Whose Identity Is It Anyway? Consumer Representation in the Age of Database Marketing

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In the information-intensive marketplaces of the networked economy, database-related marketing techniques have gained unprecedented popularity. Their development is based on the assumption that greater capturing of customer information in digital databases leads to epistemologically superior insights about the customer. The proliferation of customer databases, however, has triggered privacy concerns and has encouraged consumers to devise information externalization strategies to maintain control over their digital representation (identity) vis-à-vis companies. Drawing on poststructuralist theory, the authors argue that current consumer strategies are ineffective in maintaining control over one's identity in the electronic marketplace because such strategies are based on an obsolete ontological distinction between material identity and digital representation. They suggest that in the age of database marketing, digital consumer representations in fact constitute the consumer. Therefore, only if consumers are given full access to companies' customer databases can they maintain a sense of control over their identities in the marketplace.

Keywords: *poststructuralism; databases; database marketing; identity; CRM; electronic commerce; customer interactions; privacy*

The information age and especially the digital revolution have transformed how businesses collect, store, access, and share information. The predigital consumer went shopping at a downtown store and paid cash for all his or her purchases. As a result, he or she remained relatively anonymous and private. The faceless crowd provided a veneer of protection, and all information exchanges between him or her and salesclerks occurred in person. Except for personal recall, no meaningful trace of such transactions remained with the seller after the customer walked out of the store. In the digital mall this is no longer the case.

Being digital means first and foremost the transformation of physical matter into electronically generated bits and bytes (Negroponte 1995). The consumer who roams the mall is no longer a physical body but a set of data points—a *digital representation* of his or her movement and behavior (Turkle 1995). Once matter has "gone digital," it can also be *stored* and *transferred* as binary bits (Lunefeld 1999). This is the crux of the digital revolution: digital matter (e.g., in form of consumer information) becomes free-flowing and free-floating, in technical as well as symbolic terms. The digital consumer is no longer entirely anonymous or private. Unlike oral communication, which ceases to exist as soon as words are uttered (Ong 1982), digital communication leaves traces behind. These traces, coded in 0s and 1s, are the basic elements of an intricate language system that, as philosophers of language and media remind us, not simply represents but actively *constructs* the reality we perceive (Plant 1997). Thus, whoever controls this language controls the production of reality, at least in digital spaces.

The electronic *marketspace* of the Internet—a vast network of consumer and product databases—represents the latest and most complete form of digitization. This marketspace is dramatically different from the physical *marketplace* (Rayport and Sviokla 1994) because marketers can now survey and analyze consumer behavior in such a detailed way that they achieve what has been unachievable heretofore: turning the consumer's interior inside out (Levy 1998). Tracking software records every minute detail of online consumers (Locke 2000), rendering them fully transparent and allowing deep access into their nature. With such information

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at hand, stored in massive databases yet accessed and analyzed with lightning speed, software packages produce a digital facsimile of the consumer in real time. For the marketer, this copy of the consumer effectively stands in for the real consumer. *It becomes the consumer's identity.* Electronic databases thus play a central role in the production of consumer identities in electronic marketspaces.

With the rise of database technologies and electronically mediated communications, new forms of marketing power have emerged. Among those commenting on the marketing implications of this new "mode of information" (Poster 1990b), three camps have emerged. The first group espouses a distinctly utopian perspective of the Internet. This camp believes that the new medium revolutionizes marketing as we know it, by rendering the Kotlerite conception of the marketing mix obsolete, creating new wealth for companies, and delighting customers in the process (e.g., Kelly 1998; Rayport and Sviokla 1995; Sawhney and Zabin 2001; Shapiro and Varian 1999). The second group opposes the "end of marketing" argument and maintains that despite an undeniable increase in the use of computer networks and database technologies in market exchanges, time-honored marketing rules and economic foundations still govern, by and large, the (new) economy (e.g., Liebowitz 2002; Wind, Mahajan, and Gunther 2002). A third group believes just like the utopians in the transformative power of electronic communications for marketing practice and theory. Yet, endowed with a skeptical perspective on technological change, this group doubles the discourse of technology by concerning itself also with the threatening effects of new information technologies on consumer privacy and corporate domination (e.g., Dholakia and Zwick 2001a, 2001b; Hoffman, Novak, and Peralta 1999; Nowak and Phelps 1997).

All these ideological viewpoints and theoretical angles have much to offer for our understanding of the future of marketing in the networked society. Yet, all of them fail to grasp the "cultural innovations brought about by the integration of database technology into existing political, economic, and social institutions" (Poster 1995b, 78). In particular, the role of databases *as language* to make sense of the world, markets, and consumers has not been given due attention by marketing theorists. Basing our analysis on the poststructuralist theories of Michel Foucault (1972, 1973) and Mark Poster (1990b, 1995b), we argue that database technologies constitute a unique form of language. Because "a human being is configured as a subject, is given cultural significance, in the first instance through language" (Poster 1995b, 79), the introduction of a new language such as binary encoding alters the way individuals are constituted as subjects and mobilized as identities. Indeed, in the case of database marketing and customer relationship management (CRM) initiatives, it changes how individuals are constituted *as consumer identities*.

More important, a new language changes not only how the consumer subject is constituted but how this subject can be known. According to Foucault (1972), the creation of knowledge is the creation of cultural objects, and both are functions of linguistic power. In other words, new systems of representation—be it writing, statistics, or digital information flows—articulate newly ordered spaces of knowledge in which the object of representation (e.g., the consumer) becomes observable, measurable, quantifiable; in short, *known* (Foucault 1972; Hacking 1983; Ong 1982). Hence, the language of the database constitutes the *customer subject* as a known and knowable *object* upon which the marketer can now act strategically. This technique of inscribing or authoring the consumer subject and thereby making it known is what Foucault (1978) called the objectification of the subject. By failing to recognize that databases are a form of language, marketers inevitably ignore the role of databases *in the constitution of consumers as cultural objects*. Furthermore, if the linguistic power resides with database technologies, then the owners of such technologies are the holders of "the culturally formative power of subject constitution" (Poster 1995b, 93). Therefore, in the mode of information, the consumer's ability to author his or her own identity in the marketplace is threatened because identity is increasingly constituted "away" from the consumer self and ensconced in large customer databases.

By recognizing the productive power of databases, questions about consumer sovereignty and autonomy emerge. Specifically, the notion of consumer identity as something articulated by and tied to the consumer subject is put on trial in the electronic marketspace. In this article, we argue that the ability of consumers to constitute their own identity in the digital marketspace is severely limited if not completely eliminated because consumers no longer control the language that allows them to constitute their identities. Thus, we are not concerned here with strategic, technical, and managerial questions of database marketing and its derivatives like CRM[1] and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) marketing.[2] Rather, we hope to shed light on the cultural and theoretical implications of an increasingly networked marketplace with a particular focus on the question of consumer sovereignty and autonomy in constructing identity.

The heated discussion on consumer privacy is an indication that this new reality of the networked marketplace is disconcerting to many consumers. Yet, important as this debate may be, it addresses only one part of a larger and more general struggle over the control of consumer identity (Deighton 2003). In this article, we hope to widen the debate on consumer identity by employing new theoretical and conceptual tools of analysis to emerging marketing techniques in computer-mediated environments (Hoffman and Novak 1996). Our focus on digital marketing techniques is important because it delimits the scope of our investigation. We are here concerned with the ideological and cultural work that electronic customer databases do in respect to constructing consumer identities in computer-mediated environments. We

recognize that there are online spaces that are not governed by the logic of the customer database and that processes of identity construction in these spaces must be theorized very differently. For example, analyzing behavior in noncommercial virtual spaces like multiuser domains (MUDs) and chat rooms, theorists of cyberculture have argued convincingly that the virtual world of cyberspace creates new forms of agency, control, and empowerment for an individual that is now freed from the confines of the body as identity marker (Balsamo 2000; Stone 2000; Turkle 1995). Evoking postmodern conceptions of identity where the self is never fixed but fluid and multiple, such theories focus on the playful and theatrical aspects of text-based cyber-identities (cf. Laurel 1991; Turkle 1995) where leaving behind the limitations of the physical body and performing versions of themselves purely by virtue of their cognitive prowess create a space for "identity tourism" (Nakamura 2002). To be an identity tourist means to possess mobility, access, and creativity to enact different roles at different virtual places. Within this paradigm, agency and power are based on both the freedom from materiality and the absence of the electronic customer database. To be meaningful, it is not necessary for social behavior in these virtual places to take any recourse to the real world.

Markets, however, always already contain both the materiality of the consumer subject and the virtuality of the database because physical and virtual markets are, in the words of Robey, Schwaig, and Jin (2003), intertwined. Intertwining happens when the material and the virtual worlds depend on, complement, and reinforce each other, thus creating synergies whose effects exceed those of the individual elements. So, while we recognize that the material and the virtual are ontologically distinct, they are also always "mutually involved" (Robey, Schwaig, and Jin 2003, 118) in creating a seamless data web for capturing the consumer in all its guises. In fact, it should be pointed out that the urgency to analyze the cultural work of databases is rooted partly in the intertwined nature of digitally constructed consumer identities and the real consumer subject. Ideal-type identities that are either completely virtual (i.e., they only exist as cognitive inventions in virtual worlds) or completely material (i.e., no digital representation anywhere) are therefore not captured as part of our study.

Our article consists of three parts. First, we use the work of Michel de Certeau (1984) and Gary Marx (1999) to introduce and conceptualize popular consumer tactics of identity management in electronically mediated marketplaces. We theorize these tactics as attempts made by consumers to maintain "authorship" of their identities in the face of "cookies," click streams, collaborative filtering,[3] and databases. While hailed by many as potent consumer tactics for privacy protection and identity management, we argue that these tactics are ineffective because they are based on a model of identity developed for the physical world. Therefore, in the second part of the article, we draw from poststructuralist theory to advance our argument that the mode of information has brought about a need to retheorize consumer identity as electronically constituted. We argue that because of database-driven marketing techniques and CRM, the creation of digital consumer identities is no longer under the control of the real consumer. Indeed, consumer identities are assembled as digital representations in multiple databases without the consumer always being aware of it. Hence, we witness a *multiplication* of consumer identities, as *varied* consumer profiles of the *same* consumer accumulate in dispersed databases. Therefore, in the final part of this article, we propose that only if consumers have direct access to companies' customer databases can they regain control over their consumer identities and reclaim their autonomy in the networked marketplace of the twenty-first century.

Form a theoretical perspective, our article adds to previous writings in poststructuralist consumer research (Holt 1997; Thompson, Arnould, and Stern 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). We extend the existing literature, however, by applying the analytic power of poststructuralist theory to study the effects of information technology, specifically database technologies, on marketing as a system of knowledge (cf. Lien 1997). At a more general level, by investigating consumers' tactics of identity construction in electronic communication networks, our article contributes to the nascent literature in the field of online consumer research.

CONTROLLING IDENTITIES IN THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC COMMERCE

Firat and Venkatesh (1993) observed that marketing has become the totalizing narrative of postmodernity. In the mode of information, the totalizing discourse is database marketing. Therefore, and contrary to Robert Kozinets's (2002) vision of a temporary and local escape from the logic of the market, emancipation from the market cannot be accomplished by simply ejecting oneself from the physical geography of the market. Turned into a digital representation, the consumer is no longer the autonomous and self-governing origin of identity construction because the body is no longer necessary.[4] In physical markets, the mode of production of consumer identities is still largely in the hands of consumers. For example, activities such as riding a Harley-Davidson, skydiving out of a plane, or cheering for a baseball team allow the consumer to author his or her identity as fan, rocker, or adventurer. Identity here is constructed through lived experience, and the body becomes the privileged form of representation. The digital market does not presuppose the consumer's physical presence for participation. Once a data profile has been established, the consumer is defined, analyzed, categorized, and acted upon by the market (i.e.., marketing) at all times; even (or should we say *principally*?) when his or her "real" self is absent. Hence, unlike the

physical consumer subject, whose construction of identity takes place through and with the body (Bourdieu 1988; Merleau-Ponty 1962), the digital consumer subject is confronted with a force outside his or her body and inner consciousness that actively constructs, manipulates, multiplies, and distributes his or her digital identit*ies* through the network.

Contemporary consumers increasingly populate databases, not geographies. Kozinets's mistake is common in consumer research because of the field's emphasis on action and the phenomenology of consumer experience—for example, consuming a product, constructing meaning, experiencing a sense of self, and so on—and regarding the consumer as the locus of action and, hence, meaning. By doing so, the significance of language as a productive force in marketing discourse is continuously undervalued (O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988). To illuminate this point it, is instructive to analytically separate the concept of *consumer* from that of *consumer experience*. In this article, we are concerned with the former and not the latter, which is a phenomenological concept and thus cannot be theorized from a poststructuralist perspective. What we argue is that the processes that constitute consumers in electronic marketplaces as knowable and manageable identities are located outside the inner consciousness of the consumer himself or herself. Therefore, the control of the consumer to determine his or her digital identity is at a minimum limited. Consumer experience, on the other hand, paradigmatically operationalized as a conscious experiencing of a sense of self, remains internal to the consumer who thus maintains the power over its representation.[5]

In the mode of information, we can no longer ignore the power of language in the constitution of consumers because consumer sovereignty and autonomy cannot be conceptualized outside the logic of power that constitutes them. Hence, consumer tactics of resistance to the electronic data surveillance web—whether they prove ultimately successful or not—are likely to be linked to a desire to control the externalization of personal information. Therefore, in the first section of the article, we will describe current forms of information externalization tactics (IETs) employed by consumers to resist the corporate production of virtual online consumer identities. Echoing Douglas Holt (2002), we suggest that such consumer tactics can be understood as the quest for sovereignty; an attempt to reclaim control over the process of identity formation in the face of surreptitious modes of profiling, categorization, and targeting that are performed *by others* whenever the consumer enters the electronic consumptionscape (see also Dholakia and Zwick 2001b).

Internet, Dataveillance, and Consumer Tactics

Despite the tremendous rise of electronic transactions in North America and Europe during the past twenty years, perfect customer data surveillance was difficult before the advent of the Internet. The Internet marks a major qualitative shift in the ability to collect, store, analyze, and exchange customer data because in this seamless electronic environment customers continuously leave digital data traces that are easily recorded, stored, and cross-referenced. It has not escaped online consumers that marketers regard the Internet as a sleek and immense data collection machine. Studies on Internet privacy regularly reveal a high level of concern, expressing a consumer sentiment that Poster (1995a) has termed "database anxiety" (p. 84). Between credit cards, automatic teller machines (ATMs), loyalty programs, and the Internet, consumers must become inventive to maintain control over the externalization of their personal information and in the process secure a phenomenological sense of self-governance, sovereignty, and autonomy. The work of cultural sociologist Michel de Certeau (1984) provides a basis from which to theorize these consumer inventions and actions in the face of totalizing discourses of digital consumer surveillance.

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau investigates the art of *making do* as practiced by individuals as they go about their everyday life.[6] He introduces a clear distinction between the concepts of *strategies* and *tactics*. He argues that while systems may implement strategies to designate particular activities to specific places, individuals devise tactics that offer innumerable ways to evade or transgress this imposed "law of the place" (p. 29). In his view, a strategy is

> a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. (P. 37)

Management of a place like the information-intensive marketspace of today is made possible through sight (cf. Virilio 1989). Vision in the age of the Internet means access to data flows; bits and bytes as the representation of exterior reality. In an almost uncanny anticipation of the possibilities of current information networks, de Certeau states that a delimited place enables a practice of supervision "proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and include them within its scope of vision" (p. 37). In the world of marketing such "foreign forces" are the consumers. Furthermore, in the mode of information, the system implementing strategies to designate consumption activities and compose relations with consumers on the Internet is made of databases.

Michel de Certeau (1984) defined tactics as "a maneuver within the enemy's field of vision, as von Bülow put it, and within an enemy territory" (p. 37). As if he had the Internet in mind, he suggested that tactics are a clever utilization of, or a form of making do with, the resources of time and space that exploit cracks in the strategies enacted by the "surveillance of the proprietary powers" (p. 37). For de Certeau, devising

tactics consist of devising ways around the constraining order of the place. Thus, he believes individuals take a creative approach to everyday life, where they resort to artisan-like inventiveness, trickery, and guileful ruse. He conceives of an individual that thereby introduces play into everyday life, so that he or she may "survive" the strategies enacted by power.

Michel de Certeau's (1984) use of military metaphors may appear drastic. Online shopping is hardly a matter of life or death. Yet, this should not divert our eyes from the usefulness of these concepts to describe the nature of consumer behavior (i.e., the devising of guileful tactics) in information-intensive marketspaces. Consumers increasingly perceive such marketspaces as oft-antagonistic networks of power designed to monitor their every move for the purpose of pushing more advertising and marketing messages (Bennett 1996; Bogard 1996; Clarke 1994; Johnston 2000).

In particular, de Certeau's (1984) allusion to the subversive power of play is instructive. Consumer researchers (Grayson 1995; Holt 1995) and sociologists (Huizinga 1950; Turkle 1995) have documented the importance of playful consumption strategies in the process of negotiating social relationships. To conceptualize subversive consumer tactics as play suggests that effective resistance to the proprietary powers takes place within a delimited and shared framework of rules and regulations. In other words, instead of aiming to overturn and rewrite all existing rules of the game, playful tactics of resistance are devised within the same rules that constitute the web of domination in the first place.

Within networks of computer-mediated communications, these rules are the rules of information flows and databases. As companies build up bigger databases, consumers realize the associated change in the nature of *identity knowledge* (Marx 1999). Identity knowledge is now defined by the *amount* and *accuracy* of digitally stored personal information. Attempts to regain control over the constitution of one's identity require tactics that control the information flow to the system. In other words, as the law of the place becomes dominated by companies' data collection strategies, consumers try to devise tactics that allow them to control either the amount or the accuracy (or both) of personal information that ends up in electronic databases. Consumers understand that new ruses, plays, and trickeries are needed to "make do" once identities are formed by the language of the database.

Building on Gary Marx's (1999) conceptualization of identity knowledge, we can identify four different tactics consumers apply to manage the externalization of their personal information in computer-mediated marketspaces (see Figure 1). The same tactics also help conceptualize consumer tactics in the "real" world. After all, the distinction between cybernetic marketspaces and marketplaces (cf. Rayport and Sviokla 1994) becomes increasingly blurred because of the general proliferation of electronic transaction networks and databases. Marx's original conceptualization, however, was based on an analysis of the new realities of the virtual, which

		Accuracy of Personal Information Externalized	
		High	Low
Amount of Personal Information Externalized	High	Identifiability	Anonymity/ Pseudonymity
	Low	Confidentiality	Secrecy

FIGURE 1 FOUR TACTICS OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

brings into much stronger focus the need for consumer tactics of identity management.

The first tactic, *identifiability*, refers to the consumer's disposition to disclose all personal information with high accuracy, thereby allowing companies to acquire a high degree of identity knowledge about consumers. Identifiability is therefore the least powerful tactic for protecting personal information. Identifiability, however, may be perceived (wrongly as we will argue below) as the most powerful consumer tactic—laying all the cards on the table to secure an authentic and accurate digital representation in the marketspace. *Confidentiality* is the externalization of restricted but highly accurate information to a specific company. Confidentiality then incorporates identifiability but restricts the information flow in terms of what is externalized and who gets to see it. It is based on trust. The consumer's objective is to secure an accurate representation of his or her identity to a designated and trusted set of companies and Web sites. *Secrecy* expresses a disposition toward the sharing of little and potentially inaccurate information. Identifiability, and to a degree communication, is avoided, and the relationship is characterized by distrust. Consumer information is not actively shared. Secretive withholding (avoiding externalization) of personal data is then regarded as an attempt to block any digital representation from emerging in the networked marketspace. *Anonymity* and *pseudonymity* are tactics that enable the consumer to externalize virtually infinite amounts of *inaccurate* personal information—infinite because pseudonymity allows for the ongoing invention of new personae for which new personal information has to be creatively imagined. Overt identifiability, in the sense of revealing to the marketer an accurate representation of the consumer self, is deliberately avoided.

While making use of the dimensions of identity knowledge in very different ways, all tactics can be conceptualized as deliberate efforts by consumers to manage and control the construction of their digital identities. For example, the externalization of fully accurate information about oneself (identifiability and confidentiality) into the network of databases aims to foster truthful digital representations "out there." Both tactics are expressions of the consumer's hope that a precise digital blueprint of him or her can, in fact, be assembled. In other words, online consumers may feel that the *diffusion* of their digital identities through the electronic networks may be hard to control. Yet, the *constitution* of these identities is in the hands of an autonomous and self-determined consumer self.

Secrecy is an attempt to avoid the construction of a digital consumer self *tout court*. While consumers using identifiability and confidentiality as their externalization tactics are concerned with the *accuracy* of the digital representation (and to some degree its rate and range of exchange), secretive consumers seek to avoid digital representations of the real self, accurate or not. According to this stance, secrecy is the only way an individual can remain a self-governing entity in the mode of information. Similar to secrecy, anonymity and pseudonymity are externalization tactics that have as their goal the concealment of a consumer's real identity, but via playful revelation of made-up identities (Turkle 1995). To participate fully in the social reality of computer-mediated communications (shopping, informational services, chat rooms, dating sites, porn sites, etc.), the creation of multiple identities is deemed necessary if the real self is to be protected from the specter of corporate dataveillance (Clarke 1991). In other words, the consumer creates a multiplication of consumer identities as a form of camouflage against the strategy of surveillance of the proprietary powers. Therefore, he or she is able to experience identity multiplication as an act of control, power, and sovereignty.

THE DATABASE AND THE DIGITAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CUSTOMER

On the surface, enacting IETs to counter corporate control and surveillance strategies may seem like useful consumer maneuvers for identity protection and management. The rationale is that if digital representation of the consumer is determined by the amount and accuracy of the customer information collected, all a consumer needs to do is control the information flow to the company. Hence, the commonsense theory of identity management conjures up a rational and autonomous consumer who reclaims—through tactics and ruses—some power and control in a place otherwise dominated by "strategic enemy forces."

Implicit in the conceptualization of all of these tactics is the assumption *that the consumer self is ontologically distinct from its representation in the electronic marketspace*. Yet, from a poststructuralist perspective, the subject cannot be conceived in this way. Because the consumer is constituted by language and the language governing the electronic marketspace is constituted by databases, the consumer (as a meaningful cultural representation, not as a body) does not exist outside this constitutive field of discursive power (see Apte et al. 2002; Berry and Linoff 2000; Brachman et al. 1996; Drozdenko and Drake 2002). Hence, the consumer's digital identity *is* his or her real identity because marketing is targeted toward the consumer profile rather than the real person.

Database-driven marketing is increasingly taking center stage in organizations' corporate strategies (Greenberg 2002; Swift 2001). The chief objective of such technologies is to obtain what is in the industry referred to as a "360-degree view" of the customer (Wyner 2001), recalling Foucault's concept of panoptic surveillance.[7] While there are major strategic, managerial, or practical issues associated with CRM, GIS marketing, and similar techniques, our approach is macroscopic rather than managerial. In a poststructuralist sense, these forms of database-driven marketing technologies are first and foremost a discourse of power that has become central in constructing consumer identities (cf. Foucault 1977, 1978; see also Rose 1988, 1997). Specifically, the formation of sizable, identifiable, and searchable customer data profiles makes possible their codification, classification, and comparison. In fact, the emergence of CRM as discourse is premised on the database's power to *individualize* the consumer and the ability to compare one with another. This is the process through which the consumer emerges as a cultural object of analysis. As Foucault (1977) wrote in *Discipline and Punish*,

> For a long time ordinary individuality—the everyday individuality of everybody—remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege. . . . The disciplining methods (such as medicine, psychology, criminology, pedagogy) reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made of this description a means of control and a method of domination. It is no longer a document for future memory but a document for possible use. . . . This turning of real lives into writing [. . .] functions as a procedure of objectification and subjectification. (Pp. 191-92)

Unlike the delinquent, the person with mental illness, the sick person, or the child who have been objects of discourses of individualization for a long time, the consumer had not been subjected to a permanent and ubiquitous regime of surveillance and observation before the arrival of the electronic database and the widespread use of electronic and digital transaction formats in the marketplace.[8] Invisible to the marketer, the "massified" consumer easily slipped in and out of markets, remaining anonymous and indistinguishable. The

individualizing of consumers through inscribing, recording, and classifying their attributes; calibrating their capacities and conducts; and managing their differences is now possible with the language of the database. The threshold of detecting ordinary individuality has continuously been lowered in correspondence with the increase in customer profile sizes. Therefore, it might be useful to think about the mode of functioning of the customer database as a representational or discursive machine that identifies and harnesses human difference (cf. Rose 1988).

Because the subject is constituted and given cultural significance through language and databases constitute the new language of the mode of information, we have to expect that the "making" of the subject and the construction of consumer identity take on new forms as well; forms that are inseparable from the language and the logic of the database. Thus, and in order to understand quite what kind of consumer subject emerges within the discursive formation of the electronic networks of database marketing and CRM, we need to take a closer look at the language that constitutes these. We must interrogate how—if no longer by the autonomous and rational consumer subject *even as he or she employs IETs*—the identity of the customer is actually "authored" in the mode of information.

The Database as Discourse

Because of their capabilities of storing information and creating digitally processed meaning, databases offer an electronic language that is distinct from speech and writing. Note that this is not a claim for the epistemological superiority of one form of cultural production over another. From a poststructuralist perspective, such a claim makes no sense. What is important to understand, however, is that a change in the logic of representation will produce different forms of knowledge, meaning, and practice. The system of representation that is made up of databases is no exception. Like any other language, it is bound, governed, and limited by a definite structure of grammar and syntax. In other words, the discourse of the database follows its own rules of formation in the act of constituting the individual consumer.

Databases at a basic level are made up of "data fields" containing information on individuals' names, postal code, sex, and whatever else might be obtained (Goss 1995). Carefully combined fields constitute an individual "record," and several of those compose a list. In a digitized format, such lists are transferable, exchangeable, and comparable with other lists. In addition, they can be distributed at the speed of light. Databases have grown increasingly complex, and large online retailers such as Amazon are no longer satisfied with, and limited to, geodemographic information. For a successful data-mining initiative, the value of data is in the details (Berry and Linoff 2000; Rud 2001). In the Internet age, a solid customer database not only contains customer contact and purchase information but "intensive customer intelligence"—historical buying and search habits, as well as real-time clickstream information—allowing for interactive predictive modeling of customer preferences (Vriens and Grigsby 2001). A good example is Amazon.com, which has constructed a predictive customer intelligence system on their Web site aimed at delivering so-called context-driven information (Satur and Zhi-Qiang 1996). Here, a customer's purchase and search history is dynamically matched with his or her current online search behavior (via clickstream analyses and cookies) in order to provide interactive purchase recommendations for impulse buying. Internet has speeded up the process of traditional database marketing. In the older forms, captured personal data slowly coagulated into lists that led to direct marketing pieces arriving in the customer's mailbox after a considerable time lapse. The data-to-direct-marketing process is now instantaneous.

Nothing, however, has changed with regard to the underlying grammar and syntax of the database. Although advanced, the database is still based on the rigidity of narrowly defined fields and categories. Each field contains a limited number of spaces for entry of numerical representations of qualitative information, a binary reduction of information that aims at structurally eliminating any ambiguity of meaning. Within the logic of the database, the online retailer undoubtedly obtains a rich representation of the customer's buying habits and tastes, yet one that is qualitatively and dramatically different from that of the local shop owner who knows his or her customers chiefly through oral communication. It is this reduction of information into data and the elimination of ambiguity that make up the strength of the database. Once put in this format, customer profiles are instantaneously accessible and cross-referenced with other information such as the individual's location, and possibly cross-referenced as well with other databases either of other retailers or any other digital collection of the individual's records. This, then, is the world of CRM at the speed of light (Greenberg 2002), where "*in effect these electronic lists become additional social identities as each individual is constituted for the computer, depending on the database in question, as a social agent*" (Poster 1995b, 87-88, emphasis added).

The mixing and matching of data fields and categories lead to the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of customer profiles according to the knowledge needs of the marketer. More important, most databases fail to refer back to their objects of representation (the consumers) to improve accuracy (Guernsey 2003).[9] Thus, databases can and do construct a *multitude of representations* of one and the same consumer. If a consumer is captured in two distinct databases that differ in composition and content of their data fields, he or she takes on two personae, two identities in the marketplace. Both databases define him or her differently *as consumer object* for any agency or business that has access to these databases. In fact, within the rules of the database, it is no longer accu-

rate to speak of *the* consumer. The consumer becomes a blended (or, in some cases, fractured) digital simulation whose "nature" depends on the composition of the databases.[10] There are now as many identities per "real" consumer as there are database representations of him or her. The real power of CRM and database marketing is not to get as close as possible to the *real* customer but to *constitute* an individualized, measurable, and comparable customer as a series of digital representations.

From a poststructuralist perspective, it is therefore insufficient to speak of CRM and database marketing as technologies of *customer addressability* (Chen and Iyer 2002). Databases are first and foremost technologies of *customer construction*. They inscribe personalities and identities onto consumers according to their discursive rules of formation, specifying the system according to which the different kinds of consumers are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, and derived from one another as objects of marketing discourse (cf. Foucault 1972, 42).

The act of digitally constituting the customer is hardly innocent. On the basis of his representation in a respective database, the consumer may be denied a credit card or car loan, inundated with what has come be known as spam (often massive amounts of unsolicited and undesired direct e-mail marketing messages), and exposed to inadequate product recommendations as well as offered certain product and price combinations and not others. Hence, databases become responsible for "the multiplication of the consumer, the constitution of an *additional self* [italics added], one that may be acted upon to the detriment of the 'real' self without the 'real' self ever being aware of what is happening" (Poster 1990a, 97-98). On the other hand, somewhat inaccurate product recommendations may still be better than no recommendations at all, and consumers may very well value the work their digital identities do behind their backs. For example, airlines merging their reward programs create new, consolidated consumer identities that may benefit the customer who now finds that once combined, his or her previously dispersed reward miles are sufficient to get him or her a free round trip to Hawaii.

Authoring the Consumer

For poststructuralists, there is a lot at stake when one form of discourse replaces another because discourses constitute cultural objects and engender action toward these objects. In other words, there is a connection between the linguistic constitution of the consumer subject and its effects on actual marketing practice. For example, product recommendations on retail sites such as Amazon.com, the music site MP3.com, or the online DVD rental service Netflix.com are first and foremost driven by software-based interpretations of the consumer's digital identity as revealed by his or her current and past purchasing patterns. When real consumers revisit sites that employ recommender systems that produce somewhat odd suggestions, they get a brief and vicarious glimpse into the nature of their other self; that digital facsimile that determines marketing action on this particular site. As Guernsey (2003) pointed out, "A discussion on a bulletin board at Salon.com this year titled 'When Customer Profiling Goes Wrong' described people's befuddlement upon receiving off-the-wall recommendations from Amazon. Someone named Molly wrote that she bought "a single trashy romance novel" and is now "branded for life." This anecdote also stresses the limitations of consumer IETs discussed earlier. In a purchase situation, identifiability cannot be avoided and yet, the consumer identity that gets stored and used for marketing purposes may still divert from what the consumer perceives to be his or her *real* self.

Thus, while consumers *participate* in the formation and population of their own data records by committing simple consumption acts, they do not *completely control* this (in)formation, despite all identity management efforts. In fact, with online tracking, powerful recoding and filtering technologies, and the increasing selling and exchanging of customer records, the consumer is no longer able to always decide what kind of information about him or her is stored, categorized, manipulated, exchanged, and acted upon by whom, when, and where. More important, matters of identity knowledge control and management are continuously complicated by the emergence of new information technologies. Radio frequency identification (RFID) technologies, for example, can be used for smart tags that store and transmit information about an object's location and operational status. European clothier Benetton was among the first consumer product manufacturers to equip merchandise like pants and sweaters with RFID tags by weaving it into the traditional garment tag. While the tag does not directly store information about the person wearing the Benetton product, it nevertheless has the potential to communicate a lot about him or her. Consider a person wearing Benetton pants equipped with an RFID tag during a shopping trip in a downtown mall. Inconspicuous receivers placed in stores and public spaces could continuously communicate with the pants' smart tag, eventually painting a detailed picture about the person's shopping trajectory.[11] Other marketing-relevant information about the consumer's wearing habits could also be captured such as whether, when, and where the pants were worn, dry-cleaned, or taken off. Of course, the chip can be disabled, and the continuous information flow from the consumer to the marketer be stopped. Our point, however, remains valid; increasingly, information technology negates consumer tactics of information externalization, thus seriously threatening the consumer self as the autonomous author of his or her own identity in the marketplace. "Unlike spoken language, the database is not only remote from any authorial presence *but is 'authored' by*

so many hands that it makes a mockery of the principle of the author as authority" (Poster 1995b, 85, emphasis added).

Recognizing how the database is formed by many hands and populated with data from many sources forces us to depart from the dominant notion of the autonomous and unified consumer subject who, by virtue of rational consumption acts and conscious speech acts, constructs his or her own identity in the marketplace (see also Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Once we come to see the consumer in the mode of information as digitally constructed, we are in a position to reject IETs as effective identity management. Our claim rests on two pillars. First, in the electronic marketspace where marketers put together strategies based on digital consumer identities, the question as to whether these identities correspond to some real consumer "out there" is no longer philosophically relevant because the digital and the real identity are ontologically one and the same in electronic marketspaces. This collapse of the digital and the real means that accuracy and amount[12] of personal information is no longer important for determining customer identities.[13] Therefore, even if consumers use pseudonyms to protect their real identity, they actively constitute *an* identity (e.g., as someone who creates pseudonyms), which will become real as soon as marketing action is based on that particular identity knowledge.

Second, because customer profiles are being "authored" to a large extent in absence of the real consumer and assembled increasingly with information collected without his or her active participation (as in the RFID example), identity management through IETs promises only very minor success. Short of a complete absence of *any* information externalization, a digital identity is created and multiplied through the network of company databases, with or without the real consumer present or consciously aware. What the real consumer is left to wonder is whether his or her digital identity might become a problem (e.g., a credit history problem) or an asset (e.g., an unexpected and gratifying frequent flyer upgrade).

In sum, the introduction and proliferation of database marketing constitutes a powerful discourse that alters the way individuals are constituted as consumer subjects in the market. We have argued that in the mode of information, the constitution and multiplication of digital consumer identities occur largely in the absence of the real consumer, illustrating that direct consumer input is only of minor importance for identity formation. Therefore, focusing on IETs in the struggle for control over consumer identity construction is unproductive. Instead, by suggesting that knowledge is a function of linguistic power and linguistic power in the mode of information resides with database technologies, we propose that a struggle for consumer identity needs to be fought at the level of the database. Indeed, we argue that consumers must be given direct access to customer databases in order to ensure that they regain a viable voice in the act of their constitution as customers.

ACCESSING THE DATABASE = CONTROLLING CUSTOMER IDENTITIES

Recommender systems best illustrate how the constitution of consumer identities takes place outside the inner consciousness of the consumer. From the beginning, developers of such systems envisioned software solutions to master the creation of perfect consumer copies. The theory was that as more customer data become available, the recommender software could be adjusted and optimized to get closer and closer to capturing the true inner self of the consumer. To put it in poststructuralist terms, recommender systems provide the rules within which the language of the database makes utterances and thereby constitutes the consumer as an object of marketing knowledge. It turns out, however, that consumer identities created by the rules of this language consistently fail to make sense to the original (Guernsey 2003). In addition, consumers who are exposed to the reality of additional consumer selves in the digital marketspace usually find themselves incapable of intervening in the composition of their digital alter egos. Structurally, the artificial "intelligence" of online recommender systems does not require direct consumer input to produce actionable and ontologically valid consumer identities.

This is why, in the mode of information, ontological distinctions between a "real" consumer and his or her representation in the database become tenuous. Contrary to modern theories of knowledge, poststructuralism posits that knowing the customer is not a question of having a well-authenticated customer profile. *Any* consumer profile will do because within the rules of the language, this profile makes up the consumer. Thus, the relationship between knowledge and power has been reversed. Because knowledge is a function of linguistic power, customer knowledge originates from the discursive power of the database.

The poststructuralist invalidation of an ontological distinction between representation (customer profile) and object of representation (customer) clashes with the possibility of consumer tactics of resistance because these tactics presuppose exactly this ontological split. In other words, if we accept that there is no essential difference between the real consumer self and the consumer self constituted by the discourse of the database *regardless of the accuracy and amount of information used to constitute him or her as a subject*, any concern about information externalization becomes pointless. Consumer tactics of resistance based on limiting or forging one's representation (via IETs) in the marketspace will fail. Immediate access to the database, on the other hand, would allow the consumer to act directly on the linguistic composition of his or her identity. Therefore, this is the only real alternative to the control of identity construction that consumers possess in the physical marketplace via speech and action.

The thought of providing consumers with such access rights may seem frightening to many organizations. Yet, a look at Amazon.com's recommendation system illuminates that giving consumers the power to constitute and manage their own identities can produce a win-win scenario. As a pure-play Internet retailer, Amazon.com's biggest asset is its customer database. This massive data structure forms the basis for the company to construct a reality about its customers and their identities. Constructing a reality that reflects accurately the preferences, dispositions, and personalities of its virtual shoppers is difficult in an environment where consumer identity is no longer tied to the consumer body. Secondary data sources such as IP address, click streams, and stored cookies are problematic identifiers because of the possibility of multiple consumers using the same computer to shop at Amazon.com. As a result, a consumer identity could be constructed in Amazon.com's database that encompasses multiple actual consumers; impossible in the physical marketplace where a person's identity is necessarily tied to his or her body. Therefore, in an attempt to constitute one digital identity per actual shopper, the Web site asks the visitor to sign in.

While not very effective in matching the digital identity with the one in the real world, within our discussion of consumer identity construction, the seemingly trivial request for authentication gains new significance because it marks the first, albeit minor direct link between the customer and Amazon.com's customer database. Yet, we refer to the sign-in process as a "weak link" because the customer is not given the ability to effectively alter the content of the database.

Continuously at the leading edge of database marketing, Amazon.com has come to understand that constituting valuable and strategically superior digital consumer identities cannot be accomplished without customers' direct access to its databases. To our knowledge, Amazon.com was the first major online retailer that grasped the potential of referring its customer database back to its "original," the customer. After recognizing return customers via sign-in and cookies, Amazon.com offers them dozens of product recommendations. After each recommendation, a hyperlink "Why was I recommended this?" is offered. Clicking on this hyperlink offers a glimpse into the section of the Amazon database that stores previous correlated purchases of the customer. The customer then has options of clicking on "Not Interested" in that specific recommendation or to intensify or dilute the recommendation algorithm by tweaking the intensity of preference for the previously purchased correlated items on a 5-point scale. In effect, Amazon.com lets consumers take control of the constitution of their customer identity by allowing them to *access and alter the code and content of the database*. In short, Amazon.com has created a "strong link" between the customer and its database. Consistent with our argument that authoring the language that inscribes identities in the mode of information is the only effective form of identity management in the digital marketspace, we propose that Amazon. com's move to open up its databases is a much more promising avenue for ensuring consumer self-determination, sovereignty, and control than any of the IETs presented earlier.[14]

That increase in consumers' ability to take control over their identities goes hand in hand with companies' desire to improve their customer relationships, and knowledge can be inferred from recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence. Several companies like Netflix.com and TiVo, the digital television recorder, already have adopted the Amazon model of opening up their databases to direct intervention by its customers. In addition, recommendation systems software developers like digiMine and TripleHop Technologies have recognized that technological solutions by themselves may not be smart enough and that bringing in the "human mind" (Guernsey 2003) may be necessary if digital consumer identities are to be constructed so that real consumers feel accurately represented in the electronic marketspace. To be sure, it is not our intention to suggest that the increase in control provided by consumer access to company databases denotes some form of real increase in consumer power or agency vis-à-vis the marketer (Schor and Holt 2000). The fundamental fact that consumers are objectified by the practice of storing and acting on digital data profiles does not change by granting consumers access to them (cf. Holt 2002; Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

In electronically mediated marketspaces, consumer autonomy and sovereignty cannot be (re)claimed by a vision of consumer agency that presupposes the existence of a consumer subject that stands outside the mediation of language. Consumers always already participate in their own self-constitution as subjects of database marketing, CRM, and GIS marketing, even as they engage in tactics of identity management. From a poststructuralist perspective, the possibility of identity management is therefore tied to the control of the source of language (the database) and not, as suggested by privacy advocates and libertarians of the information age, by controlling the externalization of personal information. IETs offer no more than a *perception* of consumer sovereignty and autonomy.[15]

At a theoretical level, our argument is a critique of the prioritization of action over language in marketing and consumer research (see also O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988). From a poststructuralist perspective, we analyzed database-driven marketing technologies as a form of linguistic power through which the consumer subject is first discursively constituted as a cultural object and then acted upon as a target for marketing practice. According to our view, the power to constitute consumer identity is tied to linguistic power and in the mode of information, that power is located

within the database. This is the crux of the digital revolution. The owner of database technologies "authors" consumer identities. Therefore, only by giving consumers access to the growing number of customer databases will they be able to claim the ability to (co)author their own identity (Poster 1995b).

Clearly, de Certeau-type consumer tactics are ineffective in the mode of information. Following Poster, the only way to reclaim a sense of agency, autonomy, and sovereignty in the electronically mediated marketplace is to heed Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) advice at the end of *The Postmodern Condition*: "Give the public free access to the memory and data banks" (cited in Poster 1990a, 126). Amazon.com already has opened up its databases to the authorship of the consumer. What at first seems like a threatening proposition emerges as a powerful strategy to develop relevant and well-targeted permission marketing efforts. Allowing consumers to reclaim control over their own identities might just deliver the comparative advantage needed to win out in the hypercompetitive and fast-moving marketspaces of the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. Because today database-driven electronic networks enable customer relationship marketing (CRM) (Goodhue, Wixom, and Watson 2002), CRM and electronic CRM (eCRM) are effectively one and the same thing. We will use these terms interchangeably.

2. GIS stands for Geographic Information Systems. Marketers use GIS to map consumer lifestyle data onto geographic regions. The best-known application of GIS marketing is the Prizm classification system (Goss 1995).

3. Collaborative filtering is a technique that based on a consumer's purchasing or search history matches a consumer to a group of others who have purchased or recommended similar products. The technique then analyzes the group's data to predict what else the consumer might like.

4. Following postmodern consumer researchers, we acknowledge the ontologically fragmented and dispersed nature of the postmodern consumer self, possessing multiple identities in the physical world. However, what differentiates identity construction in the real versus the virtual world is *who is doing the constructing*. Assuming multiple identities in the real world is considered an act of individual choice where the market, because of the signs and symbols it delivers, is regarded as postmodernity's site par excellence for enacting and expressing these multiple identities. Thus, "identity work" in the real world is done by the individual himself or herself. In many ways virtual space is an even better site for creating multiple identities (Nakamura 2002; Turkle 1995). However, it is also a space where one's identity is constructed by many hands (i.e., companies storing their own particular data version of the consumer). Hence, in digital spaces, the fragmentation of the self is amplified because of the multiplication of a consumer's identity outside his or her purview.

5. This is not to say that database marketing has no role to play in the production of consumer experiences. It is, however, quite vicarious, and any satisfying analysis of this link would go beyond the scope of this article.

6. De Certeau understands everyday practices as "the ways in which users operate" or "ways of operating" or doing things (p. 474).

7. We will return to the concept of surveillance at a later stage.

8. We are referring to consumers as part of contemporary mass consumer markets. Of course, data storage systems existed before the electronic database, capturing and computing statistical details about consumers, citizens, or business partners (Hacking 1982, 1986). However, the individualizing power of the electronic database is qualitatively and quantitatively dramatically higher than any previous storage facilities. Hence, for the first time in history, organizations, institutions, and the state are enabled to survey, observe, and individualize very large populations in very short amounts of time.

9. As we will discuss later, Amazon.com is a noteworthy exception.

10. Even in the case of Amazon.com, wherein a limited form of control of the database is offered to the customer, the database creates bizarre product recommendations when a family computer is used to order items. The database representations of diverse family members—the dog lover, the postmodern critical thinker, the hip-hop music fan, and the romance novel reader—get associated with the same "cookie," leading to a hodgepodge of inconsistent recommendations.

11. In essence, radio frequency identification (RFID) technology imitates offline the kind of digital consumer tracing possible online and by doing so renders concepts like offline and online obsolete.

12. When there are absolutely no customer data, in the information age, the customer has no identity. In poststructuralist terms, this customer does not exist.

13. We, of course, acknowledge that the accuracy and amount of customer information is of *managerial* importance because, presumably, more detailed customer profiles will improve the effectiveness of direct marketing efforts (Fayyad and Uthurusamy 2002). But here we are concerned with the prerequisites for the production of *a* digital consumer identity, and according to the intellectual tradition of poststructuralism, all that is needed to constitute a digital consumer identity is the power to do so, that is, a database profile and the analytic language of the software.

14. Providing database access for consumers can also be framed as a question of property rights (Elgesem 1995; Falkenberg 1998). If we decide that any form of externalized information belongs to the externalizing party, data profiles and digital consumer identities trapped in massive customer databases would not necessarily qualify as the property of the owner of the database. Access to a company's database would then become a right to be granted, not an act of goodwill or good business (see also Dholakia and Zwick 2001a).

15. As mentioned earlier, consumers can actually gain a sense of agency in digital spaces in general and in markets in particular because the Internet is also a tool to do things. However, what we are concerned with here is not so much whether the Internet empowers the individual to be a "better" consumer (i.e., price search, online shopping, free downloads, do-it-yourself banking and investing, etc.). We set out to show that the control over the production of consumer identity in digital market spaces is no longer solely in the hands of the consumer self. A sense of agency and loss of control are not mutually exclusive. As consumers feel empowered by the Internet, they nevertheless face a struggle over defining their identity as disembodied data subject. And this struggle, we argue, consumers are currently losing regardless of the use of information externalization tactics.

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