

Consuming Charity: The evolution of consumer cultures and the consumption of charity wristbands.

With the world apparently growing a conscious recently, global warming, environmental sustainability and poverty have increasingly become major topics of concern around the world. As consumers begin to factor these issues into their consumption choices, it is an interesting time to examine the state of consumer culture in today's society. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a range of consumer culture theories and engage with them using a consumer product as an example. The example I have chosen is charity / awareness wristbands, specifically the *Make Poverty History* wristband (which I may also refer to as the save-the-world wristband¹) and the *Lance Armstrong Foundation's LiveStrong* wristband. Silicone wristbands have been used recently by charity organisations as a tool to increase public awareness. The *Make Poverty History* and the *LiveStrong* branded wristbands have been the two most successful applications of this concept. These examples will therefore be used to analyse both negative and positive views of consumption. I will be primarily arguing that consumers are not alienated, passive or unimaginative, but rather consume in active and self-constructing ways. The essay will provide the reader with an historical context, and will predict a possible direction for the future of consumer cultures. We will begin in the late 19th century and move chronologically from there.

During the late 19th century, production techniques improved rapidly, making possible the large-scale manufacture of affordable standardised products for the first time. Producers had an oversupply of goods, and thus, needed new ways to differentiate their products from the competition in order to sell their excess stock. In order to achieve this, products were branded and advertised through the mass media. The extra meanings added to products through this branding process resulted in the

¹ I have done this because I think that some readers may have already formed a very positive understanding of this brand. By removing the brand and replacing it with a quite cynical and satirical name, I hope to help the reader overcome this positive association so they can really engage with the arguments examined in the essay.

domination of the product's exchange-value, rather than its obvious or original use-value. Featherstone (1991, 16) uses the example of a bottle of vintage port to demonstrate this concept. The wine may actually never be consumed (opened and drunk) but *is* consumed symbolically (gazed at, talked about, photographed and handled). Rather than simply a good to be used up and discarded, the product began to communicate something about the purchaser; it became a symbol (Baudrillard cited in Featherstone, 85). Rapid urbanisation was also occurring at this time. Simmel (cited in Paterson 2006, 39-40) refers to the 'blasé outlook' when describing the large and populous city. The result of this monotonous view was that city dwellers were looking for ways to stand out from the crowd in order to be noticed. This was also a contributing factor to the rise of branding and the increased effort spent on identity construction.

The deliberate addition of constructed meanings to products is what prompted Marxist academics to argue that consumption was opposed to authenticity. They opposed the idea that consumers should be urged to work harder in order to buy unnecessary products, or 'false needs'. The extra time and attention that consumers were committing to portraying an identity, in their opinion, alienated us from what really mattered (Sternberg 2007a). Frankfurt School academics suggested that citizens should be consuming and working less, and instead learning about history and philosophy. Consumerism was distracting the public from our 'historic mission' of developing a "revolutionary class consciousness" and praxis (the practice of ethical, economic and political knowledge) (Swingewood 1977, 79). In my opinion this is a valid argument, however I disagree with their suggestion that the cultural industries produce an homogeneous mass culture and that modern capitalism is a totalitarian form of society (Featherstone 1991, 15). The Frankfurt School believed in authentic identity, and thus disapproved of consumers who subscribed to the idea that purchasing particular products and brands was required to reflect their social class and express their identity.

While the *Make Poverty History* wristband is an unusual example to apply the arguments of Marxist / Frankfurt School academics, I do believe that it can be used to examine this philosophy. The Frankfurt School would argue that consumers of

wristbands are wasting their time on the unnecessary pursuit of distinction. The emotional branding campaign, celebrity endorsements and global music concerts, fool the consumer into thinking that this purchase will provide a necessary part of their identity. The consumer purchases the brand, instead of making their own white wristband, just as they purchase Coca-Cola, instead of sugary carbonated water. While this may seem like an extreme opinion, there is certainly evidence to support this point of view. To illustrate this point, here are a few facts. None of the profit generated from the sales of save-the-world wristbands has been donated to charity. Instead, the profits are reinvested into the running of the campaign (White band it 2007, para. 3). Consumers in this sense do not support the cause in any direct way. The wristbands have also been described as “ultra-fashionable” (Harrison 2005) and as having achieved “pop-culture status” (Hines 2004) suggesting that they have simply become fashion accessories. *LiveStrong* wristbands have also been bought on online auction sites for inflated prices (Hines 2004). The fact that consumers are willing to pay a premium price for a wristband while knowing that none of the money will go to the charitable organisation suggests that at least some consumers purchase these items to communicate how fashionable they are, rather than to support the charity.

In opposition to this portrayal of consumers as passive and unimaginative, other academics are more optimistic about the state of consumption in capitalist societies (Featherstone 1991). As we move forward in time to the period after the Second World War and toward post-Fordism, a shift occurs away from the dominance of class based society, to a society based on lifestyles. The fragmentation of the media and further refinements in the methods of production, reveal that at this time in history, marketers had the ability to target niche groups. In my opinion a more accurate representation of consumer culture is revealed, in which consumers are no longer seen as a mass group nor a series of social classes, but rather a series of dynamic subcultures and groups. At this stage in history, consumers began to make choices to reflect and construct their lifestyle (Paterson, 2006). Consumers were actively constructing their own identities and were freed from the constraints of their social class, however the meanings of lifestyles and the products that consumers were engaging with, were still not “conditions of their own making” (Sternberg,

2007c).

The ever-changing constant flow of new commodities produced in this vibrant society made encoding products difficult. People, who had high levels of cultural capital within specific lifestyle groups, would apply their 'taste', in order to encode products for the whole group (Featherstone 1991, 17). Therefore, what is considered 'cool' or not is determined by the lifestyle the consumer is trying to communicate, and this changes frequently. Post-'Bono tour of Australia' and without the media attention and global live music events, the meaning of the save-the-world wristband is no longer being constantly reinforced. The wristband therefore becomes a weak communicator for consumers and they reduce their consumption of it. I would like to take a slight deviation here and touch on the use of celebrity in both of these wristband campaigns. Paul Hewson (known as Bono; lead singer of U2) and Lance Armstrong, no doubt sincerely passionate about their respective causes, use their celebrity status to raise awareness. Celebrities were not offered up for consumption until the Golden Age of Hollywood when soft lenses, framing and the 'press junket' became standard ways of making a 'bankable' film (Sternberg, 2007b). The celebrity becomes a topic of cultural capital and an important source of identity for particular lifestyles. Which raises the question: what proportion of the consumer's interest in the save-the-world wristband is directly related to the celebrity's endorsement? It is difficult to separate the support for the celebrity from the support for the charity, when considering consumption in this situation.

As we move further into the present (and perhaps glance into the future), the pervasiveness of advertising increases and the ability for any one group to fix the meaning of a product becomes more improbable. Featherstone (1991, 83) describes this period in time as postmodern consumerism, and can be identified as a situation where the proliferation of images and information with flexible and unstable meanings no longer relate with social class or division. Chambers (1987, 7) suggests that this 'world of advertising' is one where "our clothes, our bodies, our faces become quotations drawn from the other, imaginary, side of life: from fashion, the cinema [and] advertising". Brands are no longer polysemic in the sense that they have many meanings, but rather in the sense that they have almost infinite meanings.

I would also like to suggest that this eventuality may have arisen due to the ability to precisely target niche markets using increasingly fragmented and digital mediums, and advancements in manufacturing that made possible affordable mass customisation. Academics argue that this phenomenon liberates consumers, as we celebrate the artificiality of a vast array of fictions (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, 255; Featherstone 1991, 24). Even the advertising industry has noticed this shift in consumerism. Douglas Holt (2002, 83) stated that “the postmodern branding paradigm is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if ... [they are created as] cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses”. To some extent, this can be observed using my example. In the years since the wristband became popular as an awareness-raising tool, there has been a vast increase in the number of wristbands available. In fact, I could inexpensively custom design my own white wristband for whatever ‘cause’ I deem to be appropriate and share them with consumers all over the world. With the massive number of white wristbands (or indeed any colour of wristband), it becomes more difficult to convince consumers that any one particular wristband is more important than the others, and therefore they all lose their ability to communicate a specific identity.

I will now conclude by summarising my opinions. In capitalist society we will always be encouraged to consume even when we do not truly need what we are consuming. However, I do believe that as consumers we have the ability to consume in active and self-reflexive ways. Through the essay, it has become clear that our social conditions and technological capabilities have informed the different ideologies of consumption. In the early years of the 20th century the invention of mass communication and production techniques created a class-dominated consumer society where individuality was suppressed. As production and communication techniques improved, consumers began to express much more fluid and individual lifestyles. In the future, the move toward a postmodern form of consumerism will further allow consumers to define their own form of identity using products to which they assign their own meanings. When consumer culture theories are viewed in this way, we begin to see that the ideas of the Frankfurt School are not as relevant in the present, as they were when first expressed.

In this essay, I have tried to provide an historic perspective of consumerism. Both viewpoints of consumption, and the light in which they cast the consumer, have been examined. I have argued against the somewhat outdated theories which characterise consumers as passive, duped masses, and suggested that the active, creative and self-reflexive consumer is a more accurate representation of consumers in modern society. Using the example of the *Make Poverty History* wristbands, both the negative and positive characteristics that are parts of people's consumption of awareness bracelets have been illustrated.

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