

# 4

## Marketing and THEF Consumption as a Socio-Cultural Process

### ■ Introduction

This chapter introduces a perspective of THEF marketing that builds upon the preceding two by introducing the important idea that both marketing and consumption are fundamentally cultural activities. By this we mean that the marketing and consumption of THEF products and services not only create value but also mediate and (re)-produce socio-cultural meaning and values. Additionally this chapter further locates the consumer by examining their motivations and more fully explains the reasons for interacting with the THEF marketplace as well as the outcomes of their consumption. When taken together, this forms a culturally orientated definition and view of the marketing audience. In doing this we will demonstrate that this perspective also reinforces the view of consumers that is advocated by the service perspective of marketing, as much of the theory that supports this turn in thought highlights the central role that consumers play in both meaning production and in creating cultural and social value. Put simply, as will be evidenced in this chapter, consumers integrate their own resources with the *cultural resources* supplied by the THEF marketplace, to construct their own meanings and create their own forms of socio-cultural value (Arnould, Prices & Malshie, 2006). Or to

utilise the language of the service perspective: THEF products in their broadest sense “provide the service of identity provision and communication” (Arnould, 2007, p.58). Finally, in embracing the view of meaning co-creation more generally, we will show how symbolism in the THEF marketplace is shaped in relation to the activities and stories that are shared by a range of agents who have an interest or stake in an organisation’s products or services.

In this respect, to explore these important ideas more fully we draw upon a broad body of theory and research to illustrate:

- 1 The symbolic nature of THEF products and services and the manifold goals consumers pursue through interacting with the symbolism afforded by the THEF marketplace
- 2 The roles that THEF consumption plays in community formation and sociality;
- 3 The ways in which consumers extend the cultural and symbolic value of THEF experiences beyond the immediate service encounter; and
- 4 How the meanings of THEF products are co-created by multiple *authors* in the marketplace.

## ■ The symbolic nature of THEF products and the goals consumers pursue

The notion that THEF marketing and consumption can be broadly understood as a socio-cultural practice is based upon the idea that marketers are fundamentally engaged in a process of selecting and circulating systems and units of meaning through their marketing activities and products. To draw on the ideas of McCracken (1986), in effect, marketing is a conduit through which meanings in the ‘culturally constituted world’ pass through the THEF marketplace to consumers. Accordingly a key theme of this approach is the idea that THEF products and services have the potential to hold and carry meanings which in turn become valuable resources for consumers. Or

as McCracken (1986:71) puts it “consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning”.

Central to this view, is the idea that THEF consumption is not a purely instrumental or autotelic act, in the respect that a consumer takes a vacation to relax, shops at a discount grocery store to save money, or consumes a bottle of fine wine to appreciate its idiosyncratic character. On the contrary, it is also an expressive process whereby consumers utilise the meanings from the marketplace to communicate things about themselves or to find solidarity with others. Or, in the words of a pioneer of this approach, Sydney Levy (1959, p.118), “*people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean*”. Consider, for example how Waitrose or Marks and Spencer’s Simply Food both differ from each other and also differ in relation to Tesco or ALDI, in terms of their symbolic meaning and social significance. These and other food retailers and brands, as well as other products that cut across the THEF sectors more broadly, clearly carry and denote deep socio-cultural associations that have developed dynamically over time, and in so doing serve the market in a variety of ways. That is to say THEF products take shape as *cultural resources* to be deployed in consumption. In support of this argument, a sweeping review of the literature quickly reveals the numerous ways in which consumers appropriate the symbolism afforded by THEF products and servicescapes to accomplish a range of goals and projects which amongst other things, include;

- 1 The construction and realisation of independent and collective identities (e.g. Arsel & Thompson, 2011), for instance that of the foodie (Getz et al., 2014), independent traveler (Caruana, Crane & Fitchett, 2008), or skier and snowboarder (Edensor & Richards, 2007). Consumers also use the cultural resources provided by the THEF marketplace to perform and realise age (Goulding & Shankar, 2004) gender (Goulding and Saren, 2009) and sexual identities (Kates and Belk, 2001), and some of these ideas will be discussed later in this chapter.