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National College of Art and Design

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CONSUMING PASSIONS

An Inquiry into the Nature of Shopping

By

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“It is only shallow people who do not judge
by appearances. The true mystery of the
world is the visible, not the invisible”

Oscar Wilde

"It is only shallow people who do not judge
by appearances. The true mystery of the
world is the visible, not the invisible"

Oscar Wilde



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Introduction

Introduction

The subject of shopping has always been of particular interest to me. Being a fashion student, and an avid shopper myself, and intending on entering the fashion industry at some level, I have a personal fascination in exploring the complexity of consumer behaviour.

The simple question - *Why do we shop?* Was the starting point in my research, which opened up many new and interesting subjects like cultural, psychological and business studies. Not having any great familiarity with these subjects I needed to define my structure, the questions that needed to be explored, and examine how the world of fashion relates to consumer behaviour.

At first, I found it difficult as I took a marketing and psychological view, and soon realised how broad and specialised these subjects are, and how they helped in confusing my topic!

It was at this stage I looked at cultural studies, social studies, and how people behave in today's materialistic world, and found information relating directly to consumerism. Questions then arose about the interaction between designer and consumer; who dictates the direction fashion and production go? To what extent do they consider each other when buying or designing? Who buys? And what influences them to purchase goods?

I found it a very interesting and educational topic. My sources of research included books, magazine articles, cultural studies, and business and marketing classes that are part of my course.

Chapter One, Consuming Women questions the female's role in society and as consumer. Has it changed and where will it go in the future? It also looks at the traditional male position as *producer* and how it has changed.

Chapter Two, Consumer Culture outlines the progression from mass production to popular culture and relates the significant more towards lifestyle shopping and living.

In the Third Chapter, Consumer Behaviour, I have identified factors that effect the consumer's decision to buy, such as gender, age, social class and lifestyle, and also the affects of advertising and the media on our society today. It shows how the marketers use these influences and target customers through that information.

I found these topics covered what creates, effects, and influences consumer behaviour. This subject is much clearer and comprehensible now to me after completing this thesis.

CHAPTER 1 CONSUMING WOMEN

- **Does Male = Producer, female = consumer?**

- **Women as consumers in the 90's**

Does male = producer, female = consumer?

The fact that the department store was the first place that women could legitimately be occupied on their own is very significant when addressing the subject of female consumerism. Was it because society then saw a fine line between home and shops, as a kind of extension of one's own territory, or is shopping a natural progression from home management and family upbringing?

Whatever the reason for this acceptance towards female independence, it suggests the question as to why females were naturally seen as consumers, and males as the opposite: producers. Further more, is it still the case in society today?

Around the turn of the century, the idea of shopping was that it was in keeping with the daily household chores, cooking, cleaning and the general organisation of domestic goods. Therefore shopping was seen as a vital part of good household management, also luckily incorporating exercise, social interaction, and enjoyment into the bargain, the female's perfect pastime!

Shopping has been, in a capitalist society a form of leisure activity, while the head of the house was out working, the woman could in turn please him with her purchases when he got home. At this point, society had accepted these positions for each gender, which has continued for many years, with the example of dreamy Doris Day springing to mind, eagerly awaiting the return of her hard working husband!

The 1950's brought with it such a close relationship between female and consumption, that goods were designed and marketed particularly at the female population. This increasingly overt feminisation of goods in this period, came in an explosion of pink radios, coloured appliances, and the importance of pattern and texture in the domestic interior, which showed the expanding power of the female consumer and the growing stature of feminine culture as a whole. The emphasising of gender difference at this point was essential, as it provided a realisation that goods could be marketed to a specific customer through relating with gender. e.g. the separation between men's and women's razors define two separate markets, but one product.

But back then, even the big car manufacturers, Ford, General motors and Chrysler saw this expanding female market. In the 50's women were not yet their chief consumers, but the fact that all three manufacturers employed women designers in their styling studios to work on interior textiles implied that feminine taste had a significant role to play both in production and consumption. This was a small advance towards female as producer, and also illustrates how feminine taste affected sales. But as Penny Sparke States (1995 pg 199) on one hand these cars were:

pieces of mobile sculpture designed by men, for men, with female sexuality as a selling tool - but they were also feminised domestic spaces filling all the aesthetic and symbolic requirements of a home life

Meaning, that instead of the previous boxy more masculine shape, cars were taking on a curvier form associated with the curves of the female body, making it more appealing to both sexes.

But was all this feminisation of goods a way forward for female liberation, or was it just another way of making the female happier with her nicely decorated domestic interior she was locked into? This seems like the exact same idea of the female being *allowed* to go unaccompanied to the department store. They all lead to the same point, that guaranteed after her shopping and purchasing a new curvy pink food mixer, the woman had to go and serve! A good example which illustrates this irony is by John Fiske (1989 pg 23) who quotes a 50's lecturer Elizabeth Cady Staunton who advises women to:

Go out and buy a new stove! Buy what you need.... And when he tastes his food from the new stove, he will know you did the right thing.... GO OUT AND BUY!

This reinstates the fact that it is *she* who has the consuming power, but greatly justified if it is to please *him*.

In an environment where male is seen as producer, female as consumer, shopping almost becomes a war or business. Success entails achievement against a powerful oppositional force, which is capital, and the successful shopper is properly *tough*. Therefore to "go out and buy" also invokes a relative emancipation in women's active role as consumers.

Also if money is power in capitalism, then buying, particularly if the act is voluntary, is an empowering moment for those who the economic system otherwise subordinates. This is one of the elements of consumerism which adds to its highly faceted nature. The actual act of buying is meant to put the consumer in a dominant/controller position, but is this actually true when you consider all the marketing ploys and strategies which have influenced this so-called *dominant* consumer's decision? In this respect the strategies used on the consumer supersede their *power* as it is very likely they were *conditioned* to accepting a brand or style, instead of being motivated by personal choice. Certainly the buyer has done a great job in eliminating all other brands and products, but most likely that decision was affected by media, advertisements and even environmental influences.

With female emancipation over the past century, the binary oppositions such as male equals freedom, female equals slavery cannot be accepted any longer. Women have been in most developed countries (or else still are) fighting for equal living, working and social rights to men, but why then is there an overabundance of connotations and symbolism attached to shopping as being a female activity?

With the rise and flop of the *new man* over the past decade, perhaps the genders as consumers are merging more. With androgyny being a major statement in 90's fashion and advertising, could it be that we are beginning to see the "new *toughened* male consumer"? Unisex has been incorporated into our perfumes (CK one, CK be) hairstyles (long or short, undefines age or sex) and wardrobes. Men

are beginning to admit their self-consciousness in outward appearance, and of course, why not? To the extent outlined above, men have started to become as much a part of consumerism as women. Their construction of a sense of who they are is becoming as much now through style, clothing, body shape and the right image, as is that of women. The emphasis is still, as it always has been on outward appearance, but perhaps instead of it being a custom or tradition, men are more self aware and conscious of their appearance in society

While apparently addressing women precisely as disempowered domestic consumers, shopping may actually offer opportunities to break free not just from the structure of the binary oppositions that produces them. Men were traditionally linked with work, earning, production and empowerment, which summed up freedom. Women were the opposite, associated with leisure, spending and consumption, which equalled slavery.

(Bowlby 1987)

This suggests that while still linked to all that represents slavery, shopping involves choices and independence and therefore also contradicts such binary structures. The concept of shopping/ puts the shopper in an empowered position, the *shopper* being one who the system usually subordinates. Therefore the *shopper* or female consumer/ is placed in a masculine position.

But since women have for so long fought for equal rights, is it not only fair that men share a part in this wondrous leisure activity that capitalism has deemed strictly feminine?

Another major concern in changes in female consumerism/ is the effect of family planning on society. Changes in the conditions of mothering over the past 100

years have made it increasingly difficult for women's reproductive dispositions to be taken for granted. Although the structure of the family may have changed, the *head* of the family not being necessarily male, the availability and common use of contraception well illustrates the way which child bearing can now be represented in the structure of today's society.

This century has seen a huge turn around for women's place in this socio-economic culture. With more status in working and living environments, independence and a choice as to what to do with her life, where does that leave the once *full-time* female consumer with little else to do? Is the future female?

Women as Consumers in the 90's

Throughout history, women were dominated in every aspect from how they dressed to the way they spoke, and who they spoke to. But the 1990's are certainly more for women. We have seen the evolution of dress has moved to a point where women can now dress for themselves. Of course there may be other reasons to dress the way they do, but women have that choice. At the turn of the century, women dressed according to social acceptability and wayward styles were just not socially permitted. Now at least women can consciously decide to dress for themselves, or others, as they please.

We also see the female as co-worker, professional and ambitious. The salary cheque is more than a living for women, it is a statement of independence who have at last got the financial foothold battled for centuries. At last those years of women's liberation have borne the first of a serious hike in women's wages. Now 12% earn over £30,000, 45% earn over £40,000 and 59% of working women in Europe provide at least one half of the household's income (British Marie-Claire, November 1995). The result is a female sex wealthier than before.

In general women do most of the household shopping in supermarkets and shopping centres and are thus thought of as the *ideal customers*. A great deal of advertising on T.V. and in women's magazines is aimed at developing, eliciting, articulating and shaping the desires of women, which will lead them to purchase

particular products and to live according to a particular lifestyle. Take a look at the three most popular fashion magazines, Vogue, Marie-Claire and Elle. They're all directed at working women with a healthy obsession for style and the latest news from the catwalks, to the glamour pack. These are women with money to spend on themselves and perhaps a gift for *him* or the kids.

In the 80's greed was good, and people wanted money in order to conform. But the expression of wealth was all too predictable Porsche, matt black furniture, wearing obvious labels, and not forgetting the mobile phone. The difference is now women want money so they don't have to conform. A new standard is evolving, a new international style of understated elegance.

Gone is the desire to wear it on your sleeve, in diamante, silver or gold. That style is regrettably still seen on celebrities such as Cilla Black and Joan Collins, layered in primary coloured, shoulder padded suits.

The new cash-rich woman respects the deliciously understated styling of Prada, the pared down 70's feel of Gucci and the barely-there DKNY logo. The new way to wear these labels is with the utmost discretion and a compliment of personal style. The Prada bag may look like any other, but that little triangle carries a lot of weight, and a big price tag! It is so discreet that you'd have to be someone who wanted one, or who has one to recognise it. This is the understated label of the new upper class.

Even our cosmetics epitomise what the 90's woman likes to spend her money on. One example is *Origins*, another range from Estee Lauder, an expensive environmentally friendly range, appealing to our ecological concerns. It was launched in the UK with one retail outlet - Harrods, inevitably reinforcing its exclusivity, and therefore securing a place on the list of chic *must haves*.

Now more than ever before, money is the new leveller, breaking down traditional barriers and buying entry into far more excitement than social class. Even some of societies' *glamour pack* like Tara Palmer-Tomkinson and Jodie Kidd are paid to go to parties they were already going to, but wearing Ray-Bans! These are people who are paid to look good and have fun. They set a standard for style among the glamorous societies and a feeling of enviousness among their peers. Such big spenders realise their consuming power and its effect on their onlookers as they are often seen in leading fashion magazines.

But with such emphasis on *self* and body beautiful, are we striving for an idealism that will never be reached? What about all the lifting, sucking, stretching and re-shaping of plastic surgery? It's obviously not the answer to ageing and other natural life processes. Are we supposed to hail Cindy Jackson, the woman who became a living Cindy doll thanks to plastic surgery?

"I just wanted to have a face and body that I felt
were really mine"

states Cindy, holding her tiny prototype in one hand, doll and woman identically dressed. (Image, October 1993 pg. 94).

Having such technological and medical advancements, there's not much one can't do for self-improvement, but it is un-nerving to think that this environment of mobile plastic figurines is paving the way for the future. Perhaps we are surpassing ourselves by making these ideals reality, constantly striving for exterior perfection. This inevitably, like fashion, creates a hunger for more. So where will it stop?

Ironically, people are now, in the fashion industry, recognising beauty in unusual, irregular features instead of the perceived *perfectly symmetrical beauty*. The new supermodels like Stella Tennant, are termed *imperfect* which creates a trend in the opposite direction. If so, we should soon experience the common desire to be different and accept our irregularities. This reversion, like all revamping of trends could then mean the return of female submission, and why not get un-
emancipated? Shed all our earnings, jobs and status in society and get back into the life with constricting, uncomfortable clothes, and turn on the softly lit Doris Day greeting her husband home with a perfectly chilled Martini.....and then perhaps not!

So what is the future for gendered consumerism? This section has discussed female consumers in the 90's and how they spend their income, as opposed to women in previous years, who's jobs in the family unit were their main responsibility. Now with better education, and the chance for women to succeed as career people, they can choose which lifestyle to take or a combination of both.

We have also seen the change in the male/female, producer/consumer scenario, where the oppositions have been challenged and overthrown. Male does not necessarily mean producer, or female, consumer any more. We are living in an age where boundaries have, and are being crossed, and where such views are being recalculated. The future is a free-for-all.

CHAPTER 2 CONSUMER CULTURE

- **How consumerism is affected by mass and popular cultures**
- **Lifestyle shopping and living**

How consumerism is affected by Mass and Popular Cultures

Mass culture is the affect of industrialisation and mass production on society, which in turn opposes popular culture. The latter is a reaction to mass culture. While *mass* encourages large scale production, which means urbanisation and a loss of personal identity by the growth of cities, *popular* stands for democracy, choice and new identities through a diverse society. Both question where power and authority come from; the people, or those seeking power over them. But what or who determines popular culture? Where does it come from? Does it emerge from the people themselves as an expression of their interests and modes of experience, or is it imposed from above by those in positions of power as a type of social control? The question, does popular culture rise up from the people *below* or does it infiltrate down from the elites "on high", or is there an interaction between the fashion industry of, who dictates the public's needs, or the designers? Does the increasingly universal market for popular culture ensure that it is truly popular because it makes available commodities people actually want? But then again, when popular culture is manufactured industrially and sold according to the criteria of marketability and profitability, does the product lose its quality because of mass production or does commerce come out on top? These are the main questions asked time and time again, especially in the fashion industry.

Yet, it could be that popular culture (which can be compared to streetstyle, and mass culture to designerwear) is there to hold the position of the people, to get them to accept and adhere to ideas and values which ensure the dominance of

those in better positions to exercise power over them. In other words, different cultures, subcultures, social groupings, and in the fashion industry, bottom of the line, cheaper ranges are maintained to keep a hierarchy of classes to which people can belong to, aspire to, be in, and differentiate themselves from.

Mass culture and popular cultures are relevant at this point as they document the rise of industrialisation and the importance of consumerism in our society today. The major claim of the mass society theory refers to the disruptive consequences of the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. The theorist Strinati claims that:

the destruction of the tightly knit village community, monotonous and alienating factory work, the establishment of patterns of living in large autonomic cities populated by anonymous crowds, are argued to have eroded the previous social and value structures that held people together.

(1995 pg 6)

This, he believed left the individual stripped of the ability to make decisions and open to the manipulation of other forces (like advertising or trends). The individual in mass society is left more or less on their own, and has fewer and fewer communities in which to find identity or values to live by. They cannot foster identity, define conduct and fashion morality. Therefore (it is believed) individuals are vulnerable to being manipulated and exploited by things like mass media and popular culture.

With industrialisation and urbanisation, theorists believe the community and morality break down, leaving the people to be manipulated by the only source of

surrogate morality available to them - the mass media. Without media coverage, hype and attention that products get, people would be quite happy to live and consume products they already know and trust, without worrying about the unknown or unseen, in essence, in ignorance.

It can be said that mass culture itself is mass produced for a profit to a mass public of consumers. It is commercial culture, produced for a mass market. Being a consumer only leaves the desire to repeat the process, so therefore, it feeds off its own nature to survive, and exploitation is its biggest seller.

An example of this is the shop Miss Selfridge. Inside are always constant swarms of young girls around the make-up counters, smearing on *brown bare* lipstick and lashings of bruised eyeshadow. The bop to the music in their *with it* clothes. Young girls dressed as adults. Fodder for exploitation. This is an example which clearly concentrates upon the seemingly most passive and exploitable of all mass consumer markets, the youth market for fashion and music. (Vogue Jan. 1997)

The problem is that the mass culture theory tends to underestimate the power and diversity of popular culture. Although mass society saw the masses as atomised groups, with no relation or morality, they did not recognise the identities of individual groupings, communities, and subcultures. Of course, they were fed the idealised image of mass culture e.g. America during the 30's, *duke* boxes and milk bars, but after all, it was only an image, interpreted and reconstructed with the other cultures' own distinctiveness. For example, the *mods*, a young working

class subculture based in the central areas of large cities which emerged first in the early 1960's borrowed as much from Italy, (suits and scooters) as it did from American popular culture (modern jazz and soul music). It can be said then that popular culture is open to different interpretations by different groups in society, as they can take something, and totally alter its function and symbolic meaning according to the class it's put into. Take the fabric denim, for instance. It was originally used in workwear, because of its outstanding durability, and practicality. It was then a working class fabric. Much later it became popular for casual wear, putting it into a more versatile and sporty category. Then worn by a huge range of age groups. Finally, when designers started using denim, making its diverseness a statement, it had reached all social classes, from the elite to the working. This shows, through each social class how its value has changed dramatically.

It is interesting to see how mass, and indeed, popular cultures have shaped our consuming habits today. From mass taste and production, people have been encouraged to develop their own styles and tastes. Popular culture is more modern, and open to change. From this has emerged lifestyle shopping, which not only sells you a product, but a *whole look* or *package* as discussed in the next section.

Lifestyle shopping and living

- The idea of lifestyle shopping is not just viewing, producing or consuming a product independently, but is all about the taking on of a whole *package*. Most shops nowadays, develop complex strategies to try and identify their targeted sector in the market. One of these strategies is to pinpoint the type of person to sell to, and then to cater broadly to their particular tastes and styles. Take Habitat, for example. This chain of interior goods commends itself on its particular and identifiable style, which sells products for every room in the household, inside and out, even down to the finer details like dressing gowns, to decorative bottles and jars to line your shelves with. They complete a look. Habitat creates that look, and gives you an image of an idyllic way of life. The shopper really is made to believe that this complete beautiful home would give you that fulfilment and make you happier.

Shopping is now a marketed commodity. It is no longer an action done, driven out of human necessity, but it is also categorised as a leisure activity. Even the huge growth of shopping centres, malls and theme parks pride themselves in being able to provide the complete *consumer's packaged deal*: Not only can you do your grocery and clothes shopping, but have a meal, get your hair done, leave the kids with a day care group and go off and see a film! This is manufactured shopping, marketed by its convenience.

Also, many simulated fantastical adventure centres have sprung up, like Disneyworld, and Waterworld, and have gone one step further in recreating

different historic and futuristic events, in giving people a more real-life experience. People are excited by these *packages* and different areas are now attractions. Whereas these sites may have been formerly defined as *low-life* areas, are now elevated to worthy objects of the tourists' interest. So the range has extended from areas of traditional historic value, to newly created, simulated environments now both seen as attractive and saleable. Therefore it can be seen how these *packages*, being tangible objects from shops like Habitat, or experiences from simulated parks or centres, all capture the whole mood or theme, selling the consumer the whole deal.

Look at the re-development of run-down inner-city areas, through the revival of the new middle classes. These areas are made attractive by the estate agents by providing the idea of a higher profile for these communities, these people are, in essence, the producers, and the consumers which make up the stylization of life. Templebar is an example of this. It is an area where modern business people and creative people produce a working atmosphere of youth and trendiness. A lot of residential building has re-developed this once run-down area.

Another example is New York's Soho. From once a troublesome run-down area it became a known area for artists and intellectuals. Their's is a lifestyle focusing very much on identity, appearance, presentation of self, fashion design, decor and putting considerable time into the cultivation of personal taste. People are attracted to this creative ambience, and have a fascination for the stylisation of their lives. Such subcultures and communities are capable of keeping up with

styles, consumer goods, and consumer culture, which the industry is glad to generate, as creativity breeds open-mindedness. Therefore, in Soho, was created an area and community ripe for re-development and open to change. This ambience is it/s most famous characteristic and object of tourist fascination today.

It can also be seen that on a global view, it is the end of the dominance of a few cities e.g. New York, Paris, who face competition from other centres rich in culture, arts, fashion and the entertainment industry, like Barcelona and Dublin, for instance.

But on a smaller scale, the idea of lifestyle living or shopping, has rooted itself deep into marketing the goods we are surrounded with every day. In everything from cars to chocolate, we are only sold the product, which a lot of the time we buy regardless, but advertisers want a contract with us consumers, so we'll buy that product for a long time. Like one car manufacturer has a theory of not wanting to sell one man one car, but five cars throughout his lifetime!

In a large extent we are an audience, who move through spectacular imagery, designed to represent sumptuousness and luxury, or to summon up atmospheres of desirable exotic far away places, and nostalgia for past emotional harmonies. We shop, for the experience. We live the Nescafe saga, we dream of being Papa or Nicole motoring around the south of France in a Renault, and we long for that larger-than-life comfy chair munching rich creamy slabs of Galaxy chocolate.

Such companies build themselves up so much, that we really do want a slice of their empire. Perhaps we feel like that ideal customer to fit into those size 6 trousers we saw advertised, or else they make us feel that. Either way, we're not just making a purchase, but buying into the lifestyle of Habitat, Jigsaw or Armani.

Once having bought a Chanel nail varnish, I stood and crammed all my other shopping bags into one, leaving the other hand free to swing my small, but very obvious bag around! It didn't matter that nail varnish was one of the cheapest items produced by Chanel, but the fact was that I owned that tiny bit.

When shopping, there's a huge emphasis on where the item was bought and it's label which has the power in today's consumer's eyes, to up and down grade a product. This is part of the lifestyle approach to shopping and living. Have we totally lost sight of quality as being a priority or would we buy anything with a recognisable label? Materialism has, in a sense, outrun itself. Not only do we consume out of obsolescence and greed, but we also evaluate a product on the basis of it's maker/designer rather than it's inherent qualities!

Where does a culture with such an emphasis on labels and chasing an idealised image go? What is the future for lifestyle consumerism? Perhaps we will all be chasing the same idealised image, re-creating mass taste, or else we'll abandon all common styles, leaving fashion literally a personal statement. The direction we take is influenced by the media and advertising, as they play a part in shaping our consumer desires. This is looked at in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3 CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

- **Influences on consumer behaviour**
- **The affects of advertising and the media on consumerism**

Influences on Consumer Behaviour

Marketing is a tool that utilises information about consumer choices. It aims to influence those consumer choices but realises that an individual makes their consumption choices based on several fundamental criteria like gender, age, class, lifestyle and status. Although the marketer can do little to control these factors, they must be taken into account.

When considering varying cultures worldwide, different people project different behavioural patterns. So therefore some products would not be popular or even understood in certain geographical areas.

Subcultures tend to express more individual styles and tastes, as these smaller groups of people would have more in common with each other. For example, religious communities can be quite distinct from each other, and have varying impressions about how to live their lives. This is a great influence on subcultural consumer behaviour.

Social classes are relatively ordered and permanent divisions in society, and play a huge role in effecting people's buying patterns. Social class is measured by variables like occupation, income, education and wealth. People can move up and down within social class, but marketers are interested in it as classes tend to practice similar buying behaviour. For example, the economically elite when buying, would tend to be quite conservative rather than outwardly displaying their

wealth, whereas those who move up from the middle class would often consume conspicuously to impress those below them.

Family plays a role in people's decision making. Whether married or single, with or without children, these are all very different roles with varying responsibilities. Being married would influence a person's consumer behaviour, because it is likely they will have to make a joint decision, or at least seek advice. This could alter the individual's personal opinion. The fact that a person living alone, or in a couple situation, had children, would also effect what they would spend their money on, and even the age of the children would also have a great influence. For instance, when children are young and growing fast, they constantly need new clothes and shoes, or if they are older, the parent/s may need to pay school or college fees, therefore the buyer's priorities change along with their family situation, and what they spend their money on is affected by this.

The role and status people have in society is another factor influencing their consumer behaviour, especially when considering large purchases. Clothes buying often reflect people's jobs, e.g. level of professionalism, business person, labourer, or artist. People also tend to show their status or level of income in the cars they drive. Newness, comfort and styling being measures of status.

As the categories get narrower, we can see more specific segregation and preferences within varying cultures. Even personal factors, such as age, occupation, economic situation, lifestyle and one's own personality and self image will influence the decision process. People are constantly being categorised by

marketers according to their tastes, interests and behaviour, to find out what exactly makes them open their wallets!

It can be seen then, that all of these influences sway peoples decision-making, even before the marketer has a chance to work out a business strategy. But these strategies are useful however in identifying interested buyers, and shaping products and appeals to better suit their needs or wants. This complex interplay of cultural, social and personal factors is a constant source for marketers when campaigning through advertisements and the media, as they play on our desires, perceptions and self-images every day.

The affects of advertising and the media on consumerism

Advertising, on the simplest level, ensures the distribution of commodities to people in society. It helps the manufacturer or business secure a section in the market by organising and influencing people's tastes and behaviour. It not only helps sell goods, but also encapsulates idealised ways of living and exposes it to people through the media. The media works with advertising by *selling* the audience to the advertisers, as the media is the largest, quickest and most popular way of reaching the masses.

The media plays a part in creating desires that previously did not exist. It arouses our emotions and interests in favour of consumption, and this creates the need that has to be satisfied. It is true to say that our wants are shaped by the system of production, as advertising's job is to gently persuade, and the media encourages this manipulation.

Advertising survives by encouraging us to be greatly insecure about ourselves, especially our body size, our odours, our face and even about our gender.

Although advertising does a great job in affecting our decisions, it does not control our thoughts and we are therefore to a great part, responsible for our behaviour. We are not helpless victims, as not only are we willing to consume, and not only does consuming make us happy, but *getting and spending* is what gives our lives order and purpose. As lifestyle shopping and living is increasingly more popular, buying a *whole look* contributes to the order and stylisation of our lives.

There is a tendency in society to consider advertising in the way we consider many other cultural events, like religion and politics as somehow *out there* and beyond our control. It is as if we're not careful, these *messages*, conscious or subliminal, may possess us and make us act irrationally!

Advertising has been blamed for the rise of eating disorders, the eruption of violence on the streets and the takeover of the materialistic element in holy times like Christmas and Easter. And this is true, advertising contributes. But it is based on society and present day issues, even if they are exaggerated or idealised. But by seeing ourselves as victims of its *powerful force* is a scapegoat for many who perhaps are easily influenced, and eliminates an understanding of consumer influences.

Not only can advertising influence people's buying behaviour, but many advertising companies can also control the amount of exposure we get to information. Advertising agents spend huge amounts of money in magazines, papers, T.V. and radio, and often are the main source of financial income for these media. Therefore, advertising companies can threaten to cut capital supplies unless the media agree to their terms. Cigarette companies, for example often have this control. University of Michigan researchers in America found that magazines carrying tobacco ads were 38% less likely to discuss the risks of smoking than those magazines without. (J.B. Twitchell 1996 pg. 120) This shows that information printed is often selected on the terms of the advertising

companies. It is also shocking to learn that the two biggest contributors to advertising culture are alcohol and cigarettes, and they are also the two chief causes of premature death and loss of work. It is therefore difficult to say that advertising doesn't have an affect on consumers, especially since a lot of the information we get through the media is controlled by the company of the product advertised.

Even though the society we live in is extremely materialistic, why then is the presentation of the objects themselves not enough for us to consume? Companies need advertising and the media to sell their goods. Does this then mean we are not materialistic enough if rational arrangement and presentation cannot be relied upon to do the jobs of advertising and the media?

CHAPTER 4 THE FASHION CYCLE

- **Who dictates?**
- **The trickle effect**

Who dictates?

Fashion involves change, which is defined as a succession of short term trends or fads, each season's collections relentlessly pushed on by the *must-haves* of the next. Fashion marketing itself is a business philosophy, or way of thinking about the industry from the perspective of the potential customer. Most designers have a mental picture of a typical customer, and then design for them. Fashion marketers ask how typical is that mental picture, and does *the customer* belong to a group of buyers that form a profitable prospect for their company.

The very nature of fashion, where change is intrinsic, give a different emphasis of fashion marketing activities from other areas of marketing. Everybody buys clothes, and wears them. So, because there is such a wide scale of customers, the marketer for each company or firm must use different statistics to identify their specific customer. For example, Miss Selfridge, very obviously targets young impressionable teenagers, whereas shops like Next and Principles aim at the slightly older working woman, perhaps married with young children, and therefore cater for these people with kiddie's and men's departments. Factors such as culture, social class, age and lifecycles, motivation and personality all go towards how the marketer can target the customer in their specific grouping, who will buy their product.

But from concept to the design, to the wearing of the product by the customer, who dictates the trends? Does the designer launch a new idea, and with the

correct timing, the public will see it as the way for the future, or do the public create the need for the design?

It seems to be an interaction of the two. Time and time we have seen outrageous designs on the catwalks, that were unaccepted and pushed aside, but it only takes a little time, perhaps a few seasons, until the public accept these designs as they are watered down to street level. An example of this is the return of *flares*. For a while they were seen as hideous, but were gradually accepted. Fashion controversy sparks off trends, like Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren's shop "Sex", which played a huge part in 70's punk, and Alexander McQueen's *Bumsters* from which hipsters are adapted for street wear. Such outrageous displays of style have, and will pave the way for future trends.

On the other hand, what about the designer's perspective? If the consumer has the ultimate power to make or break a design, how then can fashion be forecast years in advance? When it is the case that we are purposefully lead to walk in a certain direction around a shop, and when the media and advertising are constantly exposing us to offers, how then can we say our decisions are unbiased and are 100% our own personal choice? We cannot deny/ that we are not in full control of our purchasing power, as we consciously and subconsciously fall for marketing strategies that are set out for us consumers.

To a certain degree consumers are aware of such strategies, but, in hopeful optimism for that perfect purchase, we play along with these marketing ploys.

How many times have we gone shopping for something specific, and been lead astray by a “2 for the price of 1” sign, or a “bargain bin”? It is commonly known that supermarkets stock sweet foods on low level shelves for children to pick up, and that fast and slow music make our movements act accordingly, but does this awareness make us stop shopping? Of course not, most shop-aholics would need more than an awareness of gentle manipulation to stop them!

The trickle effect

The trickle effect is a theory which describes the process whereby new styles or fashions are introduced via the socio-economic elite, copied and then passed down to the other classes through mass production. This trickle effect has traditionally been working in a downward spiral. In more recent years, however, many trends have moved in the opposite direction, and we will look at the effect of the trickle-up theory on our consumer society today. To what extent is trickle down in motion nowadays, or is it rebutted by the sideways approach?

Fashion was not always so changeable. In medieval days, one fashion might last 100 years, while another introduced contemporaneously, flourished only 30 years. (Willis and Midgley 1973 pg. 35) But it was through royalty that styles were launched. The elite dressed to associate themselves with the ruling class, thereby differentiating themselves from the lower classes, who may have managed to adopt some aspect of the earlier fashion and would now feel more removed from the fashionable people

As long as there is imitation there is differentiation, as long as there is differentiation, there is imitation. The highest ranking groups must differentiate for there are no higher groups to imitate, the lower groups must imitate, for there are no lower groups to diffrenciate.

(Michael R. Solomen 1985)

This is to say then that the socially elite were consistently on a search for new styles to differentiate themselves and also, the quicker one took on a new style, the more likely they were classed among the wealthy and rich. This is the same theory sold to us by designers today. Even if you can't afford a Chanel suit, you

can buy into a slice of the empire by purchasing earrings, make-up or nail varnish! Therefore, you get the same feeling of luxury even though you only bought a tiny item, complete with bag and logo.

This inclination on the part of the economic inferiors, to copy the styles of their superiors was always in conflict with the tendency on the part of the superiors to differentiate themselves from their inferiors. The division of classes were far more cut and dry then. Today with our multitudes of subdivided classes, the exact same effect takes place. Just take a look at the British Royal family for example. All lady Diana has to do is to be seen wearing, using or promoting a product, and the producer/designer is overcome with orders. e.g. The Miss Dior bag by Christian Dior. Because their design has been given the quality seal, everyone then trusts that brand or label.

On another level, all critics, designers and manufacturers are ready with pencils poised for the designs in the latest catwalk show from the leading designers. Within a few hours after each show, some other companies are going into production using these fresh ideas and styles just seen. The actual shows are for selected attendance, but it doesn't take long until all the ideas are leaked out into the watered-down garments of mass production.

Even though this trickle down effect has great power over fashion today, there are still those teams of designers working in various corners of the fashion industry, who all need sources for inspiration. They live in the same environment we do,

and are influenced and impressed by the same social and geographical factors as the everyday public. To get their inspiration, where do they look, but to everything that is happening around them. Therefore, designers are enormously influenced by street life, and style. Street styles being incorporated into designer clothes known as the trickle up effect.

There is another theory which questions the trickle-up and trickle-down effects, which takes the form of the sideways approach. Instead of the consumption of an object symbolising the more upwards, or downwards of the consumer on the social scale, but rather it is the product, and its symbolism that moves up or down.

For instance, the *businesswoman look* was adopted by women in the workforce to gain a look of credibility, presence and authority in the business world in the 1980's. It has been an attempt to isolate certain aspects of male business clothing and incorporate it into female fashion. Therefore the look did not move up or down the social scale, but across to female fashion.

This theory can be applied to other things like the latest technology on the market. When launched, a product, like compact disc players for instance, were seen as exclusive only to those who could afford them, because their availability was limited. But with further development and mass production, the product loses its exclusivity and becomes more widely available to lower financial groups. Instead of the consumers rising in social status, the product, CD players are merely seen as a more common asset.

This is not to say that this sideways approach eliminates the trickle up and down theories, but rather puts a third perspective on the subject. For centuries we have seen the battle between the socio-economic classes, and now the fluctuation of product class and symbolism has been introduced, which subdivides society and the products they consume even more, leaving us in an environment where everybody and everything is categorised, emphasising a greater importance on materialism.

Conclusion: So why do we shop?

People purchase out of basic human necessity, but during this century in particular, we have seen influences on us as consumers, that encourage the desire in us to shop as an end in itself. Now, shopping goes far beyond the simple issue of necessity, and factors such as marketing and advertising continuously encourage a greed to buy and possess.

We are living in a time where convenience has a great importance in our lives. *Quick-fix* goods and clothing are commonplace, therefore a major reason why people shop is because of consumer obsolescence. This is the tendency to replace new clothes with newer more *up to date* ones, long before the first ones are worn out. Shops like Topshop sell cheap, high fashion clothes, that date quickly and so lasting quality is not the main concern.

The fashion cycle encourages obsolescence, (as seen in Chapter 4) because when the new collections are launched, consumers are made feel that they must keep up with the latest trends.

Marketing and Advertising are to tell us, first of all, what objects will help us form our ideal identity. And once we have that object, their job is to promote a different object to serve almost the same purpose, except this time its slightly different.

The object we already have, that recently gave shape to our sense of identity of self-worth, no longer has the appeal that the newer objects have. It is therefore considerably less desirable, our attention and desire now focused on a new object we hope to have. We hope to have it to help us increase our sense of acceptability and belonging to whatever group we identify with.

People in general, are self conscious beings and are aware that in many situations , people are judged by how they look. It can be seen in different social groups how people dress in accordance to their peers e.g. punks, ravers, even college students from different colleges have a specific style. This tendency to follow uniform can ironically be seen in groups which outwardly reject regular social conformity, like Travelling communities and New age travellers.

Male and female identity have changed dramatically this century and is a major influence on how we shop. Women are increasingly involved in economic productivity and men's identities are increasingly including issues of appearance. Men and women are now co-workers, and many more of both sexes are independent and free to make choices. Therefore marketers now target the taste, status and lifestyle identities of their customers, rather than simply their gender identity. Identity and a sense of self-worth are central to people. In the 20th Century both identity and self-worth are increasingly given expression through the objects we own. When products lose their status due to their increased availability, our status is lost with them.

Something else is needed to replace it, and to get that thing, we need to shop. A striving to maintain our sense of identity and self-worth is therefore immediately associated with shopping.

Shopping is the process through which we maintain our self-esteem. It therefore gives us pleasure. This pleasure can in some cases become associated with the act of shopping, rather than with the product purchased. Shopping is an activity wholly bound up with ones sense of self and it is becoming the 20th Century pastime. Shopping gives a buzz, but unfortunately that buzz is short-lived.

“A cigarette is the perfect kind of perfect pleasure, it is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied”.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*

Shopping, as with smoking, only leaves behind the desire to repeat the process!



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