New Perspectives in Critical Marketing and Consumer Society

A Contemporary Essay Collection

Edited by

Elaine L. Ritch, Jennifer A. Brown, Julie McColl and Margie Shields

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Author biographies

Morgan Addie holds a First Class Bachelor of Arts with Honours in International Marketing Degree, demonstrating both academic achievement and a strong commitment to the field. She is currently working part-time while actively expanding her marketing skills and life experience.

Millie Ashworth-Ritch holds an MA (Hons) in History and Politics from the University of Dundee, where her dissertation, "*From Colonial Narratives to Inclusive Histories: Redefining Cultural Representation and Authenticity in UK Museums through Repatriation Efforts*", explored the ethical, legal, and cultural challenges of repatriation in British museums. Her research advocates for greater inclusivity, accurate representation, and the dismantling of colonial narratives in cultural institutions. Now working in social innovation and marketing, Millie brings a strong passion for social justice and advocacy to her role. Her academic background in history and politics continues to influence her work, particularly her focus on creating impactful, community-driven campaigns that champion inclusivity and diverse representation.

Jennifer A. Brown, is a Lecturer in Digital Marketing within the department of Fashion, Marketing, Tourism and Events. Jennifer is programme leader for BA (Hons) International Marketing and module leader for Social Media Marketing (Level 2), International Marketing Communications (Level 3), and Postgraduate taught module: Integrated Digital Marketing Communications. Jennifer supervises dissertations at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels in the field of Marketing/Fashion with a particular focus on social media marketing and generational cohort theory research. Jennifer has worked in industry as a marketing manager and a research analyst. Jennifer spent a number of years working in various marketing and research positions for non-profit organisations, this experience heavily influences Jennifers teaching and research, she is a strong advocate of 'real-world' teaching. Jennifer has a keen interest in research, particularly within the field of fashion and marketing, after achieving her MSc in Marketing and MRes (Master

of Research) at GCU, Jennifer embarked on a PhD at the university, her PhD research looks at creating appropriate marketing strategies to make the fashion industry a more inclusive environment, with a particular focus on Generation-X women.

Rachel Burns is a recent graduate from Glasgow Caledonian University, where she earned a first-class BA (Hons) degree in International Marketing. Driven by a belief in marketing's potential to inspire positive social change, Rachel is eager to build a career that aligns with her passion for social justice and creates meaningful impact.

Grace Guillén is a recent graduate from Glasgow Caledonian University with a First-Class BA (Hons) degree in Fashion Design with Business. With a background in both retail and hospitality, she brings strong customer service skills and a keen understanding of consumer needs. Passionate about fashion and branding, she is eager to transition into the marketing side of the fashion industry, where she can combine her experience with her creative interests. She is enthusiastic about expanding her skills in marketing strategy and digital engagement and looks forward to contributing to a dynamic team that values ethical practices and inclusivity in fashion.

Melissa Henshaw is currently an Events Administrator for itison venues in Glasgow. She graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University with a First Class Honours in International Fashion Branding, earning a First Class Grade for her Dissertation Research Project titled *"TikTok Made Me Buy It: An Exploration of TikTok Marketing and Its Impact on UK Generation Z Consumers' Buying Behaviour."* During her studies, she gained valuable experience in the events industry and completed an internship as the Sponsorship Director for Scottish Fashion Association. Melissa aspires to continue advancing her career in the Events and Marketing industry.

Dr Julie McColl is Assistant Professor at Heriot Watt University and works across a number of universities in the UK. Her research interests are in branding, fashion branding, luxury fashion and the internationalisation of luxury brands. She has previously co-authored *'New*

Perspectives in Critical Marketing and Consumer Society', published in 2021 (Ritch and McColl, 2021), and *'Pioneering New Perspectives in the Fashion Industry: Disruption, Diversity and Sustainable Innovation'*, published in 2023 (Ritch, Canning and McColl, 2023),

Connor McLeod is a recent graduate with First-Class Honours in BA (Hons) International Fashion Branding from Glasgow Caledonian University, where he was jointly recognised as Best Student of the Year 2024 during his final year. Passionate about forging connections between the fashion and music industries, Connor is a live music photographer and artist. His work captures the energy and style of performances, allowing him to blend his interests and explore the dynamic relationship between visual aesthetics and musical expression.

Megan Helen Merry is a First-Class Honours Graduate BA (Hons) International Fashion Branding from Glasgow Caledonian University, where she is currently pursuing a master's degree in international Fashion Marketing. As the class representative for her master's program, Megan actively engages with her peers and faculty to enhance the academic experience. Her interests lie at the intersection of fashion, branding, and marketing, where she explores innovative strategies to connect with diverse consumer bases. Passionate about sustainability in the fashion industry, Megan is committed to integrating responsible practices into her work.

Lauren Murray graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University in July 2024 with a First-Class Honours degree in International Fashion Branding and is currently working in local venues selling artist merchandise. As someone who has been overweight her whole life, the implications marketing has had on the body positivity movement and acceptance of fat people has, and still is frustrating, often feels like it's one step forward, two steps back. Lauren believes that marketing has a key responsibility in shifting societies perspective of fat bodies and is grateful to have been given the opportunity to shed some light on the issue.

Kirsty Shearer is a recent graduate from Glasgow Caledonian University, where she earned a first-class BA (Hons) degree in International

Fashion Branding and was awarded joint best 4th-year student. Kirsty has displayed an interest in sustainable fashion throughout her time at university, by assisting non-profit steering group Sustainable Fashion Scotland with research into systems change in the Scottish fashion community, as well as participating in the EU-funded Sustainable Fashion Employability Skills research project which was presented at a conference in Madrid in 2023, and aimed to foster employability skills and support the implementation of sustainability strategies in the fashion industry.

Margie Shields has extensive experience in designing, developing and managing marketing programmes and modules and teaching marketing concepts and strategies and consumer research techniques at Glasgow Caledonian University. She is committed to creating a dynamic learning environment and preparing students for successful careers in marketing.

Dr Elaine L Ritch is a Reader in Fashion, Marketing and Sustainability at Glasgow Caledonian University. She has made significant contributions to the sustainable fashion literature over the last decade and has adopted novel methodologies to explore consumer perceptions, including with young children as they reflect on Eco-School activities. Elaine is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She leads the research group 'Consumer Lifestyles and Experiences' and teaches 'New Perspectives in Critical Marketing and Consumer Society.' Her approach to research and teaching is very much driven by the 'Common Weal' (Scots for Common Good) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Sophie Wade is a recent graduate with a BA (Hons) in International Marketing from Glasgow Caledonian University. In the summer of 2023, she completed a transformative marketing internship with The Edrington Group in New York City, facilitated by the Saltire Scholarship programme. This experience allowed her to apply her academic knowledge in a corporate environment, honing her skills in luxury brand marketing and brand development. Currently, Sophie is trave-

ling through Southeast Asia, immersing herself in local traditions and expanding her worldview. Passionate about the intersection of culture and commerce, Sophie is excited to begin exploring roles where she can continue to develop her knowledge of international marketing and cultural intelligence.

Robyn Williamson holds a BA (Hons) in International Fashion Branding from Caledonian University, where they conducted a detailed study on visual merchandising and consumer behaviour in their dissertation, "*Gender Differences and Similarities in Impulse Buying Behaviour: A Comparative Study among Generation X Consumers in Fashion Retail Environments, Analysing the Influence of Store Layout and Design within the S-O-R Visual Merchandising Model.*" Now working in recruitment, Robyn brings a unique people-centred perspective to their work but is driven by an ambition to transition into marketing, with a keen interest in the storytelling aspect behind impactful campaigns. Their work reflects a strong foundation in branding and consumer behaviour, and they are eager to bring that expertise to the world of marketing.

Sofia Wise holds a 1st Class BA (Hons) degree in International Fashion Branding, specialising in the role of brand reputation within UK fashion marketing. Their dissertation, *"Investigating the Role Brand Reputation Has on Generation Z Consumers in UK Fashion Marketing: A Study on the Impact of Brand Reputation on Consumer Behaviour and Brand Loyalty,"* explores the intricate relationship between brand perception and consumer loyalty. With additional research in "A Critical Analysis of Authentic Fashion Marketing Management," Sofia Wise brings an insightful, research-driven approach to social media marketing. Now actively working in the field, Sofia is dedicated to utilising social media in the marketing industry and looks forward to what the future holds.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Elaine L Ritch, Jennifer Brown, Julie McColl and Margie Shields

Following from our books '*New Perspectives in Critical Marketing and Consumer Society*', published in 2021 (Ritch and McColl, 2021), and '*Pioneering New Perspectives in the Fashion Industry: Disruption, Diversity and Sustainable Innovation*', published in 2023 (Ritch, Canning and McColl, 2023), this book addresses some of these previous concepts in a practical setting. This new book follows from those titles with intersectional and unique themes as interpreted by young marketers; rather than emerging from traditional research, each essay looks to marketing and societal discourse for examples of how marketing management can design content that acknowledges a more ideologically progressive cohort of consumers. As such, this book represents new perspectives and critically evaluating marketing discourses, all of which are supported by examples from the marketplace to illustrate marketing in action.

This book adopts a unique perspective in critically evaluating new perspectives of marketing that fall within ideologically progressive constructs, including EDI (equality, diversity and inclusivity), gendered constructs and implications and sustainability (people and planet), all of which are intersectional and embedded within consumer culture. Marketing is often criticised as being commercially focused – profit over people. This book suggests that marketers could and should include consideration for authenticity and ethical implications by providing examples of how this can be conceptualised within current markets. In support of evolving consumer values, the chapters include insights from consumer society that capture co-created social discourse. This is especially true of the fashion industry, which has a history of alleged exploitation of garment workers, and more recently of the environment. The chapters include discussions on social media where consumers

have expressed their disappointment with brands marketing activities and business operations, when claims are considered as tokenistic and inauthentic. As such, the topics in the book support Kotler, Hermawan, and Setiawan's (2021) *Marketing 5.0: Technology for humanity*, and other research that focuses on brand values, brand integrity, and brand authenticity. There is much here to learn for marketing management, and we postulate that theory can be supported by observing marketplace interactions and societal discourse.

This book is structured into three sections, covering fashion marketing, gendered implications in marketing and consumer culture, to reflect upon the way in which societal ideologies and discourse are evolving. Each chapter has one theme, set within four intersecting contexts covering ethics, sustainability, globalisation, gender, technology, and consumer culture, where theory is critically reflected and discussed with marketing examples to deepen our understanding. The chapter themes reflect the authors interest and are all unique. These topics are of interest to marketing management due to the contemporary content that reflects current marketing and societal discourse. The aim of the book is to critically evaluate topical discourse with implications for marketing management, and we anticipate that the book will be relevant for higher and further education students, as well as marketing professionals who seek insight into societal reflections of marketing activities. This book examines theoretical frameworks and marketing literature alongside examples from marketing and social media, demonstrating the blurring between marketing and social discourse that is supported by technology enabling co-created discourse.

We anticipate that the topicality of the book will draw in students and academics, by providing a new contemporary lens through which marketing can be understood within consumer society. It can help school pupils, higher educations, undergraduate and postgraduate students who may be interested in working in the marketing industry understand more about the role marketing plays in commercial markets and within society. This is especially relevant as consumer values become elevated within consumption – and perhaps anti-consumption – prac-

tice. We also envisage the book as supporting UG and PG students understanding of the ethical implications of marketing. It can support students with assessments, particularly in scoping out topics for their dissertations or thesis. The chapters provide concepts for further investigation, theories relevant to marketing and demonstrate how topical marketing mediums can be investigated and positioned. The book can also support academics with marketing examples for developing the curriculum, lecture content, and assessment design. The book will also be of interest to marketers/practitioners who want to engage with topical marketing discourse. This insight into new perspectives captured and evaluated with academic literature and theory provides an illuminating way to engage with the marketing curriculum. The book provides an up-to-date account of marketing within current consumer society. Finally, the book will be of interest to the media as it provides insight into cultural and societal expectations. The book provides a glimpse into the future of markets and marketing.

Section 1: Fashion

The fashion industry is globally significant for many economies, from source materials to production, through to consumption, retailing and marketing (Ritch, 2023). Fashion is also socially and culturally relevant, and is located within consumer culture as informing ideologies, behaviours, practice and signalling self. Our second chapter explores fashion consumer culture through the lens of the Met Gala, one of the most anticipated events of the annual fashion calendar and one where the outfits of the attendees will be posted in traditional mediums and throughout social media platforms. Addie examines the impact of the Met Gala on consumer culture with particular examination of identify creation, building on theories developed by Featherstone (2017) and Sirgy (1985). This symbolic presentation of fashion is, as Addie argues, highly influential and diffuses into wider society, progressing perceptions of gender binaries and encouraging sustainability for fashion practice. In this chapter we can see fashion as a creative output that symbolises ideologies and innovation, pushing boundaries with

subliminal messaging, rather than a neoliberal mechanism for profit generation (Ritch, 2023). Addie concludes that the Met Gala enables a site for challenging social conventions and progressive politics that is visually enticing and ideologically stimulating.

In our third chapter, Wise considers how authenticity is an important dimension for fashion marketing management. Evolving from advances in technology and social media platforms that encourages business to consumer communications, the platforms also enable consumer to consumer and consumer to business interactions, which constitutes a co-created discourse. As such, consumers can now influence one another in greater numbers, as well as challenge brands for marketing claims and operational activities. Wise examines authenticity through gender equality claims from fashion brands, as well as how fashion addressed consumers concerns for sustainability. Building on Sirgy's (1991) Self-Congruence Theory, Wise acknowledges polarised ideologies prevalent in societal discourse and argues that current consumers are more aware and attuned towards issues around equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) and sustainability. Wise therefore counsels brands that they should take care when advocating EDI issues in marketing and to make sure that all claims are representative of all aspects of business operations to avoid online criticism from consumers.

In our fourth chapter, Williamson also examines claims made in fashion branding, this time by examining how fashion marketing elicits controversy and how this can either make a brand appear edgier, or how this can lead to brands being cancelled. Williamson examines how brands subvert consumer culture, cultural heritage and sexualisation, and while this may have been successful in the past, more recently, there is evidence that consumers are attuned to cultural and sexual sensitivities. Williamson provides examples from fashion to highlight claims of cultural appropriation and sexually insensitive marketing, drawing on social movements, such as #MeToo, as shifting societal discourse around gendered expectations and experiences that can leave marketing exposed to dated ideologies. Through situating the importance of

co-created discourse, this chapter supports Kotler et al.'s (2006) assertion for growing consumer power that can destabilise marketing activities.

In chapter five, Henshaw considers the role of communication as a promotional tool for fashion brand marketing management. Set within co-created discourse, Henshaw considers issues of control and authenticity for brand management along with the symbolic narratives of brands for consumer signalling. While social media has enabled the rise of the influencer marketing for fashion branding, this chapter also considers the role of 'deinfluencing' to reduce frequent impulsive fashion consumption. Henshaw highlights the interconnectivity of consumer culture, technology, globalisation and sustainability for fashion brand management, providing examples to support this critical analysis.

Section 2: Gender

Gender discourse and gendered expectations are ingrained in culture and society, and efforts for gender equality are also well established as represented in feminism. The four waves of feminism represent this long journey over the last 200 years (Ritch and Dodd, 2021; Maclaren, 2015). In the UK, the first wave included the Woman's Suffrage movement from the 1850s which focused on women demanding the right to vote in political elections. In the 1960's, in the UK, the second wave sought access for equal employment pay, access to financial credit services (only men were allowed access to financial credit), marital rights, the contraceptive pill, access to abortion and childcare services, all of which would support equality in the workplace, at home and on wider society (Ritch and Dodd, 2021). The third wave occurred in the 1990's, diversifying into race, class, disability and ethnicity, in advocation of a more inclusive society. Arguably, this was also a time when gender and sexuality became commodified to become a core feature in marketing. While gender stereotypes were evident in marketing during both the second and third waves, in the 1990's there was a focus on gender and sexuality as enabling key market opportunities, as represented by 'girl power' and the 'pink pound'. While this demonstrated the main-

streaming of homosexuality and gender equality, it was still reliant on gender and sexual stereotypes in marketing, especially in presenting images of women within the male gaze. While women experienced less stigmatisation for expressing their sexuality, it was still considered as their currency for success under a patriarchal dominated paradigm. The fourth wave challenges gender and sexual stereotypes and is underpinned by notions of multiple feminisms – a key message that is communicated on social media platforms, evident in social movements, such as #MeToo and #BLM (Patsiaouras, 2021), and increasingly challenged to advance and support EDI. However, within this are polarised ideologies of what constitutes gender, and this is something that can impact on marketing.

Fourth wave feminism is a core feature of chapter six, where Wade examines the Barbie film released in 2023. The Barbie doll, and brand, has evolved over the last sixty years, since the doll was launched in the late1950s. Despite criticisms that the doll minimises young girls' expectations for gender equality and career ambition as well as representing a narrow vision of femininity that is culturally restrictive, the film launched in 2023 sought to diversify the brand. Directed by Greta Gerwig, who identifies as a feminist, the Barbie representation in the film included diverse body shapes, ethnicities and a transgender Barbie, all of whom span a spectrum of professional occupations, as well as 'weird' Barbie and mermaid Barbie. Wade examines the impact the Barbie film had on consumers, and how this alters the Barbie narrative, through the lens of gender and EDI. She also considers how the brand, and the film, encourages planned obsolescence, and how this is out of tune with other progressive principles presented in the film.

In chapter seven, Shearer examines gendered implications through the lens of the modelling industry, with examples of self-objectification that support Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory. Shearer reflects that consumer values are progressing through co-created discourse that gives voice to those traditionally marginalised by providing examples of brands who have not transgressed with societal values and have subsequently experienced criticisms. The role of human models in marketing

is symbolically interpreted, and is representative of branding; consequently, the impact on society has long been of interest to academics and Shearer situates those theories and critical analysis within current marketing and societal discourse, covering topics of wellbeing and autonomy, before considering how technology is advancing modelling and marketing imagery through artificial intelligence (AI). However, as she argues, even within AI, issues around EDI persist.

Chapter eight tackles the FIFA Women's World Cup, held in 2023, which illuminated on gender inequalities for the game of football. Burns explores gendered stereotypes ingrained within society and how this plays out in the context of football. She provides examples from social media and marketing which are entrenched in gender inequality, despite noting the grassroots popularity of women's football, outlining the disparity between professional assumptions and public opinion. Burns notes the importance of language for progressing gender equality and moving beyond gendered stereotypes, critically analysing the semiotics of terminology from the media and from FIFA. She concludes that FIFA Women's World Cup in 2023 demonstrates fourth wave feminism, including representations of LGBTQIA+, outlining how marketing management can support EDI.

In Chapter nine, Guillen critically examines the intersection of feminism and fashion, arguing that historically women's' fashion evolved in tangent with gender equality, with examples from the last century, beginning with the flapper movement of the 1920s. Guillen postulates that recent advances of globalised production and consumption as characterised in the fast fashion business model erode gender equality, especially when women are more likely to be exploited in order to make fashion cheap and disposable to encourage frequent impulsive consumption. This moves beyond feminist principles and Guillen suggests that value can be created through addressing production through ensuring transparency and marketing management that is mindful of EDI.

Chapter ten focuses on the Body Positivity Movement which challenges the narrow social norms of body shapes. Murray argues that marketing management has been over reliant on portraying unrealistic appearances in imagery and that this has been damaging for physical and mental health. She considers how this can be conceptualised within Objectification Theory and how fourth wave feminism and social media can advance the normality of alternative body shapes that are more inclusive, respective of diversity and embracing equality.

Section 3: Consumer Culture

Arnould and Thompson (2005) define consumer culture theory as a *"Family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings"* (p. 869*)*. Over the last few decades, research exploring consumer culture theories has offered rich insight into the intersections between individuals, businesses, consumer movements and markets, revealing fresh insight into motivations, practice and values (Patsiaouras, 2021). Consumer culture theory seeks to consider the *"social arrangement"* between *"lived culture and social resources"* (p. 869), to examine how this can be made *"meaningful"* and how marketing management provides is symbolically responsive to consumer markets and movements (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This book speaks directly to those concepts, and has explored social arrangements, such as the Met Gala and the Barbie Film to determine how the core messages can be interpreted to be meaningful. Social arrangements and lived culture were also evident in the chapters on gender, where idealisations of EDI and gendered expectations were challenged. Arnould and Thompson (2005) posit that this *"meaning"* moves beyond being simplistic and heterogeneous, as overlapping meanings emerge, stimulated by globalisation, technology, world events and exposure to new ideas (Nystrom, 1928). Through considering Consumer Culture in the current marketplace provides examples of how meaning is shifting and progressing. In this third section, we look at cultural implications that provide examples of niche aspects of marketing management.

In chapter eleven Merry examines cultural polarisation that is emerging from societal discourse, encouraged by both traditional and social media. In certain domains, what has been coined as the 'culture wars' could be considered the medias favourite topic, and this discourse is imbued with fearful language that criticises cultural erosion and the loss of traditional lifestyles. Merry examines polarised ideologies within four focused themes: Globalisation; Politics; Feminism; and Language. She examines globalised markets that neglect to consider cultural sensitivities, which is often a criticism of global markets and multi-national organisations, and particularly post COVID-19, there has been a rise in consumer preferences to support local businesses (Bedford, 2023), which can be considered as political consumerism. However, as Merry argues, social movements also fall within the realm of pollical marketing, and brands have been rewarded and criticised for adopting a political stance by supporting social movements, such as #BLM. Similarly, gender and sexuality are themes that fall within polarised ideologies, within which brands navigate their stance. Lastly, Merry explores how language is not universal, and cultural understanding is crucial within global markets to protect brand reputation.

McLeod explores marketing implications that emerge from music subcultures in Chapter twelve, specifically that of Hardcore Straight Edge, a niche musical subculture that branched from punk music, rebelling against the use of alcohol and other mood enhancing substances. McLeod argues that meaning is made through the core ethos of the subculture, and this can be understood through theories such as Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory and Kozinets (2014) Social Brand Engagement Theory. Through navigating this subculture, McLeod considers the immersion of EDI principles and political positioning as social arrangements that communicate belonging, as well as how an anti-drug/alcohol movement follow into an anti-consumerism stance that aligns with sustainability. This chapter concludes that subcultures adopt brands and commodities inevitably, due to representation of core values and beliefs, and that this is often considered as more authentic. He concludes with opportunities for marketing management.

In our last chapter, Ashworth-Ritch examines colonial narratives from museums, illuminating more closely on the impact of social movements, such as #BLM and #MeToo. Through considering how co-created discourse gives voice to marginalised communities to address previous injustices, this chapter considers the wider impact of the response from governments and official institutions, such as museums, when addressing calls for historically stolen artefacts to be returned to their place of origin. Using the example of the negotiations between The Nisga'a (an indigenous community in now north-western British Columbia) and the National Museum of Scotland to return the Ni'isjoohl Memorial Pole, which was removed almost a century ago, Ashworth-Ritch considers how the process can be considered as endorsing cultural respect and understanding. This aligns with emotive storytelling and experiential marketing, as well as educating people about the wider impacts of colonialism which can encourage reflection on historical injustices and progress towards addressing reconciliation and healing.

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Part 1

Fashion

Chapter 2

The Met Gala: Examining the Influence on Fashion and Society

Morgan Addie

Introduction

The first Monday of May might come across as any old Monday to some people; but, to the fashion fanatic, celebrity obsessed, chronically online members of the public, it is known as the exclusive star studded and much anticipated fashion event of the year: 'The Met Gala' (Lang, 2024). Formerly known as the Costume Institute Benefit, the Met Gala is an annual haute couture fundraising event that celebrates the grand opening of the spring exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. When the Costume Institute was first established in 1937, it was known as the Museum of Costume Art. The Costume Institute was formed in 1959 after the Museum of Costume Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art amalgamated in 1946 with financial assistance from the fashion industry. The Costume Institute's collection of almost thirty-three thousand items spans seven centuries, from the fourteenth century to the present, and includes clothing and accessories for men, women, and children (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021). Consequently, this is the largest and most extensive costume collection worldwide, containing an unrivalled chronicle of Western fashion history. To grow its collection, the Costume Institute depends on the kindness of collectors, designers, and the general public, which is how the now infamous MET Gala came to fruition. Ironically, although receiving a great deal of media coverage, the Met Gala does not receive the same level of scholarly scrutiny. This chapter aims to explore the influence and effect that the Met Gala has on societal discourse and how brands can use this to their advantage (Mclean, 2023). For marketers, it's a blank canvas on which to create a brand story that speaks to the dynamic

and constantly changing fields of consumer culture, gender, sustaina-
bility and politics. An examination of those intersections can provide a
deeper understanding of the Met Gala influence on the fashion industry
and consumer society.

The Met Gala

In order to financially assist the newly established Costume Institute at
the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 1948 fashion publicist
Eleanor Lambert organised a dinner event to support the opening of
the annual fashion exhibition (Riley,2022). The Met Gala started off as
a smaller 'midnight supper' and has grown to become one of the most
well-known and prosperous charity events, attracting guests from the
industries of fashion, film, society, sports, business, and music. Around
600 guests attend every year spending, around $30,000 to $275,000,
depending on whether individuals buy a single ticket, or organisations
buy a table for all their representatives (Mclean, 2023). Many guests
feel honoured to receive an invitation to the Met Gala, as the exclu-
sive guestlist is carefully crafted by the editor-in-chief of Vogue, Anna
Wintour, one of the most influential fashion figures (Business of Fash-
ion, 2024). Since 1971, the yearly fundraiser has focused upon a specific
fashion theme which acts to direct each year's show, further influencing
the link between fashion and art and representing the current zeitgeist of
evolving cultural changes. The theme is usually decided by the Costume
Institutes chief curator, along with a handful of co-creators. Some of
the most memorable and culturally relevant themes have been Camp:
Notes on Fashion (2019); Heavenly bodies: Fashion and the Catholic
Imagination (2018); Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty (2011); and
Haute Couture (1995) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021).

The influence of the Met Gala on consumer culture

Consumer culture can be characterised as a social arrangement, in which
the links between aspects of everyday life, social discourse and available

resources are curated to give meaning; consumer culture is shaped by symbolism and physical assets which are transmitted through consumers and markets (Arnould et al., 2011). Furthermore, consumer culture acts as an outlet for transmitting cultural values, customs, and norms to future generations while also allowing individuals to freely express themselves through their choices. This interplay between individual expression and cultural transmission aligns with Featherstone's (2007) view of consumer culture as threefold: the first is that the foundation of consumer culture is related to the growth of capitalist commodity production, which has resulted in building a materialistic society that values the acquisition of consumer products, and frequents locations for consumption; the second emphasises the various ways that people use products as representative of social divisions and to gain social capital (Veblen, 1899/1994) and, the third captures the visual delights and immediate hedonistic physical thrills that are produced by consumption, as well as the emotional pleasures of consuming and the fantasies that are honoured within consumer cultural imagery (Ritch and Siddiqui, 2024). All these points above create a rising focus in identity construction practices through consuming. Due to the global reach of technological digital platforms, materialism, social capital and hedonism have infiltrated wider consumer consciousness, influencing the obligation to pursue a unique sense of self through material symbols, as well as the urge to imitate those who are considered as representing higher social capital (celebrities). The allure of a material world is mediated by markets, and the homogenised representations of the ideal or good life are all aspects of global consumer culture (Ritch, 2023; Arnould et al., 2011).

Given the points made above by Featherstone (2007), it is evident that fashion supports identity creation, evolving into a medium of expression that consumers use to project their desired self-image. Consequently, this goes beyond the features of the product, in terms of material and construction, because consumer culture enhances and adds symbolic value to clothing and accessories. In addition to purchasing the newest summer clothing, a customer purchases the associated meaning and image (Le Bon, 2015). With a focus on consumer values specifically,

materialism provides an insight into consumer wants and how they want to be perceived within society, be it real or imagined (Sirgy, 1985). Values are overarching goals that guide individuals or social groups in various situations, serving as a compass for decision-making and behaviours. These values serve as general cultural concepts that govern behaviour, hence influencing society and culture (Workman et al., 2010). There can be many different values that consumers may prioritise over the others such as power, achievement and security. One value that influences purchasing is materialism. People who adhere to this value are more inclined to make purchases that enhance the perceptions of their success and wealth held by others. The value of personal autonomy is reflected in the desire for material items (Schudson, 1991). A person's possessions might take precedence over their religion, friends, and accomplishments in their lives.

High materialism aligns with the self-enhancement end of the continuum that favours self-orientation (Workman et al., 2010). This concept is further clarified by Sirgy's (1985) Self Congruency Theory, which explains how individuals are drawn to purchasing goods that complement their real or idealised selves. Empirical evidence supports this notion, showing that consumers feel more positively towards brands that resonate with their identity and are less enthusiastic about those that conflict with it (Koay et al., 2023). For example, this idea applies to the relationship between self-concept and fashion choices. People select clothing that reflects how they see themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others, which in turn influences how they communicate their goals and ideals. Consequently, fashion serves as a powerful medium for expressing individuality and fulfilling materialistic aspirations. Fashion self-congruity, or the alignment between personal style and self-concept, varies among consumers based on their unique perceptions of identity. This personal understanding affects their connection to fashion brands and products that convey their self-image, and as their self-awareness grows, their self-concept often becomes clearer (Furey, 2020). By dressing in ways that align with their ideal image, individuals project this constructed self into the world, expressing their aspirations through their clothing choices (Kaur and Anand, 2021).

Given the relationship within consumer culture of fashion, self-concept, and materialism, it is clear why the Met Gala is so popular among consumers; it is the most elite fashion event of the year, often coined 'the Oscars of the fashion industry.' Those who are invited are considered the pinnacle of social capital, possessing an enviable personal style that is idealised for self-concept. Being connected to this lavish event in any way enhances one's ideal self-image—whether through participating in online discussions about the Met Gala, buying clothes that align with that year's theme, or simply possessing knowledge of the event that one can casually reference in conversation, all of which can increase social capital and self-concept. Although non-celebrity consumers may not be able to purchase the fashion items that celebrities wear on the Met Gala carpet, they can still voice their opinions on the outfits and the individuals wearing them. The main discussions following the Met Gala focus on the guests' attire and whether they understood 'the assignment.' Here, fashion media and the public scrutinise the outfits, determining how well they fit the theme and their overall appeal (Mclean, 2023). This provides brands with a significant opportunity to engage in Met Gala discourse by analysing what was successful and what was deemed a fashion failure; these discussions yield insights into predicting consumer preferences and enable brands to be at the forefront of setting fashion trends (Banister and Hogg, 2007).

Marketers can leverage Social Brand Engagement (SBE) theory during this time by aligning their messaging with Self Congruency Theory. SBE encompasses the strategies brands use to cultivate meaningful interactions with customers both past and future by sharing their narratives through social networking platforms (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020). This approach involves utilising engaging language, captivating visuals, and the cultural meanings associated with the brand, creating a dynamic dialogue that resonates with consumers. Through SBE, brands not only promote their products but also foster a sense of community among consumers, encouraging them to share their experiences and perspectives related to the brand (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018). This engagement enables customers to incorporate the brand into their personal expressions and identities, often viewing it as an extension of

themselves (Osei-Frimpong and Mclean, 2018). Furthermore, effective SBE allows brands to listen to their audience and adapt their strategies based on consumer feedback, creating a two-way communication channel that strengthens brand loyalty. This is particularly vital during high-profile events like the Met Gala, where consumers are eager to elevate their social capital. By participating in the conversation and showcasing their alignment with contemporary trends and values, brands enhance their relevance and appeal (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). They can engage consumers not only through brand-centric content but also by encouraging user-generated content that highlights how consumers relate to the brand's image and ideals. Moreover, the Met Gala increasingly plays with gender binaries, a discourse that filters into wider society and reshapes perceptions of gender values (Sarkar, 2019). By aligning with these evolving cultural narratives through SBE, brands can position themselves as progressive and socially aware, further solidifying their connection with consumers who value inclusivity and self-expression.

Challenging gender binaries at the Met Gala

Gender identity refers to the internal and personal definition of femininity or masculinity that manifests itself in identification, behaviour, and personality. Through visual language or symbols like clothing, a person performs and continuously negotiates their gender identification, and often this will include their sexual identity (Akdemir, 2018). One's level of interest in fashion is often correlated with their level of participation with their gender identification, indicating a favourable link between gender awareness and fashion awareness. A form of nonverbal communication is fashion therefore it aids consumers in how they express their social and personal identities (Bardey et al., 2020).

When looking at the role gender plays within the fashion industry, it is vital to first inspect the typical gender stereotypes that are used. Stereotypes are shared values and beliefs within a community, culture, or religion (McDonald, 2020). Gender stereotypes are preconceived

notions about the qualities and attributes of men and women, as well as how individuals should behave or dress, depending on their gender (Kulkarni, 2023). The most common example in western culture is that the colour blue is assigned to boys and pink for girls (Akdemir, 2018) and this is related to clothes, toys and other commodities (Ritch and Dodd, 2021). Women and femininity are linked to 'communal' qualities such as kindness and dependability, whereas men and masculinity are linked to 'agentic' attributes, of decisiveness and assertiveness (Archer, 2021). It is the assumption that culture gives people a set of guidelines, or lenses, for appropriate behaviour and cognition that has been ingrained in social institutions, societal ideals, and people's minds, that inform implicit norms, values, and beliefs within society, perpetuated throughout many generations (Cerulo, Leschziner and Shepherd, 2021). Consequently, gender stereotypes are rooted within societal expectations informing how boys and girls are socialised and how they internalise their gendered selves (Archer, 2021). However, in certain (sub)cultures, clothing that is deemed feminine may be considered as normal for men to wear, yet in other cultures this may appear outlandish. While it can be argued that that all clothing is fundamentally unisex, through socialisation clothing is assigned a gender based on cultural standards and repeated labelling, which reinforces how it is viewed and subsequently worn (Bardey et al., 2020).

Increasingly, today's fashion revolutionaries are challenging gendered binaries and accepted gender norms associated with masculine and feminine attributes, seeking to blur the boundaries between them rather than merely feminising males or emasculating women. This is often referred to as gender-neutral fashion, which provokes assumptions about conventional gender roles, appearing on designer catwalks and filtering into the high street (Akdemir, 2018). It has also been observed that fashion-conscious men are happier with who they are, which is indicative of a societal movement in favour of accepting a wider range of masculinities (Mähönen, 2021). Men who devote time on fashionable clothes show that they are comfortable with both their public and private selves, exhibiting their uniqueness and capacity for self-expression (Shephard et al., 2016). Harry Styles, for example, stole the show