Community and consumption
Towards a definition of the “linking value” of product or services

Bernard Cova
European School of Management, Paris, France

Community and postmodern marketing
Many questions confront today’s market researcher. But, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the central question seems to be: is it possible to push the boundaries of marketing beyond the individual level of analysis in order to increase our understanding of consumer behaviour? The last conference of the Association for Consumer Research directed attention towards the phenomenon of community, often considered to be of immense social importance in our postmodern era, yet curiously neglected within our discipline. Communications in this conference (Gainer and Fischer, 1994, p. 137) suggested that “our neglect of non-individual level phenomena stems from the biases of our dominant perspective and theories. The goal of most consumer behaviour studies has only been to explain how individual cognition, perception or traits influence individual behaviour”. When units of analysis other than the individual have been considered, dominant theories have cast group level phenomena as the product of modern self-interest maximizing behaviour. Their analyses of group behaviour seems to be bounded by a rationale based on commendable decisions made for reasons of interest and not emotional choices which draw their worth from the aesthetics aspects of being together in a community context.

However, some researchers, especially in the area of services marketing, have tried to introduce notions such as “communitas” (Arnould and Price, 1993) or “communality” (Goodwin, 1994) in their research designs in order to get a better grasp of emotional and communal phenomena of consumption. In doing so, they advocate the need for ethnosophological approaches in the study of community consumption. They argue for an anthropology of consumption (Grafton Small, 1987; McCracken, 1990; Sherry, 1995), which can be of great help in a postmodern era. This paper proposes to go one step further in the understanding of the communal dimension of consumption by developing the concept of “linking value” of a product or a service (Cova, 1995) – a concept which has been borrowed from recent works in anthropology and sociology (Godbout and Caillé, 1992) and which seems to be able to throw light on postmodern consumption.

In this paper, we will try first to present a conceptual framework of the metamorphosis of the social link, from tradition to postmodernity, while putting the emphasis on the return of community in our Western societies, a phenomenon usually called neo-tribalism. This conceptual framework will
enable us to embed the current confusion in consumption in an ethnosophological approach of societal and market changes. More precisely, it will help us to show the potential of the tribalism and the linking value to understand phenomena of disorder in consumption. We will conclude by an overview of marketing trends adapted to the postmodern condition and especially the return of community.

**Postmodernity and metamorphosis of the social link**

The idea of the present as postmodern is now firmly on the agenda for debate. Indeed, the social changes characterized by the label of postmodernity are considered as major traits of our times by a growing number of European and North American marketing practitioners and researchers (Badot and Cova, 1992; Brown, 1993, 1994, 1995; Cova and Svanfeldt, 1992; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat et al., 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992), and the two special issues of the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, (1993, 1994).

The term postmodernity renders accurately the defining traits of the socio-economic condition that emerged throughout the affluent countries of Europe and of European descent in the course of the second half of the twentieth century. The term is accurate as it draws attention to continuity and discontinuity as two faces of the intricate relationship between the present socio-economic condition and the formation that it preceded and gestated. It brings into relief the intimate, genetic bond that ties the new, postmodern condition to modernity – the socio-economic formation that emerged in the same part of the world in the course of the eighteenth century and took its final shape during the nineteenth (Bauman, 1992, p. 149). Postmodernity may be interpreted as fully developed modernity; as modernity which goes beyond its false consciousness and comes to understand what it actually was doing all along, i.e. producing ambivalence and pluralism, and also reconciles itself to the fact that the purposes which were originally set, e.g. rational order and individual freedom, will never be reached (Bauman, 1992, p. 134).

**From traditional communities to modern aggregations**

Modernity entered history as a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality – but one can readily wonder whether that promise has been sustained. As long as traditional forms of communal mediations have existed (family, village, religion …), the modern being has constantly tried to liberate them from them in order to make the enlightened project of the free subject come true. In this perspective, the social link was understood, in the strict sense of the word, as something that ties individuals, i.e. that hinders them (Farrugia, 1993). And the contract appeared as a way to escape the condition of the “bad community”, the community that enslaved people. Modernity, in this way, opposed the notion of contract, a voluntary and reversible choice made by each individual to associate rationally with others in a specified and limited framework, to the traditional notion of community, an irreversible obligation imposed on each of its members to share the same fate. In the modern view, the individual was primary, he or she existed
first as a pre-social being, relations were secondary and essentially instru-
mental. Differentiation, more than communion, guided the action of individuals. In order to uproot himself or herself from the communal debris of the Middle Ages, the modern being relied on new forms of mediation which were rational and near universal aggregations of impersonal ties, like the nation-state or the social-class. To achieve their freedom the modern being was supported by the market economy that soon appeared as the strongest force behind the destruction of old communities.

But, in fact, “nous n’avons jamais été modernes”, as stated by Latour (1991), and the new and modern mediations have lasted as much because of their contractual basis as thanks to the shared emotion of their members and their “natural” instinct to recreate the communal link. Then, what we call “class consciousness” or “national consciousness”, relied, beside their rational justification, on a form of communal enthusiasm made up of shared feelings and passions. Certain periods of history and certain regions did however come near to attaining the modern social link. It was apparently the case in eighteenth century England where, as Disraeli wrote in no uncertain terms in Sybil, “modern society acknowledged no neighbour”, and where isolation between individuals in big cities was extreme. The twentieth century, which put into practice the great political and scientific utopias of the nineteenth century, has lived out very intensively the myth of the liberation of the individual. This tension has resulted in the breaking up and delegitimization of all forms of contractual aggregations inherited from the last two centuries, and from the so-called uniformization of behaviour. The individual has never been so free in his or her private and public choices as today, and never so alone and cut off from the spirit of community.

The postmodern link: individualism versus tribalism

Consequently, and according to a first current of sociological research (Lipovetsky, 1983, 1987, 1990), postmodernity is characterized by individualism, the logical conclusion of the modern quest for liberation from social bonds, whether those of traditional communities or complex modern societies. The postmodern individual, freed from the restricting limits of communities, is restored to themself and able to become totally autonomous. In postmodernity, the conquest of self has become inescapable and each individual, wherever they come from, must accomplish the feat of becoming someone by showing their difference. The right to liberty unbounded in theory – but limited in modernity to the economic, political and intellectual field – is affecting all aspects of daily life. The idea is gaining ground of a postmodern condition where the individual, freed of the constraints of collective ideals in matters concerning education, the family, sex, is operating a process of personalization as a way of managing behaviour, not through the tyranny of details, but with as few constraints and as many choices as possible. We have now entered the age of the ordinary individual, that is to say an age when any individual can (and must) take personal action so as to
produce and show their own existence, their own difference. Mobility characterizes the action of this ordinary individual both on the spatial and social level. The postmodern individual has thus become a nomad of the present; they have no more, or few, durable social links. The fragmentation of society, and in particular the fragmentation (and the ephemeral nature) of consumption are among the most visible consequences of this postmodern individualism. This fragmentation is made possible and fostered by the developments of industry and commerce: products and services have progressively freed the individual of all alienating tasks left behind by tradition, even purchasing itself. From their own home, and without the necessity of a physical social contact (distance-purchasing), the postmodern individual can obtain almost everything they desire. All the products and services offered thus increase the isolation of the postmodern individual while permitting them to be in virtual touch with the whole world (fax, TV, telephone, CD-ROM …). The process of egocentration, induced by the development and above all the widespread use of computers in all aspects of human existence, thus characterizes postmodern daily life.

Postmodernity can therefore be understood as a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism. But, attempts at social recomposition can also be glimpsed: the individual who has finally managed to liberate them from archaic or modern social links is embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe on the basis of an emotional free choice. Less than differentiation, it is de-differentiation which seems to be guiding individual action. Postmodernity can therefore be said, according to a second sociological current (Bauman, 1992; Maffesoli, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993), not to crown the triumph of individualism but the beginning of its end with the emergence of a reverse movement of a desperate search for the social link. In this view, individualism corresponded solely to a short period of transition: late modernity as described by architects, and not to postmodernity.

It is sometimes claimed that the social dynamics, characteristic of our postmodern era, are made up of a multiplicity of experiences, of representations and of daily-experienced emotions which are very often not properly understood. Whilst such dynamics are, most of the time, explained by individualism, they stress the tribalism which is developing more and more. The word “tribe” refers to the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism … , the common denominator of which is the community dimension. These tribes try to revive the community archetype of the village or the district, but they are not communities which are clearly definable in spatial terms; some use all the resources of the latest technical means of communication (micro-computers, minitel, fax) in order to form virtual tribes in which face-to-face encounters or co-physical presence is not compulsory.

The return of community?
These postmodern communities (Maffesoli, 1993) are inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of
modern society; instead they can be held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices. They exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members. They can rely on neither executive powers able to coerce their constituency into submission to the tribal rules (seldom do they have clearly codified rules to which the submission could be demanded), nor on the strength of neighbourly bonds or the intensity of reciprocal exchange. Postmodern tribes are, therefore, constantly in statu nascendi rather than essendi, brought ever again into being by the repetitive symbolic ritual of the members but persisting no longer than the power of attraction of these rituals (Bauman, 1992, pp. 157-8). Postmodern society, unlike modern society – conceived as an ensemble of social groups (socio-professional categories, classes) – looks like a network of societal micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common sub-culture, a vision of life. In our times, ethnic diasporas, occupational communities like computer engineers or ballet dancers, and style-conscious youths like rastas or skinheads develop their own complexes of meanings and symbols and form more or less stable tribes which are invisible to the categories of modern sociology. The postmodern communities taken as a whole are referred to by the term “sociality” which is different from “social” as it stresses not the mechanical and instrumental function of an individual member of a contractual aggregation, but the symbolic and emotional role of persons within ephemeral tribes. Each postmodern individual belongs to several tribes in each of which he or she might play a different role and wear a specific mask; this means that the modern tools of sociological analysis cannot classify him or her. And the fact of belonging to these tribes has become, for him or her, more important than belonging to a modern social class; this makes every attempt at classification impossible. The social status, that is to say the static position of an individual in one of the social classes of modernity, is progressively replaced by the societal configuration, that is to say the dynamic and flexible positioning of the individual within and between their postmodern tribes.

In fact, late modern individualism has moved to an “aestheticization[1] of everyday life” (Featherstone, 1991) made up of shared emotions favouring the concatenation of small ephemeral entities. In a sense, it can be said that there is aesthetic enjoyment in everyday life, in the collective passions of the tribes, in all ephemeral comunions. These opportunities for communion in private life are in opposition to the duplicity behind which individuals hide in public life where there is less and less emotional investment. It is emotion and communion which lead postmodern persons to the re-integration of rituals and transcendence in everyday life. There are numerous sociological studies (Ferrarotti, 1993) which emphasize the return of rituals, but in a profane and not religious manifestation. Religion has often given a purely divine meaning, whereas the basic Latin etymology is indeed the linking (re-ligare): linking humans with the divine and thus linking humans with each other. It can therefore be said that religion is not on the wane in our postmodern societies, it
has changed form: less institutional, more improvised, but always present as a factor of the social link, a sort of faith without a dogma. This new rituality therefore expresses the creativity of postmodern society and its numerous tribes.

So, there is no consensus as to what postmodernity is. One current of thought declares it to be the accomplishment of the process of individualization (Lipovetsky, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1992), while another claims it is the beginning of a reverse movement of social recomposition on the basis of ephemeral tribes (Maffesoli, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993). In fact, it even seems to be the case that the four modes of social link presented in Figure 1 coexist today: traditional communities, modern aggregations, postmodern (or late modern) individualism, and postmodern tribes. This can explain the coexistence of different forms of consumption: from an individualized consumption to a tribalized consumption, with in between, modern mass consumption and traditional local consumption (founded on reciprocity of a non-economic nature). And these different modes of consumption, like the different modes of social link, can be experienced by the same person in the course of daily life.

Confusion in consumption
Characterized by a crisis of consumption, deconsumption, a consumer who is more and more described as a chameleon or an ant, our postmodern era seems to be a period of extreme disorder in consumption, and consequently, of unpredictability in consumer behaviour.

A marketing revolution! In the coming years, consumer hunting is going to be a really difficult sport. My target? My segment? My life-style? How simple it was when the customer corresponded to categories, when their SPC (Socio-Professional-Category), their sex and their age indicated the contents of their trolley and the capacity of their car. Today, panels are going crazy, life-cycles can be counted in months, and the consumer no longer heeds the seasons since the champions of the short circuit offer six a year ... At the turn of the century, the consumer is giddy (L’Expansion, 1992).
According to the above statement, the consumer appears giddy, he or she does as he or she pleases, upsetting all the modern reference systems which had organized individuals according to categories. Furthermore, he or she appears fickle and unreliable, buys black in the morning and white in the afternoon, making it impossible to pin down their behaviour. Finally, they buy less, or at least, spend less (as sales have not gone down in volume), causing confusion in a socio-economic system founded on a market economy whose motor is the increase of consumption. So, postmodern individualism (Lipovetsky, 1983) may appear to be a powerful explanatory factor for the confused state of consumption. Indeed, it can explain both the difficulty in classifying the preferences of consumers and the instability of these preferences. Deconsumption, on the other hand, seems to be more difficult to explain and is even, in a sense, in contradiction with the individualist movement. A possible explanation for deconsumption will therefore have to be sought in postmodern tribalism (Maffesoli, 1988).

Before exploring the links between postmodernity and confusion in consumption, three preliminary remarks must be made.

First, sensational comments on the confused state of consumption which can be heard on the different media with provocative headlines such as “Impossible Mr Consumer” or “The Breakdown in Consumption” are often in tune with the times but are not always in keeping with the facts. Numerous European marketing managers and consultants[2] talk of the relative stability of the majority of consumers, confusion being limited to a fringe, perhaps growing, but still a fringe of all consumers. Some socio-economic studies conducted among readers of the women’s press (Cova et al., 1993) show that, at the beginning of the 1990s, the percentage of women who could be called postmodern was about 30 per cent for countries like France or Italy, 25 per cent for The Netherlands, and down to 17 per cent for Germany, and to less than 5 per cent for Portugal. In each country a great difference has been recorded between the increasingly postmodern urban woman and the rural woman, who is sometimes not yet modern, but traditional.

Second, confusion and giddiness are relative. From a modernist mechanist perspective, the fact that more and more consumers no longer fit into predefined categories, which make their behaviour predictable, is a cause of real confusion. From a postmodernist perspective, it is first possible to think of categories other than those defined by modernity to classify the consumer (lifestyles are a first attempt at this, already overtaken by events). Above all, it may be possible to consider giving up the study and the classifying of the consumer and to take instead an interest in consumption: “by having limited the study of consumption to the study of the customer, the research has only achieved partial results. In fact, it has obstructed the acquisition of a real understanding of market phenomena, because it has not been able to reflect the complex, multidimensional nature of the process of purchasing, nor its evolution” (Fabris, 1990, p. 67). Instead of pinning down the consumer, postmodern consumer research has to take an interest in the situations of consumption (Dubois, 1991) and their physical surroundings (Bitner, 1992), in the rituals of consumption (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), in
consumption trends (Burgaud, 1994), all of which influence the mood and the behaviour of the customer. And this does not make it necessary to hunt down the consumer to fit them into segments or even niches.

Third, confusion and giddiness are limited to the fringe of society which is still able to buy. While many consumers are giddy, and global trends suggest more will be, a growing part of the consumers are not giddy, they are dispirited and live in poverty (in 1995, between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of the European population lives precariously according to different studies; Cova, 1995).

The age of the individual: the virtualization of the social link

Individualism seems to be able to explain, for a large part, the present confusion of consumption. The difficulty in classifying the preferences of the consumer, that is to say the impossibility of explaining and predicting their behaviour according to social indicators can be explained by the determination to be a person, in the full sense of the word, and not a number in a social class where behaviour is supposed to be identical. The days are gone (the 1960s) when a secretary could cause a scandal in a company because she arrived at the factory in a car associated with another social class. At that time, no words were strong enough to describe her behaviour: “But who does she think she is?”; “She doesn’t know what she’s doing!”; and other, even crueler, remarks. Sometimes, the scandal could even make the person go back on her choice and buy a car more in keeping with her social status. Today, a minister can arrive at Matignon in a 2CV and an unemployed person can drive a BMW or Mercedes without anyone turning a hair, apart from tax inspectors. The possibility of free choice for the postmodern individual in all aspects of daily life, without limits being imposed by any social constraints, is totally in step with preferences which have nothing to do with class. In fact, for the postmodern individual, the essential quality of products and services is the zero defect and their main virtue is to serve and satisfy their slightest needs in a personalized fashion. Their use value may be functional (material attributes), symbolic (immaterial attributes) or a mixture of the two, what seems always at stake is the person in their independence and their distinction compared with others. Objects circulate from producers to consumers who have no a priori social link (self-service); if a minimum social link exists, it is at the service of the economic link, therefore at the service of the independence of the person freed of their public, social obligations and who can choose the obligations they wish in the private sphere.

In the same vein, the instability of the preferences of the consumer indicates the free choice of the postmodern individual in every sphere of daily life. They may purchase the same food item one day at the most basic hard discounter and the next day at Marks & Spencer or even Fauchon. They may dress in the morning like the concierge and the afternoon like a top model. They may adopt several different life styles in the same day. In fact, for the postmodern person, the leitmotiv is: “It is as I wish and when I wish” according to the mood of the moment. The postmodern person is therefore in perpetual social movement,
and is unpredictable even in relation to their former behaviour. Some see in this erratic behaviour the very ransom of liberty and of social destructuring:

the individual is certainly freer, but he/she also pays the ransom for this liberty and for the profusion of brands and products. Without orientation and a compass, he/she yields to the temptation of trying everything as if consumption were a game. Therefore, he/she becomes increasingly unfaithful to products and takes ever greater pleasure in changing the way he/she consumes (Weil, 1994, p. 26).

They are so unpredictable that some think that individualism of today opens the way for a different representation of the consciousness of the individual: not a single consciousness, but a multiple one, thus breaking with the Cartesian tradition. According to this idea, the conscious self is only a weaving, a momentary coming together of functions, at times linked by a single common thread. The extreme case of multiple personality disorder (MPD), when a person assumed successively different personalities, is evidence of the re-emergence of the multiple consciousness, repressed by modernity and rationality.

One of the important consequences of individualism is that the postmodern individual, who has become their own Pygmalion, is on a never-ending identity quest, a quest for the meaning of their life (Elliott, 1994). Everyone constructs themself and their life like a work of art, which leads to an aesthetization of everyday life, and consequently to an aesthetization of consumption (Featherstone, 1991). In the absence of traditional or modern references – a consequence of the decomposition of traditional communities and modern utopias – the individual turns towards objects and services, that is to say the system of consumption in order to forge an identity. They have a “thirst for values”, reads another provocative title in the press, and this thirst for values appears to be the consequence of a “lack of community” (Elliott, 1993, p. 138). Thus, the system of consumption becomes central to the existence of the individual (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993), and the products represent veritable social hybrids, quasi-objects and quasi-subjects (Latour, 1991), which are increasingly replacing the other (human) in the process of identity creation. Thus, entire stretches of life, yesterday sheltered from the market sphere, today become commodities that can be exchanged for cash. Consequently, by paying, the postmodern individual can build an identity for themself with cultural symbols and references (plays, exhibitions, films, books), humanitarian references (The French Doctors, Bosnia, Somalia), but also sporting references (the complete outfit of the OM supporter), and, in fact, all possible references since, in a postmodern universe where eclecticism and the confusion of values reign, everything can be taken and assembled according to the free choice of the individual.

And this phenomenon is likely to expand with the development of virtual reality where the individual will be able to build for themself successive virtual identities (liquid selves) totally under control, without having to take all the risks involved in the social link. All instruments invented by science and technology, and particularly electronics, are “anti-link” instruments which are likely to increase the isolation of the individual while paradoxically favouring
communication and the circulation of people in the so-called cyberspace (Escobar, 1994): virtual shops, working from home, E money, all-in-one computer-fax-telephone … The notion of “nomad of the present” adopted by numerous technocrats in order to promote a new organization of work (the virtual company), and the development of new technical objects (nomadic objects) thus hides a vision of the relatively dehumanized man/woman: an interactive communicational particle, in perpetual feedback, plugged into the network and visualizing the podium. Taken to the extreme, this means the individual will be able to do without direct contact with others[3].

Towards a linking value of products or services

But on the other side, a rebellion against objects is worrying observers of society:

what strikes me most is the rebellion! Look at the number of people who let things drop. This acute collective clumsiness is spreading like an epidemic. In everything that drops, there is subversion. In fact, these things are dropped because there is today a relationship with objects of hysterical rejection. Before, there was an idyllic and conjugal relationship with objects – it has become hysterical” (Sarduy, 1994, p. 19).

It is possible to suppose that at the beginning of the last century, a four person family of average means was surrounded by 150 to 200 elements at most, including crockery and clothes. Today, the same family would have a system of about 2,500 to 3,000 objects (Branzi, 1988), including electrical household appliances and decorative objects – excepting books and cassettes. Some even estimate that a person is in contact with about 20,000 products in their daily life (Norman, 1988). Throughout a slow but steady process, it has been possible to witness a true revolution which has replaced by goods and various industrial products the traditional presence of a community made up of neighbourhood and extensions of the home where daily tasks were carried out (the wash-house, washing lines, wells). Wishing to liberate the individual from their daily tasks, modernity cut them off from their environment and isolated them in the midst of its productions. Today, as one of the consequences of this revolution, daily acts of clumsiness towards objects are perhaps the signal of a deep crisis of the postmodern individual, who has not totally given up satisfying their desire for community in a direct way rather than, in a compensatory way, through products and services of the consumer society.

And deconsumption, at its structural level – and not at its transitory level, a consequence of the rise in unemployment and in anxiety – could be linked to the search for the satisfaction of this desire for community which could take two forms:

(1) rejection of virtual satisfaction through the purchasing and above all the repeated purchasing of the “new” which lost all its meaning with the crumbling of the modern myth of progress;

(2) seeking for direct satisfaction through emotion shared with others, not through consuming with them, but through being with them.
Tribalism therefore appears to be much more powerful than individualism as an explanation of the phenomenon of deconsumption. The phenomenon of a loss of landmarks and of meaning in daily life and of having much more free time together with the phenomenon of rebellion against objects, reinforces the idea of a postmodern tribalist individual who is looking less in consumption for a direct means of giving meaning to life[4] than for a means to form links with others in the context of one or several communities of reference which will give meaning to their life. Then, the system of consumption is not always perceived as first and using the social link, but often as second, and in the service of the social link (Cova, 1995): the link is more important than the thing.

In other words, the postmodern individual values the social aspects of life at the cost of consumption and the use of goods and services. The goods and services which are valued are mainly those which, through their linking value, permit and support social interaction of the communal type. The consequence for consumption may be important. There could be a decrease in the consumption of products and services which isolate people and an increase in those which bring people together. But, as these last are few in number, individuals would go back to vectors of linking not sold on the market (example: hashish as a vector of communion and of shared emotion), or would turn the existing vectors away from their original utilitarian finality (example: shopping malls as favourite meeting places for urban tribes). Ephemeral tribes which need to consolidate and affirm their union are, in fact, on the look-out for anything that could facilitate and support the communion: a site, an emblem, the support of a ritual of integration, or of recognition, etc. Thus, to satisfy their desire for communities, postmodern individuals seek products and services less for their use value than for their linking value (Godbout and Caillé, 1992).

The new tribalism which characterizes postmodernity therefore seems to necessitate a redefinition of the value of products or services, the latter having to serve at the same time the person in their individuality and the group togetherness, the “among several”, the “between two”. They thus play the role of cult object or of cult place meaning the link and the interdependence between people (link and interdependence refused and even denied by modernity). In postmodernity, the product or the service does not isolate but is like the totem for primitive tribes; it serves as a pole of attraction for postmodern tribes. It is mainly the support for “authoritative performances” (Arnould et al., 1994) which focus on creating and sustaining rituals and the connection between individual and community (contrary to the late modern product or service that is more the support for “authenticating acts” which emphasize self-referential behaviours, uniqueness and individuality).

In the extreme case, if the hypothesis of “tribalism + linking value” comes up against that of “individualism + use value”, there could be a two-speed consumption, as in the model of the egg-timer (Wickham et al., 1994): a rise in the consumption of basic products (but with no defects) sold in places like hard discounters, combined with a rise in the consumption of cult objects sold in cult places. Between the two, all products and services too burdensome for their use
value (functional or symbolic) and with no linking value would see their sales decline progressively. They would be the main victims of the phenomenon of deconsumption. This outline needs to be tempered by a semiotic reflection about the meaning ascribed to objects (McCracken, 1988): it is not the producer who decrees that their product has a linking value, it is the people who are going to use it who will give it this meaning. Moreover, as the meanings of objects are no longer fixed and connected with their functions, but free floating, each individual may ascribe different meanings to the objects. There is therefore an extreme relativity in the linking value of a product or a service, contrary to its “universal” use value as it was perceived in modernity.

Towards a tribal marketing

Two visions of postmodern marketing

In the marketing conceptualizations applied to postmodernity, the duality individualism/tribalism, brought to light by the ethnosociological analysis of the social link, can be observed. This duality is even expressed geographically as Anglo-Saxon marketing conceptualizations stem from late modern individualism, whereas the sole marketing conceptualizations stemming from postmodern tribalism can be attributed to authors from Mediterranean cultures.

A feature common to the numerous Anglo-Saxon marketing approaches which are trying to adapt to postmodern fragmentation and individualism is the search for the “proximity of the consumer”. Be it “one to one marketing” (Rapp and Collins, 1990), “micro marketing” (Hapoienu, 1990), “database marketing” (Davies, 1992), “after-marketing” (Vavra, 1992) and above all “relationship marketing” (starting with the seminal article of Gummesson, 1987), to the handbook of Christopher et al. (1992), their principal aim seems to be to build, develop and maintain the relationship with the customer as an individual, rather than to bombard a market made up of an anonymous mass broken up into homogeneous segments. In order to do so, it is generally recommended to give up mass marketing in favour of direct marketing with the help of a database of clients and known prospects. The credo of marketing practice adapted to the age of the individual can therefore be the following: “a very personal form of marketing that recognizes, acknowledges, appreciates, and serves the interests and needs of selected groups of consumers whose individual identities and marketing profiles are or become known to the advertiser” (Rapp and Collins, 1990, p. 36). Companies like Quaker Oats or American Airlines adopted such an approach in the US at the end of the 1980s (see Rapp and Collins, 1990, for detailed case studies).

These approaches are justified by the following arguments:

- If the market can no longer be cut up into homogeneous and stable segments, the only alternative is to pin down the consumer individually (with the help of computerized information systems), with the possibility
of forming, a posteriori, small groups of consumers in order to facilitate marketing action.

- If the consumer is fickle and unpredictable it is not so important to predict their behaviour as to be able to react immediately to their new aspirations through the maintenance of a continuous relation.
- If the consumer is individualistic, they seek everything that will permit him/her to maintain and develop their liberty, that is to say a relationship of trust with a supplier which guarantees the zero defect or total quality of the material aspects of life.
- If the consumer wishes to differentiate themself, they ask for personalized products and services which only a continuous, close and interactive relationship can assure.

Taken together, these approaches do not call themselves postmodern. They are researchers in marketing interested in postmodernity who have reintegrated these approaches in a postmodern perspective.

The work of Firat and Venkatesh (1993), on the other hand, clearly expressed the wish to examine the impacts of postmodernity on marketing practice. Following on from their early works, and starting with the observation (p. 239) that the market has become central in our societies whereas all other institutions and forms of mediation have lost a large part of their legitimacy (state, class, school, family, etc), they consider that the postmodern individual gives a meaning to their life essentially through consumption and that marketing may already be the major postmodern institution (“Postmodernity: the age of marketing”). They derive seven possible consequences of this for the practice of marketing in postmodernity:

(1) Thanks to the confusion of values and generalized eclecticism, marketing can today penetrate areas which had so far been closed to it, such as art, culture and ideology (“the consumer increasingly becomes a consumer of culture, and culture increasingly becomes a marketable commodity” p. 245).

(2) Because of the fragmentation, the transience and the diversity of styles, marketing is having to constantly renew the meanings and representations ascribed to the product which, itself, has no need to change (“the image does not represent the product, but the product represents the image” p. 244).

(3) Because of the rejection by individuals of the dominant values and of everything that is normal (or is in the process of becoming normal), and the desire to do “one’s own thing”, marketing is as interested in the diversity of marginal lifestyles as in the dominant model in society.

(4) As the postmodern individual prefers simulation to reality, they can choose to live all their consumption activities in a virtual manner (in the
(5) As the educational system is still based on modern institutions which are not adapted to the postmodern generation, the marketing system, which plays the role of generating values and meanings, has therefore become the principal vector of education in our societies.

(6) Because of the confusion of genres and particularly the blurring of feminine/masculine bipolar categorization, marketing has to change its representation of the “ideal” consumer (the housewife) both on the level of strategic thinking and on the level of communication and of images (“both men and women thus become ideal consumers and producers” p. 244).

(7) Thanks to the globalization of culture, transnational companies are becoming, through their marketing actions, agents of cultural change par excellence. Firat and Venkatesh (1993, p. 246) consider that, in postmodernity, “marketing is the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation”.

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) therefore go further than the previous Anglo-Saxon approaches which were only interested in one aspect of postmodernity: the mechanical aspect of market fragmentation. These approaches seem in fact still too modern for they focus on the functionality of the offer and do not manage to take into account the postmodern movement of aestheticization of everyday life which gives a privileged place to emotions, representations, hyperreality and the societal aspects of the offer (van Raaij, 1993). Elliott (1993, p. 136), in the same vein as Firat and Venkatesh (1993), considers that the meanings conveyed by objects have, for the postmodern person, as much importance (if not more!) as their instrumental functions. He insists on the fact that the meanings of objects are no longer fixed and linked to their functions, but free-floating as each individual may ascribe the meanings they desire to the objects. Finally, Elliott (1993, p. 138) makes the hypothesis that, in a more and more individualistic and atomized society, the lack of community has to be compensated by the consumption of signs and symbols which reassure the individual of their identity and give a meaning to their life[4], while giving them the illusion of belonging to a virtual community of consumers (Belk and Bryce, 1993, p. 293). Elliott (1993) concludes from this (like Firat and Venkatesh, 1993) that the marketing system plays a primordial role in the construction of the identity of postmodern individuals.

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) and Elliott (1993) thus share the preoccupations of the so-called Latin school of thought in postmodern marketing which aims to make marketing play a societal role. But where Firat and Venkatesh (1993) and Elliott (1993) perceive marketing as a system making it possible to fill the postmodern vacuum caused by the lack of community, the Latin researchers propose a view of marketing as a vector of the community link. This Latin view,
sometimes called “societing” (Badot et al., 1993), sees the marketing as the activity of project and design of innovations destined to facilitate the co-presence and the tribal aggregations of individuals: a kind of communal or “tribal marketing”.

In a more precise way, the representatives of the Latin view (Badot et al., 1993; Bucci, 1992; Cova, 1995; Cova and Svanfeldt, 1992; Gobbi et al., 1990, 1993) also reproach one-to-one marketing and other individualistic marketing panaceas of the following:

- Not being completely in step with postmodern times in their desire to be the closest to a known customer, without sharing any emotion with him or her. They reproach them of confusing proximity and intimacy, and of basing everything on customer service: postmodern persons do not want to be only the object of an individualized service in terms of customization of functions, they also wish a personalized link.
- Being shortsighted in the way they look at what they call the “relation”. While the individualistic approach to relationship marketing aims at creating and developing a relation between the brand or the company (even a member of the company) and a customer, the communal approach to relationship marketing prefers to recreate and support the relation between customers. Products, physical supports, employees, are dedicated to support the communal link, not to be a substitute for it (an often unfeasible and counterproductive task).

Thus, the credo of tribal marketing is that postmodern persons are not only looking for products and services which enable them to be freer, but also products and services (employees + physical surroundings) which can link them to others, to a community, to a tribe.

Some elements for a tribal marketing

In order to grasp the specificity of the Latin approaches in postmodern marketing, it is necessary to return to the principle underlying postmodern tribalism: in products and services, the use value (functions and symbols at the service of the individual as a means of distinction) is being sought as much as the linking value (link with the other or with others and means of tribal symbiosis). A product or a service would thus be able to play the societal role of support of communities. It would be a support for co-presence, and effective co-presence, not of solitude in a lonely crowd! Again, we can use the postmodern leitmotif: the link is more important than the thing (e.g. the thing is only the societal support of the link).

According to the Latin view, the marketing problem companies are facing in postmodernity therefore seems to be that they produce goods and services which, when placed on the market, become commodities with a certain use value (even symbolic) for an individual taken in isolation, but are only rarely objects or places with an aesthetic potential of linking value for a community of
individuals. On the basis of this statement, some conceptual propositions have been already put forward by Mediterranean representatives:

- ethnomarketing for marketing research;
- societal innovations for product innovation;
- linking places for service design.

The idea of ethnomarketing (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Badot et al., 1993), that is to say the analysis of postmodern rituals of consumption (see also Belk et al., 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991 for investigations on consumption rituals) has been developed to bring together the return of rituals in their profane form and the practice of marketing. Ethnomarketing seeks out the link between the practices of consumption and the tribal imagination, starting with the idea that people do not function in a social vacuum, acting on the sole impulse of advertising impacts. The meaning ascribed to products and services is often related to societal occasions and to social links, and rituals are one of the best collective opportunities to affirm, evoke, assign or revise these meanings. Consequently, the objective of ethnomarketing is to pin down elements of an intangible nature which are imperceptible taken one by one but can be discerned in situations taking place in an atmosphere of trust established over a period of time. These situations, when repeatedly enacted, are in fact rituals created around objects or places in circumstances of both functional and aesthetic use. In modernity, a few privileged moments existed to enact rituals and many rituals have disappeared, thus depriving the product or the service of this aura of mystery and sacredness which used to give it a specific identity by giving it a meaning. With the rejection of materialism and the aestheticization of everyday life which characterizes the postmodern condition, the search for rituals and their integration in the design of products and services can play the role of the active memory of a society seeking the sacred. So it is that today “many businesses owe their livelihoods to their ability to supply ritual artifacts, or items used in the performance of rituals, to consumers” (Soloman, 1992, p. 529).

Ethnomarketing isolates repeated fragments of daily life in order to derive deep significations from them, together with forms of relations between objects or places and people. The ecology of human relations, that is to say the aptitude to define new ritual codes of behaviour between people, particularly through objects and places, has therefore become one of the major themes of postmodern marketing (Badot et al., 1993).

The concept of socio-sensitive innovation (Gobbi et al., 1990) or societal innovation (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1992) has been put forward to designate the process through which new significations and new possibilities of emotion are introduced in the postmodern social system. Societal innovations appear capable of bringing together emergent socio-cultural trends and multiplied technological possibilities. They result from the recombination of familiar material in unconventional ways and they serve as a means by which a society both encourages and endures change. Societal innovations completely renew
the product or the service through the more or less conscious consideration of a new experience shared by customers (see for example the cases of the Acova radiators and the Découvertes Gallimard collection in France, (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1992, and the cases of the weekly paper *Quo*re and the boutiques Max and Co. in Italy, Gobbi et al., 1993). These innovations are supported by sociocultural trends that they reinforce and sometimes even start up; consequently, some (Bucci, 1992; Burgaud, 1994) speak in this case of “trend marketing” to qualify this postmodern marketing practice. Societal innovations can have a trans-segmented potential (Gobbi et al., 1993) and be adopted by several groups or have limited potential and only affect some tribes. Their success (Gobbi et al., 1993, p. 210) seems to stem from the spontaneous communion of the individuals they provoke and their resulting role of social support. The conditions of this success were brought to light by research (Cova and Svanfeldt, 1992): Japanese flavoured marketing and management methods blended with the vision of an artist-entrepreneur. Along the same line of thought, certain researchers (Bucci, 1992) insist on the conditions behind the emergence and the development of innovations with a strong aesthetic potential: a design director (or art director) capable of inspiring the company to adopt a particular style and rhythm, thus giving the company a true competitive advantage based on emotion.

Services marketing provides an ideal context for the concept of linking value to be seen in action. Indeed, service places design is today still largely oriented towards the functional maximization of space for the satisfaction of an isolated user (Bitner, 1992). In a postmodern perspective, if service places may assume the role of social support or communality (Goodwin, 1994) they traditionally provided (the wash house, the town square, the pub …), they would be perceived as the favourite places of urban tribes for the enactment of their rituals of integration and recognition: they will become linking places. This is already the case when shopping malls are taken over by gangs of teenagers. This is the move certain service companies are trying to make: through the creation of linking places they try to participate in the (re)construction of social links and achieve a very favourable impact on customer satisfaction. Hotel chains are now moving in this direction as they realize that postmodern individuals are no longer seeking the “cocoon-prison” hotel (to borrow an expression used in a RISC survey) where they remain cloistered in their rooms to be able to benefit from all the personalized services of the hotel. What they are looking for now is the “contact-hotel” which has an open, friendly atmosphere where new acquaintances can be made, and where they can share their evening meal with the hotel managers (see, for example, the development of the Campanile chain in France).

**Conclusion: the re-embeddedness of marketing**

This paper investigated the phenomenon of community in postmodernity as it influences consumption and marketing. First, it explored the consequences of postmodernity at the level of social links and communities. Second, it derived an
ethnosociological framework to understand the current confusion in consumption. Third, it related this framework to postmodern marketing conceptualizations and especially the so-called societing or tribal marketing. In fact, the central leitmotif of societing or tribal marketing – the link is more important than the thing – leads researchers not to analyse economic activity as an independent one but as an activity embedded in a societal context which, at the same time, encompasses it and renders it possible. Consumption can therefore be studied as much for its functional and symbolic aspects relative to the individual as for its emotional and aesthetic aspects relative to the communal link between individuals.

Notes
1. Aesthetics has to be understood here, not in its restricted modern sense of superficial beauty, but in the full sense of the word as living emotions, feelings, shared passions (Maffesoli, 1990).
3. This is already happening for some computer specialists as shown in the following extract from an interview with David Kusek, CEO of Passport Design, a pioneer in music and personal computers (Morph’s Outpost, 1994): “The thing I like about computing is you design your own world on this machine and you have total, 100 percent control of it, and very few external things can affect what happens to you. I got attracted to that, having played in bands for years and having to deal with people, mostly unreliable and unprofessional people. I really was attracted to the computer environment as something I could control and manipulate myself. I got into it”.
4. Where we speak of meaning here, it is of the meaning individuals give to their social relations, i.e. the societal meaning. And it is clearly of this meaning that people are speaking when they discuss the meaning of their life.

References
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