‘Doing’ stuff will overtake ‘owning’ stuff

Competitive consumption is over. Or it could be entering a golden age, thanks to social media. It won’t be what you buy, but what you do and who you tell. By Rory Sutherland

Do you want a really good laugh? Go on eBay and buy a cookery book from the '70s. For a start, everything’s brown. If you served children this kind of food nowadays, you would be reported to the social services. Then there’s the furniture. To give a classy feeling, the backdrop will feature some faux-antique furniture, often made from an endangered hardwood. That’s brown, too. Then there are the clothes... and the carpet.

Tastes and fashions change. The means used to signal taste and status constantly shift. Sometimes the advertising and marketing activities of large corporations are blamed for this - as though we’d live in some egalitarian, permanently contented Eden were it not for their continual creation of new wants and desires.

There is a little bit of truth in this view. But it is not the whole explanation. Human clannishness and status-
In 2014 we shall see a shift in fashions and trends away from activities which are probably not negative (owning a second home, for example), and towards equally rewarding activities which have a greater unintended benefit for one’s fellow man (car clubs), away from simple possession and towards wider, shared or shareable experiences.

The reasons for this aren’t altruistic. Though the wider effects may be unintentionally positive, the process may be driven by self interest. The reason for the change is the widespread use of social media, which fundamentally alters what is visible and hence self-defining about your expenditure.

Let’s go back to that distinction between the boiler and the Prius: to your online network, if it is interesting enough, your boiler may have more “visibility” than your car. If your home heating system has a mechanism which makes your behaviour shareable, a once-invisible appliance may offer greater status than the vehicle on your driveway.

Experiences may define you more than possessions. A trip to an interesting restaurant may confer more status than buying a large TV. “You are what you do” may come to overtake “You are what you own”. Social media are better at documenting experiences than possessions, and better at displaying creativity than at displaying wealth.

The car industry has already noticed this effect: among young – especially metro-politan - consumers, cars ownership simply does not have the badge value it once did. The effect may be heightened in large cities, where no one much cares what their immediate physical neighbours think of them, but instead cares about making a good impression with a peer-group scurried across the city – and indeed the world.

This may mean that intelligent, collaborative consumption grows at the expense of rivalrous, competitive consumption. A kind of Protestant consumption ethic born of high visibility – and perhaps, too, the threat of censure. If this is the case, we could be in for an economic renaissance born of new, more intelligent patterns of discretionary expenditure, a change which could alter society not through the ballot box but through the wallet.

Of course, we have less control over these things than we imagine. It may be that people continue to compete for status by making ever more elaborate cucmies in new ranges of eretic colours. I really don’t know. But there is a small reason to be hopeful, at least.

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Men’s lib: the next emancipation

Traditional expectations that males be stay-at-home dads need to change, if we want true gender equality, by Anne-Marie Slaughter

n May 19, 2013, Barack Obama delivers his first commencement address at Morehouse College in Atlanta – the all-male, historically black college that was Martin Luther King Jr’s alma mater. He exhorted the graduates to “keep setting an example for what it means to be a man. Be the best husband to your wife, or your boyfriend, or your partner. Be the best father you can be to your children. Because nothing is more important.” At the end of his address, Obama urged the young men listening to him to be leaders who can help “transform the way we think about masculinity.” Next year, transforming the way we think about manhood will be one of the fundamental tasks we face. Many of the gender and social inequality issues we continue to see, even in developed societies, cannot be fixed unless men have the same range of choices as women. To make those choices real, however, men will have to be respected and rewarded as men for making them: for choosing to be a primary caregiver; to defer a promotion or work part-time to spend more time with kids; to challenge their own parents, or other loved ones; to take paternity leave or to ask for flexible work hours; to challenge stereotypes.

To achieve this, we will see the rise of a new men’s movement, early signs of which are already evident. In a blog post in May, British writer Jack O’Sullivan, co-founder of the Fatherhood Institute, reflected on a speech by Labour MP Diane Abbott on the “crisis of masculinity” in the UK, and called for a “debate with genuine male participation and leadership”. And, he said, the time is right: “Men, like women, are belatedly escaping what we now recognise to be the confines of our gender”, enjoying “a massively increased engagement with children” and