

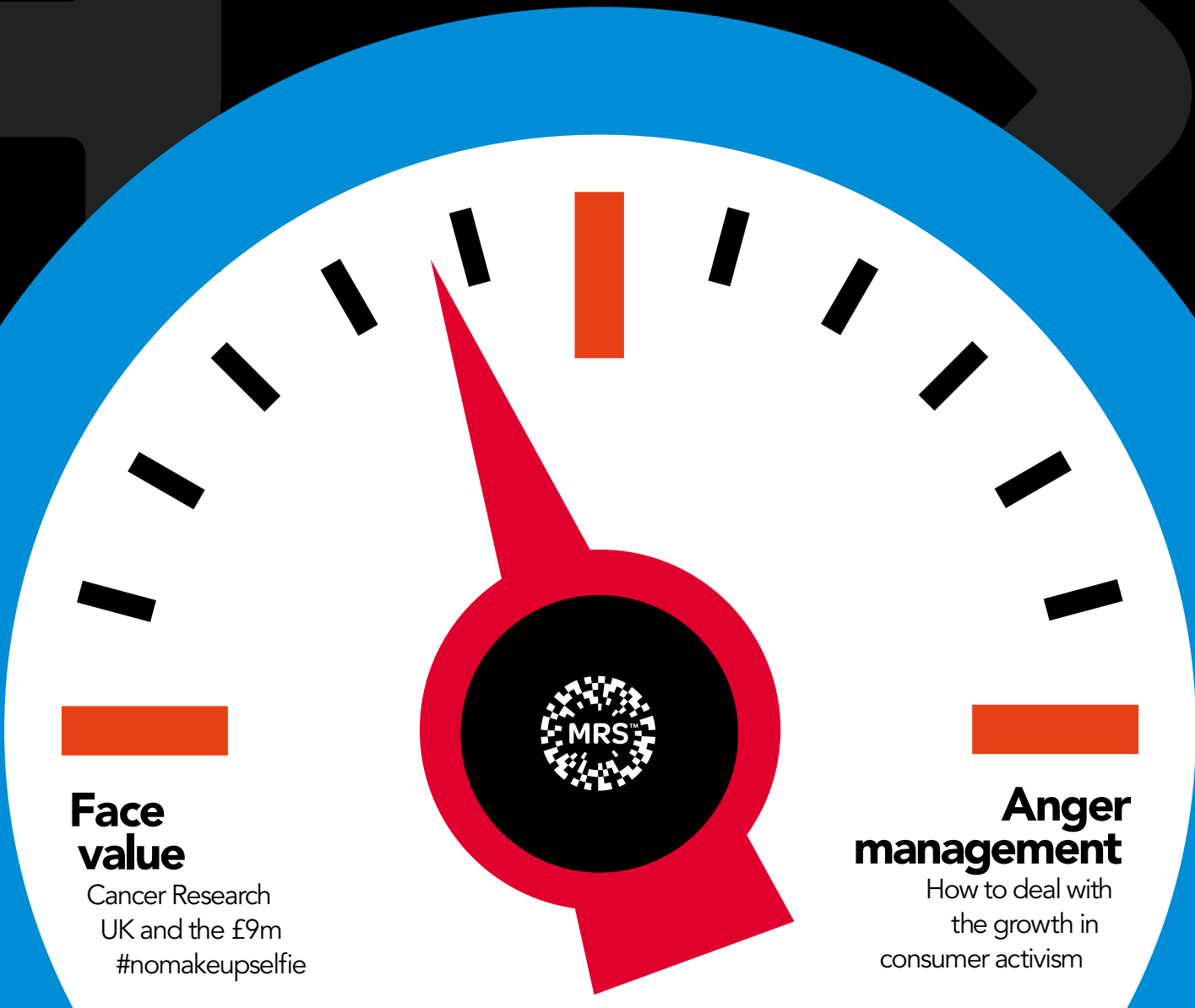
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USING EVIDENCE & INSIGHT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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SELF HELP

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST
HAZEL ROSE MARKUS
TALKS CULTURE CLASHES
AND MULTIPLE SELVES –
AND WHAT IT ALL MEANS
FOR MARKETERS AND
RESEARCHERS. INTERVIEW
BY ELINA HALONEN

In a globalising world, research projects are increasingly international – which makes getting under the skin of consumers from cultures different from our own a crucial aspect of the work being commissioned. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes is difficult though – which is why researchers turn to psychological theories for guidance.

But how universally applicable are those theories on which we're basing our insights? Do cultural differences

throw a proverbial spanner in the psychological works?

Professor Hazel Rose Markus is a leading researcher in cross-cultural social psychology, and – at a recent Society for Consumer Psychology conference in Miami – she spoke on how culture impacts our lives and our decision-making processes.

A co-author of a recent book, *Clash! 8 Cultural Conflicts That Make Us Who We Are*, Markus stressed that cultural conflicts are not a product of differences in inherent traits among groups. Instead, they arise from differences in the five I's – ideas, institutions, interactions and individual identities – which bind cultures together.

Markus talked the audience through three everyday cultural clashes – East v West, men v women, and working class v middle class – while explaining how to manage them. *Impact* caught up with her afterwards to ask what advice she would give to marketers and market researchers.

Impact: You talked a lot about the differences between independent and interdependent selves, and how this is a tool to understand cultural differences. If you had to choose, what would you say is the most crucial difference between them – the one that has the biggest impact on everyday life?

Markus: Independent selves think of themselves as individual, unique and separate from their groups, in control of their fates, free to act on their own self interest and equal to others. Interdependent selves construe themselves as relational – similar to others, adjusting to others, as rooted in history, place and obligation, and as ranked in hierarchy. There are many points of difference between the two. When an

independent self is active, people are highly self-focused and very concerned with expressing their own preferences and goals. When an interdependent self is active, people are more tuned to their relationships with others, and to fitting in and being part of groups and communities. All of us have – and use – both of these selves but, depending on our mix of cultures, one of these selves is likely to be elaborated more than the other.

Impact: You said that for independent selves, it's important to express uniqueness and exert control over our choices. Marketers are interested in what makes consumers select specific products, which makes the psychology of choice crucially important for them. What implications of the different selves do you see for global marketing and marketers?

Markus: We need to learn a lot more about how culture shapes our selves and our behaviours and how, in turn, our selves shape our cultures. But we can make some initial generalisations. First, products and services that are consistent with, or that match, people's desired, possible selves – or that activate those selves – are highly attractive and motivate action.

For example, those in the US middle class, and in some other parts of the West, are likely to have very elaborated independent selves. This means they will be responsive to the norm of not following the norm. Ideas of being unique and different and not unduly influenced by others are very attractive to them. For many in the East, as well as in most of the South, however, an oft-reinforced and inscribed norm is to follow the norm, so ideas about being on trend and doing what is popular are likely to be more powerful.

Decisions here begin not with a focus on self and what 'I' want, but instead with the context – the prevalent norms; with 'we' and with what is the right thing to do, in order to be in sync with important others. Furthermore, in the West, people ideally want to feel strong, positive emotions; in the East, they often prefer calm or harmonising emotions. Getting it right depends on good, theory-driven market research.

Impact: How can market research help brands understand the selves of their customers? How should we determine the distribution of different selves in the customer base of a specific brand, for instance – assuming it's different for, say, Ford v Lexus?



► **Markus:** Many in the market for a Lexus are likely to respond to appeals to independence, to control, to influence, to productivity, and especially to choice. Choice provides an opportunity to define the independent self – by exercising one’s preferences. For those less likely to be able to afford a Lexus, this type of appeal can leave them cold. Leveraging the interdependent self with appeals to being strong and resilient, able to withstand hardship and to protect others – to be practical – is likely to be relatively more effective.

Impact: You said in your talk that men and women tend to have different selves – men are more independent while women are more interdependent. Given that a lot of brands have an equal mix of genders among their customers, how should a company best appeal to both selves?

Markus: Typically, marketers with this dilemma have appealed to men. Appeals that feature independence, uniqueness and freedom are good strategies for most products in the West because these are elements of mainstream US-style independence. They resonate well with both men and women.

However, if it is possible in the same message or image also to appeal to interdependence – to make a connection between the product or service and good feelings, connecting people, or to doing one’s part to foster the whole – the appeal may be more effective among women. Independence and interdependence can be in tension, but they need not be.

Impact: The selves also differ between working class and middle class. But market research studies often use samples that are predominantly middle class because marketers target their products to these audiences – partly because



respond well to ads that target group membership, fitting in and being part of a group or relationship, connecting to and being like others, group loyalty, sticking by one’s friends, being stable or consistent in one’s values and actions.

The research also suggests that those in working class contexts are more empathic and sometimes more aware of others’ perspectives. At the same time, they are sensitive to the fact that things may not be as they seem.

Impact: Behavioural economics and social psychology have become a big part of the research and marketing toolkit in the past few years. How should we best take into account the different selves when applying the science of decision making?

Markus: It requires research and care but the evidence is voluminous and robust. Appeals to selves (to identities) are powerful.

It is now possible to offer some educated hypotheses about consumers’ selves and how to leverage them. For example, those in WEIRD contexts – that is Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic contexts – are likely to have very well-honed, independent selves and leveraging these selves to develop interest in a product or a service is likely to be a good place to start. For everyone else – those in non-WEIRD contexts – leveraging the interdependent self through appeals to community, to a good everyday life, and to a satisfying and positive present, are likely to be equally or additionally effective.

Impact: If you could give one piece of advice to marketers trying to succeed in a world of multiple selves, what would it be?

Markus: Marketers can be effective by appealing to the selves that are common among those making the product decisions. So, for example, women make almost all healthcare decisions. As a consequence, associating healthcare products and services with interdependence – with taking care, with empathy, understanding and fostering good relations and well-being – is likely to be a good strategy. Without ongoing research, however, it is easy to go wrong. Cultures and selves make each other up and are constantly changing. ■

Elina Halonen is a partner at The Irrational Agency, and a communications officer for the Society for Consumer Psychology

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