

## **Consumer Culture, Product Placement and the “Fictional Self”.**

### Abstract

Consumer goods, products and services are undeniably an integral part of everyday culture, serving to define individuals both to themselves and to those they meet. The phenomenon of attributing identity traits to consumer goods and the projection of these traits onto individuals through the possession or use of consumer goods can also be observed on a meta-level within the entertainment we consume, where advertisers spend millions to integrate their products into every facet of the characters' lives. The integration of consumer goods into the lives of fictional individuals has in turn had a wide-ranging effect on consumer culture at large, serving to reinforce the public's reliance on goods to define, differentiate and evaluate the various groups and subcultures encountered within society as a whole. Product placement on television has also impacted the connections developed between the viewer and the characters observed, allowing the viewer to instantly evaluate fictional persons based solely on products integrated into their lifestyle and surroundings.

Drawing from a wide range of disciplines, including marketing and advertising, consumer culture research, mass communication and psychology, this paper explores the motivational and theoretical underpinnings of product placement on a cultural level. Existing typologies of product placement, consumer culture and self-identity are examined and synthesized to create a unifying structure for the development of future theoretical and experimental research into the interplay of consumer culture, integrated advertising and the development of self.

### **Consumer Culture, Product Placement and the “Fictional Other”**

The evolution of the mass media from the early days of the press and newspapers has had a drastic impact on the social conditions of modern life. As the press developed into a capitalist enterprise, as opposed to a vehicle primarily concerned with reporting the occurrences of the day, it adopted the role of a cultural actor, informing and swaying public opinion, becoming one of the primary gateways through which corporate interests and powerful individuals could directly influence the whole of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). While early research into the effects of exposure to the mass media as a whole found increased social stratification among the audiences, this same research found exposure to the advertisements and endorsements contained within the primary programming to have a leveling effect. The exposure of lower class individuals to the lifestyles and commodities of the upper classes provided a model to which they could aspire, not through actual social, economic or political advancement but through the symbolic advancement opportunities provided by the adoption of upper class lifestyles and the use of associated goods and services (Habermas, 1989). The invention and widespread availability of the radio, and presumably the later development of the motion pictures, television and internet, further advanced this removal of social stratification, fostering a perception of *potential* equality (Cantril & Allport, 1935). Television, as a commercial institution, is invested in producing programming which will generate capital for the investors and corporations involved. However, it also produces (and proscribes) social representations and ideas about the world, particularly as they relate to notions of

power, place, and identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth), whether or not that is the intent of the programming (Grindstaff & Turow, 2006).

Certain forms of mass media programming have actively shaped the landscape of consumer culture through the blurring of the line between content and advertising. The newspaper industry, as a whole, has striven to differentiate the advertisements from the editorial endorsements, while the early radio and television industry made no such effort, particularly in regards to entertainment programming. In recent years this line has blurred even further, nearly disappearing at times, as product advertisements and endorsements have continued to invade every facet of the television consumption experience, with VNR's, stealth advertising and product placement becoming more wide-spread as the cost of production, or simply the profits desired, rises beyond the reach of traditional advertising models. But, like conventional forms of advertising, these embedded advertisements seldom seek to create new attitudes or behaviors. Rather, they utilize, and by utilizing canalize, existing behavior patterns, beliefs and preconceptions (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948).

### Patterns of Consumption

Under Foucauldian thought, consumption and production are arranged in an unequal balance. Consumption is a primarily private activity, occurring at the home or during play, which creates nothing of value to society or culture. The sole purpose of consumption was to replenish the individual, allowing them to resume their role as producers. This production was the only truly valuable activity in the public domain, adding meaning and value to human lives. However, as the progression from *modernism* to *post-modernism* occurred, the value of consumption began to change. The

consumption act itself become valuable to society; the “working family” began to morph into the “consuming family” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) and the act of consumption shifted from one of pure use and personal gratification to an act exerting a direct impact on society as a whole. This shift in the cultural meaning of consumption was mirrored by a growing recognition of the individual meaning(s) embodied by the act of consuming. Consumption itself became a powerful method by which to indoctrinate individuals into the culture, as well as a means by which they make sense of and influence the culture through the attachment of individual meanings to the objects being consumed. As these meanings moved from individuals to the level of the society, goods became the means of transmitting messages, values and symbols throughout the public. This new symbolic meaning of goods in society is structured, and gives structure to, four differing types of capital: economic, cultural, educational and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1989). It is at the intersection of these forms of capital where one finds the individual defined as a socially oriented consumer.

The socially oriented consumer makes use of each of these forms of capital in the pursuit of changing the way in which society is structured. They utilize their *economic* clout to purchase only those goods and services they deem suited to their vision of society. They work in conjunction with each other to form small sub-*cultures* wherein they can reinforce their own beliefs and meanings. They utilize their own *education* about specific causes and societal discords to inform their purchase decisions. They endow the objects of their consumption, and active non-consumption, with *symbolic* meanings which they broadcast to those around them. In short, the socially oriented consumer seeks to reappropriate the structure of production and consumption within a culture to make

fundamental changes to the culture itself, turning the act of consumption from a destructive and profane act into a form of communication, a sacred act (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Rather than restricting themselves to the traditional act of rhetoric as speech act, these consumers have adopted a rhetorical life-style wherein each act is itself persuasive and communicative. Similarly, producers and cultural influencers, such as the media and advertising industries, have in turn appropriated this trend, using the labels adopted by the socially oriented consumer to advance their own agendas. This power dialectic has built an interesting landscape of shifting power, with both the producer and consumer engaged in a struggle for control of their own meaning and social role.

#### The Role of the Individual in Consumer Society

“In American society, people often satisfy or believe they can satisfy their socially constituted needs and desires by buying mass produced, standardized, nationally advertised consumer products. This was not always the case nor is it today a universal phenomenon. Why should it be so prominent a characteristic of contemporary American culture?”

-Schudson, 1984, p. 147

The answer to this question lies in the formation of our identity (or, more accurately in this digital age of co-presence, identities). Over time the conceptualization of identity has shifted from the relatively static entity predetermined by sociological influences such as gender, race, and class to a highly fluid and subjective conceptualization of identity. Individuals no longer adopt a single, all-encompassing self to be projected to the world as a whole. Rather, they must assume a *multiplicity* of roles to deal with the constantly shifting social and cultural interactions (Bell, 1956). This multiplicity of roles has given rise to a more holistic view of the individual comprised of three interconnected parts: the actual, ideal and social selves. As defined by Sirgy (1982), “actual self refers to how a person perceives herself; ideal self refers to how a person

would like to perceive herself; and social self refers to how a person presents herself to others” (Sirgy, 1982, p. 287). That is, to navigate the increasingly fragmented social structures inherent in post-modernity, “individuals adjust both appearance and demeanor somewhat according to the perceived demands of the particular setting” (Giddens, 1991, p. 100).

Historically, consumer researchers have worked to differentiate between the influence of actual, ideal, and social selves on purchase behavior. For instance, Landon (1974) examined the complexities of identity by exploring self-image, how one views themselves, and ideal self, how one wishes to be viewed. His findings suggest that consumers’ purchase intentions are more strongly correlated with either their actual self-image or their ideal self-image depending on the unique goals of the purchase behavior. Thus, depending on the situation, both actual and ideal self-image can influence purchase intention.

Hughes (1976) examined also the relationship between the conceptualization of ones “ideal self” and professed brand preference; specifically investigating whether the visibility of a product’s consumption was correlated to actual or ideal self-concept. In contrast to prior studies that were unable to find support for a relationship between “the respondent’s ideal self-image and the brand image of his most preferred publicly consumed product” (Hughes, 1976, p. 530), Hughes found strong support for this relationship. That is, highly visible consumer products were found to be more congruent with individuals’ ideal self-concepts, while those low in visibility were more congruent with actual self-concept. More recently, Malhotra (1988) examined the various influences of actual, social, and ideal self in his analysis of consumer behavior and attitudes, and

found evidence that that respondents preferred houses, the purchase and ownership of which is a very publicly visible consumption act, that more closely matched their ideal self-image, as opposed to their actual or social self-image. Although the study only examined one type of consumption object, the findings suggest that “...when a multidimensional view is adopted and the differential role of the self concept components is taken into account, self concept exerts a much stronger influence on preference...In the context of self concept, the goals of the individual could be to maintain (actual self concept), enhance (ideal self concept), or project a certain self concept to significant others (social self concept)” (Malhotra, 1988, p. 21).

This tripartite conceptualization of self is not influenced solely by the social environment being navigated. Individuals can, and do, actively shape each of the three elements of the self, constantly re-evaluating and re-prioritizing different facets and goals as part of the “...*aesthetics of the self*: a conception of the self as a work of art that is freely and continuously re-created over time.” (Thompson, 1995, p. 259). In drawing on the representations of others in the media, individuals take the other and make it themselves. Even their own experiences become mediated by the mass media, and individual experiences are not stored as such in the recesses of memory. Rather, they are stereotyped and categorized based on the ideals and images provided by the media. In some cases, these experiences may not be believed until it is confirmed by the experiences of others, most often conveyed to the individual through the mass media (Mills, 1956). In this way the media have “entered into our very existence of our own selves. They have provided us with new identities and new aspirations of what we should like to be and what we should like to appear to be” (Mills, 1956, p. 395). By expressing,

dramatizing, and repeating cultural patterns, both the traditional and the newly emerging, the media reinforce tradition and at the same time explain new roles. (Breed, 1958)

### The Paradox of Product Placement

Product placement is, at its heart, a culture or society based advertising medium. Consumers form an impression of the goods, services or idea being promoted not through the reasoned comparison or direct appeal of conventional advertising, but through an indirect and association based appeal. As numerous studies have shown (Brennan, Dubas, & Babin, 1999; Carr, 2007; Russell, 2002), consumers are swayed regularly by these appeals, whether they are explicit or more subtle. These goods and services have become unifying devices for many American consumers. What we eat, drink, and drive define and link each of us with countless other consumers. For example, during the counterculture movements of the 1960’s tie-dyed clothing, long hair and music became badges of recognition, providing members of the movement with a sense of community and shared meaning (Calhoun, 1998). The act of consumption has become central to society, as it is the primary domain through which the individual is realized. Consumers engage with each other via the products they consume, whether that product is a political candidate, TV show, or a t-shirt; shifting consumption from a destructive act to one which is culturally and symbolically creative and meaningful (Deuze, 2008).

The rise of global mass communication has given rise to new forms of both publicness and visibility. Individuals are no longer reliant on geographically local groups for definition or inspiration. The increased visibility of and connections with geographically dispersed groups continues to negate the need for a local community,

placing the global media outlets at the center of a system which produces both vast amounts of social capital, monetary capital and symbolic meaning (Thompson, 1995).

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) outlined a number of social functions of the mass media, one of which, the *status conferral function*, is of particular note. Defined as the conferral of status on “public issues, persons, organizations and social movements” (p. 233), it follows that the inclusion of consumables, lifestyles and fictional individuals within this category is not an outlandish, or even notable, addition. The media continue to bestow and legitimize the status of each through the same method described years ago by Lazarsfeld and Merton: recognition. The mass media both create and perpetuate the images of popular idols (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). In turn, individual publics have countered this appropriation of power by developing their own forms of symbolism, which, once recognized by the larger community, of which the global media conglomerates are themselves a part of, become incorporated into and adopted by the whole (Thompson, 1995).

The endowment of consumption with symbolically creative power is not lost on the researchers investigating socially motivated consumption, nor is it the unifying power of collective action. Rather, what is missed by most researchers in this field is the effect that this collectivistic consumption has on the socially oriented consumer. The rise of global mass communication has given rise to new forms of both publicness and visibility. Individuals are no longer reliant on geographically local groups for definition or inspiration, but rather draw from a worldwide symphony of culture and consumption practices. The increased visibility of and connections with geographically dispersed groups continues to negate the need for a local community, placing the global media

outlets at the center of a system which produces both vast amounts of social capital, monetary capital and symbolic meaning (Thompson, 1995).

Yet the agentic action of the consumer is ultimately derived from actors’ class-based institutional roles within consumer society, rather than freedom from them. Agentic behaviors cannot exist apart from the cultural templates that authorize and guide the actions taken. As Bourdieu (1989) and others (e.g., Swidler 1986) have shown in some detail, culture always shapes peoples’ habitus, or strategies for action and understanding, and if they live in a consumer culture, those strategies are themselves defined by the act of consumption.

One underlying problem with the agency construct is the impossibility of separating empirically autonomous, or “free,” from “determined” behaviors (Loyal & Barnes 2001). Social action can only be explained and properly understood when considered in reference to the elements of choice or causation constraining or guiding their actions. In some situations there may be no difference in the characteristics of action that “could have been otherwise” and those that “could not have been otherwise”, to some degree negating the free will and self-expressive aspects of the act, deciding instead in favor of determinism and cultural constraint. In general, however, if people act agentially, they are agentic (Fuchs, 2001). The consumers’ ability to emancipate themselves, to develop reflexive distance from the marketing code by acknowledging its structuring effects and to fend off the marketer-imposed code may be restricted by the actions institutionally authorized, but because markets are an institutional apparatus that can be put to many social ends, they also provide space for progressive political action. This separation is also why some theorists (e.g., Baudrillard 1998; Firat and Venkatesh

1995) argue for the predominance of consumption over production in the current economic order.

The lack of direct interaction and mediated presentation of individuals and society gives rise to what some scholars have termed a *Gesellschaft*, “an ‘artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings’” (Bender, 1978, p. 17). In modern societies, the majority of the information individuals possess about members of other communities, and in general about people different from themselves, comes not through any direct relationship or experience, but instead comes through the media (Calhoun, 1998). As the media consumption of each individual is a highly subjective act, the culture received is similarly fragmented and constantly recombined as new information is integrated into the larger framework. In this realm, culture itself is constructed by each individual actor, self-produced based on their exposure and self-consumed based on their desires. Lacking any universally accepted and common codes, there is a cacophony of misunderstood messages, structured only by the underlying hypertext of the media, the only potential source of shared cultural codes and meaning (Castells, 2000).

But this reliance on the media to provide the hypertext of culture is not enough to provide the entirety of the consumer culture experience. As a conscious act, the consumptive practice also exists within the larger framework of everyday interpersonal society. The relationship between the individual, the other, and societal norms, in this case driven by mediated consumptive practices such as product placement, is in fact at the heart of socially motivated consumption. This phenomenon of social desirability, wherein the individual attempts to conform to the expectations of the group as a whole,

drives those who engage in consumption to simultaneously engage in conspicuous consumption, transforming it into a performative act.

Indeed, this phenomenon may be why public sentiment seems to be largely on the side of product placement. As a whole, the public claims to dislike conventional television advertisements, while research has shown that many consumers like product placements, as they can enhance realism, provide a sense of familiarity, aid in character development, and provide context (Nelson, 2002). A survey of 11,300 subjects, conducted by WPP Group’s Mediaedge: CIA, utilizing interviews in 20 countries across North America, Asia Pacific, and Europe regarding their attitudes towards product placements in motion pictures provides some enlightening statistics to support this view. They found that 57% of 16-24-year-olds are able to identify products or brands incorporated into motion pictures, followed by 49% of 35-44-year-olds, and 43% of 45-54-year-olds. 16-24-year-olds are the most likely to consider trying products advertised through product placements **solely due to the fact that they were product placements, with 41% stating they would try a product because of its presence in a motion picture**, followed by 28% of 35-44-year-olds and 22% of 45-54-year-olds. Globally, 61% of respondents said they notice brands embedded in motion pictures while 62% stated that they notice conventional television advertising (Hall, 2004). Indeed, a separate study completed by Sharkley (as cited in Solomon & Englis, 1994) found that 20% of consumers report that they actively look for brands in movies.

So how is product placement paradoxical? Well, by placing product placement within the framework of consumer culture, identity and the social self concept, it becomes obvious that there is in many cases no “other consumer” to be connected to. The

culture or society to which the consumer relates is not the culture in which they live, although it may bear a striking resemblance. Consumers are instead connected to a set of illusory comparative frameworks: their own ideal selves, their perceptions of other consumers, and the fictional character, situation or even culture on screen. Suddenly the “social” connection provided by the consumer good has become a set of para-social connections, indirect social relations which involve no physical co-presence but instead exist only through the intermediation of information technology and the mass media (Calhoun 1986; 1998). This lack of direct interaction and mediated presentation of individuals and society gives rise to what some scholars have termed a *Gesellschaft*, “an ‘artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings’” (Bender, 1978, p. 17). In modern societies, the majority of the information individuals have about members of other communities, and in general about people different from themselves, comes not through any direct relationship or experience, but instead comes through the media (Calhoun, 1998).

As the media consumption of each individual is a highly subjective act, the culture received is similarly fragmented into a thousand competing facets and constantly recombined as new information is integrated into the larger framework. In this realm, culture itself is constructed by each individual actor, an act of self-creation based on their exposure and self-consumed based on their desires. Lacking any universally accepted and common codes, there is a cacophony of fractured and misunderstood messages, structured only by the underlying hypertext of the media, the only potential source of shared cultural codes and meaning (Castells, 2000). But this reliance on the media to provide the hypertext of culture is not enough to provide the entirety of the consumer

culture experience. The final piece comes in how the consumer relates to the individuals onscreen, the “fictional others” who are actively engaged in using the product, or at the very least providing it with a certain degree of cachet simply by associating with it.

### The Un-Real Reality

Early mass media research by scholars such as Herzog (1941) into the relationships of individuals, in this case housewives, with radio serials and the characters in them provides a sound basis from which to begin this discussion. Respondents in this study almost uniformly expressed concern for the characters in the dramas, a clear sign of connection with them, and often stated general desires to be like them. Many respondents even qualified this desire with statements like “but I couldn’t do that.” or “she’s so much braver than I am...” When observed viewing these shows, statements like “No, don’t go in there” and “Kiss him!” were often voiced by the listeners, again a clear sign of the deep, though imaginary, bond between the listener and the shows. (Herzog, 1941)

Moving forward in mass media research, Ang (1985) asked regular viewers of the drama "Dallas", itself a descendant of these early radio serials, to write essays about their reasons for watching the show and the meaning(s) it had for them. Ang (1985) found that viewers "find 'Dallas' 'taken from life'; what happens to the Ewing family is in their own eyes not essentially different from what they themselves (can) experience in life. . . . The concrete situations and complications are regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness, and misery" (Ang 1985, p. 44-45). Indeed, later research comparing viewers of “Dallas” and “Dynasty” found that not only are consumers exposed to differing types of consumption practices, “Sacred”

and “Secular”, but they also pick up on these and make effort to apply them to their own life (Hirschman, 1988).

In one sense, these vehicles of popular culture are removed from real life and real consumption; they are, first and foremost, fantasy narratives populated by imaginary characters confronted by make-believe crises and choices. Yet, in another sense, as Ang's (1985) respondents declared, they are real. As such, the relationships developed with the characters are themselves as potentially real as the ones developed through every day interactions in the “real-world”. “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Rothenbuhler, 2003). Indeed, for some the reality of these shows is so concrete that it spills directly into their own lives, outside of the realm of consumption, leading them to personally engage with the programming and characters through alternative means (Grindstaff & Turow, 2006).

But television use cannot easily be separated from the rest of everyday life. As Ang (1996, p. 68) observes, “the activity so often simplistically described as ‘watching TV’ only takes shape within the broader contextual horizon of a heterogeneous and indefinite range of domestic practices.” A small insight into one of these broader parasocial interactions, specifically with other consumers and the public at large, can be found through the application of Third-person effect/Perceived Influence theoretical framework. The third-person effect, or TPE, states, at the most basic level, that people will estimate greater effects of mass communication on the attitudes and behaviors of others than on themselves. And, even more importantly, “in some cases, a communication leads to action not because of its impact on those to whom it is ostensibly directed, but because others (third persons) think it will have an impact on the audience”

(Davison, 1983, p. 1). Indeed, some TPE researchers have even gone so far as to state that even “the *myth* of media impact is influential, too” (Katz 1986, p.32, as cited in Cohen, Tsftati & Sheaffer, 2008) and suggest that people possess a media effects schema which includes the belief that the media and messages contained within are powerful in their own right and therefore have an effect on the public (Perloff, 1999). The theory of the Influence of Presumed Influence (IPI), an extension of TPE, goes one step further and proposes that people perceive some effect of a message on another and then act according to that perception (Gunther & Storey, 2003). So not only do individuals base their consumptive acts on the actions of fictional characters, but they may also base them on the perceived impact those fictional characters have on the culture at large.

In conclusion, examining the practice of product placement as part of the larger framework of society is really the only way for practitioners, academics and recipients to truly grasp both the power and the limitations of this art form. For the practitioners, the knowledge of how the message propagates and evolves once it enters the population allows for more accurate targeting and more effective campaigns. Knowing how the differences between the varied concepts of “self” and the effect of the “other”, whether they be real, perceived or fictional, provides insight that simple tracking metrics and product evaluation scores cannot. For academics, it provides solid theoretical foundations for whole new areas of research, both on product placement and consumer culture as a whole. Knowing the socio-political culture wherein the placements are targeted and the impact this has on the placements allows for more firmly grounded hypotheses, greater validity and increased applicability between similar fields of research, including, but not limited to, pro-social narratives, political commentary and rhetoric.

For recipients, well, I’m unsure.... I would love to be able to state that improved knowledge of product placements and their effects will have a beneficial effect on the public at large, providing the media literacy skills necessary for them to logically evaluate these advertisements. But I have yet to see any evidence to this end. Indeed, given the state of our consumer culture and the acceptance evidenced by the public at large, there may be no light at the end of this tunnel. At best, one can hope that the recognition of the extreme consumerism of our culture and the impact that products have on our lives will have a positive effect on the public. But, that’s another matter entirely...

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