
Existential consumption and irrational desire

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If marketing is truly the “ultimate social practice of postmodern consumer culture” (Firat, 1993) then it carries the heavy burden of “determining the conditions and meanings of life for the future” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). Certainly, social theory is now focusing on consumption as playing a central role in the way the social world is constructed, and it can be argued that marketing is too important just to be left to marketers as it plays a “key role in giving meaning to life through consumption” (van Raaij, 1993). Marketing has been criticized from within as being a “technique” without moral regard for the consequences of its actions, and there is no shortage of critics of its most public face: advertising. This paper aims at identifying some of the issues raised by postmodern and poststructuralist accounts of consumption. In particular, it is argued that consumption can be conceptualized from cultural, social and psychological perspectives as being a prime site for the negotiation of conflicting themes of freedom and control. It is proposed here that in postmodernity the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain and communicate identity and social meanings. This use of consumption as a resource for meaning creation and social transactions is a process that involves the making of choices that are sufficiently important to be considered as existential. This is not an attempt at rehabilitating the practice of marketing, but is intended to demonstrate that the consumer is far from being a passive victim but is an active agent in the construction of meaning. In part this can be seen as a response to Ölander’s call for “consumer research for the consumer’s sake” (Ölander, 1993), but also as providing theoretical underpinning for concepts such as “advertising literacy” (Ritson and Elliott, 1995a) which attempt to build new socially located and meaning-based-models of advertising.

Exploring some consumption dialectics

As a heuristic device to help unpack some of the complexity of the consumption experience, five dialectics will be explored and their (sometimes polar) tensions used as analytical frames for reviewing competing discourses on the meanings of consumption:

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- (1) the material versus the symbolic;
- (2) the social versus the self;
- (3) desire versus satisfaction;
- (4) rationality versus irrationality; and
- (5) creativity versus constraint.

It is acknowledged that binary oppositions are essentially structuralist and thus in danger of betraying the complexity of the poststructuralist accounts they are being used to elucidate here, and that they are inevitably reductionist. However, postmodernism is riven with contradictions, even Baudrillard's account of postmodernity is itself a totalizing "meta-narrative" (Hebdige, 1989), so we must learn to participate in the "tolerance of incompatible alternatives" (Lyotard, 1984) and "the juxtaposition of opposites and contradictions" (Foster, 1983) called for by postmodern theorists in the hope that it can develop our understanding(s) of the meaning(s) of these complex ideas. As a heuristic device, these bipolar oppositions should not be read as posited structures but merely as aids to coming to grips with the sometimes mind-numbing interrelations between what are often incommensurable concepts. The binary opposition is false and should, of course, be allowed to "melt into air" (Berman, 1983).

The material versus the symbolic

As soon as a product's ability to satisfy mere physical need is transcended, then we enter the realm of the symbolic and it is symbolic meaning that is used in the search for the meaning of existence (Fromm, 1976). Central to postmodern theories of consumption is the proposition that consumers no longer consume products for their material utilities but consume the symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images; products in fact become commodity signs (Baudrillard, 1981). "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions" (Debord, 1977) and "the ad-dict buys images not things" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). This semiotic perspective of products as symbols raises difficult questions about the location of cultural meaning. The term symbol itself can relate to the product that carries meaning or to the meaning it carries, and the interpretation of meaning is a complex product of what is contained in the representation and what the individual brings to the representation (LeVine, 1984).

Symbolism can be analysed semiotically by examination of the system of signs and what they signify. It has been realized, however, that this leads to an infinite regress as one sign leads to another without there ever being anything "real" outside the system. All meaning is socially constructed and there is no essential external reference point, so ultimately "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1977). To complicate matters further, symbolic interpretation is essentially non-rational improvisation that does not obey the codes of language but operates at the unconscious level (Sperber, 1975). A Jungian analysis goes

even further and suggests that the full significance of a symbol cannot be grasped in purely intellectual terms, if it becomes fully definable in rational terms it is no longer a true symbol (Storr, 1973).

But even for the sign-dependent human being things are never purely material nor purely meaningful, there is always a mediated relation between matter and meaning. This mediated process operates through the materiality of language as a dynamic force in the transformation of an indeterminate range of human possibilities into a restricted moral economy of meaning, in which we are simultaneously authors of and authored by the language with which we try to communicate (Pfohl, 1992). This relationship is partly a function of the individual's ability to understand and control the interaction between the material and the symbolic, and material objects themselves are always in transit and their meaning is likewise on a trajectory (Appadurai, 1986).

The social versus the self

The functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions, outward in constructing the social world – social-symbolism – and inward towards constructing our self-identity: self-symbolism (Elliott, 1995). Consumption of the symbolic meaning of products is a social process that helps make visible and stable the basic categories of a culture which are under constant change, and consumption choices “become a vital source of the culture of the moment” (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). The meanings of consumer goods are grounded in their social context and the demand for goods derives more from their role in cultural practices rather than from the satisfaction of simple human needs (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978). Consumer goods, then, are more than just objects of economic exchange, “they are goods to think with, goods to speak with” (Fiske, 1989). Consumption as a cultural practice is one way of participating in social life and may be an important element in cementing social relationships, while the whole system of consumption is an unconscious expression of the existing social structure through a seductive process which pushes the purchasing impulse until it reaches the “limits of economic potential” (Baudrillard, 1988). It is within this social context that the individual uses consumer goods and the consumption process as the materials with which to construct and maintain an identity, form relationships and frame psychological events (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992).

The self-symbolic role of material goods is long established in social anthropology and the individual's attachment to objects may be a culturally universal function which symbolizes security, expresses the self-concept and signifies connection to society (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Consumer goods are not only used to construct our self-identity but are also used by others to make inferences about us that guide their behaviour towards us (Dittmar, 1992). But now in postmodernity we are able to use consumer products to become any of our “possible selves” (Markus and Nurius, 1986) in

which we utilize consumer goods to construct pastiches of others we have been exposed to via the media or more directly. "In cyberspace, I can change myself as easily as I change my clothes" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). But the choices as to which self to construct and present are attended by the possibility of social consequences which may be very negative for example, a failure of a young person to utilize symbolic capital in the form of knowledge of the appropriate meaning of advertising can lead to rejection by the peer group (O'Donohoe, 1994).

Desire versus satisfaction

The symbolic gratification promised by advertising manages to recode a commodity as a desirable psycho-ideological sign (Wernick, 1991), and the operation of advertising at the unconscious level is driven by the search for an imaginary self which motivates the individual with desire for coherence and meaning (Lacan, 1977). Advertising feeds the desire to achieve the unobtainable unity of the self with destabilized meanings (Featherstone, 1991), images which separate commodities from their original use and offer the possibility to reconstruct the self by purchasing the symbolic meaning of goods and constructing a "DIY self" (Bauman, 1991). For as Williamson (1978) points out, "The conscious chosen meaning in most people's lives comes from what they consume", and this is energized by the attachment of bodily desire to symbolic meaning where the inchoate needs of the pre-linguistic self are channelled into language. Central to Lacanian theory is the mirror-phase, where the child recognizes itself in a mirror and assumes an image through a transformation from the imaginary to the symbolic. The symbolic for Lacan is linked with absence, in that symbols represent a world of people and things that are not there. The "real" can only be approached through the symbolic medium of language, yet language itself contains the contradictions and fragmentations of gender, power and meaning (Kristeva, 1980).

The symbolic focus of much promotional activity in postmodernity is desire, and for Lacan desire exists in the gap between language and the unconscious. "Desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary desire desires desire. The reason images are so desirable is that they never satisfy" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). Postmodern consumption is inextricably linked with aspects of sexuality, both conscious and unconscious, as it promises the satisfaction of previously taboo desires through imagery and representations (Mort, 1988). These desires are constructed through the symbolic linkage between consumption and the human body (Kellner, 1992), and operate in large part through the consumption imagery with which we are surrounded and which makes even mundane consumer actions, such as looking in shop windows, highly significant in our psychic lives (Bocock, 1993). Thus meaning is created through a search for links between identity (the social) and the self and the pursuit of sexual satisfaction through consumption, both of which are doomed to failure.

Rationality versus irrationality

This postmodern fragmentation of the experience of self has been termed the condition of “multiphrenia” by Gergen (1991), who points out that the new opportunities for exercise of choice are almost unlimited and so bring with them a “vertigo of the valued” where the expansion of “wants” reduces our choice to “want not”, a multiplicity of competing values and beliefs which make “the very idea of rational choice become meaningless”. The mass media, and advertising in particular, are responsible for an “expansion of inadequacy” which is encouraged by a barrage of new criteria for self-evaluation. Cushman (1990) argues that we are in an era of the “empty self” in which alienation and loss of community can be solved by the “lifestyle” solution in which the consumer constructs a “self” by purchasing and “ingesting” products featured in advertising, a behaviour which can be construed as, at best, of limited rationality.

In the Lacanian perspective there is a stress on the individual subject as being fragmented and incoherent, and this leads to the framing of the consumer as simultaneously both rational and irrational, able to both consume and reject what is being consumed, to desire and yet consume without satisfaction (Nava, 1991). “Identity becomes infinitely plastic in a play of images that knows no end. Consistency is no longer a virtue but becomes a vice; integration is limitation” (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). The consumption of meaning, even the meaning of supposedly unambiguous television soap operas, is always ambivalent and contradictory (Ang, 1985), and the modes of rationality which operate in the space between the unconscious world of the imaginary and the symbolic world of language are little understood as they are constrained by the “despotic signifying semiologies” which limit the possibilities for other forms of semiotic systems and other forms of rationality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983).

The conceptualization of other modes of (ir)rationality is paralleled by the recent development in social cognition of the theory of motivated choice, which emphasizes the role of emotion in decision processes (Forgas, 1992; Kunda, 1990). Motivated choice is where judgement is driven by an emotional desire to arrive at a particular conclusion, where biased information search and reasoning processes are used “to arrive at those conclusions they want to arrive at” (Kunda, 1990). From these perspectives, cool, rational, information-processing choice is at least uncommon, and may in fact be very rare, for “the real, the really real, is irrational, that reason builds upon irrationalities” (de Unamuno, 1962).

Creativity versus constraint

The dialectic between freedom and control in the consumption domain is typified by the influence of advertising. The ability of consumers to resist the influence of advertising and thereby exercise freedom has been minimized by the Marxist analysis of its central role in the maintenance of capitalism (Leiss *et*

al., 1990) which operates through the creation of “ideological hegemony” (Goldman, 1992). Marxists have also portrayed advertising as a “magic system” (Williams, 1980) of magical inducements and satisfactions which validates consumption, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings and thus transforms goods which had rational use-value into irrational symbols. This focus on the power of the symbolic is further developed by Williamson (1986) who argues that advertisements function at an unconscious level at which the consumer is unable to resist latent meaning transfer. More recent post-Marxist analyses have weakened their deterministic stance and recognized that “the meanings and uses of products cannot be entirely controlled” (Williamson, 1986). However, hegemony still exists, but now depends on affective gratifications provided by mass-mediated popular culture where “everyday life in amusement society proceeds within a dialectic of enfeeblement and empowerment” (Langman, 1992).

From a post-structuralist perspective limited freedom is allowed to the individual through consumption choices: “for most members of contemporary society individual freedom, if available at all, comes in the form of consumer freedom” through which the individual must take responsibility to invent and consciously create a self-identity (Bauman, 1988). Through the “new existentialism” (Laermans, 1993) consumers can exercise the freedom to create new meanings for goods through their own idiosyncratic performance of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984). This freedom can be used for collective and individual resistance against the imposed meanings of the dominant cultural categories, particularly through the choice of style and the use of bricolage tactics (Fiske, 1987; Hebdige, 1979).

A sustained argument for the active exercise of freedom through consumption is developed by Willis (1990), who characterizes the consumption choices of the young as the behaviour of “practical existentialists”. The young are seen as exercising choice through consumption-related symbolic creativity which operates via the concept of “grounded aesthetics”, a process which builds higher-level symbolic meaning structures from the mundane concrete experiences of everyday life. This allows the young a small creative space for making the received social world, to some extent, controllable by them. This process is very similar to the marginal “tactics” (de Certeau, 1984) by which the powerless make sense of consumption, and in relation to advertising would allow them some control over the meaning of a text, but not control over the agenda within which the text is constructed (Morley and Silverstone, 1990). This is a limited freedom where we “make our own spaces within the place of the other” (Fiske, 1989) but yet it is potentially liberating in that to escape from dominant meanings is to construct our own subjectivity (Condit, 1989), and can therefore be conceptualized as “authentic” existential choice, rejecting the “bad faith” of accepting the dominant consumption meanings as inevitable or unproblematic (Sartre, 1969).

Advertisements can be seen as cultural products in their own right, and young people consume them independently of the products and have a creative symbolic relationship with them. Although Willis (1990) sees advertising as manipulative to some extent, he emphasises the scope for individual choice and creativity in meaning and identity construction, as individuals use advertising images as personal and social resources. These are invested with specific meanings anchored in everyday life, via the process of grounded aesthetics, which are then used to construct or maintain personal and social identities. These creative practices are particularly prevalent amongst young people of "Generation X" (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995b).

The construction of social identity through "styles of consumption" is referred to in terms of lifestyle membership of "neo-tribes" by Bauman (1990), where one may join the tribe by buying and displaying tribe-specific paraphernalia. The neo-tribe is informal, without authority and only requires acceptance of the obligation to take on the identity-symbols of the tribe. The consumer may thus exercise the freedom to choose social groupings through existential consumption. The exercise of choice through consumption now flows across national boundaries in a global cultural economy through the operation of advertising "mediascapes" which are image-centred strips of reality which offer the consumer a series of elements "out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places" (Appaduri, 1990).

If aspects of advertising imagery can be appropriated at will by "practical existentialists" then they may, as Baudrillard (1983) suggests, "live everywhere already in an 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality", in which the real and the simulated are indistinguishable. However, the extent to which, in a "mediacratia" age, advertising reflects reality or actually creates it is problematic. Are the "practical existentialists" using advertising or is it really using them? Schudson (1984) suggests that advertising is "capitalist realist art" and that although it does not have a monopoly of the symbolic marketplace, different social groups are differentially vulnerable especially during transitional states of their lives. This form of art idealizes the consumer and portrays as normative, special moments of satisfaction. It "reminds us of beautiful moments in our own lives or it pictures magical moments we would like to experience" (Schudson, 1984). This suggests that young people in particular, who are at a transitional state in their lives, may be subject to excessive influence by "buying-in" to advertising's depiction of a false reality. In contrast, young people may be exercising (limited) freedom in their use of advertising as a cultural commodity for "even as the market makes its profits, it supplies some of the materials for alternative or oppositional symbolic work" (Willis, 1990).

This dichotomy between creativity and constraint (Moore, 1993) in the context of advertising is represented by the problematic of hegemony, which sets parameters on the freedom to construct meaning (Ang, 1990). Hegemony

does not dominate from outside but is a “thick texture” which interlaces resistance and submission, opposition and complicity (Martin-Barbero, 1988) and which therefore poses difficult problems for ethnographic analysis to unpack. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) offers a solution to the dualism of structure versus agency, by positing that the “structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise”. Thus the consumption of advertising can be both an active and creative practice yet is carried out within constraints imposed by material situation and ideological hegemony.

Desire, irrationality and choice

Desire develops from physical need through a growing awareness of the existential choice between a desire to have and a desire to be, desire being defined by absence or lack of being (Sartre, 1969). Lacan’s identification of language as the symbolic order which develops from the pre-verbal imaginary order accompanied by increasing anxiety about the self has been reframed by Kristeva (1980) as the two orders of the semiotic and the symbolic. The imaginary/semiotic order is unconscious whilst the symbolic order is rational, but there is potential for “slippage” between the two orders of meaning, with a regression to the unconscious and irrational order of the imaginary where desire for the unattainable comfort of the perfect mother holds sway. The gap between the fantasy world of consumption day-dreams of perfect pleasure and the disappointments of reality is the basic motivation for Campbell’s (1987) “autonomous imaginative hedonism” which results in limitless wants and a permanent state of frustration. The limited resources of the individual consumer must therefore require choices to be made, choices of which desire to feed and which to deny, which meanings to consume and which to reject or avoid. This vital act of consumer choice may not be to choose that which is most pleasing, but to reject that which is most distasteful. Bourdieu (1984) suggests tastes that “when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes”. We may define ourselves not by what we like, but by what we dislike, and it is strong negative emotional reactions to the consumption practices of others that may structure our social categories. This “refusal of tastes” seems to operate at the level of the imaginary/semiotic and be driven by pre-verbal inchoate emotion.

While consumption may often operate at the level of the imaginary/semiotic or day-dream, it can also have “real” effects in facilitating the construction of self-identity (Falk, 1994). Phenomenological descriptions of the everyday consumer experiences of women (Thompson *et al.*, 1990) have surfaced a dominant theme of being in control/being out of control which reflected an anxiety about not buying in the “right” way, so that women felt guilty when they perceived themselves as not making rational purchase decisions. However, they nevertheless admitted to making purchases in a “dreamlike” way when they were “captivated” by a product. In this situation, to act in a self-perceived

irrational fashion, to surrender to the symbolic, is itself an authentic existential act of creating meaning through choice, the choice to be irrational.

But to what extent is existential consumption the conscious exercise of freedom through choice as idealized by existentialism? Certainly there are severe limits to the freedom contained in consumption choices due to individuals having unequal access to the necessary resources, so existential consumption may only exist for some people in some societies. However, the lived experience described by consumers (Elliott and Ritson, 1995; Thompson *et al.*, 1990) conveys a strong sense of Sartre's "engagement" even if not at the level of decisional seriousness discussed by Kierkegaard (Macquarrie, 1972). Marxists may dismiss an individual's claim to be making conscious choices about consumption as "false consciousness" but this is to deny the "situated meaningfulness of everyday consumer experiences" (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). The freedom of practical existentialism is authentic, even if it is constrained by inequalities in the economic system and by ideological hegemony.

The emotion-laden experiences of the consumer – irrational, incoherent and driven by unconscious desires; constrained by the market economy yet obtaining limited freedom through existential consumption and symbolic creativity; able to build a DIY self through consumption yet suffering an expansion of inadequacy through advertising – this constructs the subjectivity of the postmodern consumer with whom postmodern marketing (Brown, 1995) must deal.

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