

## **Richard Elliott    A Model Of Emotion-Driven Choice**

University of Oxford  
St Anne's College  
Oxford  
U.K.

*An alternative to the information-processing model of the consumer choice process is developed, based on emotional processes rather than cognitive evaluation and which instead of focusing on the individual decision maker locates consumer choice in its social and cultural context. Motivation in the model is drawn from the symbolic project of the self, which views consumption as a resource for the extraction of symbolic meaning for identity construction, maintenance and communication. The conceptual model is non-linear, emotion being seen as complex, socially-constructed and sometimes followed by post-hoc rationalisation. The implications for brand positioning strategy and marketing research methods are discussed.*

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### **Introduction**

The predominant model of the consumer choice process is based on information processing where consumers are seen as making subjectively rational decisions, but this cognitive framework has rarely managed to explain more than 20% of the variance in global evaluation measures or behaviour (Obermiller, 1990). This paper develops a conceptual model of a different mode of choice which is based on emotional processes rather than cognitive evaluation and which instead of focusing on the individual decision maker locates consumer choice in its social and cultural context.

### **Emotion and Consumer Choice**

Traditional models of consumer behaviour have assumed a hierarchy-of-effects in which cognitive activity is followed by emotional evaluation in the formation of an attitude, which ultimately results in behaviour. This assumes that cognition mediates emotion and directs it, while emotion mediates behaviour (Peterson, Hoyer and Wilson, 1986). Although the growing recognition of the existence of low-involvement purchasing produced such concepts as affect-referral (Wright, 1975) and spontaneous attitude accessing (Fazio, 1986), these were assumed to be a result of previous cognitive processing which were stored in memory. A major challenge to this orthodoxy was made by Zajonc, (1980) who proposed that emotion is not only a separate processing system which does not involve cognition; but is also the primary influence on the development of preferences and sometimes actually precedes cognition (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). Zajonc (1980) defined some of the other characteristics of emotion as: inescapable, irrevocable, judgements which implicate the self, are difficult to verbalise, and are independent of cognition.

Mittal (1988) developed three of these characteristics of emotion into a model of "Affective Choice Mode." This model applies to the purchase of expressive products (products with symbolic meaning) and suggests that emotion-based choice is holistic, self-focused and unable to be verbalised. Holistic choice means that consumers are unable to separate out the individual attributes or 'preferenda' (Zajonc, 1980) but form an overall impression. For example, one may not be able to break down a preference for a perfume into specific attributes. Choice is self-focused in that emotional judgements of expressive products involve the judge directly. That a car is 'too flashy' reflects the values and personality of the judge more than any inherent property of the car. Emotional judgements are made almost instantaneously and reflect basic subjective feelings which may not have verbal descriptors, and thus emotion relies much more on non-verbal channels of communication (Zajonc, 1980). The affective choice mode model has received some support from simulated brand choice decisions in comparison with information-processing models (Mittal, 1988; 1994).

The consumption experience is replete with emotion, often of a high degree of intensity. In the area of impulse buying, consumers describe a compelling feeling that was "thrilling", "wild", "a tingling sensation", "a surge of energy", "like turning up the excitement volume" (Rook, 1987). A study of the everyday consumer experiences of women yielded phenomenological descriptions of making purchases in a 'dreamlike' way when they were 'captivated' by a product and give an impression of an almost seamless flow of events unpunctuated by 'stopping to think' (Thompson *et al.* 1990).

The concept of 'extraordinary experience' has been used to describe a special class of unusual hedonic consumption which is intrinsically enjoyable and involves high levels of emotional intensity. A study of white-water river rafting demonstrated that despite the vivid recall of retrospective reports of the intensity of the emotional experience, participants did not appear to want to engage in very much cognitive recall as the magic was 'best preserved if the associated feelings and sensations are not examined too closely' (Arnould and Price, 1993).

### **Social Perspectives on Emotion**

A major problem with the conceptualisation of emotion used in most consumer research is that it refers to a personal and individual phenomenon, when in fact the most important aspects of emotion are social (Parkinson, 1995). Interpersonal communication theory proposes that "emotion is constructed on-line as part of the developing relationship emerging from a real-time encounter between people" (Parkinson, 1995). Emotions are not simply internal events but are communicative acts addressed to specific audiences, and are thus partly defined according to conventional cultural representations. The social constructionist theory of emotions (Averill, 1980; Harre, 1986) views emotions not as natural responses elicited by natural features in a situation, but as sociocultural constructions which serve a situated social function, so that the meaning of an emotion is located within the sociocultural system in which it is

culturally appropriate. An emotional response is a function of shared expectations regarding appropriate behaviour (Averill, 1980). Cross-cultural studies have shown that cultural differences in the conceptualisation of the self can play a central role in shaping emotional experiences e.g. Lutz, 1988; (Triandis, 1989). For example, Asian cultures that insist on the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other, result in different experiences of such emotions as pride, guilt and anger in comparison with Western cultures which are more focused on the individual and inner attributes (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Thus the cultural context of consumption will lead to socially-constructed emotional responses, under the direction of situational norms. Hochschild (1983) describes how we learn the local "Feeling Rules" in a social situation so that our emotions are appropriate to local circumstances and meet the expectations of other people.

### **Some Laws of Emotion**

Although the study of emotional response is not a well-developed area, it is possible to propose some principles of the human responses to emotion, which assume that emotions are grounded in mechanisms which are not voluntary and are under only limited human control. These principles, which are basically empirical regularities, have been framed as laws by Frijda (1988) who proposed eleven laws of emotional responding, four of which are crucially important in understanding the consumer.

#### *The Law of Concern*

Emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual's goals, motives, or concerns. This links values and situations by stating that hidden behind every emotion is a more or less enduring disposition to prefer certain states of the world. This is a key issue for understanding consumer emotions as it is the law of concern which links our motivations and emotional responses and underpins consumer involvement and thus drives much consumption. A prime source of emotional involvement is the search for identity in postmodern society where the individual is threatened by a number of "dilemmas of the self" (Giddens, 1991 p. 201): fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and a struggle against commodification. These dilemmas are driven by the "looming threat of personal meaninglessness" as the individual endeavours to construct and maintain an identity which will remain stable thorough a rapidly changing environment. Although the individual may on the one hand fear mass commodification because it threatens to remove choice and replace it with standardisation, in fact, through ever-growing plurality of consumer choice the individual is offered resources which may be used creatively to achieve "an ego-ideal which commands the respect of others and inspires self-love" (Gabriel & Lang, 1995 p.98). Thus it is likely that goods which can be used as resources to construct and maintain identity will involve emotion-driven choice. This will be explored later in a discussion of the symbolic meaning of goods.

### *The Law of Apparent Reality*

Emotions are elicited by events appraised as real, and their intensity varies accordingly to the level of reality attributed. In this regard, "knowing means less than seeing." Vivid imagination also has the power of 'reality' and is capable of eliciting strong emotions, in this respect "feeling means more than knowing." The law of apparent reality accounts for the weakness of reason as opposed to the strength of passion as it suggests that imagination and fantasy can overwhelm reason and that the consumer can create their own 'reality'.

### *The Law of Closure*

Emotions tend to be closed to probabilities and likelihoods, and to be absolute in their judgements and have control over the action system. It may be that the cause of an emotion may be relatively minor but emotional response may not recognise this and be a total experience. When one is very angry the thing that happened is felt to be absolutely bad, and the person involved to be intrinsically bad too. Verbal expressions of emotion tend to reflect this absoluteness in quality and time: "I could kill him" or "I cannot live without her." The absoluteness of feeling and thinking tends to be reflected in behaviour and to override other concerns. The law of closure may be considered the essential feature of emotion, in that it captures the involuntary nature of strong emotional impulses and urges. Desire for a consumption object can be a totally overwhelming sensation which drives out all other aspects of the environment and entails complete absorption in the shopping experience (Elliott, 1994).

### *The Law of the Lightest Load*

There is a tendency to view any situation in a way that minimises negative emotional load. People tend to avoid and deny unpleasant knowledge and will seek to interpret a situation in a way which maximises emotional gain. This suggests that emotion can drive our interpretation of a situation in such a way that we can make it more pleasing to us and that we are motivated to develop strategies of emotion management. Individuals may be motivated to preserve a positive emotional state by using mood maintenance strategies, and to alleviate negative emotional states through strategies of mood repair (Isen, 1984). Mood repair has been found to be the prime motivation maintaining addictive consumption, in that the shopping experience is a very effective short-term solution to feelings of unhappiness and stress (Elliott, 1994). It is likely that mood repair is a major motivation underlying a broad range of compensatory consumption behaviour (Elliott, Eccles and Gournay, 1996). Strategies of mood maintenance may include the common social behaviour of going out to dinner after a pleasant occasion and then going on after that for a drink.

So despite their cultural and local situational contingency, emotions may be law-like in their effect upon us. The law of apparent reality states that once events are subjectively perceived to be real, often through imagination and fantasy, then the emotional responses overwhelm objective evidence; and the law of closure proposes that emotions are blind to reason and that they "know no probabilities...they do not weigh likelihoods" (Frijda, 1988). In this sense then,

preferences really do direct inferences and emotion does dominate cognition (Zajonc, 1980).

### **Consumption and the Symbolic Meaning of Goods**

As soon as a product's ability to satisfy mere physical need is transcended, then we enter the realm of the symbolic meaning of goods. Central to contemporary theories of consumption is the recognition that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products' utilities but from also from their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; McCracken, 1988). The functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions, outward in constructing the social world: *Social-Symbolism*, and inward towards constructing our self-identity: *Self-Symbolism* (Elliott, 1997). As consumption plays a central role in supplying meanings and values for the creation and maintenance of the consumer's personal and social world, so advertising is recognised as one of the major sources of these symbolic meanings. These cultural meanings are transferred to brands and it is brands which are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (McCracken, 1987; Mick and Bui, 1992).

### **Consumption and Identity**

The self can be conceptualised not as a given product of a social system nor as a fixed entity which the individual can simply adopt, but rather as something the person actively creates partially through consumption (Dittmar, 1992; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991). The consumer exercises free will to form images of who and what s/he wants to be, although, paradoxically, 'free will' is directed by values which are probably also a social product. Thompson (1995 p.210) describes the self as a *symbolic project*, which the individual must actively construct out of the available symbolic materials, materials which "the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity."

The individual visualises her/his self according to the imagined possibilities of the self. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that "an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences." Thus the nature of the self-concept is complex: the consumer may possess a variety of actual selves (or roles) and a variety of possible or ideal selves. We live in a symbol-rich environment and the meaning attached to any situation or object is determined by the interpretation of these symbols. Through the socialisation process the consumer learns not only to agree on shared meanings of some symbols but also to develop individual symbolic interpretations of his/her own. The consumer uses these symbolic meanings to construct, maintain and express each of her/his multiple identities.

The development of individual self-identity is inseparable from the parallel development of collective social identity, and this problematic relationship has been described as a 'dialectic of identification' by Jenkins (1996 p.20), who maintains that self-identity must be validated through social interaction and that the self is embedded in social practices. Endeavours to create the consumer's self identity often involve the consumption of products, services, and media and there is always a tension between the meanings we construct for ourselves and those we are exposed to socially and this dialectical tension requires active negotiation of meaning. Dittmar (1992 p.3) suggests that "material possessions have a profound symbolic significance for their owners, as well as for other people and the symbolic meanings of our belongings are an integral feature of expressing our own identity and perceiving the identity of others." Although McCracken (1988) maintains that ritual is the prime means for the transfer of symbolic meaning from goods to the person, the complex social practices of consumer culture extend far beyond the concept of the ritualistic, and entail a reciprocal, dialectical relationship between the individual and her/his cultural milieu. As the nature of self-identity and social-identity varies between cultures, so too will the nature of emotional experiences in relation to the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

### **Symbolic Meaning and Motivation**

If consumers "identify themselves by the formula: I am = what I have and what I consume" and it is symbolic meaning that is used in the "search for the meaning of existence" (Fromm, 1976 p.36), then we can think of the extraction of symbolic meaning from consumption as a powerful motivational force. Symbolic interpretation is essentially non-rational improvisation that does not obey the codes of language but operates at the unconscious level (Sperber, 1975). A Jungian analysis goes even further and suggests that the full significance of a symbol cannot be grasped in purely intellectual terms, if it becomes fully definable in rational terms it is no longer a true symbol (Storr, 1973). This suggests that perhaps the function of emotion is to make up for the insufficiency of reason (O'Shaughnessy, 1992) and to help us carry out the vital task of symbolic interpretation so that we can effectively construct an identity and communicate it to others. Thus the symbolic meaning of consumption can be seen as a potent and perhaps prime motivation for emotion-driven choice.

### **A Conceptual Model of Emotion-driven Choice**

We can now begin to construct a conceptual model of the process of emotion-driven choice as being motivated by the interpretation of symbolic meaning and the construction of self and social identity. The model is illustrated in Figure 1.

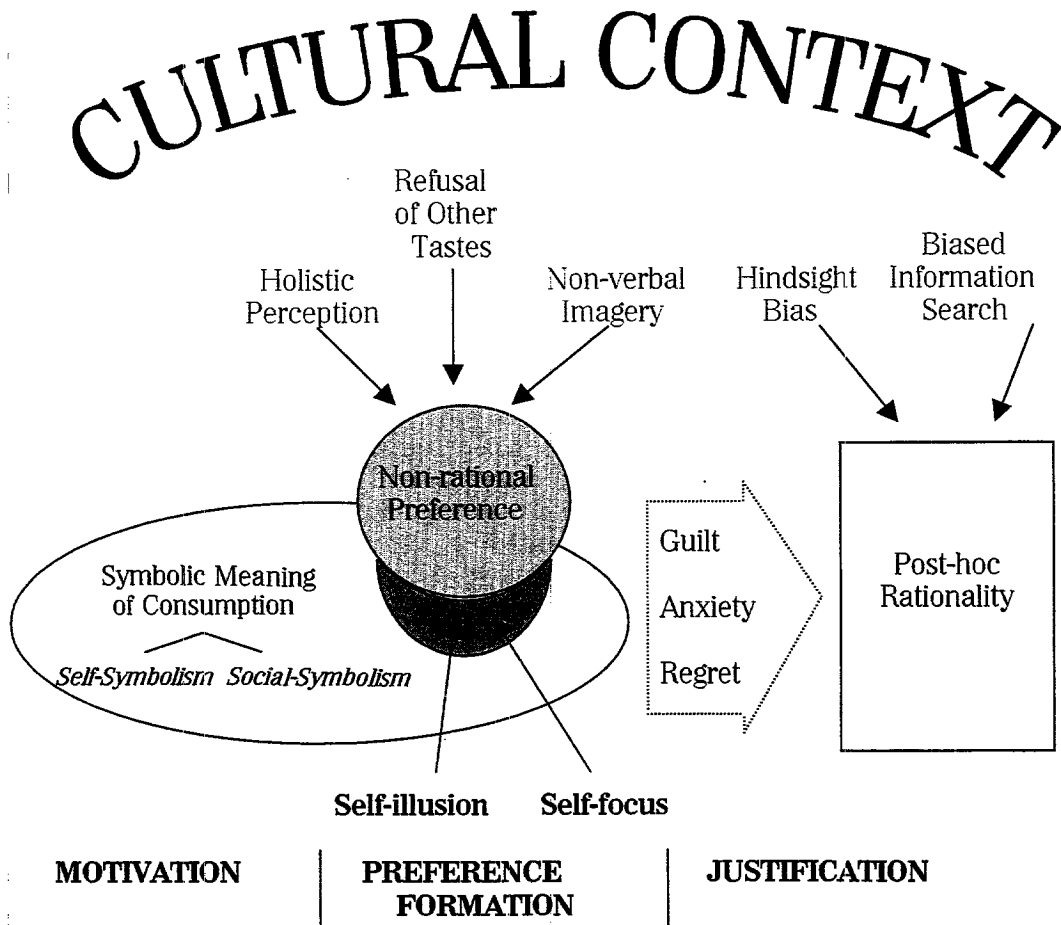


Figure 1. A Model of Emotion-Driven Choice

**Emotion and Preference Formation**

*Self-Illusion*

The law of apparent reality suggests that imagination and fantasy can overwhelm reason and that the consumer can create their own 'reality'. Campbell (1987) has suggested that modern consumption is active pleasure-seeking, often carried out in a state of "self-illusory hedonism", characterised by daydreams where we can "know something to be false but feel it to be true." In this state of self-illusion rational beliefs are suspended because they are not strong enough to prevent us enjoying ourselves.

*Self-focus*

Emotional judgements implicate the self, in that our assessment is more about us than it is about what is being assessed (Zajonc, 1980). When evaluating an item of clothing the consumer is likely to be imagining how they would look in the clothing rather than features of the clothing itself. In addition,

individuals may frequently use their own emotional state at the time of judgement as a piece of information in a "How do I feel about it?" heuristic (Schwarz and Clore, 1988). Rather than computing a judgement on the basis of cognitive evaluation, individuals may instead rely on their present feelings to guide a judgement, such that if they feel positive they make more positive evaluations than when they feel negative. This is particularly likely when the emotional judgement is considered to be overly complex, if it is based on information processing, when there are time constraints, and when there is little other information available (Schwarz, 1990).

### *Holistic Perception*

The formation of a non-rational preference involves holistic perception, in that we reach an overall evaluation which need not be traceable back to some component attributes (Mittal, 1988). Also when making emotional judgements people tend to "form sweeping global impressions" rather than engage in analytic reasoning (Schwarz, 1990). In large part, the holistic nature of emotion-driven choice may be a result of our inability to verbalise the reasons for our feelings "there simply aren't very effective verbal means to communicate why we like people and objects or what it is about them that we like" (Zajonc, 1980). The way in which we directly experience the world through emotions is different from the system of arbitrary symbols (language) we use to make verbal descriptions. With "the articulation our feelings through words we acquire a distance from them, so it is possible to act with respect to our emotions rather than expressing them directly" (Radley, 1988).

### *Non-verbal Imagery*

The communication of emotion relies heavily on non-verbal channels, especially facial expression which may have elements of pan-cultural universality (Ekinan and Friesen, 1971). The 'vividness effect' evoked by pictures has much more effect on attitudes and behaviour than verbal reports of the same events (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). The iconicity of advertising images (the ability of an image to represent reality by partial similarity or by analogy) means that they can be 'soaked with meaning' by their association with a rich variety of emotions to which we are already attuned through our interactions with our social and natural environments (Messaris, 1997). Thus imagery can allude to many of our past experiences and cultural learning with a potency unavailable to the more restricted channel of language. Imagery interpretation processes are "subconscious and private in nature" and have "a latent content that does not appear in overt verbal reports" (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982)

### *Refusal of Other Tastes*

Bourdieu (1984) suggests that the basic element in the forming of preference may not be a positive emotional response but a negative one, not to choose that we like most but to reject those that we most dislike. This "refusal of other tastes" is a powerful force: "disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (sick-making) of the tastes of others." When they have to be justified, tastes are asserted purely negatively; and taste is the basis "of all that one has - people

and things - and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others." The rejection of other people's consumption lifestyles may be one of the strongest barriers between social classes, and is proposed as a fundamental factor in establishing and maintaining social class distinctions. So perhaps consumer choice may often follow from rejection of disliked alternatives, leaving those not rejected as the preferred option. This is particularly likely to be so in the case of goods which carry high levels of social-symbolic meaning. The consumption of these goods is proposed to involve the accumulation of symbolic capital by demonstrating an understanding of class-appropriate style and taste.

### **Justification of Emotion-driven Choice**

#### *Post-hoc Rationalisation*

Zajonc & Markus (1982) have argued that decision research has consistently overestimated the role of cognition in choice because many people believe that they should act rationally and therefore report rational judgement activities that they did not actually use. This ever-present tendency for people to engage in post-hoc rationalisation is similar to the proposition that "hedonic consumption acts are based not on what people know to be real but on what they desire reality to be" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

Another form of post-hoc rationalisation is described by Zajonc (1980) who suggests that people form a preference first based on emotional response and then justify it to themselves cognitively. It is proposed here that this process, if it occurs at all, is driven by attempts to cope with post-decisional and/or post-purchase feelings of guilt, anxiety and regret.

#### *Guilt, Anxiety and Regret*

The subjective emotional experiences of regret, remorse and self-blame after purchase are facets of consumer guilt (Lascu, 1991). Unfortunately the whole area of postpurchase theory and research is "still at an early state" (Gardial *et al.*, 1994) and the role played by emotions has tended to focus on rather simplistic taxonomic and dimensional analyses of consumer satisfaction (e.g. Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Two exceptions are studies of impulse buying which have shown that many impulse buyers subsequently experienced feelings of anxiety and guilt (Rook, 1987), and that when asked about their mood following a recent impulse purchase just as many respondents said they were anxious and guilty (24%) as said they were feeling pleasure and excitement (Gardener and Rook, 1988). Consumer guilt has been used in advertising through 'guilt appeals' which attempt to arouse feelings of guilt (or fear of such feelings) and then offer a guilt-reducing solution (Ghingold, 1982). Alternatively, advertising may attempt to diminish the importance of guilt by the promotion of a "guiltless hedonism" (Lascu, 1991). Guilt is a culturally constructed emotion and varies according to the cultural location and the local feeling rules in relation to the self, society and the interdependence of the two (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Opinions differ as to whether there has been a general decrease in the occurrence of feelings of guilt in response to

consumption of luxury goods (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992) or in contrast, an increase in feelings of guilt associated with postmodernity (Giddens, 1991). At the moment there is insufficient data on the subject, but it seems likely that the global growth of consumer culture is associated with a reduction in feelings of guilt, anxiety and regret and as a consequence in the frequency of post-hoc rationalisation.

### *Hindsight Bias and Biased Information Search*

The theory of Motivated Choice (Kunda, 1990) proposes several mechanisms through which post-hoc rationalisation may affect judgement and choice. Building on evidence that in testing hypotheses people rely on a positive test strategy, that is they seek out instances which are consistent with the hypothesis rather than seeking instances which are inconsistent (Klayman, & Ha, 1987), it is proposed that a hypothesis-confirmation bias operates and people search out evidence which supports their desired outcome, and will ignore or 'forget' evidence which might disconfirm their hypothesis or desired outcome. A second mechanism is that of hindsight bias, where people maintain a belief that events that happened were bound to happen. In both cases, the underlying mechanism seems to be resistant to the provision of 'rational' information and people will make considerable efforts to defend their emotional judgements against contradictory arguments and go to great lengths to construct seemingly reasonable justifications for their conclusions (Kunda, 1990).

### **The Process of Emotion-driven Choice**

When driven by emotion the process of choice is non-linear in that non-rational preference is formed holistically and faster than cognitive processing, in fact, almost instantly. It may then be followed by attempts at post-hoc rationalisation. The formation of preference may be driven by the deriving of symbolic meaning for use by the individual in their project of identity construction, or it may be a negative drive emanating from a refusal of other tastes. Once the non-rational preference is formed it tends to drive out further rational evaluation as the emotional responses overwhelm objective evidence and dominate consumer behaviour.

The apparent absence of thoughtful decision-making and unbiased reasoning when consumer choices are driven by emotion may not necessarily be detrimental. It may actually be beneficial, not least because unrealistically positive views of the self and the social environment are often very adaptive (Wilson & Schooler, 1991). There is evidence that actually thinking about the reasons for preferences may have disruptive effects leading to less optimal choices, and to people being less satisfied with their choices (Taylor & Brown, 1988).

### **Implications**

As emotion is socially constructed, we learn the feeling rules appropriate for our culture through the socialisation process. One of the social roles of advertising is

in educating consumers how to feel about products and services, and this is exemplified in the current move towards 'emotionalising' many product categories. For example, instant coffee and luxury ice-cream have both been re-positioned successfully as products with romantic/sexual connotations. This suggests that it is possible to 'emotionalise' products which have little rational connection with powerful emotions. However, when marketing across borders, care must be taken to ensure that an emotional positioning strategy is culturally appropriate.

Positioning strategies that engage with the emotional energies surrounding the construction and communication of identity are likely to motivate consumers, and brands can be used as resources in the symbolic construction of the self and to cope with the threats to inherited identity posed by postmodernity (Elliott, in press). Brands can acquire deep meaning for consumers by their involvement in the socialisation process, and from then on brands can evoke profound feelings of nostalgia and provide comfort from insecurity (Olsen, 1995).

As emotion-driven choice is an almost instantaneous process, it is imperative for marketers to ensure that there are no impediments to immediate purchase. In some cultures, and with some product categories, it may be necessary to provide consumers with rational evidence to support their emotion-driven choice, either during or post-purchase.

Because consumers may have great difficulty in verbalising emotional experiences, marketing research should focus on interpretive methods using visual materials such as collage boards and autodrawing. Non-verbal projective methods such as psycho-drawing and bubble-drawing can help consumers to express the deep emotional responses they find it difficult to express in words.

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