

Cultivating Alternative Self-Schemas and Lifestyles: Resisting the Normativity of Consumerism.

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This inquiry examines the contradictory relationship between alternative cultural practices and the normative notions of self that marketers construct through myriad lifestyle-based portrayals. In a consumerist society, these narratives of self are conceptualized as *self-schema* that represent cultural frames through which consumers make sense of themselves and their relationships with others. Taken together, these are *hegemonic* schemas that cumulatively naturalize the definition of the self as a consumer and the normative practice of self-construction through consuming. The normativity of marketed self-schema exerts powerful pressures on consumers to construct a self that is recognized and accepted in consumer culture. Those consumers who resist and seek self-meaning through non-materialism are typically placed at its margins. This paper explores theoretical and empirical issues involving how these pressures and difficulties are negotiated by those who shun the legitimizing social currency of marketed self-schema and choose to construct selves based on alternative, non-market-based consumption practices and beliefs.

To better illustrate why some opt to construct identities based on non-marketed self-schema, this study explores an annual phenomenon called the Rainbow Gathering. As a counter-cultural initiative based on practices and beliefs that resist consumerism, Rainbow represents a shift toward alternative lifestyle-based communities that emphasize de-commodified social relations, a radical embracing of differences, a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, a reverence for nature, and non-marketed constructions of self.

Ironically, although Rainbow can be seen as an initiative explicitly aligned against marketed meanings of self and other, it is also fertile ground for expansion by marketers seeking to position certain goods and services as having the potential to bring alternative lifestyle-based consumers closer to realizing a purportedly more authentic and non-marketed self. The potential for marketers to appropriate anti-consumerist practices and meanings and convert them into marketable commodities underscores how the hegemony of consumerism—as well as opposition to it—is never wholly stable or fixed, being constantly renegotiated across market-based and anti-consumptive contexts.