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Marketing Meal Kits: From Consumer Agency to Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Meal kits delivered to the home have become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Several companies offer these through monthly subscription with a vast range of ingredients and easy-to-follow recipes based on chef-inspired meals that customers can cook themselves. This paper examines the marketing of meal kits from three UK companies in terms of how they discursively construct the agency of the consumer. The study is based on a thematic analysis of web-based marketing material from the companies in terms of more or less coherent rhetorical ways of constructing matters in terms of common place descriptions, tropes, figures of speech, and metaphors. The findings point to several ways in which such a positioning is achieved under four thematic headings: the creative and committed consumer, the ethical consumer committed to sustainability, the consumer as an efficient time-saver, and the consumer aligned with corporate social responsibility. It is argued that this marketing approach is more elaborate than conventional identity approaches associated with brands, in that it taps into the consumer's sense of agency both with and beyond the product.

Keywords: meal, kits, discourse, agency, corporate, social, responsibility

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Introduction

The Covid-19 virus pandemic and resulting behavioural restrictions across national populations impacted the food industry, and in particular dining out in restaurants. However, while this was problematic for the restaurant industry it has also created more of an opportunity for companies that produce home meal kits (Estrella, 2020; Webb, 2020). These ready to cook boxed kits involve a set of raw or sometimes minimally prepared, ingredients (cut, trimmed, peeled, washed etc.) that require cooking once delivered to the home (Costa et al., 2001). These kits pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic and were originally developed as a means of offering the consumer the convenience of home cooked recipes, often to restaurant standard quality, without shopping for ingredients and with easy-to-use recipe cards (Levy, 2018). It is now possible to purchase meal kits on a subscription basis with company websites offering tips and blogs and often with recipes that stress ease and relatively short cooking times. Moreover, these companies stress the fact that the pre-portioned ingredients save on food waste and spending time on supermarket shopping. Instead, they offer the consumer the appeal of cooking high quality meals with an appeal to 'doing cooking' and enjoying the food experience in the convenience of their own home (Hill & Maddock, 2019). In offering selected fresh produce with a variety of meal plans and recipes, the meal kit companies tend to stress the healthy nature of the produce they offer the consumer rather than traditional convenience foods that have sometimes become associated with highly processed ingredients with artificial preservatives and so on. In this regard, meal kits can be considered as

“convenient food provision, cooking and eating” (Halkier, 2017, p. 136). However, as the current cost of living crisis has struck, meal kit subscriptions may be considered as a somewhat expensive means of food provision for households. It is therefore in light of the current economic conditions that meal kit companies find themselves having to come up with a strategic approach to marketing these products that will maintain their marketability.

Meal kit providers are in the business of offering the consumer convenience and in so doing conform to traditional marketing associated with the likes of frozen food or ready meals in terms of the promise of speed, ease of cooking, and freedom of choice (Smith, 2001). Providers such as Gousto, Hello Fresh, and Mindful Chef stress these features in their marketing, and in particular appeal to the “time-poor” consumer (Brewis & Jack, 2005). Such appeals are attractive when combined with a discourse in which meal kits are presented as offering the consumer “new combinations and configurations of doing” (Shove, 2009, p. 26) in terms of the relationship between food provisioning and cooking. As such the marketing of meal kits provides an alternative food script for the consumer (Block et al., 2011) as well as their agency and subject positions (Hall, 2000; Serazio & Szarek, 2012). While for some, this type of alternative script is something to be critiqued in terms of the power imbalance in favour of the meal kit provider and a distancing of food provisioning from the consumer (Hill & Maddock, 2019), it can also be considered in terms of the rhetorical construction of consumer agency. In other words, a key focus of this work is on how the consumer’s agency is “worked up” in the marketing material such that the purchase of meal kits is presented as a form of enhanced agency in relation to key issues in today’s society. These come in many forms, but previous research has identified some of the main ways in which they are marketed as addressing these issues. Perhaps one of the most pressing and obvious issues is that of food waste and this is often related to over-buying groceries when supermarket shopping, both in-store and online. There has been a growing concern at the amount of food waste, particularly in developed nations. Meal kits can therefore be marketed as assisting consumers by saving them time grocery shopping and helping them in reducing food waste through portion control and ingredient usage (Troy & Acosta, 2017). It is also the case that the time-poor consumer can be receptive to the marketing of the idea of cooking with meal kits with the benefit of a desirable way to increase quality time with family (Hill & Maddock, 2019). Another aspect in the marketing of these kits lies in the idea of a being creative and skilful cook without the pre-requisite experience. In other words, the easy-to-follow recipes and instructions enable consumers to feel creative and confident in their cooking (Levy, 2018). There is also an element of learning culinary skills here but in the privacy of a home setting. Finally, and now rising up the agenda of consumer concerns is that of purchasing food that is marketed in terms of environmental sustainability. Recent research by Heard et al. (2018) found that on average, regular grocery life-cycle meal greenhouse gas emissions are 33% higher than meal kits. This kind of statistic presents meal kit providers with a key marketing message in terms of sustainable food provision. Marketing related to sustainability may also strengthen the positioning of meal kits as premium products worthy of a relatively high price. Consumers tend to see green products as having higher prices than non-green alternatives (Gleim et al., 2013), and therefore a discursive marketing strategy based around sustainability may serve to further legitimise the higher prices of meal kits compared to cheaper supermarket alternatives.

The features outlined above can make meal kits a highly marketable product, albeit on aimed at a segment of the population with sufficient disposable income and cultural capital (Bourdieu) to purchase them. From the point of view of the present study what is interesting is how this type of marketing is accomplished rhetorically and how it positions the consumer with an enhanced sense of agency in moving beyond food provision as a mundane activity

towards one that speaks to the issues outlined above. The following section lays out the methodological position adopted in the study in examining this issue and the sample of material examined.

Methodology

The study involved data collected from the websites of three of the main UK meal kit companies: Gousto, Hello Fresh and Mindful Chef. The marketing statements made on these websites, including company claims about their meal kits, customer testimonials, and blog entries were drawn upon in order to produce a set of themes that could then be analysed in more detail. Thus, the data was analysed in two stages. The first involved informed a broad thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) which consisted of reading, re-reading and coding the data set. These initial codes were based upon were collated in order to establish an outline of potential themes that were derived from the both the online company material as well as the academic literature outlined above.

The themes were then examined as potential “interpretative repertoires” underpinning the meal kit marketing rhetoric. An interpretative repertoire can be defined as a “recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations, distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterizations of actors and situations” (Edley & Wetherell 2001, 443). These were considered in terms of the meal kit consumer and the ways in which their agency was constructed, either directly or indirectly. The relevant exemplars below are drawn from across the three company websites that most clearly illustrate each of interpretative repertoires identified.

Analysis

The creative and committed consumer

The foregoing analysis of the various company website promotional material considers how the identity and agency of the consumer is discursively constructed as paramount. This can be examined under four main interpretative repertoires: (i) the consumer as a creative and committed cook, (ii) the ethical consumer committed to sustainability, (iii) the consumer as an efficient time-saver, and (iv) aligning the consumer with the socially responsible company.

In order to market meal kits effectively, the consumer must be discursively positioned as an active agent in the cooking process. In other words, the agency of the consumer must be forefronted in such a way that the creativity involved in cooking can be identified with. This is apparent in the following promotional material.

Gousto

Butter chicken or 'murgh makhani' is a mild Indian curry that the whole family will love. You'll create a fragrant, silky smooth base for succulent chicken with tomato, spices and golden-fried onion, before serving over fluffy coriander rice. Butter than a takeaway!

We've taken inspiration from the flavours of a 'parmigiana' – a classic Italian baked aubergine dish – for this easy, cheesy, incredibly tasty pasta bake. You'll combine golden-fried aubergine, rich tomato sauce, pasta and two cheeses to create a truly delicious meal the whole family is sure to love.

What is analytically interesting in this material is the active use of the contracted “You’ll” based on the pronoun “you” and active “will” with the immediately following verb “create”, all of which constructs the agency of the consumer as a creative cook. This contracted form also is less direct than “you will” and as such fits with the informality of the descriptions “fragrant, silky smooth base” and “easy, cheesy, incredibly tasty pasta bake”. It is also worth pointing out how these descriptions make copious use of adjectives to describe the meals (“... a fragrant, silky smooth base.”; “... succulent chicken...”; “...golden-fried onion...”; “... fluffy coriander rice”; “...golden-fried aubergine, rich tomato sauce, pasta..”). This kind of over-lexicalisation serves the purpose of enhancing the marketing of the meals as of chef-grade standard.

This kind discursive construction can also be seen in other providers where the active and creative consumer-cook is also presented in the form of testimonials. In the examples below references to “enjoyment” related to the creative act of cooking.

Gousto

So... I'm about to gush... @goustocooking is AWESOME. It's made me cook. I love how zen it all makes me after a long day. The food is absolutely spectacular too. Just cooked my first ever authentic Moroccan tagine, which is my favourite food. I'm buzzing. Thanks Gousto.

I cannot thank Gousto enough. What a fantastic idea! I have always struggled with time and ideas around what to cook. Now I am producing delicious, fresh and 'made from scratch' meals for my family...

Hello Fresh

I'm enjoying receiving meals from HelloFresh, as the variety of recipes has rekindled my interest in cooking, choosing and cooking the recipes with my son has awakened an appreciation of cooking tasty meals without the hassle of shopping for the ingredients.

My husband does all the chopping and I cook which is great, Wide choice of meals so lovely not to have to decide what to have every day!!

Mindful Chef

We've been using Mindful Chef for over three years! In all that time we've never had a meal we haven't enjoyed. Getting fresh ingredients for interesting, healthy and very generously portioned meals saves having to think about a delicious dinner three evenings a week.

Again, we can see how the agency of the meal kit consumer is foregrounded in terms of what they have produced (“Just cooked my first ever authentic Moroccan tagine...”; “Now I am producing delicious, fresh and 'made from scratch' meals for my family...”; “cooking the recipes with my son has awakened an appreciation of cooking tasty meals...”; “...I cook which is great...”, “...we've never had a meal we haven't enjoyed.”). Allied with this construction of agency is the positive personal impact in terms of excitement (“I'm buzzing.”); coming up with ideas of what to cook (“I cannot thank Gousto enough. What a fantastic idea! I have always struggled with time and ideas around what to cook.”; “...Wide choice of meals so lovely not to have to decide what to have every day!!”); and returning to cooking as a pleasure (“...the variety of recipes has rekindled my interest in cooking...”). Using meal kits is therefore presented in terms of the activity of cooking as associated with

pleasure and contrasted with life's mundane issues ("I love how zen it all makes me after a long day."; "I have always struggled with time and ideas around what to cook."; "...without the hassle of shopping for the ingredients."; so lovely not to have to decide what to have every day!!", "...saves having to think about a delicious dinner three evenings a week.").

The ethical consumer committed to sustainability

Another way in which the agency of the meal kit consumer is constructed is in terms of their purchase as involving a commitment to sustainability.

Gousto

In our quest to make sure every meal leaves the world better off, we've received some very exciting news. A weekly Gousto box reduces your carbon emissions by a whopping 23% compared to buying the same food at a supermarket.
<https://www.gousto.co.uk/blog/carbon-emissions>

If UK households replaced supermarket dinners with meals from Gousto for just one year, we could save 10.3 million tonnes of CO2.

That's the same as taking 141,910 buses off the road!

Hello Fresh

By giving you the exact amount of ingredients you need, we cut food waste. For many customers, food waste starts at the supermarket. Over-shopping often results in unnecessary ingredients (which are often over-portioned for the specific need) that don't get used and end up in the bin. At HelloFresh, we have a simple solution for this problem. Our ingredients are delivered to the consumer in pre-measured portions, which leave consumers with little to no food waste or leftovers. They receive and use exactly what they need based on their household size. We also educate our customers in meal planning and conserving the quality of food.

Mindful Chef

An astonishing 400 million meals worth of edible food is wasted by supermarkets & manufacturers in the UK each year. We are on a mission to change this.
At Mindful Chef, we operate a 0% food waste model. How do we achieve this? We go straight to the supplier and only order exactly what our customers need every week. Every ingredient is pre-portioned into the exact amount required for your meal so you won't end up throwing away any wilted bags of veg at the end of the week.
We believe this is the future of grocery shopping and are proud to be at the forefront of this revolution.

Lifestyle changes are personal. To be successful, understand your motivations. Are you after a health overhaul? Concerned about animal welfare? Want to reduce your carbon footprint? Or are you simply up for Veganuary?

Whatever your reason, keep in mind you're more likely to persevere by focusing on what you're gaining over what you're giving up.

What is apparent in these extracts from company websites is the focus on reducing food waste. This can be accomplished in terms of giving agency to the consumer through

comparison with supermarket grocery shopping (“A weekly Gousto box reduces your carbon emissions by a whopping 23% compared to buying the same food at a supermarket.” ; “For many customers, food waste starts at the supermarket. Over-shopping often results in unnecessary ingredients (which are often over-portioned for the specific need) that don’t get used and end up in the bin.”; “you won’t end up throwing away any wilted bags of veg at the end of the week.”). All of the meal kit providers construct the agency of the consumer as a partner in the process of environmental sustainability, sometimes through using the possessives “our and “your” in referring to themselves and then the consumer (“In our quest to make sure every meal leaves the world better off.” [followed by] “A weekly Gousto box reduces your carbon emissions...”).

In other cases, the partnership between company and consumer in engaging in sustainable consumption is fostered through the possessive “our” and generic “consumer” (“Our ingredients are delivered to the consumer in pre-measured portions, which leave consumers with little to no food waste or leftovers.”). It is also the case that categories of meal kit consumer, notably vegans, are catered for in relation to their lifestyle and ethical values (“concerned about animal welfare? “Want to reduce your carbon footprint?”). The personalisation of such choices as deriving from values is therefore central to the positioning of the agency of the consumer in relation to their food choices (“Lifestyle changes are personal.”).

The consumer as an efficient time-saver

Although much has been made of the time-poor consumer in the marketing of meal kits, less has been examined in terms of the positioning of the construction consumer’s agency in terms of being efficient in saving time. The following extracts from the company websites draw the consumer into this world of speedy meal preparation as representing an efficient use of time.

Gousto

This ragù develops an incredible depth of flavour in just 10 minutes thanks to our British slow-cooked pulled pork. You'll make a super speedy tomato sauce, flavoured with roasted garlic paste, before stirring through quick cook spaghetti and a good scattering of cheese!

Dinner, but not as you know it. Our big red recipe boxes will help you whip up wholesome, impressive meals no matter your skill level, with all of the flavour and none of the fuss.

Hello Fresh

HelloFresh is great for busy lifestyle and saves you shopping for ingredients etc.

We deliver everything you need to create delicious dinners from scratch so you spend less time shopping!

Mindful Chef

Get healthy, save time, reduce waste. Discover the UK’s highest rated recipe box.

A weekly box containing 2 to 4 healthy recipes for 3 to 5 people

Easy to follow recipes with meals ready in as little as 15 mins

You'll be cooking things you love - from bubbling fish pies for the family, to a spicy Bibimbap or a Sri Lankan curry.

With 20 recipes to choose from each week, there are no recipe ruts here. Discover flavours from all over the world - with a Mindful Chef healthy twist.

What is interesting about these descriptions is how they position the meal kit consumer as someone who saves time and can still cook good quality meals efficiently with minimal effort. This can be accomplished through the quickness in cooking the meal itself (“This ragù develops an incredible depth of flavour in just 10 minutes.... You'll make a super speedy tomato sauce.... before stirring through quick cook spaghetti..”; “Our big red recipe boxes will help you whip up wholesome, impressive meals”. “Easy to follow recipes with meals ready in as little as 15 mins.”) through to traditional appeals to saving time shopping (“...great for busy lifestyle and saves you shopping for ingredients..”; “...you spend less time shopping!”); through the utilising time for the enjoyment of cooking and eating (“You'll be cooking things you love..”, “...there are no recipe ruts here.”) In these discursive formulations the consumer is positioned as someone who decision to purchase meal kits is a savvy choice rooted in maximising their time and enjoyment of cooking and meals. The meal kit consumer knows how to maximise convenience and their agency in this process is confirmed through their purchase.

The consumer aligned with corporate social responsibility

Given the current cost of living crisis associated with relatively high price inflation and rising heating costs, there is an increased pressure on consumers to scale back their spending due to having a lesser amount of disposable income. This places meal kit companies in a difficult position, given that they rely on what some may consider as relatively expensive subscriptions from customers for their products. Although introductory discounts are offered by most of these companies, these only last a limited time before the full subscription rate is applied. It is also the case that the media often highlights the issue of food poverty and those who are less fortunate having to fall back on charities and food banks in order to meet the needs of those who face food insecurity. It is therefore the case that the present economic circumstances meal kit companies with face a challenge both in terms of the ‘luxury’ status of their products and in being seen to assist with tackling food insecurity.

In order to address the above issues, the meal kit companies have begun to stress their corporate social responsibility credentials. This is achieved through various strategies, some putting more stress on previous marketing appeals in terms of saving on food waste as well as energy for both the company and consumer.

Hello Fresh

Reduction and avoidance of food waste is at the core of how HelloFresh operates and what we offer to our customers. Our make-to-order business model pulls exactly the right quantities from the supply chain based on consumer orders. Only 2.2 grams of food per every meal we sell is wasted in our facilities and our operations generated 82% less food waste than traditional food retailers.

Our vertically integrated supply chain is easy to follow: The ingredients are shipped from our suppliers to our production facilities, we produce the meal kits and send the boxes to our customers. This enables us to reduce a lot of transportation emissions by

not having to ship our products from one warehouse to another and putting it on display for customers. It also leads us to another example for how our business model is inherently sustainable.

Compared to traditional supermarkets we save a lot of emissions by not having to operate stores and warehouses that need energy, heating and cooling. We are also currently working on transitioning the distribution centres in our markets to green energy.

With a HelloFresh subscription, you'll have fresh, pre-portioned ingredients for your chosen recipes delivered to your door for an affordable price every week. And best of all, as a cheeky pre-Christmas treat, HuffPost UK readers can get 60% off their first box, as well as 25% off for the next two months, and free gifts, with the exclusive code FRESHPOST60.

With the 60% discount, you can get your hands on three two-person recipes per week, for just £11.40 – rather than £28.49 – offering you huge value for money.

What is interesting to note about the above marketing material extracts is the strategy of stressing both how the company saves on waste and energy as well as how the consumer can also do so. The HuffPost is a liberal news aggregator and blog, with localized and international editions. By advertising in this media source, the company has its sights on a particular audience who are more than likely to be young adult professionals, interested in engaging in environmental sustainability issues, and are prepared to shoulder an increased cost for such a commitment. Note the use of “pre-portioned ingredients delivered to your door” which implies less waste for the customer in both food and fuel than if they were to purchase food through conventional supermarket shopping. However, to add to this there is the inducement of a substantial discount offering “huge value for money”. This marketing strategy involving a discourse that aligns the consumer with corporate social responsibility is also present in a different context in terms of the offer by Gusto.

Gusto Blog post (4 August 2022)

Everyone should be able to enjoy tasty, nutritious meals, but today there is an 81% increase in need for emergency food compared to five years ago and we want to help.

We've worked with the Trussell Trust a lot over the years, and donated meals to their food bank network. But as the cost of living crisis bites, we need to do more.

We're working alongside one of the busiest food banks in their network, Hammersmith & Fulham Foodbank, to pilot a test that will update their emergency food parcels into healthy meal kits for that area.

Our nutritionist Ellie Bain has designed meal kits chock-full of wholesome ingredients, nutritional advice, and tailored recipes by the Gousto chefs.

We're pleased to share that each recipe will have at least two of your five-a-day. Our chefs have worked hard to include a delicious balance of wholegrains and healthy fats too, like nuts, seeds, eggs and avocados.

None of the recipes take more than 30 minutes to cook. And to save on energy, all the recipes are super easy to make and can be cooked without an oven. Food bank customers can look forward to a delicious variety of colourful, fresh, veg-packed meals from over nine different global cuisines too.

Due to the cost-of-living crisis, the need for emergency food has increased by 29% compared to last year. Your donations could help people facing hardship. If you'd like to, you can donate directly to Hammersmith & Fulham Foodbank.

Mindful Chef

15 million school meals donated

In September 2017 we partnered with the charity One Feeds Two, so that for every Mindful meal sold, we donate a school meal to a child living in poverty.

Buy a meal. Give a meal. Helping with every mouthful.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world so supporting kids like Lexi is life-changing. For far too many of them, a hot school meal is the only meal they will eat that day.

In the first blog we can see the company elevating their corporate social responsibility by point to the work they are doing with food banks to update “emergency food parcels into healthy meal kits for that area”. By making this claim it is evident that Gusto are claiming to offer something much more than the standard donated tinned food and this is prefaced by the use of the extreme case formulation of “Everyone should be able to enjoy tasty, nutritious meals, but today there is an 81% increase in need for emergency food compared to five years ago and we want to help.” The health message is reinforced through the claim that “each recipe will have at least two of your five-a-day.” Also note the named nutritionist which personalizes the company’s operations. Stress is also put on the energy saving cooking of these kits (“And to save on energy, all the recipes are super easy to make and can be cooked without an oven.”). Finally, the consumer is invited to align with the companies stance on corporate social responsibility by making a donation (“Due to the cost-of-living crisis, the need for emergency food has increased by 29% compared to last year. Your donations could help people facing hardship.”).

Mindful Chef also makes a point of stressing its corporate social responsibility, again aligning the consumer with their work with the charity One Feeds Two. This is stressed through the three-part strapline (“Buy a meal. Give a meal. Helping with every mouthful.”) which effectively makes the point of how the consumer’s purchase of meal kits contributes to the programme. The named country, Malawi, and its levels of poverty id drawn attention to as is the naming of a child, Lexi, and the “life-changing” effects of the charitable provision of hot meals.

Results

In summarising the analysis, what is apparent across these interpretative repertoires is the discursive construction of the meal kit consumer’s agency in partnership with the companies concerned. The idea that customers “cook with” these companies transforms the purchase of meal kits as something more than a financial transaction and instead supplants this with the consumer as gaining experiences of cooking and food with others, including family and a wider community of users. The meal kit consumer is therefore drawn into the

material practice of cooking through the ways in which their agency is actively constructed through the marketing of these products. Food is thus presented a more than mere sustenance, a point noted Herakova and Cooks, 2017, p. 2) who point out that making food involves social relations and cultural understanding. We also see how it is presented as being creative through working with raw ingredients to transform them into quality chef-like meals. This can also involve more ‘exotic’ culinary offerings drawn from other cultures which can be seen as enhancing the sense of agency and satisfaction of the meal kit user. This transformation of ‘natural’ ingredients into the cooked meal plays to a deep-seated sense of human agency working upon the natural world (Morton, 2007; Khan & Sowards, 2018). The creation of a recipe-based meal plays to this kind of sense of creativity which is further enhanced by the material embodiment of eating food as enjoyment involve the human sensorium. Of course, this is made all the more enjoyable in terms of the meal kit user as someone who can do this by being efficient with the time and effort. The delivery of the ingredients, as we have seen, plays to the idea of the time-poor consumer who exerts their agency by opting for the ‘smart’ choice in subscribing to this service. This is one of the key marketing messages of meal kit companies: they source and deliver the ingredients; the consumer saves time and only has to do the cooking. We also have seen how meal kits are marketed as contributing to environmental sustainability. The agency of the consumer is presented as doing so through the act of choosing to purchase meal kits. This kind of subtle marketing offers a discursive alternative that elides the gloom and doom of some environmental discourse or the hope and possibility alternatives (Hall, 2014). Finally, we have seen how meal kit companies have signalled their corporate social responsibility through charitable involvements. The customer is encouraged to align with this stance through making a donation.

Conclusion

The discursive construction of the meal kit consumer’s agency is a key aspect of the marketing strategy deployed by these companies. This can be considered an effective approach given that consumers of meal kits purchase them to engage in cooking and thus are active in that sense. However, the marketing strategy also draws upon a wider sense of agency in which the consumer, through their purchase, is positioned as actively contributing to environmental sustainability. This places the agency of the consumer into the realm, not only of cooking as an enjoyable activity related to the provision of everyday meals, but also as a practical and symbolic demonstration of an ethical stance. The notion of the ethical consumer is further strengthened through the association made with corporate social responsibility and food bank provision or charitable work with developing countries. What makes this discursive strategy effective is that it is not simply rooted in the conventional identity marketing associated with brands, but rather taps into the consumer’s sense of agency both with and beyond the product.

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