to refer to consumers and company and an extensive use of imperative forms and questions, establishing direct address and an engaging tone. This may become clear from the text examples provided, but since the significance of these devices was discussed in great detail above, Section 6.2 does not present an in-depth textual analysis.

⁷⁹ App. J.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

6.2.2 Guidance

Consumers are offered assistance in the planning process through various tools made available via the Disney website. These include customized maps which make it possible to ‘highlight favorite activities and attractions’ or ‘get suggestions that would be perfect for your family’; a DVD containing virtual tours, planning guides, and tips; and the mobile application ‘My Disney Experience’.⁸⁴ An interesting device is that of the ‘Disney Parks Moms Panel’ which is a forum where online ‘Moms’ answer questions and offer guidance about planning a vacation to Disney destinations around the globe. These panelists represent the company, and while they possess ‘excellent knowledge’,⁸⁵ it is significant to note that they are represented as equal and relatable interactants. Consumers are invited to ‘Meet the ‘Moms’’ and ‘Get to know *the everyday people* who share their personal vacation planning advice and their Disney Parks experiences.’⁸⁶ Hence these ‘Moms’ come to act as intermediaries, facilitating personalized interactions between company and consumer. It should be mentioned that consumers still have the option of choosing a more traditional package solution;⁸⁷ emphasis is, nevertheless, placed on *planning* rather than *booking* throughout.⁸⁸ The “experienter” is encouraged to take on a participatory role, with the “experience provider” (Poulssohn & Kale 2004, 275) presenting the means for doing so, and so it seems to be the case that ‘guest’ and ‘experience stager’ are engaged in an act of co-creation of the Walt Disney World experience.⁸⁹

The subject position provided and promoted is thus one in which the consumer is “empowered to co-construct a personalized experience” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004a, 12). It is also a subject position which posits the consumer as a self-governing agent – capable of planning, choosing, and designing. In both of the cases considered, the subject positions articulated can be seen to be based upon ideas of the “productive agency” of consumers (Arvidsson 2005, 247). In that sense, consumption may offer a venue for self-determination. Viewing the findings above through the governmentality lens could draw attention to another aspect of the co-creative interaction between marketer and consumer. In the present case, the use of the platform ‘My Disney Experience’ and the Disney consumer profile created might be perceived as a *technique of government* – mediating the direction of consumer behavior (Walters 2012,

⁸⁴ App. K.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁸⁷ <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/>

⁸⁸ App. K.

⁸⁹ The experience itself in the thematic settings of the Disney parks will almost inevitably entail varying levels of *staging* for the consumer, through shows and the performances of the famous Disney characters. Yet, it appears that consumers are enabled to exercise a great deal of control in the configuration of this experience, e.g. via various interactive media.

11-12). While the consumer is creating and customizing, he or she is guided in different ways. One means thereof is the panel discussed above where panelists are represented as experienced equals and relatable ‘Moms’, thus possibly offering rather influential guidance as consumers are to make decisions in the planning of their dream vacations. As argued by one governmentality-inspired researcher, in exercising choice in consumption, consumers are simultaneously involved in mechanisms which seek to predict and direct this choice (Hodgson 2001, 125). From this perspective, different engagement platforms and consumer communities may not only serve to engage the consumer as a co-creator, but can also represent a central means of guiding and shaping the possible fields of action – the choice and conduct – of acting consumer subjects.

6.3 Conclusion

The analysis illustrates that the texts on the Starbucks website are characterized by an engaging and informal communicative style which serves to personalize company and consumer and signify a relatively personal, equal relationship between the two actors. While, from a CDA perspective, this would be perceived as the manipulation of interpersonal meaning for instrumental effect, the involvement of consumers also assumes a more concrete form. ‘My Starbucks Idea’ appears as an interactive engagement platform, through which consumers are encouraged to voice their thoughts and wants with the object of enhancing the value of their Starbucks experience – an object that is represented as a joint effort between marketer and consumer. In the second corporate case, a personalized, customizable vacation is represented as the means of turning a particular consumer’s Disney dream into reality, a process in which the consumer becomes an involved participant. So, on the one hand, both company approaches seem to recognize and encourage the active agency and participation of consumers in the creation of the offering and experience to be consumed. On the other hand, the texts analyzed could be seen to illustrate the influence of marketers and marketing in constituting consumption contexts and shaping consumer desires and lifestyles, anticipating and framing consumer agency, shaping patterns of consumer behavior, and directing acts of consumption.

7. Discussion

This thesis set out to examine the issue of consumer agency in relation to marketing discourse, theory, and practice. Section 7 discusses, reflects upon, and brings together the central concepts, models, and approaches of and to marketing and consumption drawn upon throughout on the basis of the findings of the analyses.

7.1 Marketing and consumption, power and freedom

The analysis of Kotler's seminal marketing text shows a movement from a treatment of consumers as constituting a unit in the marketplace chosen and targeted by marketers to a conception of consumers as agentive individuals. The most recent edition displays clear recognition of consumers as increasingly active players in the game of marketing today and deals explicitly with the notion of consumer empowerment. But while Kotler's text certainly takes account of academic trends and practical challenges, of changes and continuities, so as to stay current, his discursive and theoretical framework essentially builds upon conventional, company-centered marketing thinking, with Kotler encouraging marketers – then and now – to embrace the marketing philosophy and concept (1967, 6; 2012, 28), to which “creating, managing, delivering and communicating superior customer value to chosen target market(s)” remains essential (Kotler et al. 2012, 30). The engagement of consumers in this very process emerges as a prominent feature in the analysis of current marketing communications. Consumers are considered, and involved as, active agents who are capable of choosing, customizing, and creating – empowered and enabled to shape a valuable offering. While some variance is presumably to be expected between academic marketing literature and practical approaches in such a dynamic field and environment, the two companies could be seen to have anticipated the changes identified by the marketing guru as emerging approaches to marketing challenges and the roles assumed of consumers and marketers therein. It might, however, be relevant to point out that the co-creation approach is not perceived as a celebration of consumer empowerment for its own sake. It may be argued that the “emergence of co-creation marks less an effort by marketers to support consumers in their individual(ist) and individualizing articulations of consumption as the pursuit of distinction and difference” (Zwick et al. 2008, 176); while consumers are positioned as self-directed participants, marketers remain self-interested agents.

Following on from this, Kotler's text draws attention to the interrelationship between the agency of consumers and the power of marketers, more or less explicitly, yet, without ever going into the

complexity of this. The analysis of the marketing communications of Starbucks and Disney also points to this subtle, complex interplay. Enabling a deeper exploration of this aspect may be part of what a Foucauldian-inspired framework can contribute with. The analytical findings seem to suggest that it is constructive in the present context to conceive of power as dynamic and relational. On the one hand, today's active consumer is construed and positioned as a free, self-actualizing agent, as a chooser and creator. At the same time, the governmentality perspective suggests that by positioning themselves as facilitators of consumer agency, in "empowering the entrepreneurial subjects of choice in their quest for self-realization" (Rose 1999b, 142), marketers simultaneously seek to shape consumer agency, by projecting consumer preferences and lifestyles, channeling consumer behavior, and constituting consumption contexts. A central insight thus lies in challenging the traditional opposition between freedom and power, suggesting that power may operate "through the conduct of individuals 'freely' pursuing their needs and desires" (Hodgson 2001, 125). Consumer empowerment is also commonly equated with the power to exercise choice, and in that case, perfect competition would seem to empower fully the consumer (Shankar et al. 2006, 1015). Yet, while it is recognized that consumption, and in this consumer choice, can represent a manifestation of agency, the insights of the present study call into question whether this is always the case, whether more choice should be perceived as unambiguously empowering. Attention to work on governmentality could be of value through the questioning or *problematization* of "easy notions" and taken-for-granted assumptions of consumer empowerment by delving into inherent power relations and the "productive and seductive operation" of these (Hodgson 2002, 326). In forging a link between notions of empowerment and government and seeking to develop a nuanced understanding of the issue of consumer agency in contemporary marketing, discussions such as the present may contribute to generating a view of consumer empowerment as complementary to marketer power rather than as antagonistic forces. In that sense, marketing and consumer research might benefit by conceptualizing consumer empowerment as generated through "the iterative interplay" between consumers and marketers (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006, 965).

7.2 Agency and experience

As to the question of consumer agency and experience economy theory, the findings of Sections 5 and 6, examining Pine and Gilmore's theory and the approaches of Starbucks and Disney respectively, could be taken to indicate that a divide is emerging between theory and practice in this area. This seems to be the case in spite of the fact that the analysis takes as its point of departure the two exemplars cited most frequently in Pine and Gilmore's writings (cf. Pine & Gilmore 2007, xiii). Pine and Gilmore have

developed a theoretical framework which is defined by an explicit emphasis on the centrality of and the role played by the experience-*staging* marketer in the creation and delivery of the experience to be consumed, which presents consumer agency as a matter of secondary importance. In contrast, the centrality of the experience-seeking consumer and his or her active involvement in this process is represented as a primary concern by the two experience enterprises considered.

The analysis in Section 6 shows that web-based and interactive media and devices are essential to the engagement of active, informed, and connected consumers. And so, in a world defined by change, development, and technological advance of unprecedented scale, the year of publication of Pine and Gilmore's influential work – 1999 – could be of significance. Fortunately for the advancement of this discussion, the two consultants published a revised edition of their bestseller in 2011. In the preface to this, Pine and Gilmore address objections encountered concerning *The Experience Economy*, first of all, precisely the use of the verb *stage* (2011, xviii). They argue: “One could substitute an alternative verb – *orchestrate* comes to mind – but only at the risk of diluting our emphasis on the importance of stagecraft in, well, staging engaging experiences. Stagecraft it is ...” In the same vein, they reassert that theatre is meant not as a metaphor but “a *model* for human performance in staging experiences” (ibid.). Another criticism encountered concerns the aspect of co-creation in the formation of experiences. Pine and Gilmore explain that their primary aim has been to encourage the creation of new experiences; therefore, they “focus much more on the stager of experiences” – yet, “while recognizing that to a degree all experiences are co-created, as they happen inside the individual person in reaction to what is staged outside that person” (ibid. xx). While the experience economy pioneers display some recognition of other perspectives on and potential contributions to their conceptual model, as regards the “more participatory role” of the guest (ibid.), revision of their central work apparently did not entail modification of their framework so as to more fully integrate the experiencing consumer as a full-fledged subject into their theory of the full-fledged experience economy.

Two conceptualizations of the experience construct were introduced in Section 3.2. To recapitulate the essence of these, Pine and Gilmore propose that an experience occurs when a company purposely employs services as the stage and goods as props to engage a consumer (1999, 11), whereas an alternative description articulates an experience as a result of the interaction between a consumer and an experience provider and the act of co-creation between the two agents (Poulsson & Kale 2004, 271). In both of the cases considered, the roles of consumer and marketer appear to be less clearly designated

than the discursive representations of guest and stager designate. While the environments surrounding the Starbucks and Disney experiences can be taken to be staged by the two experience enterprises, consumers are encouraged to participate actively in the configuration of their experiences, rather than positioned as passive recipients of that which is staged for them. The analysis, therefore, suggests that the companies have adopted an approach which lies between the two visions, moving towards the latter, based upon interaction and the co-creation of valuable experiences with consumers to varying degrees.

Taken together, an examination of experience-centered marketing theory and practice appears to support the case that “the time has come to further define and embed the subject” within existing theories (Boswijk et al. 2007, 10). Attention to the co-creation paradigm might represent a means of bridging the divide between theoretical and practical approaches. Debating, extending, and refining some of the core tenets and underlying assumptions of this paradigm may help to integrate the aspect of interaction as a central factor and develop useful perspectives on value and exchange, of relevance to theoreticians and practitioners alike – incorporating ideas from the different conceptual models, and importantly, involving a change in focus, and perhaps mindset, so as to incorporate more clearly the perspective of the consumer in addition to that of the marketer.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine central aspects of consumer agency through a study which was guided by the following research question:

To what extent are consumers considered active agents in seminal marketing texts and current marketing communications in relation to notions of consumer empowerment and governmentality, and how do aspects of consumer agency relate to predominant experience economy theory?

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding thereof, the analysis considered discursive representations of consumers and marketers and the apparent basic assumptions underlying these in Kotler's classic marketing text and Pine and Gilmore's pioneering work on the experience economy and examined how the two global marketers and experience enterprises Starbucks and Disney consider their consumers as reflected in the online communication with these.

The analysis shows that consumers essentially constitute target markets, a central component of the task with which the marketer is faced, in the original edition of Kotler's marketing text. Consumers are explicitly dealt with as increasingly active and empowered players in the most recent edition, and this reality is gradually changing the game of marketing. Yet, while consumers are considered active agents to a certain and increasing extent, Kotler's approach remains company-centric, and as of now, the proclaimed shift in the relative balance of power between marketer and consumer has not substituted the marketing concept as the overriding ordering principle of Kotler's marketing bible. The principles of theatre are fundamental to Pine and Gilmore's theory, and as illustrated, this translates into distinct representations of marketer and consumer as experience stager and guest respectively. While the two scholars consider elements such as customization and customer-unique value, a conceptual framework which revolves around ideas of staging and the marketer as experience stager and value provider means that consumers appear primarily as the parties affected by corporate performances and only secondarily as agents of their consumption. Consumer engagement, on the other hand, emerges as a prominent feature in the analysis of the communications efforts of Starbucks and Disney. Consumers are considered active agents to a high extent and involved as active participants who are able and enabled to choose, customize, and create, empowered to shape the commercial offering and co-create a valuable experience through engagement platforms, interactive devices, and personalized options. Also, while both types of marketing text analyzed position the consumer as a free and self-directed actor, guided by the will and ability to exercise choice and satisfy wants, the analyses illustrate how marketers may

attempt to shape consumer agency by subtly directing acts of consumption – through discursive practices and techniques which seek to simultaneously shape and work through the desires, choices, wants, and lifestyles of consumer subjects.

The conceptual framework of the study both enables and suggests an interpretation of consumers as active agents, at once free and governed, influencers and influenced. The findings suggest that it is constructive to conceive of power as dynamic and relational in the present context. Hence a central insight lies in challenging the traditional view of power and freedom as oppositional forces. Points raised, moreover, call into question an uncritical equation of more choice with consumer empowerment. In recognizing and delving deeper into inherent power relations and the productive and seductive operations of these, it may thus be useful to conceptualize consumer empowerment as generated through the interplay between consumers and marketers. As regards this interplay in the realm of experience creation and consumption, the findings indicate that a divide is emerging between theory and practice relating to the agency and role of the consumer. Pine and Gilmore's theoretical model is defined by an explicit emphasis on the role played by the experience-directing marketer, which presents consumer agency as a matter of secondary importance, whereas the active involvement of the experience-seeking consumer is represented as a primary concern by the two experience enterprises considered. Looking into some of the core tenets of the co-creation paradigm and its potential contribution to theory-building and practice in this area might be one means of bridging this divide, of integrating interaction as a central aspect and incorporating more clearly the perspectives of both marketer and consumer.

Exploration into the potential contribution of the co-creation paradigm is one possible avenue for further research. Since the present study is based upon qualitative case study methodology, it will also be useful to examine the issues raised in additional contexts. Researchers could draw upon the governmentality literature as a theoretical framework for examining consumer resistance as a dimension of consumer empowerment, considering how consumers may challenge the subject positions envisioned and the preferences and lifestyles projected by marketers, how they may resist the shaping of consumer conduct. Consumer movements or communities could be one place to begin the search for answers and blogs a relevant empirical source to consider. This highlights another issue: A call for more empirically-driven investigations. The contribution of increasing the volume of empirical work inspired by a Foucauldian framework would ideally be twofold: In addition to providing insights or new understandings of the social issue under study, it may help to develop this perspective as a conceptual lens for social research

in various fields of contemporary significance, as is currently happening in the area of environmentalism. It would, moreover, be insightful to supplement textually-oriented analysis such as the one conducted in this study with further investigations into the realm of experience creation. Inspired by the differences found between theory and practice, such investigations could take the form of in-depth interviews with practitioners and also academics educating future experience economists, as these could be seen as human links between theoretical and practical approaches in this field. Finally, it would be interesting to complement the present analysis of marketing communications with a closer look at how a commitment to varying degrees of consumer engagement is followed through or put into practice. Such knowledge is probably best obtained through an in-depth company case study.

These suggestions are all potential steps which could be taken towards further exploration and enhanced appreciation of the complex interrelations between desire, choice, freedom, and power and the many factors and forces at play in interactions and exchanges between consumers and marketers in today's dynamic marketspace.

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10. List of appendices

Appendix A:	A CD containing a PDF version of referenced pages from <i>Marketing Management</i> (Kotler 1967 and Kotler et al. 2012) examined in Section 4 and referenced pages from <i>The Experience Economy</i> (Pine & Gilmore 1999) as well as the journal article “Welcome to the Experience Economy” (Pine & Gilmore 1998) examined in Section 5.
Appendix B:	Company profiles of the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company.
Appendices C-K:	Screenshots of all sections of the websites of the Starbucks Corporation and the Walt Disney Company examined in Section 6.
Appendix C:	Starbucks, ‘Coffeehouse’
Appendix D:	Starbucks, ‘Coffee’
Appendix E:	Starbucks, ‘Starbucks Evenings’
Appendix F:	Starbucks, ‘The Flavors in Your Cup’
Appendix G:	Starbucks, Opening page
Appendix H:	Starbucks, ‘My Starbucks Idea’
Appendix I:	Starbucks, ‘Menu’ and ‘Nutrition’
Appendix J:	Disney, ‘My Disney Experience’
Appendix K:	Disney, Vacation Planning