

**Shopping for Your Self:  
When Marketing becomes a Social Problem**

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## ABSTRACT

### Shopping for Your Self:

#### When Marketing becomes a Social Problem

Ann Renée Belair

This theoretical study explores the relation between marketing and consumption. This research questions the social ethics of marketing practices from a Kantian ethical perspective. The main argument is that marketing has far more influence on consumers than is commonly admitted due to the way marketers appropriate and deploy symbols and images from our popular culture in order to sell consumer products. In contemporary marketing, things are valued over people and people are treated as means rather than ends in violation of Kantian dictates. In short, marketing overemphasizes material culture. The negative social consequences of today's marketing practices are evidenced by such phenomena as the increasing rate of personal bankruptcies, massive credit card debt, new social ills such as shopping addictions and also social trends encouraging the conspicuous consumption of designer logos and name brands. In conclusion, marketing is argued to be a social problem because not only is it unethical and has negative socio-economic consequences, but also consumerism is found to be adversely affecting our construction of self and our social interactions.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore in depth the relation between marketing and consumption. Since marketing has had an overwhelming impact on consumer's daily lives in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the intent of this paper is to explain why the temptation of consuming fashionable goods, such as clothing goods, has become increasingly more difficult to resist over time. Of course, one of the reasons that the consumption of fashionable goods has increased correlates with the increase in availability of goods. As such, the intent is to examine how the growth of the fashion industry has permeated all aspects of our lives; from catalogs sent to our home to the increase in shopping malls.

On a first level, the ethical repercussions of marketing will be explored in relation to the individual consumers. Questions will be raised about the assumptions that marketers make about consumers. Is the consumer really free from coercion? Are consumers really free to choose or are they manipulated by advertising? If advertising increases consumption, aren't consumers being encouraged to buy when sometimes they should pass on a purchase? Is consumer welfare taken into consideration in developing marketing strategies or is it all about increasing profit?

Of course, marketing theorists claim that they do not harm consumers whatsoever. In fact, they claim that consumers are in full control of their purchases. There is a fine line between deception and honest persuasion. Moreover it is unclear just how far marketers can stimulate the latent desires of consumers. Meanwhile, marketing students are often left alone to make sense of these questions. Hopefully, this paper will help pave the way to sensitizing marketing students to social problems that can be addressed in the future.

In the first chapter, I will be using an ethical approach based on Kantian philosophy to provide guidelines in order to determine whether marketers' have adequately defended their practices. Kant's categorical imperatives are principles that help determine whether an activity is based on cooperative behavior and humanitarian values. Since marketers claim that the welfare of consumer's is taken into consideration there should not be any problems with examining these pro marketing arguments. However, according to most social scientists, it is believed that since the basis of all business is to outdo the competition, marketers seem to fall short in considering the right of consumers to choose freely without constraint (Weiss,1994:137).

In trying to answer these questions about marketing and consumers, the preponderant role of marketing in our society will be further concretized. Without assessment of this factor, we might fail to recognize the extent that marketing has reshaped the act of consumption. For example, shopping has become a very complex social activity; as its primary function has gone beyond the act of purchasing goods. In fact, shopping is now a form of entertainment for some, and even a method of relaxation for others. Simply said, consumption has become much more than just an economic process. Its' cultural ramifications have expanded tremendously, once again, due to marketing. Thus, in the next section, it will be important to demonstrate that marketing plays a more extensive role than marketers want to take responsibility for as they deliberately shape our cultural realm.

Due to the fact that our culture is one that is saturated by signs and images, marketers easily appropriate cultural signs and images by linking them to consumer product that they wish to sell. As such, comparative shopping is not just about comparing quality, durability and price. Marketers have made it possible for consumers to also compare image and style of products. Thus, nowadays, consumption is more than an economic transaction; it is also a cultural one. It is argued that: “producers try to commodify meaning, that is they try to make images and symbols into things which can be sold and bought” (Abercombie, 1994:51). The object is associated with a particular image signaling specific cultural meanings, which in turn tells us more about the object.

Thus, a car is no longer just a means of transportation; it says more about lifestyle choices. To illustrate this lifestyle choice, a convertible Volkswagen says something about being with a preppy young crowd and it is often driven by women. On the other hand, a Volvo station wagon says something about a well-to do family; safety conscious parent caring for their kids. As such, the image that comes to mind is that of a parent that drives their kids to hockey practices and other extracurricular activities.

Ultimately, it will be argued in this thesis that marketers have appropriated cultural images and symbols by using them to sell material goods to consumers. With this in mind, it is important to understand how the consumer perceives the pressure to consume and whether the changes that marketers have brought to the world of mass consumption have lead it to becoming a social problem. Why do some people turn to stylized consumption in creating their identity? How does fashion, a vehicle for cultural symbolism, act as a means to recreate and reshape an identity which is socially prescribed by the media? And how does mass consumption blur social divisions.



## Chapter I

A large debate revolves around the ethical implications of marketing on consumers. Marketers defend their practices by arguing from a utilitarian standpoint in favour of the economy. Moreover, marketing theory denies that the general practice of advertising causes any harm to consumers or to society at large (Velasquez, 1988). On the other hand, the critics of advertising have often called upon feminist or Marxist theories in order to shed light on the repercussions of marketing on society (Barthel, 1988; Coward, 1984). Accordingly, theorists have identified many different problems that stem from marketing but most of their claims are not supported by empirical evidence (Jhally, 1990). The main problem is that “it is virtually impossible to measure the influence of advertising on a culture...” (Kilbourne, 1999:56).

Moreover, much of the uproar against marketing practices relates to the knowledge that is acquired through the social sciences regarding human behavior. Business people wanting to increase profit capitalize on this information. To many social scientists, this is unacceptable since their intent is to help humanity. They see their own motives as ethical. As a result, the ethical debate as to whether marketing is harmful to consumers is often left inconclusive since social scientists are so much at odds with business theorists that it seems impossible to resolve this problematic.

Perhaps, this explains why there appears to be very little dialogue between the theoretical research in these two fields. Although, marketing theorists acknowledge the critics, they are evidently defensive. Social scientists, on the other hand, rarely address the arguments of marketers. As such, this research paper seeks to address this debate and the lack of discourse between the field of marketing and sociology. Moreover, it seeks an

answer to the question of whether marketing practices are stimulating latent desires in a manner which has crossed the fine line of unethical practice. In other words, is marketing, as it is conducted today, a socially ethical practice?

According to the literature presented in business textbooks, the ethics of marketing is presented as a metaphysical debate that cannot be answered (Velasquez; 1988, Kotler; 2002). Each reader is left to contemplate the critics of advertising and resolve to carry on with their business studies. Business people are generally aware of the criticism, but they do not pay much attention to it. Thus, in the following paper, pro marketing arguments will be addressed systematically in order to draw attention to the specific problems that are left unresolved by marketing theorists. This critical analysis will refer back to Kotler's marketing textbook used by Concordia University's marketing department in teaching marketing to students. The discourse will be analyzed to locate arguments made in favor of marketing. Then, using a Kantian moral ethic, the subject of marketing will be analyzed from a philosophical point of view. Marketing jargon will need to be defined in this section.

Also, some of these arguments will be weighted in consideration with statistics regarding shopping behaviors and the increasing rates of personal bankruptcies. This evidence will help to clarify the actual experiences of consumers with regards to marketing. Moreover, interviews conducted with bankruptcy trustees will help in determining whether there are any patterns that support the arguments made in this thesis; namely, that marketing practices have become invasive of consumer's private lives and therefore unethical because the welfare of the consumer is not taken into consideration. Consumers are experiencing problems with managing credit, but nothing is done to help

consumers since their dilemma is beneficial to financial institutions, marketing and retailing industries.

## Chapter II

In the development of this research paper, it will be demonstrated how marketing has appropriated cultural symbols and meanings to heighten their impact on consumption. As mentioned earlier, this process has intensified and the meanings of objects have proliferated. In part, people still buy objects for their function but the style and cultural meanings that are attributed to the objects determine their choices. The question is whether the pressure to consume has increased due to the appropriation of cultural symbols by marketers? In order to further understand this process, an analysis will be made of the historical changes in production and consumption. The cultural realm will be defined by symbols and meanings that are found in the media and the entertainment world.

In this portion of the thesis, the process of analysis will begin with the theoretical writings of Georg Simmel. From a functionalist perspective, Simmel's theory provides a basis for understanding how marketing plays a role within our economic system, in light of the relation between the consumer, the producer and their objects. Moreover, his theory also examines the significance of meaning within objects and how we use this meaning, in part, to define our self-identity.

Then, we will examine two important historical changes in consumption habits that altered the way we shop. First and foremost, the first department stores changed how we relate to new objects and eventually lead to the shopping mall mania of the last few

decades. Credit has also played a significant role in changing our spending habits. Thus, the discussion will center around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when department stores made their entry and the post WWII era when credit became more widely used. These two periods will be viewed as evidence of the changes in consumption habits.

Furthermore, the infusion of cultural meaning into designer logos put on merchandise, more specifically fashion merchandise such as clothes will attest to the fact that marketing practices have become much more sophisticated in their means of pursuing market share. This leads to the question: what are the social effects of organizing consumption into this pattern of stylization and infusing commodities with the burden of meaning they currently have? This historical account will help to establish that major changes in our consumption patterns account for shopping being at an all time high. Conspicuous consumption is greater now than ever before due to the changes cited above, however, it is important to examine the consequences of these changes on the fabric of society.

As such, a phenomenon called stylization of consumption is a key concept in understanding this change. Most critics of marketing agree that popular culture has been reshaped by advertisements and they also identify marketing as a leading cause of certain social problems. The effects of these social problems will be examined in chapter three. Fortunately, it is possible to identify patterns that link some of the social problems to specific issues such as self-identity and socio-economic class. The literature review indicates that most theorists have not boiled these issues down to what one may consider core issues. Yet, many of the problems seen in marketing relate in some way or other to the idea of self-identity and the issue of social inequalities.

### Chapter III

Lastly, the consequences of marketing, viewed as a social problem, will be examined in this last section. The question will focus on whether marketing is affecting our construction of self and our social relations? Given that we define our self identities in part through the objective world around us, how is consumerism affecting our selves and our social interactions? The problem being that consumer culture fosters an environment that is conducive to competition, envying others and narcissism and these ultimately affect our social relations. For example, marketing promotes excessive consumerism and addictions, all this while objectifying one another and eroding the quality of our social relations (Kilbourne, 1999). Although, the lack of empirical evidence makes it difficult to establish the link between these social problems and marketing, Kilbourne's analysis of advertisements exposes the underlying messages fostering an environment that encourages these social problems.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, I argue that marketing is unethical in its impact on people and society because it encourages us to use consumer symbols to mediate our relationships with others. More specifically, my argument is that an individual who gets caught up in consumer culture and becomes increasingly dependent on fashionable goods will eventually experience distant social relations. They become so engrossed in managing their visual self that they lose touch with more authentic social relations. Theorists argue that when an individual's primary concern is to manage their presentation of self, the social realm becomes a performance (Goffman; 1959, Mason; 1981, Ritzer; 1999), whereby "social relations become an exercise in controlling the opinion of others, winning their approval, or at least, impressing them sufficiently to

garner respect” (Finkelstein, 1991;117). Individuals who practice impression management decide how to manage their image by emulating the images that are advertised in consumer culture. If they cannot afford to do so, the credit card becomes the aid that makes impression management possible at all costs (Ritzer; 1995,1999). Thus, marketing, with the help of the credit card industry, indirectly affects how people relate to one another.

Most theorists argue that such individuals are essentially trying to seek social status by establishing signs of wealth. Most of the literature concentrates at looking at why individuals get involved in conspicuous consumption. My questions also center on how does conspicuous consumption affect their social relations? My hypothesis is that those who are less concerned with impression management will experience more genuine social relations because the performance aspect will be removed from the equation. They are not trying to control the opinion that others will have of them. At the end of this paper, the logic of this argument will be demonstrated through the concept of authenticity. Although empirical research would be needed to corroborate the premise, that investigation would have to take place at a later date.

## **Chapter I-Marketing Ethics**

To analyze the ethical debate of whether or not, and the degree to which, marketing practices have become manipulative and invasive of consumer's private lives, we will examine both sides of this debate; beginning with a brief explanation of the marketing process, followed by the critics' perspective on marketing practices and then the response made by marketing theorists. The next portion of this chapter will be a critique that examines the reasoning behind pro-marketing arguments which I will argue is not thoroughly discussed. In the last portion, marketing practices are measured against the standards of Kantian morality

### ***Defining marketing***

Due to the vast array of consumer products on the market today, one should note that the main purpose of a marketing department, according to marketers, is to introduce new products or make the consumer aware of improvements to an existing product. While reading the following, it is important to keep in mind that marketing is about selling and more importantly it is about gaining consumer confidence. In other words, marketing is the strategy behind the sales pitch. For instance, advertising is used as a means to send out a message to consumers that corporation "A" only sells good products. The common belief regarding "effective" marketing is that it should get one to buy something one does not necessarily need. The theoretical concept of marketing seeks to make one change one's opinion to form a desire to purchase products.

In this research, the term marketing will refer to many forms of marketing: mainly advertising, but also telemarketing, mailings and promotions. Moreover, it will be acknowledged that marketers have numerous roles towards consumers. One is to inform the public of consumer products on the market. Secondly, marketers see themselves “as the customer’s voice within the firm and are responsible for motivating [the firm] ...to having a customer focus (Kotler, 2002:6). Lastly, good marketers feel that selling techniques are achieved with the help of customer satisfaction which they must deliver to the customer.

Obviously customer satisfaction is measured mostly by customer loyalty since satisfied customers are more likely to repurchase, thus increasing the efficiency of the marketing strategy. As a result marketing has been made into a science whereby marketing “wizards” analyze, plan and implement marketing campaigns. These campaigns, which are aimed at specific buyers, attempt to foster a long-term relationship with them. These specific buyers, defined as a target market, are a distinctive group of buyers selected from the larger population of consumers. They are distinct in that they have common characteristics such as similar needs, wants or purchasing behaviors. In order to single out this information about the target market, research is conducted by collecting data about the socio-economic profile and purchases of these specific consumers. This market research process allows marketers to gain a better sense of the psychological profile of the individual consumer who will purchase their product. Once marketers have analyzed the data, they will eventually develop a marketing mix that aims to create the right image and product design, place of purchase and price that will lure their targeted customer. This information is also used in creating brand names so that



products come with a sort of personality attached to them. The idea is to get the consumer to relate to the product in a very personal manner so that they can be distinguished from competitors. In sum, marketers know that they have succeeded in attracting their target market, when this particular customer identifies with their product and seeks it out through brand name recognition. Unfortunately for marketers, this whole system of researching consumer profiles is often criticized as an invasion of privacy.

### ***The critics' comments***

Marketing practices are often under attack, since many believe that marketing research rarely takes into account the welfare of individual consumers. At a societal level, marketing is criticized for creating false wants and too much emphasis upon materialism (Kotler, 2002:772). Commercialism is considered to be the main cause of environmental pollution as well as many social problems. According to Jacobson and Mazur, the advertising industry only reflects, cultivates and amplifies certain values and behaviors such as preoccupation with appearance and a belief that happiness can be purchased (1995: 187). According to Jean Kilbourne, "advertising often sells a great deal more than products. It sells values, images, and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and, perhaps most important, normalcy" (1999:74).

As such, I support the argument made by Jacobson and Mazur who argue that: "just as small amounts of commercialism can be assimilated by our cultural environment. Large amounts, however, can totally overwhelm the environment, such is the case today" (1995:188). Unfortunately, these are only some of the critiques directed towards the marketing industry as well as the media industry.

From the critics' perspective, the data that is collected through market research regarding consumer needs and wants is perceived as an invasion of privacy. Moreover, the collected data is considered to be misused when it is shared with other companies without consent; especially when used to better manipulate the consumer. Generally speaking, the research conducted to assess the socio-economic profiles of buyers is used to ascertain what product types or product images appeal to them. Thus, by categorizing the population into segments, it is easier for the advertising industry to present a set of stylized visual codes that will appeal to consumers (Nixon, 1997:208). As mentioned, Nixon argues that: "the reason for this was that these codes were mobilized in order to produce identification between the product and a specific segment of consumers" (1997:208). To achieve brand loyalty, fortunes are spent on research to obtain extremely detailed information on consumers so that advertisers [end up] knowing more about us, "than we know ourselves, and they use this knowledge to take advantage of us" (Kilbourne, 1999: 77).

For example, gender stereotypes of men and women are commonly used because people are most familiar with them. Advertisers know that we are easily influenced by gender stereotypes because they are preponderant and well entrenched into our values. Most consumers are unaware of these gender stereotypes and so they are easily reinforced. Kilbourne argues that: "the alcohol industry, like the tobacco industry, has been targeting women with the theme of liberation for many years" (1999:174). Gender socialization tells us that heavy drinking is okay for men, but not for women. Thus, to get around this, alcohol ads will "imply that drinking will give a woman some of men's power and privilege without detracting from their femininity" (1999: 175).

Unknowingly, men and women are swayed by these advertisements because behind every ad, a lot of research is done so that they may be carefully crafted to appeal to the psychological facets of consumers. Everything from theories of motivation and focus groups to psychographic tests are used in the process of conceiving the perfect ad. As such, values indoctrinated through gender socialization can be manipulated so that consumers identify with product ad. Kilbourne cites as an example an ad from the mid 70's featuring as beautiful but tough-looking woman alone in a bar. The headline reads "Isn't it time you knew an exciting drink to order?- instead of taking a man's suggestion" (1999:175). Product image is often manipulated so that consumers buy without consciously realizing that the ad is misleading.

Meanwhile, advertisements which build brand image often conceal product information, especially negative information. Misrepresentation is a common practice when a corporation is aiming for a squeaky clean brand image. For instance in the retail trade, brand image is tarnished by involvement with sweatshops. Many corporations have been involved in child labour and exploitative labour practices such as the Gap, Guess jeans, Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Ralph Lauren, Liz Clairborne and Tommy Hilfiger. Klein explains that: "in a single image, the brand-name sweatshop tells the story of the obscene disparities of the global economy: corporate executives and celebrities raking in salaries so high they defy comprehension, billions of dollars spent on branding and advertising- all propped up by a system of shantytowns, squalid factories and the misery of" [young exploited workers] (2000:329). In part, this is why they criticize the marketing industry for deceiving consumers with what they characterize as illusions, fantasies and false hopes.

### ***Pro-marketing arguments***

A common retort to these accusations is that marketers must spend their time appealing to wants that already exist; in other words, “marketers also claim that advertising does not create needs but merely responds to consumer demand (Jacobson,1995:187). In an article by Robert Arrington, Advertising and Behavior Control, he demonstrates just this argument. He explains why the business world rejects this interpretation of the market research done by the advertising industry (Desjardins & McCall,1990:328). He cites an article in Business Week, which dismisses the charge “...that the science of behavior, as utilized by advertising, is engaged in human engineering and manipulation”. It editorialized to the effect that ‘it is hard to find anything very sinister about a science whose principle conclusion is that you get along with people by giving them what they want’ (1990:328). The argument can be summed up as “Give the customers what they want, in order to keep ‘em happy” and ultimately stay in business. Consequently, many business people actually see themselves as being at the mercy of consumers rather than in control of the industry.

Also, “marketers claim that advertising does not create values or shapes our way of life; rather it simply reflects existing lifestyles” (Jacobson,1995:187). The critics contend that advertising is all about manipulation and deception in hopes of controlling consumer behavior but, the defense argues that it would not be cost-effective for marketing departments to create new wants rather than appeal to existing wants since this would complicate the marketing process (Kotler,2002:752). Many in the business world argue that this method of advertising makes sense for the marketing industry because deception does not pay in the long run. This is not only the simplest process but also the

most honest. According to Kotler, “responsible marketers discover what consumers want and respond with the right products, priced to give good value to buyers and profit to the producer. The marketing concept is a philosophy of consumer service and mutual gain (2002:745). Thus, responsible marketing does not involve shaping societal values or stimulating desire; moreover it gives the marketing industry too much credit for its ability to persuade and influence buyers.

Those who defend marketing practices argue that consumers are not unaware that some advertisements can be misleading and so many buyers are dubious of advertisers. Arrington argues that: “advertising may, but certainly does not always or even frequently, control behavior, produce compulsive behavior, or create wants which are not rational or are not truly those of the consumer” (1989:402). He claims that it is not enough for an advertiser to have the intention of manipulating buyers; an advertiser must also put into effect the conditions, which will bring about the deception. Thus, the advertiser must act deliberately and have full control of the circumstances affecting the purchase. Hence, while advertisers may tempt buyers to make purchases, they can never be in full control of a person’s autonomy. Meanwhile, other defenders claim that if advertisers incite a certain amount of distrust, it can only be healthy for consumers.

Critics and defenders like to argue about whether the desire for an object is genuine or fabricated depending on whether the desire is intrinsic or whether it originates from the advertisement. Arrington summarizes Braybrooke’s argument in that: “if the consumer had more objective information than he is provided by product puffing, if his values had not been mixed up by motivational research strategies, and if he had an expanded set of choices... , then he might want something quite different from what he

presently wants” (1989:398). The logic of the argument is that if the advertisers allowed us to follow our own desire, we would make choices according to product information. Arrington refutes this by saying that this claim seems empty. He argues: “it amounts to saying that if the world we live in, and we ourselves, were different, then we would want different things” (1989:399). Arrington argues that he has fully explored the philosophical dimensions of this debate regarding the autonomy of consumers and so in the end he sides in favour of the advertisers. However, it appears that Arrington has taken a quick decision on this matter. His line of argument is too narrow. He does not contemplate any of the larger philosophical questions regarding human rights, nor does he address any social and environmental critiques of marketing. Typically of marketer’s dogma, he washes his hands of the whole matter as though it is a waste of precious time that could be spent making money.

### ***Refuting defense***

Most critics do not see the problem of ethical marketing as a simple philosophical debate. Therefore, they are rarely satisfied with the condensed arguments used by Arrington and many others who defend marketing practices. They argue their case by looking at very specific issues yet without analyzing the social ramifications of marketing on society at large. In Baybrooke’s passage cited in the previous section above, he clearly explains the impact of motivational research strategies on consumers. Referring to the lack of objective information and product puffing, he argues that if it were not for these methods of marketing a consumer might want an entirely different product, but in Arrington’s response, he does not address these specific questions.

Defenders of marketing put much faith in the consumer's ability to recognize deception and manipulation in this vast marketing world. The consumer is regarded as having lots of wonderful qualities; he or she is referred to in an abstract manner as: a well-informed and knowledgeable person, skeptical of misleading advertisement and with lots of freedom to choose amongst the vast array of products. In other words, the consumer is considered to be free to choose amongst good and 'misleading' products, and it is left to the consumer's discretion to determine which items are a good buy. Thus, the onus is left to the consumer; let the buyer beware for the advertisers take no responsibility.

As such, the essential question that poses itself is how far should commercialism and marketing be allowed to dominate society's values and culture without taking responsibility for the repercussions on society? The marketing industry and consumer culture base their opinion of what's good for society primarily upon economic principles. Should economic values determine all our values; including the welfare of consumers?

Many ethical questions come to mind but they are never properly dealt with in marketing literature. How far should the marketing industry be allowed into the psyche of the consumer in trying to gain consumer confidence? Should there not be limitations to achieving consumer awareness? As such, Weiss (1994) argues that: "the invisible hand is often nonexistent regarding consumer protection against questionable advertising..." (137). It is left up to the buyer to file a complaint or seek out means of compensation if he or she felt cheated or wronged in any manner by the advertising industry.

I argue that critics have condemned marketers for crossing the fine line between honest persuasion and manipulation. The distinction is an important one to make because

it helps clarify what is meant by unethical practices. In my view, honest persuasion can only be achieved through effective argument. For example, “you should buy product A instead of product B because its better!” Why? The answers should be logical well-founded arguments that make sense to the buyer. The reality is that most advertisements appeal to the social psychological facets of buyers because it is believed to be the only means of persuading customers bombarded by thousands of advertisements everyday. Yet, marketing strategies that appeal to the buyer’s emotions, attitudes and aspirations are treading in murky water since deceptive behavior is harder to detect. In my opinion, manipulative strategies consist of using information to ensure a favorable response. For instance, collecting data through surveys to analyze the buyer’s reactions and socio-economic profile in order to calculate how to persuade the customer to buy is a clear form of manipulation. This invasion of privacy leaves the customer emotionally vulnerable. When the collected data is used to extract a sale, this is a form of deception. This argument will be further developed with the help of a University textbook.

Although, many of these social criticisms about marketing are acknowledged by marketing authors, still, much of the discussion of marketing ethics remains philosophical. (Kotler, 2002:721). The analysis of a textbook used to teach introductory courses in marketing will help to illustrate how marketing student are taught to think about marketing ethics. The Principles of Marketing, co-authored by Kotler, Armstrong and Cunningham, has been used as a textbook since 1996 at Concordia University. It would seem to suggest to students that there is never really a right answer since morality is relative. Under the subtitle, marketing ethics, the opening statement reads: “Conscientious marketers face many moral dilemmas. The best thing to do is often



unclear”(2002:768). Why is the best thing to do often unclear? Perhaps, morality is too complex, is what these authors seem to respond since they say that not all managers have the fine moral sensitivity to deal with these dilemmas (2002: 768). So, because they are complex, should we ignore them all together?

On the other hand, perhaps these moral dilemmas are unclear to those who struggle with the idea of privileging consumer welfare at the expense of bottom line philosophies? Unfortunately marketing practices do tend to blur these lines and make it confusing for most individuals.

According to the authors of this textbook, when marketing managers cannot resolve ethical dilemmas, corporations must step in and define corporate ethics. Otherwise, they state that another solution is to take responsibility out of the hands of corporations and leave it to the free market, meaning, let the system auto-regulate itself, or leave it to the legal system. Either way this would probably entail damage control after the fact but marketing managers would not be involved in preventative measures. The previous philosophy expects that: “each company and marketing manager must work out a philosophy of socially responsible and ethical behaviour” (2002:769). The reality of this method is vague in the sense that what is written on paper is not always practiced on a daily basis. Moreover, these solutions do not address major theoretical problems related to marketing practices such as contributing to materialism, being deceitful by advancing benefits and hiding drawbacks, projecting unrealistic images.

For instance, as discussed earlier, the ethics of marketing research is directly related to the issue of manipulation and deception. In the 4th edition of the textbook, the authors cite: “in an 1996 study conducted by the Canadian Survey Research Council

found that 73 percent of Canadians liked being surveyed. Most consumers feel positively about marketing research and believe that it serves a useful purpose” (1999:142).

Meanwhile, in the latest edition of 2002, the year of the study is removed and instead, the word ‘recent’ is used to describe the study. The fact that these authors qualify the 1996 study as recent is a slight manipulation of the data. Perhaps, if this research were repeated the percentage of Canadians who like being surveyed would decrease.

The textbook does state that: “a few consumers fear that researchers might use their findings to manipulate our buying. Most simply, resent the intrusion” (2002: 180). Furthermore, they mention that: “increasing consumer resentment has become a major problem for the research industry, leading to lower survey response rates in recent years” (2002:181). They admit that it is becoming a problem, but the ethical implications that I described earlier are not discussed. In fact, the discussion centered on misuse of research findings is tempered by the fact that “few advertisers openly rig their research designs or blatantly misrepresent the findings- most abuses tend to be subtle “stretches” (2002:182). More common are subtle abuses such removing the date of the study and then describing it as recent. It is ironic that they would be making this subtle stretch of the truth, but then again, this is why marketing gets a bad name in the first place.

The textbook merely recites the marketing ethics problems at large but offers no solution to students, nor does it provide any material for thought. In fact it would seem to endorse current marketing practices, but this is not surprising in a marketing textbook. Surely, however, better rhetoric is needed to demonstrate both sides of the debate. In a paragraph addressing social critics, the authors write: “people have strong defenses against advertising and other marketing tools” (2002:752). What defenses? The authors

do not refer to specific defenses. In addition, the text is typical of most pro-marketing arguments because they cite information that is interpreted, as relevant which may not necessarily be so.

The authors argue that: “finally, the high failure rate of new products shows that companies are not able to control demand” (2002:752). The high failure rate of new products may be attributed to a vast number of other problems. It does not imply that there is direct causal link between the failure rate and the lack of demand. This statement is typical of many of the defensive arguments used by marketing theorists. A quick analysis shows that some of their statements are empty of meaning. Although, marketers claim the contrary, it would be interesting to see if their concept of ethics stands up to Kantian morality.

### ***Kantian Morality***

Kantian philosophy can serve as a basis for structuring business ethics and regulating competitive activity since Kant’s categorical imperatives can be used to determine whether an activity is based on cooperative behavior. These three principles can be used as a pragmatic framework in order to determine whether humanitarian values on a conceptual level are being taken into consideration. For most, Immanuel Kant’s philosophy would appear too idealistic since the general attitude towards business is reflected in the saying “it’s a jungle out there”. The idea that people lie and cheat in business is generally accepted since it is true that “capitalism is a system of economic competition, but even competitive activity requires rules regulating competition”

(Bowie,1999:18). Although the business world is perceived as a jungle, if the majority of people behaved this way, businesses would not survive.

In general, business ethicists agree that business decisions should not be primarily motivated by profit but rather by good business sense. Even if the actions may eventually lead to profit, good actions should, in theory, be performed from moral motivation alone. According to Kant, if one chooses to be a part of a moral community, then one must act consequently. The sole decision to be a part of the business community is what should motivate business decisions. As such if a business professional expects that other business people should respect contracts and conduct their business equitably, then the same applies to them. This is essentially what would motivate a business professional to impose self-restrictions or even to overlook their own self-interest.

In sum, I use Kantian morality as screening criteria to determine if marketing uses ethical practices. From this perspective, this model implies that advertising has impact on consumers; whether negative or positive; but consumers, in turn, do not contribute to this relationship. For the most part, I would argue that marketing and advertising seeks to impose its will, which is to sell, rather than interact with its clients. However, I will not assume that it is a simple theory of manipulation.

In fact, I agree with Laurel Graham who argues that consumer education is a means of shaping consumers not just manipulating them thereby “maximizing thoughtful consumer conduct” in order to empower consumers (1997:539). She cites Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (1992:174) who state that: “personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations” (1997:540). As such,

we all participate in disseminating consumer propaganda. Notwithstanding I would argue that it is nonetheless a false form of empowerment. Consumers are lead to believe that they have autonomy, self-determination and freedom in the midst of consumer culture but there is too much at stake, namely the entire economy, to risk dependence on the individual consumer.

In The Codes of Advertising, Jhally's (1990) perspective is that marketing and advertising has become more of a mediator. The advertiser tries to analyze and classify its audience into segments so that when presented with the proper stimuli, the segmented audience will react appropriately; buy. However, in order for this to happen the stimuli must "resonate with information the listener already possesses" (1990:129). Jhally argues that: "advertising draws its materials from the experiences of the audience, but it reformulates them in a *unique* way. It does not reflect meaning but rather *constitutes* it" (1990:129). Thus, advertising does not create meaning. It alters it to suit its purpose, meaning that it originates from somewhere else and is transferred onto an object in order to make it sell.

### ***Measuring marketing to Kant's imperatives***

Looking at Kant's universal imperatives, he first argues that one should always treat the humanity in a person as an end rather than as a means. As such, people, or in this case consumers, need to be respected as free independent decision-makers who are entitled to personal development, self-determination and dignity. Those who defend marketing would argue that consumers are respected in this manner since they have freedom to choose products without coercion. Still, first we must ask what it means for a

consumer to be respected as a human being. In order to be respected, one needs to be treated in an honest fashion, if one is lied to then one is being treated as a fool that can be manipulated.

However the reality is that since marketing is concerned with selling; a product may not always be presented accurately to the consumer. By withholding information about the product, the consumer can no longer be considered free to make an informed decision because the information regarding the product is biased. This does not mean that the marketing strategy behind a product is aiming to deceive the consumer, but it is painting a pretty picture by suppressing negative information. Although the purpose in marketing is not to deceive, the nature of the business leads it to distorting the truth. According to Velasquez, since: "the sales contract requires full disclosure- the idea [here] is that an agreement is free only to the extent that one knows what alternatives are available: Freedom depends on knowledge" (1988:279). Thus, the buyer is only truly free when he or she has enough product information to make various comparisons between products. Otherwise, how can a consumer be considered respected when half-truths are told to convince him or her the worthiness of a product?

Unfortunately, telling half-truths is merely one of the problems that consumers experience with marketing practices. On a larger scale, blurring the 'truth' of a product by mixing ideas, images, values and style stemming from the cultural arena of our lives makes consumers easy prey for deception. Sklair states that: "the systematic blurring of the lines between information, entertainment, and promotion of products lies at the heart..." of capitalism. Consumerism has been reformulated by transforming all mass media "into opportunities to sell ideas, values, products and the consumerist worldview"

(1996:76). Thus, the individual consumer is faced with more than just deception; it is an art of persuasion that has been intensified by expanding into the cultural realm. Hence, pro-marketers argue that we have more choices due to the proliferation of products.

However, the fact that there is greater choice of product and variety in images cannot be equated to more variety of ideas or greater freedom of choice. We are constantly consuming a limited set of images that are culturally produced and so the only choice we have left is to choose among the images. These images, of course, are all part of these half-truths since they do not reveal everything there is to know about the product. Again, how can we take an informed decision on the basis of images?

Kilbourne argues that: "Although advertising tries to convince us that freedom is our right to buy things and democracy our ability to choose from a variety of consumer goods, most of us know better. We know that democracy requires active participation from an informed citizenry" (1999:308). True, we know this at a conscious level, but advertisements are so effective because they work at an unconscious level. Only 8% of an ad's message is received by the conscious mind, the rest is captured by the unconscious (Kilbourne, 1999:59) Kilbourne recognizes that the main reason advertising works so well at shaping our culture is that most people believe that they are not affected by marketing.

The defenders of marketing often argue that consumers vote with their money and so they have the freedom of informing manufacturers of their tastes. Jhally cites Tibor Scitovsky's counter-argument from The Joyless Economy (1976) that: "if the market is like a voting machine then it will most reflect the 'choices' of those who have most to spend" (1987:15). Scitovsky's concept of consumer sovereignty can be summed up in

two ideas. Buying power in the marketplace exists among the wealthy and through economies of scale, which is where the greatest amount of profit lies for manufacturers.

Thus mass production caters to conformity rather than eccentricity and the prime function of advertising here is to secure 'agreement' among the mob as to the nature and quantity of the limited number of things that are to be mass produced. Consumer free choice is free choice among those products that can be mass produced in this way. Advertising does not create demand in this perspective but molds it and steers it in certain directions that work for the benefit of producers" (1987:15).

In addition to this lack of freedom that exists through mass consumption, the methods used to steer consumer choice do not emphasize product knowledge. Rather, when products are marketed to appeal to the masses, the socio psychological facets are evoked not the rational. It is as though the consumer is patronized by the advertisements since marketers only tell the consumers what they "want to hear". Marketers feed consumers illusions regarding wealth, power and sexual attractiveness. They play on cravings of the human psyche such as our desire for eternal youth, social belonging, individual freedom and existential fulfillment (Jacobson, 1995:198). For example, more facial creams are being sold to baby boomers than ever because they are told that they can fight aging with expensive creams.

In reality, advertisements are more likely to sell a lifestyle attitude or fantasies than just a product. Ray explains that: "lifestyle advertising can help to produce commercials that communicate with segmented audiences in terms of their 'predispositions', of making sure that advertisements get to the right people with the right message at the right time (cited from Jhally, 1987:126). Products are branded with a particular lifestyle image and so consumers embrace a whole package and set of ideas. Contrarily to what marketers claim, advertising does not just deliver a message about a



product; they sell an image that incorporates a combination of the aforementioned. Behind each brand logo is a whole set of meaning that encroaches on consumer's freedom of personal development and self-determination. Being told that there are a limited number of lifestyles to choose from through product choices; is a pressure to restrict freedom, rather than allow for greater freedom.

On the other hand a simpler question to address is how do we experience freedom when more and more of our lives revolve around consumption? Over the last few decades, there has been a constant increase in consumption, especially of North Americans while the rest of the world has followed suit. According to Juliet B. Shor, Americans spend 3 to 4 times as much time shopping as Western Europeans (cited in Ritzer, 1999:35). This erodes our leisure time and transforms the shopping experience into a hobby. Shor also claims that: "the average American is consuming in toto, more than twice as much as he or she did forty years ago" (1999:35). In sum, modern consumption has changed the retail industry quite radically. Perhaps, this explains why it is more commonly referred to as hyperconsumption. In 1991, Shor cited the total land area of shopping in U.S. as 4 billion square feet. While Cowe (1994) claims that: "between 1986 and 1990, almost 30 million square feet of shopping center space was opened: (Lury, 1996:32). The investment in shopping space demonstrates that the retail industry has been very lucrative up until now.

More statistics, indicate "the importance of retailing ...[as] in the U.S. alone it accounts for some 30 per cent of gross domestic product" (1998:2). As such, on the issue of freedom, it is therefore difficult to believe that individuals who are so wrapped up in the experience of consumption can be considered free. Still, Robert Arrington would

quickly point out that although individuals are being lured to shopping malls, they are not obliged to go to the malls. Advertising and promotional sales cannot control the behavior of consumers. Hence, an article in the Financial Times states that: “developed countries appear to have overexpanded their retail sectors. For instance, between 1966 and 1993 retail sales increased by 50% while square footage for retailing ballooned by 216%” (1988:1). True, shoppers still make the choice to go and spend their time in the malls, but there is much to be said about impulse buying. This discussion about the retail industry will be further developed at the end of this chapter.

Kant’s second categorical imperative is that people should always act as though they were part of a moral community. We need to assume that people want to be respected as moral beings. According to those who endorse marketing, “advertising helps a nation to maintain a prosperous economy, ...,by increasing consumption and spending, which in turn creates economic growth and jobs” (Weiss; 1994:140). Consequently, marketers claim that they are looking out for the financial welfare of their community. Moreover, it is argued that ads try to persuade and influence consumers, but they do not coerce them. Thus, marketing is not immoral in nature, nor is it dismissing the moral community. All of this may possibly be true, but once again the information in this argument is incomplete.

In order to construct marketing ads, market research is conducted within communities in order to use information about consumers to effectively mislead them to buying products they do not necessarily need. Every time information is gained from a surveyed customer, marketers are armed with more information to manipulate consumers

into believing that their product is what they are looking for. Galbraith raises a point that if an individual has an urgent want that must be satisfied, then, logically it must be that this want originates within himself or herself. As such, “they cannot be urgent if they must be contrived for him” (1990: 323). He concludes that: “one cannot defend production as satisfying wants if that production creates the wants”. According to Velasquez (1988), whether marketing succeeds in manipulating consumers such as Galbraith argues is still questionable, but he agrees that: “...it is clear that some particular advertisements are at least *intended* to manipulate” (296). He contends that: “they are intended...to arouse in the consumer a psychological desire for the product without the consumer’s knowledge and without the consumer being able to rationally weigh whether the product is in his or her own best interests” (1988:296). As such, he makes a case for this argument by stating that when an advertisement blatantly makes subliminal suggestions, then it is obviously trying to manipulate the consumer.

Subliminal suggestions are often used when selling a product that make reference to sexual connotations, social expectations or when it is aimed at children. Moreover, marketing will often endorse products through subliminal suggestions when the product is unhealthy or unnecessary. Getting back to Kant’s theory of moral responsibility towards the community, it makes no sense to say that marketing departments are being moral when they campaign for products such as tobacco and alcohol. The sale of these products is not for the moral good of a community; rather it is for the good of the corporation’s pocketbook. When manipulative tactics are used on children to sell foods that cause obesity, again it is not for the good of the community. When sex is used in manipulating a consumer to buy a product, this is not for the good of a community.

Obviously, marketing campaigns aim to sell; they are not designed with morality in mind. As such, the consumer's purchase is simply a means for achieving profit and that profit is the end result that a marketing department is trying to accomplish. Velasquez argues that: "advertisements often do not include much objective information for the simple reason that their primary function is not that of providing unbiased information" (1988:291). Thus, the main goal of the marketing department is obviously not so much to inform the public about their product, but to deceive the consumer so that the greatest amount of profit can be attained. From this, one can conclude that their moral obligation to a community is the furthest thing from their mind.

Thus, one can conclude from the perspective of multinationals, marketing is the tool used to bolster their bottom line figures. Increasing sales may eventually lead to greater levels of profit and marketing makes this all possible by reaching more consumers. Since capitalism is a system that delivers massive amounts of goods; this mass production must be consumed in order to avoid market stagnation. Herein is simple logic, mass production entails mass consumption. Jhally argues that: "advertising is the main weapon that manufacturer's use in their attempt to 'produce' an adequate consuming market for their products" (1990:3). This line of thinking also follows Marx's theories on production. Accordingly, modern fetishism for commodities is the result of marketing ploys and is seen as a substitute for social relations. Lury also argues that: "the need for profit has led,..., to the production of an ever-expanding range of products which can only be sold as a result of increasing control over and manipulation of the consumer" (1996:42). The need to lure consumers to shopping is merely a by-product of capitalism's need for greater profit. True, the manipulation of consumers is not the main

purpose of marketing, but it becomes its' secondary motive in order to increase sales and profit. The welfare of the community is only considered important if it contributes to the bottom line.

As such, advertising has now become about portraying values and lifestyles that the consumer will desire and buy into. Tomlinson argues that: "marketing of the product has come increasingly to flatter the individual consumer, to fuel his/her aspirations, dreams, fantasies..." (1990:10). Stylization of consumption through advertisement is all part of a strategy behind selling consumer goods. Sklair points out that: "they speed up the circulation of material goods through advertising, which reduces the time between production and consumption"(1996:77). Temporarily, the fetishism for commodities takes over while conscious consumers inadvertently forget that marketing is playing on their wants, needs and emotions. The line between need and want is blurred, while the consumer, enthralled with his or her purchase, forgets about his or her own economic welfare. Personal finances often work against the dreams and fantasies of product ownership and so marketing tempts consumer through the use of credit cards.

Further proof that the welfare of the community is not the priority can be seen through aggressive marketing of credit cards. The spending of future income through the use of credit cards ensures that personal finances are mystified since many consumers are no longer certain of what they can or cannot afford to buy since credit limits seem to indicate that the sky is the limit. Unfortunately once consumers fall into this trap, they pay exorbitant amounts of interests. The banking industry and credit card companies make enormous amounts of profit, while "the economy becomes increasingly dependent on the expenditure of future income..." (Ritzer, 1999:156). According to a special report

in The Economist: “the American economy is being propped up by consumer borrowing. If that borrowing collapses, a more prolonged downturn will follow” (24:2002). Thus, if the majority of the population would revert back to focusing on personal savings, the economy would take a downfall.

Moreover, marketing is affecting peoples’ perception of money and the idea of delayed gratification is becoming obsolete (Jacobson, 1995:194). Psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm observed that: “in contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which saving was a virtue, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made consumption into a virtue” (cited in Jacobson, 1995:194). The result is that North Americans owe more than they ever have since opportunities to spend on credit are everywhere. Bach claims that: “since 1998, consumer credit in Canada has risen to more than \$15 billion from about \$10.5 billion, and bank loans add up to another \$4.5 billion. Upward of 80, 000 people declared bankruptcy in Canada in 2001, a rate four times as high as it was in 1980” (2003:86). Thus, people no longer feel the need to save up for a purchase, when everything can be acquired immediately. Unfortunately overspending can mean financial disaster.

As a result of a lack of emergency savings, for many individuals the consequences can include long-term debt and personal bankruptcies. According to statistics released on the internet on February 8th, 2002 by Industry Canada, bankruptcy rates have increased dramatically.

In Canada, from 1958 to 1971, the consumer bankruptcy rate was at a fairly constant level, and for a modern industrialized country, the bankruptcy rate was at a very low level. For example, in 1968, Canada had (6) six bankruptcies per 100,000 population. The United States, in 1968, had (90) ninety bankruptcies per 100,000 population. In 1982, the consumer bankruptcy rate jumped dramatically from 23,000 in 1981 to more than 30,000. This 33% increase over the previous year was caused by the severe worldwide recession. However, since 1985, the consumer bankruptcy rate has risen steeply, hitting record numbers in 1997 and

then declining slightly in 1998. In 1998, the consumer bankruptcy rate in Canada was 2.6 per thousand population. This compares with U.S. bankruptcy rate for the same period of 5.2 per thousand population.

The reasons cited for this increase in bankruptcies are the following: the fading of the stigma attached to bankruptcy, the unemployment rate affects consumer bankruptcy and easily available credit. The author, Earl Sands, a Trustee in bankruptcy claims that the bankruptcy rate in Canada is under control. He claims that: "in a modern consumer society such as ours, with quite easy access to credit, we must accept the consequences of a certain number of bankruptcies" (1999:3). Although this may be a realistic attitude towards the situation, Sands makes it sound like these consumers who declare bankruptcy are the cost of doing business for banks and credit institutions. The reality for this individual consumer is not quite the same since his or her financial welfare is in jeopardy.

In the United States, "Fifty-five to 60 million households carry credit card balances that average more than \$7,000, according to the Consumer Federation, a consumer protection group in Washington" (Rothman, 1998: 2). "According to the Canadian Bankers Association, in October 2002, [Canadians] were carrying almost \$44 billion in balances on Visas and MasterCard" (Vaz-Oxlade, 2003:46). Rothman argues that the rapid rise in credit card debt is attributed to "...aggressive marketing and credit extension by big banks as well as a lack of education on how to use the cards responsibly" (1998:2). As such, the rise in personal bankruptcies is not just the cost of doing business it is but a symptom of a larger problem. The advocacy group reports that: "bank card mailings increased from 2.4 billion in 1996 to 3 billion in 1997" (Rothman, 1998:2). The consumer may experience problems on an individual level, but there is overwhelming marketing pressure coming from banks and this issue must be addressed.

While interviewing trustees in Montreal, it became evident that their opinion of the rate of bankruptcies is not quite as 'in control' as Earl Sands claims. (see Appendix for questionnaire sample) In fact, Max Druker, a trustee who has been in the business for over 30 years, argues strongly that the high bankruptcy rate is due to the fact that the whole industry of credit is very lucrative. The 15 or 18% credit rate on an average credit card is a very nice margin of profit. Moreover, the impact of marketing can be viewed clearly when one examines the fact that the number of purchases made with credit is significantly higher than purchases made with cash. Druker, who deals yearly with 500 to 700 personal bankruptcies, claims that consumerism is like a drug. As the number of consumer bankruptcies has risen, he argues that the stigma has definitely become null since consumers see this as an economic decision to start fresh.

On the other hand, Murray Pinsky, another trustee from Montreal, agrees that the stigma of declaring bankruptcy has lessened and that there is excessive use of credit but he does not view marketing as the culprit. He argues that peer pressure has more to do with inciting people to buy than advertising. He strongly believes that times have changed and that the new social trend is for people to be focused on the present. By that he means that people try and acquire what they want right away, rather than focus on long term goals.

Meanwhile, Rachel Pont and Newbar Boyadjian, two trustees who specialize in personal bankruptcies believe that the stigma of declaring oneself bankrupt is not any less than what it was in the past. Personal moral values and cultural values are the main factors that influence this experience. Thus, although trustees might argue that bankruptcy cases are a business write-off for banks, the person declaring bankruptcy may



not share this attitude. In fact, Rachel Pont points out that: “immigrants who come to Canada from villages where they were not exposed to advertising may be the first to be affected by advertising and the way of life promoted by advertisements” (3/03/03).

However, even if the opinion of the four trustees differs with respect to the issue of stigma, there exists a general consensus regarding the excessive use of credit and the increase in spending. In addition, all four trustees believe that individuals who declare bankruptcy are simply trying to keep up with an average standard of living. Boyadjian claims that: “people are generally of good faith and they are trying to keep up with the cost of living and so there are very few abuses” (12/03/03). Yet, this brings up the question what is the average standard of living? Is it the standard of living portrayed by the media and advertising images? If so, the problem of keeping up may have taken on greater proportions. The welfare of the community and their struggle to maintain a quality of life is of no concern to the corporations and industries that disseminate advertising.

Even though marketing departments and financial institutions will not claim any responsibility for these changes in our consumer society, they are nonetheless responsible for consumer socialization. In fact, “consumer behavior researchers have long been interested in how people develop their buying beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors” (Faber cited in Benson, 2000:27). Consumer socialization is often thought of as the study of how people become good consumers. Yet, Faber claims that: “years of experience researching this topic indicate that many people never learn to be ‘good’ consumers; rather, they develop bad habits and behaviors” (2000:27). In the opening statement in his book, Jhally

argues that advertisement is perhaps the most influential institution of socialization in modern society. What does this entail?

Last but not least is the third universal maxim that reveals the essence of Kant's proposition and it deals with the issue of motive. Kant states that we should only act on maxims which can be made into universal laws of nature. When consumer welfare is not the primary concern of advertisements, they are not fulfilling what Kant believes to be the only action that leads to a universal law of morality. As such the following statements cannot be considered universal maxims of morality, yet, they are widely practiced.

*1-Market research should be used to gain information from the consumer and then use it against him to entice him with what we know that he wants*

*2-Deception should always be used to conceal information about a product that could hurt the number of sales.*

*3-Whenever possible, sex should be used to endorse products when the targeted consumers are men.*

*4-Telling the consumer what they want to hear is the best sales pitch even when the truth is being stretched.*

A universal maxim cannot be made of any of these statements, yet marketing adheres to the art of persuasion as though it is an ethical practice. Although, supporters of marketing may claim that it does not create the latent desires for sex, status or prestige, it does play on our latent desires through manipulation. It is as though we are manipulated through our weaknesses, but what is at the core of these latent desires that makes consumers easy prey? In order to understand what the consumers' desire from objects, it is important to examine our relation to objects and the lifestyle that we aim to achieve through objective culture.

In sum, I am arguing that marketing strategies do not take into consideration the welfare of consumers. The greater impact of marketing on society is rarely an issue to marketing theorists. Marketing practices are by and large unethical because they compromise freedom of choice for consumers. While stimulating latent desires, marketing departments only prioritize profit levels. Furthermore, marketing practices do not measure up to Kantian standards of morality since humanitarian values are put aside. According to the first imperative one should treat the humanity in a person as an end rather than as a means. Secondly, one should act as though a part of a moral community and third, act only on maxims which can be made into universal laws of morality. As I have demonstrated, none of the standards are upheld by the marketing community. As such for all these reasons and also the evidence gathered through the interviews and statistics, it is clear that marketing practices are manipulative. In the following section, this will be demonstrated once again as it will be shown how marketing appropriates cultural symbols for the purpose of manipulation.

Although I believe that Kantian standards' of morality clearly draw a line between good and bad business motives, it is also a very strict and rigid code of ethics that would probably be impossible to enforce. I feel that Kantian ethics strongly supports my argument that marketing practices are manipulative but I realize that the consumer still has some autonomy. Earlier, I have said that the consumer does not have any freedom whatsoever, but there is plenty of evidence that supports the contrary view. For example, the Financial Times claims that: "it has been estimated that the average amount of time spent by a typical American in a shopping mall has declined from seven hours a month to about two and a half hours over the past 15 years" (1988:3). Meanwhile, Newbar

Boyadjian, one of the trustees interviewed for this research, supports this view that people are choosing to stay away from retail malls. He argues that one of the spending patterns that changed during his career is that people spend more on services than on retail. These statistics demonstrate that the interest in shopping has diminished and as such the consumer is focusing time and money elsewhere. Some of this is redirected towards shopping channels, internet merchandising and the mail order industry, but there is nonetheless an overall drop in consumption of material goods. Thus, perhaps this is a sign that the consumer is not so easily manipulated by retail marketing. Many, such as Boyadjian and Bratt, strongly deny that advertising has an effect on consumers. Ironically, the marketing industry spends millions on advertisements, if it were true that advertising had no effect, then one must question the substantive expense.

Meanwhile, there are other forms of consumption such as the entertainment industry which have grown tremendously. How these shifts in consumption patterns demonstrate the power of advertising to solicit an interest in consumption? Clearly, if there isn't total manipulation of consumers, there is some. Cultural capital is used to exert some control over mass consumers. Ultimately, what does it mean when social theorist Jhally argues that advertisement is perhaps the most influential institution of socialization in modern society? Marketing is at the center of consumer socialization, the question is whether this has become a problem?

## **Chapter II-Marketing Popular Culture**

Consumption has always been an economic as well as a cultural process.

While generating ideas, images and values related to consumption, marketing deals mainly with the cultural aspects of consumption. Thus, while marketing can deny its influence on society, the truth is everywhere to be seen. Starting with the media, marketing has permeated every aspect of social and cultural life. In the following section an emphasis on the cultural process of consumption will be explored to further understand the role of marketing in popular culture. By doing so, it is possible to analyze the exploding phenomenon of consumer culture. I will be arguing that marketing is a more powerful force than it admits to be in our social and cultural life. The reason for this is to avoid taking responsibility for all the damage that comes with forming a consumer culture intent on manipulating individuals. As such, I will begin to introduce at the end of this chapter the argument that consumer culture has become a social problem. Subsequently, the argument will be further developed in the following chapter.

In the previous chapter, we looked at how Kantian ethics rejects marketing's plea of innocence in terms of manipulating consumers. The intent here is to explicate in greater detail the argument that consumers are not free in our consumer culture. In light of capitalistic values, our culture is gradually rendered synthetic as the meaning of objects is altered through the process of production and consumption. Through marketing, signs and images have saturated our culture and as a result consumption is increasingly more about social meaning. As mentioned in the introduction, "producers try to commodify meaning, that is, try to make images and symbols into things which can be sold and bought" (Abercombie, 1994:51). Through advertising, images are attached to

material objects and act as carriers of social meaning. Briefly, this explains how commodities can be used as proof of social status and cultural style. For example, Marlboro cigarettes are not just cigarettes; they are a symbol of masculinity. Jeans are almost always advertised for their sex appeal. The main argument of this text can be summarized by Sklair's statement that: "the control of ideas in the interests of consumerism is almost total" (1996:82). This argument will be further examined and developed in this chapter.

Beforehand, it is important to understand how changes in the modes of production are related to the appearance of mass consumption. Clearly, it is necessary for my argument, to examine the notion of materialism and self-identity previous to the advent of industrialization in order to better understand our present day consumer culture. At the center of this analysis is Simmel's contribution to the understanding of materialism as it pertains to self-identity. I will demonstrate that the cornerstone of this contribution lies in his analysis of the relation between producer and consumer.

Then, I assert that symbolic meaning which is found in stylized objects is used, in the socialization process of consumers, as a means of influencing the aspirations of individuals or in other words as a form of manipulation. This ensures that consumers will all strive for the same material ideals as they continuously increase their levels of consumption. Along this line of argument, Berger states that: "capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible" (1977:153).

Next, I will examine how cultural messages are appropriated by the fashion industry in order to entice the consumer into a dream world of mass consumption. Last

but not least, I will examine the exploding phenomenon of consumer labels as it attests to the fact that consumers are becoming dependent on consumer objects in the creation of self-identity.

### ***Modes of Production***

Undeniably, marketing has become a prominent force in our consumer culture. It may be argued that consumer culture would not be where it is today without marketing. However, there is more to our relationship to objects that meets the eye and although predicting consumer behavior has become the science of marketing, it is not really at the center of consumer culture. Entwistle points to the fact that: “before production can be translated into consumption, income has to be generated, habits formed and products marketed; production is tied closely to consumption, but consumption practices alone do not determine entirely the relations of production” (2000: 209). According to Simmel, “generally speaking, a broadening of consumption corresponds to the specialization of production” (1978: 455). In other words, the need for mass consumption is a direct result of the division of labour at the production level. Hence, in the process of analyzing consumer culture, one cannot ignore that production and consumption are interrelated.

Simmel explains that one must return back to the beginnings of industrialization, when the division of labour first occurred in order to understand what has changed in our relation to objects. Craftsmen once worked on the fabrication of a particular object from the beginning of its creation until it was complete. Today, the specialization of tasks separates the worker from the object created and thereby “...endows the product with objective independence” (1978:457). It will be explained further on how this objective

independence of the object erases the meaning which is transferred from the craftsman to his product. Meanwhile, Simmel also argues that a similar process occurs between production that is derived from the division of labour and the consumer (1978:457). In the past, a relationship was established between the consumer and the producer, as the consumer would contract a producer when a particular commodity was needed. For instance, when someone needed new shoes, they would request a pair be made for them by the local shoemaker who would take your measurements and create them. Nowadays, the commodity is produced independently of the consumer, so the consumer needs only to choose from a selection of shoes in the shoe store. Indeed, the consumers' role is much more passive.

As a result of this change in production, Simmel explains that the product "becomes an objective given entity which the consumer approaches externally and whose specific existence and quality is autonomous of him" (1978:457). The consumer is not requesting this object and as a result, it will occupy a shared space in objective culture whether the consumer wishes it or not. This is a cyclical process and so as an increase in consumption is felt the consumer becomes dependent upon the increase of consumer products and thereby the enlargement of objective culture. Accordingly, the more objective and impersonal objects become, the broader their appeal to the masses. Therein mass consumption experiences its beginning. Simmel explains in detail how:

"Such consumable material, in order to be acceptable and enjoyable to a very large number of individuals, cannot be designed for subjective differentiation of taste, while on the other hand only the most extreme differentiation of production is able to produce the objects cheaply and abundantly enough in order to satisfy the demand for them. The pattern of consumption is thus a bridge between the objectivity of culture and the division of labour" (1978:455).



Hence, since it is impossible to mass-produce commodities for subjective tastes, marketing emerges as a means to survey the tastes of the masses. Market research allows producers to determine how to entice the consumer into buying a commodity. As the particularities of the relation between the consumer and producer are established over time, the impact of the division of labour on our consumer behavior is readily forgotten and yet this is what led to the objectification of our commodities. The culture of objects is entirely related to human culture, but this relation is lost as objects become emptied of their meaning in order to appeal to the greatest number of consumers.

Once again, when we examine the past relation between the craftsman and his art, we discover where the meaning in the object is created. The art of creation involves the inner self of the craftsman and therefore the object is often created in his self-image. Simmel objects to the division of labour as it destroys this relation to objects. He claims that: "whenever our energies do not produce something whole as a reflection of the total personality, then the proper relationship between the subject and object is missing" (1978:454). Thus, he claims, that the self suffers due to the fabrication of objects through specialized tasks. As such, the relation between the consumer and the object is not only weakened but it is altered because the original relation between the producer and the object is erased in its totality. As Marx has argued the craftsman or worker is estranged from his labour. The lack of creative energy in the object is what is missing and this is how the object becomes devoid of meaning.

Marx's analysis of the value of commodities leads him to similar conclusions. Just like Simmel, Marx argues that the value of commodities derives its worth from its social relation but that this is neglected in our capitalist world. His starting point for his

analysis is human labour power. Before industrialization, a commodity primarily had use-value coming from its usefulness as a product of labour. Meanwhile, human labour power is embodied and accumulated within the commodity, in its abstract form, thereby giving it exchange-value (Tucker, 1978:305). As mentioned by Simmel, Marx claims that through mass production, commodities acquire a life of their own, acting and reacting to one another in accordance to economic laws (Rader, 1979:106). The exchange-value of the commodity is independent of the use-value and it only takes place in the act of exchange. It is from this exchange-value that people acquire fetish attitudes towards commodities.

Marx explains that: “since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer’s labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange” (1978: 321). It is at this moment, in the act of exchange, that these products of labour acquire a “...uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility” (1978: 321). This detached social character of the labour that gives value to the commodity is what Marx has determined to be the cause of the fetishization of commodities.

Both Simmel and Marx have uncovered the missing links between producers and their product of labour. Upon discovering this, they also recognized that there is more than commodities involved in the act of exchange, meaning is exchanged between producer and consumer. Yet, Simmel’s analysis accounts for the creative meaning that is embodied in the commodity, while Marx describes this mysterious entity as the “social character of men’s labour” (1978:320). Marx does bring another interesting contribution to the analysis of commodities in terms of their value. He argues that:

“value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product of language” (1978:322).

In other words, even if capitalism obscures the fact that commodities are cultural symbols, they have to be analyzed in order to understand their social meaning and social implications. Marx argues that their symbolic power is mysterious to us because commodities take on a persona of their own through the fetishization of commodities. This is what Simmel has called their objective independence. While Marx declares that their value is “...just as much a social product of language” (1978: 322), he recognizes that their social meaning is derived from social interaction which happens through language. Thus Marx would argue that establishing the origins of meaning for material products cannot be done without examining the social relation between those involved: producer and consumer.

As such, once the object is emptied of its meaning, at that very moment, I would argue that marketing comes about as a means to re-establish the relation between producer, consumer and, of course, the object. At this point, marketing becomes a necessity in our capitalist economy because without it the economy becomes stagnant. As such, I believe that a marketing strategy must be designed in order to give to the product a sense of artificial meaning otherwise the consumer may not develop an interest in the product. Hence it is possible to conclude that marketing exploits this opportunity to establish the missing link between the object and its meaning and thereby acts as the bridge between the producer and the consumer.

## Searching for Self

Although the division of labour sheds light on the relation between the consumer and the object, and thereby helps to explain how marketing infringes on the relation, it is not the only explanation to the ever-increasing obsession of materialism in consumer culture. Needleman (1991) claims that the spending and buying experience is so vivid that it provides a unique sense of our personality (164). Consequently, we look for our inner self through material possessions. Along these lines, Simmel claims that the inner self actually experiences a need for material possessions. He claims that:

Just as the possession of any external object would be meaningless if it did not have a psychic value, so, at the same time, the Ego would collapse and lose its dimensions if it were not surrounded by external objects which become the expression of its tendencies, its strength and its individual manner because they obey, or in other words, belong to it (1978:322).

The external objects have what Simmel calls a psychic value or a kind of embedded meaning and the Ego needs this meaning to express self-identity as well as define itself. By possessing material objects that the self considers to be a reflection of itself, it attains a sense of its own meaning. As such, Simmel argues that: "...the whole significance of property lies in the fact that it releases certain emotions and impulses of the soul..." (1978:322). Moreover, he also describes the whole process of ownership as though it is an uncontested fact that property is simply an enlargement of the personality (1978:323). The relationship between the inner self and material possessions is described here as primal. It is as though the impulses of the soul are as essential to our survival as food and shelter.

In light of this argument, one could argue that consumer's interest in materialism stems from this desire to express our personality or sense of self. In western culture,

clothes help to define the self, referring to our differences in what makes us unique. At the same time, projecting a sense of identity through fashion objects serves as a way to express our interpretation of the world in a subjective context. Thus, marketing simply picks up on this desire and fuels our need to give meaning to our lives and express our true nature.

As mentioned earlier, according to Simmel, our inner self is more likely to be in need of material possessions in order to express who we truly are as people, rather than the critics' version that consumers are bombarded with material objects. Once again, Simmel supports the argument that people actually need material possession:

What we characterize as association in the external world, this is as entities somehow unified and existing in each other, actually always remain adjacent to each other, and in referring to this association we *mean* something that we can project only from within ourselves into the object, something that is incomparable to everything external, namely the symbol for what we are unable to state and what cannot immediately be expressed (1978:472).

When he says that: "...we *mean* something that we can only project from within ourselves...", he clearly is stating that part of the self can only be projected visually or articulated in a symbolic manner. He claims that the self cannot be expressed verbally in its complete entity. What's interesting about this passage is that Simmel is not clear as to whether he is referring to the producer or the consumer who needs to associate with the external. However, it is possible to image that he is referring to both as though the symbolism that is needed by individuals is so fundamental that it is irrelevant whether one has created the object or not; the emphasis described here is on the feeling of projection into the object.

Accordingly, he views this union between the internal and the external life as an eternal process whereby one is the symbol of the other, a realization of unity and of mutual dependence (1978:472). Thus, materialistic behavior, whereby one accumulates material possessions, is not an obsession that can be induced by marketing. While seeking out his or her inner self, it is in fact, the individual that seeks out material possessions. Albeit, I will argue in the following paragraphs, that a distinction must be made between the 'need' for material possessions as opposed to an obsession with consumer possessions. In sum, people have a natural inclination to be materialistic but marketing works to heighten this interest and increase it to the level of an obsession. This way the rate of consumption grows continually.

Up until now, one could argue that marketers are simply the lifeblood of our objective culture. After the division of labor emptied the meaning out of our cultural possessions, marketing comes along and reanimates them with a sense of meaning. Then, marketers would argue that they are in fact indispensable as they give us what we need in terms of appealing to the core of our identities. Regardless of what marketing opinionates, I think that one must be careful of how Simmel's work is interpreted because his theory should not be used to uphold marketing theory. I agree with Simmel in that material objects help define who we are as persons but I perceive material objects as a tool since they help us make sense of how we differ from others. Simmel is not arguing that material objects be the essence of who we are. Simmel's argument is critical of consumer ideology which would prefer that we define our identity solely through consumer objects, thereby creating a dependency on the objects we encircle ourselves with. In truth, self-identity should not be solely based on material objects.

In my opinion a distinction between material objects, that are non-advertised, versus consumer objects that we view in the media, will help us understand how these two perspectives differ. On the one hand, when we choose to associate ourselves with a material object that we like, we are faced with concrete evidence that our choices are different from others. Consumer objects, on the contrary, are projected upon us through the media. Meanwhile, when we choose a consumer object, with all of the symbolic meaning that is attached to it, is more a reflection of what we want others to think of us.

Consumer objects have more of a socio-economic reality that reflects upon us in relation to others. In sum, I am arguing that material objects are more genuine in their appeal since their socio-economic reality is irrelevant. Simmel conceptualizes objects as creative products and so both material and consumer objects can be defined as such but a definite distinction can be made by the meaning attributed to the objects by the consumer.

As such, an object can be defined as one or the other depending on why the individual seeks them out in the first place. For example, a woman chooses a pair of boots because she likes the look of them, they feel comfortable and she wears them for as long as she can regardless of whether they are in style, simply because they suit her style. That would be an example of a material object. On the other hand, another woman chooses to buy designer boots because they are the latest fashion. She compares them to everything else in the stores and they are the boots she dislikes the least. She is not really satisfied by these designer boots because they do not reflect anything about her self-identity. However, she has seen the boots in a magazine and she knows they are the latest style. In her head, she says to herself that people will know that they were expensive and

she will be envied, so she makes the purchase. The designer boots are now a consumer object. This is how I distinguish the difference between these two types of objects.

This distinction is easy to understand on a theoretical level, but in practice, it would be much more difficult to evaluate since consumer socialization is blurring the distinction between material and consumer objects.

### ***Consumer Socialization***

Historically, people have always expressed themselves through material goods and so we must ask what has changed? Now that objects have taken on countless more meanings, the entire process of consumption is marketed as something more meaningful than just shopping. Meanwhile, this marketing “science” has succeeded in bringing cultural, social and political meaning to many levels of consumption. Thus, the act of consumption has changed because it is embedded in meaning. Consumers have changed because they are highly socialized to believe in conspicuous consumption. Moreover, our motives for consuming and also the manner in which we consume has changed. In other words, the specific qualities consumers look for in the objects they purchase are no longer the same. Lury argues that the: “stylization of consumption...is what defines [today’s] consumer culture as a contemporary form of material culture (1996: 77). Being constantly subjected to advertising through the media, consumers are persuaded to believe that objects must have style in order to be worthwhile. Thus consumers are socialized to believe in style-value and consequently they are increasingly manipulated by this concept.



This complex process takes place as conspicuous consumption and or stylized consumption are marketed as solutions to problems. Consumerism is portrayed in such a positive light that people are encouraged to strive for the ideals which advertisers present before them. For example, Finkelstein argues that: “the icons constantly displayed before us in the mass media of happy, successful, active people who have a sense of their own destiny, are frequently misread as realistic depictions of human character” (1991:191). Through these images, consumers are socialized to believe that conspicuous consumption is a way of life that leads to success, happiness and all the good things life has to offer. They are being misled to believe that their self-esteem issues will be erased so long as they select the right product that will boost their ego. As such, consumers are not encouraged to question the validity of these images and assumptions but rather they are expected to focus much of their attention on consumer goods. The presumption behind this kind of marketing is that consumer products will provide solutions to these other problems. The basic message is that the right product can fix any problem or meet any need. Shopping for the right product translates to selecting the right set of meanings or images that will resolve these inner conflicts. In the following sections, various marketing ideologies will be further explored.

According to marketing ideology, stylized material goods allow us to express our individuality and above all our socio-economic “success”. Consequently consumers are encouraged by advertisers to become excessive buyers as each object purchased promises a new solution or achievement in their lives. Researcher, Helga Dittmar has found basic similarities among compulsive and excessive buyers.

They believe that consumer goods are an important route toward success, identity, and happiness, and they purchase these goods to bolster their self-image, drawing on the symbolic meanings associated with products in an attempt to bridge gaps between how they see themselves (actual self), how they wish to be (actual self), and how they wish to be seen (ideal self) (Benson, 2000: 106).

As mentioned earlier, choosing the right look or image that reflects how we perceive ourselves is a process that requires much attention. Complicated by the sheer number of different styles on the market, consumers must choose a look that is put together attentively by selecting appropriate objects that personify who we aspire to be. Howes explains that: a set of meanings are more or less attached to objects and the assemblage of these objects represent a set of meanings within the entire culture repertoire (1996: 2). Consumers are expected to believe that since we judge people according to their chosen assemblage of objects, every item is supposed to be carefully selected. For instance, two expensive shirts may give off the impression of success, but while one says conservative and predictable, the other yells out adventurous, loud and spontaneous. This is why consumers are expected to spend time and energy to fulfill this 'marketed' cultural norm to make sure that they truly are improving their self-image in an attempt to reach their ideal self.

Consumer ideology sends out so many messages encouraging us to define our identity through consumer objects. It seems clear that they are pressuring us to do so. Unknowingly, consumers are sometimes so well socialized that they seem unaware that they have defined themselves through the objects they possess. As though, they unconsciously believe that their worth as individuals can be measured by what they spend (Boundy in Benson, 2000:6).

In a sense, we are being trained to want and like the same type of stylized objects.

Joanne Finkelstein (1991) explains in her introduction the complexity of this process as we learn to believe in the power of style and image. She cites Heller:

Understanding human character from appearances, styles and images is an authoritative narrative of modern social life which has a significant influence on our habits of sociality. For instance, individuals who have physically groomed themselves in accord with prevailing definitions of beauty and attractiveness can feel confident of having constructed for themselves an appropriate and successful social identity. Such individuals have absorbed the prevailing values and have produced a social demeanour and sense of identity which will successfully carry them through the everyday world. Yet, the sense of self enjoyed by these individuals is, ironically, constituted from the received meanings of the times. That is, their sense of self is an embodiment of the representational fiction of a self. This sense of identity is a concatenation of prevailing ideas, yet it is experienced as unique because these elements and ideas have been idiosyncratically arranged by circumstances. Such a self can be said to be accidental (see Heller 1989).

Individuals who have constructed a sense of self, which is socially accepted, will experience positive reinforcements from their social environment. For example, the owner of a new and expensive watch such as a Rolex will receive admiration and be congratulated for his or her purchasing power. However as Heller remarks, the meaning attributed to the consumer objects comes from the cultural world. Thereupon the individual draws meaning from these objects that have been regulated symbolically and culturally through advertising. Indeed, a Rolex is known to be an expensive watch. So its value is not only the money spent in acquiring the watch but also the attached meaning of wealth and status recognized by most people.

Hence, the sense of self of this particular individual is the reflection of a mold that is prefabricated by societies' ideals and values. As such, Jhally (1990) argues that mass media advertising acts as a kind of mediator between the audience or consumer and the

intended message. He claims that: “for the audience to properly decode the message (transfer meaning) advertisers have to draw their materials from social knowledge of the audience” (1990: 132).

Thus, advertising presents us with structured meaning that we can easily assimilate and when unsatisfied again, we can exchange or relinquish these meanings for yet another structured meaning (Lee, 1993:146). In sum, style resulting from marketed images and illusions is conveying a regulated set of meanings to objects. Style acts as a tool in manipulating individuals to endorse consumer culture. In part, this explains why every kind of consumer object is stylized; from jewelry to household décor.

Behind marketing strategies, a complex socialization process is put in place to actively socialize consumers to consent to this pre-existing order that one should buy stylized meaning. At the center of this socialization process is the concept of style. Marketing appropriates cultural messages and reformulates them to encourage consumerism. Mason explains how this works:

in seeking to maximize consumer demand, producers and their advertising agencies come to be particularly aware of the very strong status considerations which can influence the purchase of many commodities. The levels of prestige and social acceptance given to particular products are of especial interest to status sensitive groups and it is in the interests of manufacturers of socially ‘visible’ products to lay heavy emphasis on the real or imagined status of their products if they wish to find the widest possible sale within a particular market (1981: 115).

Therefore, the emphasis on the style-value of objects is very intentional because it helps to promote sales. By attributing a high degree of symbolic power to objects, marketing is socializing consumers to consciously look for these cultural elements in the fashioned goods. This is what defines a commercialized concept of style versus a personal sense of style which is not at all determined by the fashion media. True, one’s personal style can

be influenced by fashion media and commercial looks; it would be hard not to be, but it is not limited by this realm. Essentially, style is what defines surface impressions but it “has also become an essential inescapable instrument of cultural and political discourse” (Tomlinson, 1990:46). The social meanings attached to objects can send out various messages such as: social position, socio-economic status, a political statement. Thus, style also represents symbolic power and emerges as an important part of our everyday life (Ewen, 1988: 22).

Undoubtedly, consumerism plays an important part in people's lives but to what extent should it control our lives? People are constantly being socialized to be good consumers; which means they are encouraged to believe that consumerism will only have positive effects on our lives. As a result, consumer ideology would expect that the agency of the individual exist solely in appropriating consumer goods to fulfill psychological needs for social status and recognition, or insecurities about loss of status of individuality. Berger (1977) argues that: “it recognizes nothing but the power to acquire. All other human faculties or needs are made subsidiary to this power. No other kind of hope or satisfaction or pleasure can any longer be envisaged within the culture of capitalism (153). According to him, the sole purpose of advertising is to make us dissatisfied with our own life and hope for a better one through the power of consumption.

In the meantime, an illusion of freedom has been created for the consumer whereby he or she believes that the variety of objects to choose from allows one to express individuality as well as find solutions to problems. As mentioned in Finkelstein's argument, stylized consumers are portrayed as “...people who have a sense of their own

destiny” (1991:191). In other words, carefully selecting the objects that we possess is portrayed as having control and freedom in itself. Consequently, being recognized for having a sense of style empowers the individual with a feeling of achievement.

Unfortunately, consumer ideology does not present individuals with alternatives to consumption. Miles (1998) argues that: “consumerism has tended to divert and actively dissuade people from opposition to dominant social orders, but it is not therefore in itself necessarily insubstantial or ‘inauthentic’” (154). People oppose dominant ideology through their own creativity or rebellious attitudes; making their purchase more real by not following the intended purpose of the object. Yet, although people invest their own personal meaning in consumer goods, they are still actively taking part in a consumer ideology. For example, even if one chooses to consume vintage clothes instead of the latest fashions, one is still making a purchase. “Consumers accept particular ways of organizing the world and or organizing social life as being ‘natural’ and as a result ideology becomes an essential element of social life” (Miles, 1998:155). As such, adopting an alternative look still implies consumption. Consumer ideology requires that no one question this pre-existing assumption.

Another argument along similar lines is that “material culture is not about interaction with objects but about uncritically accepting ideas and values about them” (Dant, 1999:26). Consumer ideology dictates to people that they should choose among the predetermined symbolic meanings attached to consumer objects. They can choose vintage over corporate but they are not encouraged to opt out of consumption all together. Hence in some ways, consumers are becoming more and more alike as they are constantly socialized to become excessive consumers. For marketing purposes, fitting us

neatly into target markets is easier, so marketing attempts to homogenize individual differences.

According to Berger, advertising is the language of capitalism that works to mask all that is undemocratic within our society. "Publicity, he argues, turns consumption into a substitute for democracy"(1977:149). This argument can be corroborated if we examine fashion throughout history. Fashion clothing was once a privileged right of nobility that the poor did not have because it was understood that they were "undeserving". The established social hierarchy of pre-industrialized Europe dictated what traditional costumes were to be worn by the lower classes but once commerce took hold of the fashion concept, all of this changed. The concept of fashion underwent a dramatic change from exclusivity and distinction for the rich to encouraging social imitation, social emulation and emulative spending. As such it became "... a world which blurred rather than reinforced class divisions and allowed the conspicuous lead of the fashion leaders to be quickly copied by the rest of society" (McKendrick, 1982:43). Thus, lower classes would copy dress fashions of higher classes making it even more obvious that the lifestyle of the rich was enviable. In sum, class competition and emulative spending lead to the downward spread of fashion and the social extension of the market (McKendrick, 1982:96). Now, people of all classes wanted to be fashionable. As such, the symbolic power of ownership is taken a step further when the objects possessed are enviable not only because they are expensive but also stylish and fashionable. Thus, advertising began to manipulate and exploit latent desires regarding wealth, class and distinction.

What fashion has as an inevitable strength is the ability to evoke emotions, feelings for luxury and a dream-like sensation that acquiring everything that one wants

would be just wonderful. In 1852, Boucicaut established in Paris the first department store called 'The Bon Marche'. With the advent of department stores came the beginning of the socialization process that leads us to associate browsing with a feeling of freedom. For the first time, a customer was allowed to wander through the store, from floor to floor, just to look without any intention of buying. The extravagance and grandeur of the department stores allowed the consumers to link their imaginative desires to material ones, thereby creating a link between dream and commerce. Potential customers had to be enticed to dream of owning luxurious objects.

Entwistle explains that: "by reducing fears about shopping and stimulating desire, the department store became a showcase for an expanding market of goods and commodities to a larger number of people than ever before" (2000:233). This socialization process was meant to seduce every potential consumer into a world of fantasy and consumption. "This was a world that emphasized individuality and individual satisfaction, and increasingly secular world of leisure and consumption which played on hedonism, the libido, dreams and longings" (Entwistle, 2000: 234). From then on, showcases, department stores and motion pictures forged the dream world of mass consumption as they encouraged consumers to give in to their longings and emulate the fashions.

After sumptuary laws were abolished, department stores were the next major step towards democratizing luxury items. From here on, people from all social classes were encouraged to live a new lifestyle. Department stores provided a form of solidarity as it brought together different social classes aspiring for something better. It is commonly argued by social scientists that department stores took over the role of the church as the



culture of consumerism replaced values centered around community life (Ritzer, 1999; Bowlby, 2000). Williams argues that lavish interior designs of department stores helped to create this luxurious ambiance for shopping (1982: 26). She describes the phenomenon as such:

Consumers were encouraged to wander through the department stores at will absorbing its fantastic representation of exotic worlds and consumer goods, and they were allowed to participate in this extraordinary environment without obligation (1982:26).

They were left to indulge in the possibility of fulfilling their desire for a luxurious lifestyle and yet the thought of their actual purchasing power became irrelevant. Even today, Neiman Marcus, a well-known department store, is praised for “never letting consumers forget that Neiman’s is synonymous with luxury, fantasy and designer fashions” (2002:3). Finally, Bowlby agrees with Williams that department stores are marketed to an aspiring middle class hoping to live a life of affluence. Bowlby claims that: “department stores...fostered a sense of perpetual and limitless desire for things, in a kind of socialized abandonment” (2000:8). To an aspiring middle class, department stores market all of their merchandise as though it was within hands reach. However, consumerism is embedded in self-contradictions and paradoxes that seem to escape the attention of those aspiring to ownership.

The irony behind consumerism is that while it is perceived to be normal, perhaps even meaningless behavior, is in fact fostering social inequalities. In the past, lower-class consumers were encouraged to emulate the high culture of the rich. Nowadays, mass consumption has attempted to blur the gaps between social classes. Emulation is now a two way-street as fashion for the masses imitates haute couture and then high fashion turns around and inspires itself from street fashion. Thus, Simmel’s emulation theory is

now outdated because it does not account for the complexity of the modern fashion industry. Perhaps it accounted for the elitism related to high fashion but realistically “an elite may influence the direction of taste but they do not control it and attempts made to co-ordinate popular taste can fail” (Entwistle, 2000: 222). On the other hand, Blumer proposes that fashions are the result of selective choices made by designers, journalists and buyers. Although designers know that their collection will be filtered through cultural mediators, they can never predict with certainty which particular styles will be selected by buyers and journalists.

Meanwhile, the fact that these buyers and journalists will often pick the same trends can be explained by “...these cultural mediators which are so immersed in the world of fashion...” (Entwistle, 2000:222). In sum, Blumer argues that fashion is a product created by the interconnected relation between designers, distributors, cultural mediators and consumers. In addition, one must not forget that when haute couture finds inspiration in street fashion, it is a means of recreating new, rejuvenating life into the fashion industry. In other words, it is simply a means to market fashion products in order to keep the consumer’s interest in buying new clothes and new fashions. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, it is capitalism strength to recreate itself to keep the cycle of production and consumption turning.

Thus, emulating the elite was a popular marketing tool that worked for many decades as the middle class developed and then later aspired to become part of the rich. According to fashion journalist, Limnander, in the past, being part of the elite meant buying prescribed luxury items and sharing them behind closed doors among tight circles of elite. Over the decades, “luxury has underwent a process of mass marketing: becoming

a part of the elite status quo merely required splurging on the right brand and showing them off at the right time” (2003: 252). Now marketing tactics are much more sophisticated as they work at blurring and blending the distinctions between elite products and the ordinary. For example, Bowlby describes how:

clothes that look like aristocratic originals are now available alongside recognizably lower-class things, so that the ‘quality’ ceases to be immediately distinguishable. The windows show the mixing of the classes not as a condescension from higher to lower, luxury reaching down and blending in the middle, but as a juxtaposition of two extremes, which thereby lose their distance (2000:12).

Thus, the objects in the display windows are attributed even greater power as they blur the distinction between haute couture and everyday fashion, altogether they represent the desire for a better quality of life. Accordingly, Limnander (2003) cites Al-Sabah, a retailer, who claims that: “the future of the luxury industry lies in offering different choices and styles targeted to specific types of customers” (254). Thus, luxury is now much more fluid as everyday jeans can be paired with luxurious accessories such as designer jackets or diamonds. The idea of luxury is being associated with an expression of liberal free choice. In addition, having luxurious items customized is now the latest symbol of elitism. Limnander argues that: “designers are catering to this new desire for more individualistic interpretations of indulgence” (2003:253). And so in time, we will be socialized once again to this new idea of luxury; elite consumption and freedom of expression as the latest marketing strategy.

Consumer socialization is all about presenting consumer culture as the realm of all meaning in our lives. Herein lies the problem with this intense bombardment of sign-value. Stylish items have taken on so much meaning that Baudrillard (1993) talks about how commodities have shifted from use-value to sign-value (Keat, Whiteley &

Abercombie, 1994: 50) and now to style-value. The result is that meaning is over-emphasized in consumer objects. The difference is that people buy an object more often for its symbolic meaning or style-value rather than its function. The utility of a product lies in its meanings, sign and image.

The main objective of consumer ideology marketed by advertisements is that people should bond with products, not other people. Thus, it is no wonder that the modern consumer can feel controlled. The bottom line is that consumer ideology imposes structures that are constraining to the consumer, even though firsthand they appeared to bestow freedom of expression and fulfillment, we are essentially told that buying is the most important aspect of our lives. In modern society, we have reached a point whereby “to have a lot of style is an accolade of remarkable personhood” and yet this definition is based entirely upon consumer ideology (Tomlinson, 1990:28). As such, if this is how we are establishing our self worth, then we are dependent on the symbolic power of our material possessions.

### ***Stylized Self-Identity***

Today, the stylization of consumption has an even more profound impact on consumers than it did in the past. Due to intense marketing of stylized objects, I will argue that our self-identity is becoming increasingly more dependent on consumer objects. Finkelstein asks very pertinent questions about the role of consumer ideology in our society. Indeed she argues that: “our pursuit of fashion as a source of personal identity is, paradoxically, the primary ingredient in the degradation of identity” (1991:145). Simmel’s theory, cited earlier in this text, is that most individuals have a

genuine need for material objects in the creation of self-identity, however there is a difference between a healthy relationship with objects and an obsessive compulsion to want new things. Moreover, since most stylized objects are regulated symbolically, we are not expressing much about own personal style. Marketing departments have got our self-identities nicely packaged to fit in a target market. I argue that our need for material possessions that reflect our sense of self is exploited by marketing and as a result it has overemphasized the role of imagery in our society.

Since the role of images and style works to socialize consumers, self-identity is also being subjected to stylization. We experience what Finkelstein describes as the degradation of identity because we lose the freedom to develop personal style. In the following section a discussion of this process of stylized self-identity will be discussed. Furthermore, the problem with being dependent on images and consumer objects, as expressed by the importance of logos and trademarks, will be addressed as we look at the obsessive nature of hyperconsumption.

Our need to associate with the external is due in part to the fact that self-identity is very often expressed visually. In our consumer society, people are surrounded by stylized images and fashionable looks coming from all forms of media. According to Hollander people unconsciously simulate the images that they have seen from all forms of media through everything from their movements, gestures and stance to their clothing. Her argument is that people will inwardly conceive of themselves based on general images coming from pictures and even other people (1979:315). She claims that: "comfort in clothing is mental rather than a physical condition...." (1979: 319). Consequently, particular clothing will be preferred when it conforms to an image because it is satisfying

to know that our self-image replicates a socially prescribed look (1979: 319). Of course, what this means is that in order to live up to these preconceived images, our self-identity must also conform to this socially regulated persona. The different images are regrouped into categories of stereotyped profiles and we, as distinct individuals, must want to fit into one of these preconceived images. We are socialized to believe that it will feel good and above all, it will be rewarding to conform to these social norms.

The rewards in our consumer society are plentiful. Having a sense of style relieves people's anxieties about acceptance and consequently people feel compelled to buy consumer possessions that will help construct an appropriate look. Lury argues that since: "the self is judged in terms of the accumulation of possessions ....identity itself is a kind of wealth" (1996:57). As mentioned, having a sense of identity is an accolade of being somebody worth noticing. According to Douglas and Isherwood, goods are carriers of social identity and interpersonal influence and so as a result:

...individuals will strive to put themselves in a position from which they might gain not just access to but control of cultural meanings, and that individuals will adopt strategies to make sure that they are not marginalized by the system (cited from Lury, 1996:14).

The way they will achieve this control of cultural meanings is by appropriating it for their own personal goals. For instance, by using style as a lure to give off an impression of wealth, sophistication, and refinement, an individual is giving specific messages to others. Firsthand, their appearance tells others that they are worth their attention. As well, they are also saying that they have incorporated (or rejected) the cultural values of consumer society and that they have been successful at doing so. Tomlinson (1990) argues that: "it is in the sphere of consumption...that many will seek to express their sense of freedom, their personal power, their status aspirations" (6). In sum, by

conforming to these cultural meanings, in other words, by showing their willingness to be part of the system, an individual is rewarded with a sense of superiority for living up to the image.

On the other hand, there are those who decide to rebel against the system and defy the dominant values of social order. In these subcultures, the clothing style has much significance because it makes a point of challenging social norms. This style is defined by defying the dominant cultural values (Hebdige, 1979:74). Thus, some objects may clearly indicate compliance with dominant values. He argues that for these subcultures: "...the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown" (1979:95). As such, style is intentional communication of similarity of differences. Hebdige claims that ultimately: "youth cultural styles may begin by issuing the symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones" (1979:96). The rebellious meanings attached to these signs are more than often appropriated by consumer culture and in the end they help infuse marketing strategies with new creative strategies. Marketing simply incorporates the fashion of trend setters so that they may profit from these 'rebellious' fashions.

When marketing departments develop brand names to give products a personality so that the consumer can identify with them, they often try to address "...all that is good and cherished in our culture: arts, sports, community, communication, equality" (Klein, 2000:335). By incorporating the issues that concern the consumer, into the product, the marketing strategy ensures that the consumer will relate to the product. The consumer's self-identity can then associate itself with the brand name because its cultural message

appeals to them. Branding, as Klein argues, ...is the quest to turn brand names into media providers, art producers, town squares and social philosophers- transforming this process into something much more invasive and profound (2000:335).

People's self-identity has become contingent upon consumer goods and fashion items to such an extent that they are very often willing to label themselves with the cultural messages. We value our material possessions so much that we are willing to transform our body into a commodity which can be used for display of prized possessions (Finkelstein,1991:5). She explains that: "using fashion as a code of communication makes use of appearances as if they were reliable signposts to the nature of self and to moral character of the individual" (1991:110). It so important that the message be clear to others that we are striving to conform to consumer values, individuals feel the need to identify themselves with fashion labels. Ritzer comments that: "subtlety has clearly all but disappeared when it comes to displaying the signs associated with the goods we consume. Most of us do not seem confident that those around us can 'read' the labels on our sleeves" (1999: 209). So, we brand our selves with corporate logos in order to make sure that others will know that we associate our inner selves with specific products. This phenomenon of showing off labels; walking around with shopping bags or wearing clothing with logos defines the extent of this dependency to consumer objects.

Self-identity is more often than not subjected to stylization since many people are more comfortable when they fit into a mould that is socially accepted. We construct our image as we would a brand name and more importantly we seek out labels as a stamp of approval. Klein cites Fournier who explains this craziness for brand names. She argues that: " this connection is driven not by the image the brand 'contains' in the culture, but



by the deep and significant psychological and socio-cultural meanings the consumer bestows on the brand in the process of creation” (2000: 176). Consumers connect with the socio-cultural meanings before they even begin to assess the product. In No Logo, Klein like many other theorists argues that corporations are in the business of constructing images for their brand names rather than just manufacturing products. Marketing departments have become overly powerful through this process of branding products with socio-cultural meanings. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from competitors, corporations and their marketing departments have reached a point where they have overpowered our culture. They appropriate everything and anything that will help them sell a consumer product.

Unfortunately, the harmful effects of marketing propaganda are not evident. It is difficult to link a dependency on objects or a stylized lifestyle to serious problems such as feelings of emptiness, isolation, loneliness and alienation. According to Pipher’s summary of Kilbourne’s work, she points out that “advertisements steer us away from what really makes us happy: meaningful work, authentic relationships, and a sense of connection with history, community nature and the cosmos” (Kilbourne, 1999:13). As Klein mentioned, marketing ideology brands their products by appropriating these connections to meaningful aspects of our lives. This keeps us focused on consumer products rather than spiritual connections with the world. These connections truly give us meaning and happiness, without them, we lack meaning and it is then easy to pick up meaning from off a shelf or a rack because it is neatly packaged through consumer objects. Alienation and emptiness takes root in people with serious problems related to their sense of self, but we all succumb to the relative ease of purchasing meaning or

identity through a consumer product. This will be further explored in the following chapter.

In the media, it is not uncommon to hear suggestions that individuals should view them selves as a product and hence they should be attempting to sell themselves when searching for a job. Sadly, the more people believe in consumer ideology the more likely they are to interpret this as a question of presenting themselves with the right suit, the right tie and the right shoes. Moreover, research done by Furby (1978) and Tuan (1984) has found that the more we believe we possess or are possessed by an object, the more a part of self it becomes" (Belk cited in Benson, 2000: 79). As such, the importance we attribute to an object, the more it takes over importance in the construction of our self-identity.

In the end, the problem is that as we become increasingly dependent on consumer objects in order to build our self-identity, it is likely that our inner core will be depleted of any true meaning over the process our lifetime. Moreover, Belk argues that:

when attempts to enhance self through accumulating possessions results in the compulsive acquisition of consumer goods, using purchasing as an intended mood enhancer and possessions to compensate for a lack of significant others in our lives, more psychological harm than good may result (Benson, 2000: 95).

As people become depleted of their personal sense of inner meaning, they become more and more discontent, alienated from their self, they do not have a sense of true identity.

From this we can conclude once again that perhaps marketing departments have overpowered our culture by saturating it with stylized images.

In fact, the stylization of consumption reached even greater heights as marketing departments decided to take on as a new challenge; stylizing our entire lifestyle. Since the 1980's, we have witnessed the introduction of lifestyle marketing which focuses on

selling an image that affect all areas of a person's life. It's about selling products that work as a whole to give a mood or a style to one's life choices. For instance, a consumer's choices in a particular wardrobe would naturally lead to a furniture style, particular hobbies and even a car that encompasses the whole entire look of the individual. It is preposterous that a person should be boxed into this constraining image of self and yet this is what marketing attempts to sell as positive image of self.

In more sophisticated terms, Entwistle (2000) cites Shields who describes the phenomenon of lifestyle as "affective groupings... which emerge through the medium of shared systems of symbolic codes of stylized behaviour, adornment, taste and habitus (1992:14)" (225).

Another way of explaining how lifestyle marketing affects our lives is that it assumes that everything in our life should be packaged neatly and sensibly so that all of our consumer choices coincide with one another. In other words, if all of our choices are not coherent with one another, then we are not neatly packaged and in control of our sense of self. For example, one might assume that a marketing niche made up of "dinks", (double-income, no kids) who are professionals and probably meritocrats, would like risk-taking, adventure and luxury. According to marketing strategy, they are probably a good target market for expensive vacation packages. These lifestyle choices imply a certain predisposition for a certain lifestyle 'image' and thereby products that suit that image.

As mentioned throughout the text, the fact that consumer ideology presents a limited number of commercialized lifestyles to live by does not mean that we experience more freedom. Every time, an individual seeks out a consumer object for its' brand logo,

this person forsakes a part of their true self-identity. Finkelstein explains that: "it leads to a self fabricated from an image, which will collapse or implode under the weight of the never-satisfied desires which are pressed upon individuals from the consumer culture" (1991:191). A prime example of individuals who become dependent on consumer objects and logos in creating their self-identity are teenagers, especially teenage girls. Capeloto, a journalist for the Detroit Free Press, quotes a mother of a teenage daughter who reflects on her childhood in Alabama. She claims that although she faced racism and sexism in the U.S. South during the 1960's, she thinks that teens face just as much pressure if not more. They feel the need to fit in, or suffer the consequences as a social outcast and so "...girls obsess over everything-whether they are too skinny or too fat, and over owning the right name-brand clothes" (2001:A1).

The media has a very strong impact on how teenagers see themselves. Capeloto also cites Jerry Herron, head of the American Studies Department at Wayne State University in Detroit who argues that: "young people today increasingly rely on products to express their identity" (2001:A16). As the pressure to fit certain molds has grown, we have witnessed the growth of consumer culture among teens as they spend \$108 billion on fashion clothing, CD's, magazines and movies. Unfortunately, if a teenager does not keep up with their teenage consumer culture, their self-esteem, as Finkelstein describes, collapses into a teenage crisis, whereby it would appear that they begin to believe that they are worthless for not having the latest trend. While their fixation with consumer goods is encouraged by advertising and intertwined with their identity, they lose a sense of how to build an identity that does not over rely on consumer goods.

In general, a consensus exists among social scientists that fashion expresses the tensions between the individual and society (Simmel, 1978; Hollander, 1979; Finkelstein, 1991). Yet in the past as well as the present, the topic of fashion is often belittled for being frivolous. Although fashion is a very complex issue, explanations and theories of fashion are often restricted to either the psychological level or to the social role of fashion. Accordingly, fashion can be explained by the need to gain recognition, prestige and set oneself apart in order to demonstrate distinctions in personality, wealth and skill. This would be the reason why the concept of fashion is universal. It is important, however, not to limit the relevance of fashion in everyday life. Self-identity is very much affected by our social environment and the reverse can also be true. Cannon theorizes that if one experiences a drop in status, one's sense of position in relation to others may be re-established through fashion. In sum, she argues that fashion helps to disguise our socio-economic background since an individual with great style will often be associated with expensive clothing even if this is not the case. According to Cannon: "if self-identity were never in doubt and social comparison never took place, there would be no demand for fashion, and there would be no need or opportunity for style change" (1998:35). Although I do not agree with Cannon's assumption that there would be no need for fashion, I would argue that our present consumer ideology does focus a great deal on social comparison.

Advertising plays upon insecurities by encouraging us to compare our self to others. As a result, self-identity is more frequently put into question. While our personal clothing style, which is an expression of the self, can either reveal or hide these insecurities, if social status is in doubt, consumer ideology tells us that what we lack we

can purchase. If self-esteem is low, a stylized outfit can boost confidence. In this modern era, style and fashion is being marketed as the core of an individual's identity.

In the final chapter, I argue that the self is being emptied of its meaning in the same manner as material objects were emptied of their meaning once the worker was alienated from their product. An individual who creates their self-identity according to consumer ideology rather than their own ideas is depleted of true identity. As such, the self of many individuals is being refilled with artificial meaning. The individual is encouraged to practice what Goffman describes as 'impression management'. Ultimately, I will develop the argument that these individuals have created an artificial personality as they lead a life of pretense.

### **Chapter III- Marketing Pretense**

In the previous chapters, I argued that marketing has reached a level of unethical decision-making whereby the consumer is deceived and contrary to marketing's dogma, consumer freedom diminishes. Due to the fact that consumption had become more of a cultural process than marketers wish to admit, marketing is a much more powerful force than society recognizes. In the last few decades, our consumer culture has become an exploding phenomenon that is most accurately described as 'hyperconsumption'. The repercussions of mass consumption are ignored while this shopping fantasy world glamorizes the fact that it tries to encompass all meaning in our lives without giving it any substance.

I will examine once again from another perspective, how the sign-value of stylized objects is closely linked to the socialization of consumers. Through a social script, marketing uses stylized consumer objects as a tool to maintain social control. Their symbolic power is construed from political as well as cultural discourse in order to authenticate the narrative that 'shopping is good'. Ultimately, the impact of consumer ideology on the consumer's personal identity can only be characterized as negative.

In light of this opinion, I will be stating my arguments in the following chapter. Beginning with the argument that marketing encourages conspicuous consumption and the usage of credit. This in turn affects the construction of self as one becomes alienated from one's social relations; as consumers, we become increasingly dependent on consumer objects. The following questions arise from this premise. What happens when our self-identity becomes dependent on consumer goods? For example, what happens to the teenage girl who feels inferior to others without a designer label on her jeans?

Answers that come to mind are vulnerable and insecure. It is important to understand what happens when we define our sense of self primarily through consumer objects because more and more people are consuming in this manner without realizing that there are consequences.

I will begin this chapter by demonstrating that in comparison with traditional community life, people in modern society define themselves very differently from how they did back then. Nonetheless, in order to construct a healthy relationship with ourselves, we need to have a sense of connection with family, friends, coworkers, history, community and nature. Without these connections, we experience emptiness. I will begin by arguing that people who rely on consumer objects to define themselves will eventually experience emptiness in their life due to the fact that they will have alienated themselves from their true sense of identity which can only be based on these meaningful connections. Then, in the next section, I will argue that these people are increasingly more vulnerable to outside social scripts which promote values that are not always in their best interest. In fact, they are more likely to intensify the process of self-alienation because these values encourage impression management. Next, I argue that misrepresenting their sense of self in the public sphere through impression management will further alienate the individual. The act of pretending to be someone that is more socially acceptable only leads to an alienated sense of self. Ultimately, this process alienates a person from others creating a sense of artificial social relations and a greater feeling of alienation. Throughout this portion of this research, it will be demonstrated that this modern way of creating identity through image and consumer products aggravates our sense of alienation.



### ***Degradation of self-identity***

Examining the changes that consumer culture has brought upon our society is best achieved by looking back, once again, upon traditional society. One's social identity was not so much of an issue in traditional societies since it was already known by others within the community. Life was simplified by the fact that every individual had an ascribed role. This role was defined in terms of expectations and assumptions from family and community. Every individual had a role that was prescribed to them from birth and so they would build their sense of identity through their family network and their role within the community life. Material possessions may have been an extension of their sense of self as they reminded an individual of their family history or personal achievements. However, the image of oneself was reflected through the eyes of traditional commitments to family and friends in exchange for this conformity, the family member received fundamental human support, a powerful payment!

Creating self-identity through social life and family ties was dramatically changed when the process of modernizing traditional society led to the introduction of city life. Entwistle (2000) notes that with the city came along a certain anonymity that did not exist in a traditional rural community, where everybody knew everything about everyone (138). "Without tradition or established patterns for recognizing others, the anonymity of the city opened up new possibilities for creating oneself; giving the individual freedom to experiment with appearance in a way that was unthinkable in rural community life" (2000: 138). The city allowed for crowds of strangers to mingle and free themselves from their prescribed identity attributed to them by the community. Before long, city life

posed its own challenges as it became evident that gaining recognition from total strangers would require new social strategies.

As such, the key to surviving social life in the city meant that people had to developed their own identity rather than having an identity imposed upon them. One of the new social strategies for coping developed within the city was reliance on fashion. In order to make an impression on strangers, people relied on fashion to express information about their identity such as their class and social status. As noted by Entwistle (2000), “anonymity increases the emphasis placed upon appearance...” (112). Meanwhile, people believed that they could determine their identity, albeit through appearances. People could choose to be whomever they wanted to be. They just had to dress appropriately. Entwistle argues that: “in contemporary culture, the body has become the site of identity. We experience our bodies as separate from others and increasingly, we identify with our bodies as containers of our identities and places of personal expression” (2000: 138). Relying on the appearance of the body as a symbol of identity becomes the only means of ‘reading’ others as people became surrounded by a sea of unfamiliar faces in the city. Thus, choice of clothing and style becomes the ultimate accolade of personal identity.

Unfortunately, the freedom that is experienced through style and fashion is short-lived as “our pursuit of fashion as a source of personal identity is, paradoxically, the primary ingredient in the degradation of identity (Finkelstein, 1991:145). This passage is quoted once again because, at this point, as I argue, this statement has much deeper implications than what was discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, Finkelstein is making a very strong argument against the pursuit of fashion. As I argued earlier; not

only do we lose the freedom of expressing our very own identity, but she claims that the inner core of our identity is emptied of true meaning

The overemphasized role of imagery in the city and in marketing, in addition to our over reliance on appearance, causes us to be reduced to an image. The act of purchasing and of appearing becomes so closely linked to achieving personal success and recognition that 'buying' and 'being' are confused but the process remains devoid of any true meaning (Hammerslough, 2001:26). As a result, the concept of self-identity feels hollow and empty.

Unlike the identity prescribed by traditional community life that is forged through social relations, in the city, identity is established through material possessions as they 'tell' others who you are; as a function of who you appear to be to total strangers. However, in this context, identity can easily be manipulated, not to mention how meaningless and artificial identity becomes when it is based solely on material possessions.

The feelings of recognition and belonging that come from living in a community cannot be faked or bought through material possessions. "Conveniently omitting that one actually has to do something to actually be a part of, say a community, family or political movement"... , does not mean that the sense of easy belonging promised by possessions is real (Hammerslough, 2001:114). In sum, the identity that was once developed through traditional ties and social relations and which gave authenticity to the idea of true self-identity is being replaced. The modern self experiences an identity crisis turning to fashion as a means to frame the self but in the end these attempts to contain the self are

sensed as futile. This entire process leaves the individual alienated from his or her social ties and entirely more dependent on outside sources for self-determination.

### ***Self-identity in Modern Life***

Now that all of these traditional networks are eroded from daily life and that we are left to our own devices in establishing our self-identity, other influences determine the self. Beck (1992) argues that:

“the place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness” (131).

So although we have rid ourselves of an ascribed role prescribed by the community and family, we are not anymore in control of our identity as outside agencies and institutions try to mold us to a new script. This script informs the individual from a young age that conformity will be rewarded. As such, recognition is bestowed to those who work hard, strive to be accomplished, constantly seek monetary gains and spend much on consumer symbols of success. For instance, as mentioned earlier, people who depend on fashion to portray an image of their chosen identity, especially one that conforms to the script adhere to the social protocol of proper attire. Even if they do not wish to conform to the script they are still constrained in their style or self-expression for many different reasons related to marketing strategies discussed in the previous chapters. Finally, individual freedom is curbed because values continue to be prescribed according to society's agenda.

Society's agenda is usually to maintain status-quo and so the values promoted encourage the individual to abide by the political and economic structure. For example, society trains people to attach high value to individual initiative and achievement because these are the values that stimulate the economy (Packard, 1959: 326). As Brooks (2000) notes we are trained to be meritocrats and so we define ourselves by our accomplishments (36). Striving for success, as defined by society's capitalist structure, refers to achieving greater social status through upward mobility. Social classes are now defined by their means of consumption. As such, societal agencies constantly promote the concept of personal success as a means to define the self. Among these agencies are the corporations and advertisers that use the media as a way to disperse consumer values. And so, individuals feel compelled to ascribe to a new script which is in part defined as the "good" consumer. For instance, some feel compelled to buy expensive clothes to express their success in life. They believe that what is inexpensive is unworthy and 'a cheap coat makes a cheap man' (Veblen, 1899: 169). Here again, we simply conform to the script of the successful professional in expensive clothes.

Beck argues that: "... individualization delivers people over to an external control and standardization that was unknown in the enclaves of familial and feudal subcultures" (1992:132). Ultimately, the emphasis on personal development and individual freedom in terms of success has the sole purpose of social control. People are taught to seek out their destiny or true sense of self through achievement and self-actualization and yet they end up being "...preoccupied with acquiring evidence of status" (Packard, 1959: 357). This paradox is an example of how the script works to control the individual because initially it gives the message of freedom through ideas such as initiative, hard work and

achievement. Then the individual who wants recognition for his or her success has been socialized to believe that success is expressed only through prescribed factors.

The end result is that eventually this preoccupation with social status and achievement will become a problem for some. If a society claims that success is determined by status symbols, then those who do not fulfill this goal will experience feelings of personal failure (Packard, 1959: 326). For many the present is continually deferred as they await the moment when they can afford to fulfill the dream of success, the dream of acquisition, of purchasing success (Berger, 1979: 153).

Otherwise to admit defeat in this capitalist system is the equivalent of saying "I have nothing, therefore, I am nothing" (Berger, 1979:143). Veblen argues that: "since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (1899:74). In his book, Packard quotes Ralph Linton who argues that:

Americans have been trained to attach such high values to individual initiative and achievement that they tend to look down upon societies which are rigidly organized and to pity the persons who live in them. However, the members of a society whose statuses are mainly prescribed are no less happy than ourselves and considerably more at peace (1959:326).

In sum, although in our present system not every individual can attain the glory of success and experience the sense of achievement and recognition that comes with possessing material wealth, the irony is that most are unwilling to risk the alternative; that is that everyone should be considered equal. This illustrates the contradictions and paradoxes in the system and also at which people are indoctrinated by the system and

socialized to believe that this quest determines worthiness and demonstrates survival of the fittest.

Another problem with our society's methods of standardization is that people are encouraged to embrace all the marvels of the media and of technology at the expense of their social life. Unfortunately, as people become increasingly more focused on technology, the result is that people spend more of their time interacting with material objects rather than other people (Dant, 1999:15). While we work harder to have the money to spend on acquiring more technologically advanced gadgets, we never truly enjoy them for very long before we learn that the technology has been improved. Meanwhile, unwinding from the stress of working longer hours, we walk through shopping malls, sit through movies and watch television shows that project the image of the successful individual who takes pleasure in consuming.

Again, while we strive to spend on stylized goods and keep up to 'speed' with what the media has to offer, we always feel behind in this social quest for the successful identity. "The point is that spending time purchasing and connecting to stuff may take a backseat to connecting to the person you love" (Hammerslough, 2001:148). The people that we love are the ones who give us a sense of identity that is fulfilling. The social script that prescribes a meritorious life leaves people alienated from their loved ones because time is limited, we usually run out of time to do both. This is yet another reason why people feel the need to hide their vulnerability and they do so by acquiring material possessions.

When our self-identity suffers a crisis, fulfilling the script of the status seekers may be the easiest way to regain self-esteem or give our self-confidence a boost. In an article from The Gazette, Mary Ethridge claims that: “many shoppers- estimates run as high as 60 million- are addicted to shopping, using it as a way to fill an emotional void in their lives, the way an addict uses drugs” (2002:D3). Moreover, Packard argues that: “the vigorous merchandising of goods as status symbols by advertisers is playing a major role in intensifying status consciousness”, and he adds that emotionally insecure people are most vulnerable (1959:7). Many social theorists and critics believe that shopping is a quick fix to emotional problems (Benson, 2000, Ethridge 2002). According to Hammerslough (2001), the real question revolves around our faith in the power of possessions to answer deeper needs. Why do we seek empowerment from possessions? She argues that connections to objects can make us feel in control of the moment, but I would argue that our need to feel in control of our life is transferred to an easier means; that is controlling possessions. Packard also questions the validity of this system: “by encouraging people constantly to pursue the emblems of success, and to causing them to equate possessions with status, what are we doing to their emotions and their sense of values?” (1959:317). The answer may be simplified to appropriating emotions and values to enable the social structure.

Even though, the process of constructing our identity has undergone many changes over time, we adhere to the script, regardless of whether we measure up to it. Marketing is simply a voice, a means to disperse the values of the script. While, people rely on fashion to inform others of their chosen identity, they are really informing them of



their level of adherence to the script, their success and achievements as per determined by the script. Kilbourne reiterates the argument that:

To be one of the 'elect' in today's society is to have enough money to buy luxury goods. Of course, when salvation comes via the sale, it becomes important to display these goods. Owning a Rolex would not impress anyone who didn't know how expensive it is. A Rolex ad itself says the watch was voted 'most likely to be coveted'. Indeed, one of advertising's purposes is to create an aura for a product, so that other people will be impressed. (1999:69)

Displaying luxury goods is so important because they provide a visual cue. Veblen summarizes the process of judging others reputability (according to the script) as such:

the means of communication and the mobility of the population now expose the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging of his reputability than the display of goods which he is able to make while he is under their direct observation (1899:86).

Meanwhile, the power of marketing is not only to influence those who seek out a new status symbol, but also to influence those who will never be able to afford the status cue. The person who owns a Rolex needs the others to feel impressed and envious. This is the art of impression management. Without these feelings of envy evoked in others, impression management has no purpose. If others are not informed of the value or cost of consumer goods, then the appeal is lost because there is no fun in being the only one who knows the worth of the object. In the following section Goffman explains how we gain a sense of control in our lives by controlling material goods in order to impress others and show our worthiness in terms of the script.

## *Impression Management*

In his book, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman introduces the idea of controlling the impression that others will have of us by conducting ourselves differently in front of a group. In other words, people are conscious of the impression that they will have on others and so they devise personal and social strategies in order to “give off” a particular cultural message. They will not only achieve this through verbal communication but also through hand gestures, body stance, clothing and facial expressions. Goffman claims that every individual is always wearing a mask in front of others because we tend to be playing a role; impersonating the person we want to be or who we would like others to believe that we are. He argues that: “in a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves-the role we are striving to live up to-this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (1959: 19). The image of the person we are striving towards is normally a more positive self; with greater self-esteem, greater confidence and many other positive attributes.

The reason for this performance is that we are projecting a definition of self that will seek favorable reactions from others. Accordingly, people present themselves with the anticipation of a particular response. Goffman argues that:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect (1959: 13).

As such with regards to these principles, the self-image that we create through our performance has a double intent. We gain a sense of identity by projecting an image that gives off a cultural message, but this 'frontstage' performance also intends to inform an audience about how we expect to be treated. It is difficult to uphold a self-image with regards to how we feel about our selves if others do not believe in our performance. The positive feedback from others contributes to our well-being without which we cannot truly believe that we are who we want to be, especially if others are not convinced by the performance. Hence, in reference to Goffman's second principle, it can be understood that social status cannot be maintained without the compliance of others. The others around us have the power to help in maintaining the image or simply reject it. In sum, the others do not have to comply with the moral demand to treat them in a specific manner, however normally we are socialized to do so.

Impression management is most commonly used in situations where an individual needs to establish social status or wishes to gain esteem from others to ensure social mobility. In these particular scenarios, an individual who feels their self-identity to be threatened is more likely to convey misinformation by either using means of deceit or feigning. Goffman argues that: "...an idealized impression is offered by accentuating certain facts and concealing others..."(1959: 65). Unfortunately, the reality is that the individual who is truly convinced of their own self-definition stands more of a chance of convincing others (1959:70). Nonetheless, whether the others doubt the authenticity of an individual's performance or not, most will consent to treating the individual in the manner they so choose. Of course, the most important means of convincing others of how one should be treated is through status symbols.

Without a doubt, status symbols are sign vehicles that help substantiate the performance. As such, consumer goods help authenticate an image as they are often visible signs of status and value that "...carry expressive significance, that is, it may express the point of view, the style of life, and the cultural values of the person who makes it, or may satisfy needs created by the imbalance of activity in his particular social position" (1951:295). Either way, these symbols provide a visual cue that helps others discover the status of that individual as well as the cue that helps them determine how they expect to be treated. For example, fashion designer labels are used as symbols of social status in order to inform others of the lifestyle choices and cultural values. They also attest to a person's performance. If they can afford designer labels such as Gucci, Versace or Givenchy, then they must be who they claim to be.

In this stylized consumer world, I would argue that fashion designer labels are the status symbols par excellence. Fashion clothing and designer jewelry are marketed as reliable signposts so as to convince the consumer of the legitimacy of the purchase. An individual with lots of wealth cannot go around telling everyone where they live or what they drive. Therefore, designer labels with expensive price tags tell others that one must have wealth in order to afford such items. Meanwhile, Goffman explains that the role of status symbols is to: "visibly divide the social world into categories of person, thereby helping to maintain solidarity within a category..." (1951: 294). Designers help define an individual's social status, lifestyle and thereby self-identity.

However, designer labels on stylized consumer objects are arguably excessive as they attempt to clearly categorize consumers. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, Ritzer denotes that people who stamp themselves with a label feel the need to emphasize their

affiliation to a particular cultural messages for fear that others might not be able to identify them. "The paradox, he says, is that although we no longer seem to trust one another as readers of signs, the fact is that we have all become much more sophisticated and sensitive readers of signs" (1999: 209).

Yet, Goffman would argue that regardless of how well others can 'read' the status symbols, it is important for the person seeking a higher social status to associate with symbols of that group. It is the means of gaining access to a social network since an acceptable image in presenting the self is what distinguishes individuals on the surface (1959: 8).

Hollander would corroborate this argument by stating that: "identifying oneself through dress has therefore become a matter of appearing as a member of a group that wears certain things and not others in the same price range (1979: 347). Thus, it is essential while presenting oneself to a particular society to give off the right status signals since surface impressions are often all that count while deciphering who's who.

Meanwhile, an individual who has created a stylized identity for themselves is more likely to use the art of impression management not just to gain social acceptance into high status groups, but also to establish a reason for others to envy them. Berger explains that: "publicity is about social relations not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour" (1977:132). Strange but true, happiness according to capitalism, is having what others want, or in other words, being envied by others. Through this envy, marketing manufactures glamour. Berger argues the case as such. He claims that:

glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion. The industrial society which has moved towards democracy and then stopped half way is the ideal society for generating such an emotion. The pursuit of individual happiness has been acknowledged as a universal right. Yet the existing social conditions make the individual feel powerless" (1979:148).

As such, people who feel entitled to happiness, but do not have the means, will feel powerless, unless strategies such as impression management can be adopted to give a sense that one is on the way to acquiring what is rightfully theirs. Marketing advertises the dream of happiness achieved through consumer culture. This is what is defined as "glamorous" because the social world will envy the few who have what is out of reach for the others.

### *Pretense*

Since "the modern individual is one that is aware of being 'read' by his or her appearance", more and more people choose to manipulate the signals that they give off (Entwistle, 2000:73). As such, in this section, I argue that marketing fosters a life of pretense and impression management. Surface impressions are easily achieved by managing one's appearance very closely. In spite of the fact that fashion designer labels are marketed as truthful signs of status achievement, the reality is that it is always possible to misrepresent our self with consumer objects. Although we rely on their expressive validity, the reality is that clothes cannot always be 'read' because "they do not straightforwardly 'speak' and can therefore be open to misrepresentation (Entwistle, 2000: 112). For instance, designer clothes may sell at outrageous prices but perhaps a particular dress was bought on sale or worse it is a replica. Giving the false impression that one has spent a lot of money on their clothes is a common way to manipulate status.

True, Marx once said that the social classes would ultimately conflict, but instead for many different reasons they just blurred. Income level, occupation and social background are not so easy to detect and as a result an individual who wants to signal to others their status must rely on symbols. Consequently, "it is always possible...that symbols may come to be employed in a 'fraudulent' way, in other words, to signify a status which the claimant does not in fact possess" (Goffman, 1951:296).

Perhaps disheartening to the wealthy, the invention of credit has allowed many into elite social circles. Finkelstein explains that: "by creating the ability to live beyond one's means, by pretending to be financially stronger than one is, the age of consumerism has engendered an emphasis on the spectacular and exhibitionist (1991:118). This is why I'm arguing that credit has become an ultimate tool in the art of impression management. If an individual does not have the financial means to 'give off' the status signals, he or she can always pretend by buying on credit. Thus, it would appear that: "the democratization of fashion blurs yet further the distinctions between a fashionable elite and the majority of the population (Entwistle, 2000:134). In sum, it is much easier to claim a social position by using credit.

As such, the credit card industry has brought upon modern society a whole new dimension to social classes. No one would readily admit that they compete for social status as they consume bigger and better things, but the reality is that much of the luxuries we consume give out the signal that "I'm just as good, if not better, than you" (Hammerslough, 2001:191). Meanwhile, credit is the American symbol par excellence that allows us to live a lie of excessive luxuries.

Ritzer argues that: “among other things, the credit card is emblematic of affluence, mobility and the capacity to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of one’s goals” (1995:27). He also discusses the tactics used to lure college students to live beyond their means as “they represent a huge and lucrative market for credit card companies” (1995:12). He explains how many of the students do not realize that: “they are living at a level that they cannot afford at the time or perhaps even in the future. They may establish a pattern of consistently living beyond their means” (1995:14). And although this may be marketed to the public as harmless, the reality is that living a life on credit is masked in self-deception. Not only does it harm their finances but more fundamentally, I would argue that credit is a way of not dealing with our shortcomings in terms of the social script discussed earlier.

Goffman explained that when a person chooses to play a certain role in front of others, they must remain consistent to their role or else they risk discrediting their performance. As such, regardless of whether one has the means to keep up with their performance, people can do so on credit. If the performance is discredited then it is rather similar to admitting a kind of defeat in terms of the status race. Moreover, when people do not keep up with the charade that upholds their social identity, they are exposing an inconsistency that will shatter the beliefs that others had of them. This is the definitive blow to their self-identity.



### *Alienated Self*

Goffman argues that there are perils related to these performances. In the summation of his discussion on impression management, he warns that: "... to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others" (1959:236). Compounded by the fact that the self is constructed through consumer objects, the self that is staged through a performance will start to feel entirely artificial and without substance. When one is busy managing an outer image, the act that is performed does not authenticate the real person, but rather hides the truth as though in shame.

The act of building a sense of self that is externally manifest, or constructed through consumer objects, causes us to feel alienated from our self. Accordingly, a self that is fraudulent is a self that pretends to be someone that it does not truly identify with. Thus, many theorists argue that the dangers related to this dependency on material possessions are numerous but the symptoms are always more or less the same; depression, addictions and compulsive behaviors.

...there can be extremely negative consequences to building a sense of self that is externally manifest, because the inner core self is likely to feel more and more empty and more vulnerable as this process continues over a lifetime. Moreover, when attempts to enhance self through accumulating possessions results in the compulsive acquisition of consumer goods, using purchasing as an intended mood enhancer and possessions to compensate for a lack of significant others in our lives, more psychological harm than good may result (Belk cited in Benson, 2000:95).

Caught up in a vicious circle to acquire or maintain status through the accumulation of material possessions, an individual builds an identity that feels hollow and without substance.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when consumer goods are used to compensate for an emotional void or feelings of alienation, then material possessions simply contribute to the feelings of emptiness and insecurity. Kilbourne argues strongly that:

One certainly doesn't have to be an alcoholic or any kind of addict to have suffered from a sense of emptiness. Our materialistic culture encourages this sense of emptiness because people who feel empty make great consumers. The emptier we feel, the more likely we are to turn to products, especially potentially addictive products, to fill us up, to make us feel whole. Not everyone has to give up these things, but we all can profit from becoming conscious of their role in our lives. They all serve to distance us from our feelings and to deflect attention from that which might really make a difference in our lives (1999:29).

This psychological perspective on modern identity in this consumer world is that of a victim who empowers him or her self through the lens of the social script and through the accumulation of material possessions. While this social script simply misguides the individual to suit the purpose of outside agencies and capitalist goals, the individual is left to deal with depression, addictions and compulsive behaviors. From this psychological theory, the cycle of addiction only repeats itself when the individual returns to the shopping high as a mood enhancer. In sum, many theorists might argue that marketing can only be viewed as the trigger for those who are emotionally insecure or for those who have addiction problems. Further on in this chapter, it will be demonstrated why Kilbourne disagrees; arguing that advertising actually encourages emptiness thereby fostering addictions. The question that remains to be debated is whether people are to be blamed for their weaknesses.

Ritzer who has written on the credit card industry takes a different perspective on the idea of the compulsive shopper. He argues that:

individual consumers certainly bear some of the responsibility for their credit card indebtedness, but we can see the tendency to psychologize and medicalize the problem in popular analyses. According to his perspective, individuals get themselves into financial trouble because they are ill, because they suffer from such maladies as depression, compulsion, and addiction. However, although this perspective may explain the financial plight of some who spend their waking hours in the malls and, as a result, find themselves deeply in debt, it certainly does not explain a majority of the cases. What we need is a more sociological perspective on credit card debt (1995: 69).

What is this sociological perspective? Simply said, it is about analyzing the impact of the structure on the individual to understand the pressure to conform and in this case to consume. The social script described earlier is one that shapes people to conform and molds them to become meritocrats and to take pride in their accomplishments. Thus, no one can really be totally in control of their identity when they are pressured to conform by advertising that surrounds us everywhere we go. As such, Sut Jhally argues that: "To not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside the culture. No human being lives outside of culture" (cited in Kilbourne, 1999: 64). Thus, many addictive behaviors, including those cases of people who have credit card debt or no savings due to overspending, are often people who are caught up in the social script. The majority do not even recognize the impact of the social script on their decision. Perhaps, if people were conscious of this pressure to conform, then they could be considered free and solely responsible for their actions. Unfortunately, the social script does not allow for such freedom because social control ensures that the parts function as a whole.

### *Artificial Social Relations*

So after all of this, one may wonder, so what if credit enables people to create an artificial identity; so what if credit leads to greater levels of impression management and alienation of the self. The cause for concern is that people are unknowingly diminishing the quality of their social interactions because they are affected by all of this artifice.

Another way to explain the concern resides in the words of Karl Marx. Dant, a theorist on material culture, cites Marx who argues in light of this phenomenon that: “the devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things...” (1999:11). As people become more preoccupied by material possessions, they loose touch with their sense of self and inevitably with their social environment. If we prioritize the material world over the human world, sentiments of alienation as well as psychological harm will become a way of life that will change society as a whole.

Still have doubts that there exists a real problem? Jean Kilbourne conducted an in-depth analysis of how advertising changes the way we think and feel and she concludes that our cultural world is rendered toxic due to advertising. She states this argument because her research led her to conclude that advertising “...promotes a dissociative state that exploits trauma and can lead to addiction” (1999:56). By examining the underlying meaning behind hundreds of ads for all kinds of products, she found that advertising exploits human needs, encourages us to link our feelings to products and yet it objectifies people and trivializes relationships with people (1999:77). According to these ads, some of these products such as food, alcohol and cigarettes are considered to be good substitutes for relationships. While other ads such as those for cars, clothes and perfumes

convey a similar message that products offer more than relationships to people. In sum, every ad relays the same subtext that loneliness, isolation, disconnection and alienation can be cured by buying consumer products.

In her book, can't buy my love, Kilbourne demonstrates "how advertising corrupts relationships then offers products both as solace and as substitutes for intimate human connection we all long for and need" (1999:26). She cites the results of a study conducted by Jean Baker Miller who developed a theory on the 'relational' self which recognizes that an "inner sense of connection to others is a central organizing feature in women's psychological development" (1999:90). In all healthy interpersonal relationships, the mutual connection will promote the following factors: zest and vitality, empowerment to act, greater knowledge of self and others, and increased sense of self-worth, and a desire for more connection (1999:90). Marketing appropriates these positive outcomes that we seek from relationships with people and projects them onto consumer products. For instance, when we seek self-knowledge "an ad for accessories from Emporio Armani says 'The big items say what you do. But the little details say who you are'. While an ad for pantyhose says 'define yourself', another by Calvin Klein says 'be good, be bad, just be' (Kilbourne, 1999:91). She argues in the last example that CK perfume is advocating that it will somehow define our core identity (1999:91). This is the danger of our toxic culture that is oversaturated in advertisements.

Our consumer culture delivers the message that relationships with people will not be as fulfilling as the connection we will get from buying a desirable consumer products. Logically, we know this is false but what advertising and addiction have in common is self-deception (Kilbourne, 1999:32). As explained earlier, self-deception can occur when

we strive to attain the image of a happy successful person in advertisements. Addiction may occur when an individual tries to cope with living in a capitalist value system. Curiously, the credit industry also offers self-deception as a means of fulfilling dreams of wealth and an image of ourself as a successful human being. Thus, in many different ways, marketing works to erode a realistic image of self. Real connections with people and community offer us a sense of belonging but marketing works to erode these relations. She cites "a liqueur ad featuring a loving couple and the headline 'the romance never goes out of some marriages' which refers to the marriage of Benedictine and Brandy (1999:237). Gradually, human relationships are left depleted of their meaning, leaving us lonely, alienated and unfulfilled by the consumer world.

Surely, one must think that this notion is exaggerated. However, it is the cumulative effect of being told over and over that our relationships to products are easier than those with people. "Relationships with human beings are messy, unpredictable, often uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous" (Kilbourne, 1999:84). For example, Kilbourne cites an ad that says: "Who says guys are afraid of commitment? He's had the same backpack for years" (1999:85). She argues that: "Taken individually, these ads are silly, sometimes funny, certainly nothing to worry about" (1999:85). But repeating the same message creates a climate of cynicism and alienation that can only poison relationships (1999:85). Thus, through her own method of research, Kilbourne has come up with very similar conclusions as the ones put forward in this research. In other words, there is a problem with over saturating our cultural environment with advertising.

The fact that most of us do not realize the amount of influence marketing holds over our thoughts and our feelings makes its control over us more definite. As discussed

in the first chapter of my thesis, most marketers argue that people cannot be controlled by advertising. Kilbourne's retort is that advertising is familiar and subliminal, as such we aren't conscious of its effect on us. The truth is that "advertisers want us to believe that we are not influenced by ads" because this is the secret of propaganda (1999: 64). She cites Joseph Goebbels who explains that "those who are to be persuaded by it should be completely immersed in the ideas of the propaganda, without ever noticing that they are being immersed in it" (1999:64). That's why advertising is most effective and also why it breaks Kantian morality.

Although Kilbourne's research supports my premise that advertising affects how we interact in our social environment, she does not discuss the issue of status. However, she argues that advertising does everything in its power to redirect our attention onto consumer products rather than let us focus on meaningful work, authentic relationships, and a sense of connection with the world (1999:13). In other words, it offers a value system that does not take into account genuine happiness, thereby steering us towards meaningless values that lead to a sense of emptiness. Glasser argues that: "fashion and money are good examples of the many personal value systems that color our lives" (1984:83). He gives as an example, "people who have fashion as a personal value system look at the world through a fashion filter" (1984:83). People who adopt these value systems that are endorsed by advertisers judge others according to whether they are in style or not and the same with money, whether they have signs of wealth and social standing or not. Marketing reinforces superficial values that do not lead to happiness, but rather to feelings of emptiness because genuine connection cannot take place with these values.

Ultimately, these performances described by Goffman are a form of simulated social relations because there is no real human exchange. These performances where the self is misrepresented are only meant for people to get a 'reading' of one another's status. As such, marketing ideology provides a framework of artificial values through which we judge one another. Consequently, when people meet for the first time, they are more concerned with putting on a show than discovering the identity of the person in front of them. Hence, during social interaction, people will examine one another's clothes and accessories because consumer culture, which places premium value upon appearances, imposes this standard. Social comparison which arises from these types of social interaction lead either to admiration, or to envy, while for others, narcissism keeps them wrapped up in themselves. Social relations will gradually become artificial as this process of judging others through the capitalist lens becomes the only standard through which we relate to others.

Seeing that an authentic sense of identity does not come from the outside but from within, it may or may not be enhanced by material possessions but it cannot be defined by consumer objects. Ironically, it would seem that consumers genuinely believe that they can buy this 'authenticity'. Perhaps this is due to all pervasive marketing. The aura of authenticity seems to be the most precious commodity. Hammerslough argues that:

Granted, in these logo-laden times, it's tempting to dismiss communication through objects as a simple economic equation: The more you spend on stuff, the more respect you get, and the richer you appear, the more power you have. Certainly, communication through objects may have always involved money. But recent, meteoric rise of logomania may have as much to do with the promise of something even more special: authenticity (2001:90).

Since Hammerslough speaks mainly of the concept of authenticity in relation to consumer objects, she does not fully analyze the importance its meaning in relation to the



human world. True, there is an increasing obsession with “genuine” consumer objects. The question is why and how does this affect us. Hamerslough argues that “the ‘identity’ and aura of authenticity linked to an object, of course, doesn’t change the item itself, or what it does for you” (2001: 91). I would argue the contrary that the original logo brings a greater ego boost than the near-exact replica.

Meanwhile, the fact that this brings up a discussion regarding the issue of something ‘real’ versus something ‘fake’ is a point that should not be ignored. Herein is an interesting parallel to Simmel’s discussion of the material object that is emptied of its meaning all the while marketing authenticates a stylized consumer object with symbolic power. In this case, the original product with logo has meaning while the ‘fake’ or simulation is emptied of its symbolic power to give status. So, what is the consumer really trying to purchase through these objects? Is it respect through the symbolic power of status, authenticity or perhaps the glamour that comes with having it all?

Simulations are more about the spectacular than the authentic and so is glamour. With the help of movie productions since the 1950’s, consumer ideology has been marketing consumption through celebrity culture which is a social creation whereby fans admire or envy the public lifestyle of the ‘rich and famous’, while they wonder about their private life.

Hurst (2000) explains that: “a distinction is assumed between their public and private lives; and between their acting image and authentic selves” (110). We assume that behind their façade of stardom, they have personal problems to deal with such as any other person and that they struggle with authentic life issues. However, this appears extraordinary, in light of their celebrity status; one can only imagine them without a care

in this world. Thus, we admire them from afar as their celebrity lifestyle makes them seem different because they have achieved all that capitalist values promote in society; they embody the collective in the individual and this is what makes them into a cultural symbol.

Hurst argues that: “ ‘this admiring identification’ with celebrities not only makes them seem different or even better than us but it also reinforces celebrities as a ‘center of cultural capital’ in our society. The hope is, of course, that this capital can be turned into profit” (2000:110). By representing them as the pinnacle of success, they personify the ideal that we supposedly can attain. They are ordinary people which makes what they have achieved seem possible; like a dream that comes true. Yet, all at once, their life also seems so perfect, it seems unattainable. This celebrity status allows them to mesmerize their audience so that they forget about their own financial reality. Celebrities sell the dream of happiness through consumption. They encourage us to forget our feeling of powerlessness through our enchantment with the movies. They make the dream seem real so that we forget about the undemocratic injustice of those who have and those who don’t.

Moreover, as celebrities are packaged and presented as one would market a commodity, the film and television industry helps make this possible because “...the images blur the differences between the real and the unreal, the fake and the authentic” (2000:111). This helps to create the illusion that the glamorous world of celebrities is the ideal that we should strive for in our consumer culture. More importantly, it weakens those dichotomies between the real and the illusory, the acting self versus the authentic self.

The acting self is the same concept as Goffman's presentation of self done through impression management but on a grand scale with the symbolic power of glamour. With the help of the media, film and television industries, the acting self of celebrities and ordinary people is perceived as the real and the authentic. "In fact, the entire distinction between the simulated and the real is lost; simulated interaction is the reality" (Ritzer, 1999:117). The blurring of these distinctions makes it possible for marketing to reinforce meaning that promotes the meritorious social script. Concepts such as luxury, glamour and authenticity become fluid and their meaning is appropriated and altered through marketing.

Nowadays, true authenticity that does not originate from marketing, in a consumer product, is really not easy to come by. Perhaps, the consumer is lost in all this simulation, unable to decipher what is real in the world and in him or her self? Marx's famous quote: religion is the opium of the people, would have to be updated to consumption is the cocaine of the silent majority. I think that some consumers may have already 'forgotten' or they have been socialized to a point where they no longer know that an authentic self cannot be bought. Moreover, the person who is privileged, surrounded by consumer objects and socialized from a young age to always want consumer objects is more than likely a person whose social relations are already on their way to being artificial. Authenticity in people is only cultivated through other 'authentic' people, not through material objects or artifice. My hypothesis is that those who are less concerned with impression management will experience more genuine social relations because the performance factor is removed from the equation. The latter are not trying to control the others opinion of them.

## Conclusion

One of the central arguments that I make in this paper is that marketing has become a social problem because in many ways it has brought upon society's fabric negative changes which cannot be ignored. Through seemingly harmless modes of entertainment such as fashion magazines, fashion television shows, lifestyle channels and shopping sprees, we are constantly socialized to believe in the power of consumption to bring happiness. Thus, we are influenced to find means of authenticating the self in a narrative that conforms to society's values. Unfortunately, most of society's values, norms and goals are based upon the economy which means that they do not have individual needs at heart. By following this normative script, we are misguided. The reality is that we do not experience more freedom, now that more of our lives revolve around consumption. We are not freer, now that we have more stylized objects to choose from. For that matter, we do not have a stronger and more defined sense of self, now that we are left to believe that we determine our own identity. On the contrary, if anything, we are led to believe by advertisement that we have self-determination. In reality social control is tight even if it appears indiscernible.

Marketing is to some degree a means of disseminating propaganda on consumption so that we comply with the economic agenda. Ultimately, I argue throughout this paper that marketing is a social problem because it has gone too far in dispersing consumer propaganda. The marketing industry with the help of the media constantly sends out images that advocates a normative script about meritocracy and a stylized lifestyle. The general public is influenced by this not only because of the number

of messages that circulate but also because of the use of cultural symbols by advertisers that have real power to influence.

In the first chapter, I examined the arguments of both marketing theorists and critics. I found that pro-marketing theorists frequently avoided the macro perspective of marketing's impact on society. The micro perspective was quite often analyzed from a philosophical point of view; thus it was left inconclusive. Meanwhile, the ethical debate behind marketing research and its' quest for the utmost complete psychological profile of the target market is a subject matter given very little attention. Although social criticisms are acknowledged by marketing theorists, they are disregarded as trivial and incongruous with marketing's agenda. An analysis of a marketing textbook found that marketing theory did nothing to shed light on what to do about ethical debates regarding the social repercussions of marketing. In my opinion, marketing practices are not just a means of manipulating consumers; they have become a means of shaping and indoctrinating consumers. Hence, the argument that marketing has become a social problem. By disregarding many of the issues I have mentioned here, marketers avoid much needed changes with their practices.

In order for consumer welfare to be taken into consideration, the channels of communication between social critics and marketing theorists must be opened up. Dialogue between these opposing discourses is perhaps the only way of coming up with guidelines or even solutions to better the situation. As I quoted from Bowie; capitalism may be a highly competitive economic system, but even competitive sport requires rules to regulate the game (1999;18).

I would suggest that these rules be formulated by social and marketing theorists, so that both sides of this debate are represented. Also, by addressing these issues with marketing students within the context of the classroom, they may be able to work on solutions to these problems. Marketing theorists and students must be encouraged to think about the impact of their business endeavors on the whole of society. Marketing departments must be made accountable for the social repercussions of their practices, as well as, the multinational corporations that spend large sums of their budget to increase sales. Kantian ethics may serve as a basis for thinking about marketing ethics, but in light of capitalist values, it is an ideal that would be hard to reach. Compromise will be needed in order to establish the boundaries on the issue of too much advertising.

Evidently, marketing practices do not stand up to Kantian morality because they are often at odds with values that give consumers self-determination. In sum, in this first chapter, I argued that on a macro level, the consumer is not free and is in fact manipulated by advertising. Multinational corporations are constantly searching for greater profit levels, and so because they always want more, we, as consumers, are incited to believe that we always want and need more. Marketing propaganda shapes consumer attitude and values in order to ensure that profit levels will keep rising. Marketing has become a social problem due in part to the fact that consumers are encouraged to have a false sense of empowerment. When consumers are socialized to believe in the dream of happiness through mass consumption, they are also being led to believe that they will achieve the dream one day. Blurring social classes encourages the use of emulation tactics, spending on credit and purchasing of designer logos; all of this,

in hopes of fulfilling the lifestyle promised by consumer ideology which, accordingly, we are entitled to.

In the second chapter, I argued once again that marketing manipulates consumers. However, in order to demonstrate this, I tried to explain in greater detail how this process occurs since most consumers do indeed believe that they are free to choose whether or not to consume. Hence I argued that since consumption is more about social meaning, it cannot deny its power to influence through cultural symbols. I conclude that symbolic meaning in stylized objects is used, in the socialization process of consumers, as a means of influencing the aspirations of individuals or in other words as a form of manipulation. Finally, I examined how cultural messages are meant to entice the consumer into the dream world of mass consumption.

I began my argument by pointing out that the specialization of tasks lead to an increase in production, in turn causing a need for mass consumption. The concept of creating demand cannot be ignored in this equation. As the labourer is estranged from his or her work, I surmised that there was a parallel between objects and people being emptied of their meaning. The same way the worker is estranged from the product of his or her labour, the consumer is now estranged from the worker or craftsmen. Consumer objects are manufactured regardless of the consumers' wishes or needs. Marketing's role is simply to introduce meaning into relations that have been emptied between producer and object, consumer and producer and consumer and object. In other words, marketing re-establishes a link that was present before industrialization but that now is erased due to mass production and mass consumption. This theory helped in understanding the

framework behind the concept of fashion and stylization, as well as, the connections between producers and consumers.

Marketing is often criticized for encouraging obsessive materialism, but I argue with the help of Simmel's theoretical research that our identity or sense of self naturally seeks out ways of expressing itself through visual representation. Thus, marketing is only guilty of exploiting an already existent need for material possessions. Simmel explains that the self finds meaning in projecting itself through objects, but it is not the only way that the self authenticates itself. Unfortunately, consumer ideology is not entirely satisfied with this means of pushing consumer culture. Marketing and consumer ideology would prefer that our identity be totally dependent on consumer objects in order to have more control over the individual. It is important to stop blaming marketing so that we can begin to analyze the meaning of our relationship to objects. Simmel's theory leads the way in this respect and proves to be extremely useful in analyzing the significance of the loss of meaning in the production process of material objects. This theory allowed us, to understand how marketing re-appropriates meaning and to realize the extent of it's impact on our society.

As such, I asked myself several questions centered on the issue of meaning. Why does stylized marketing work so well? What does it fulfill? And why is it so easy to tempt us with objects? What do we get out of it? Unfortunately, the conclusions I came to is that stylized consumption is marketed as a way of life that is meaningful and satisfying so that consumers will become dependent on stylized objects. By constantly socializing consumers, marketing hopes to convince them that selecting the right product will provide access to this dream of happiness through consumption. Eventually, over time,



consumers begin to define themselves by what they buy, thereby reaching marketing's objective to make the consumer dependent on symbolically and culturally regulated objects. In my opinion, this evidence contributes to my argument that marketing is a social problem because meaning is being regulated by consumer ideology and it is used to control and manipulate consumers. The social problem is that material culture is limiting the realm of meaning in our lives to a consumer culture that is regulated while falsely professing greater freedom.

The function of a marketing campaign is not only to sell but more importantly to have consumers consent to the pre-existing order of values that comes with consumerism. These values are tied in to the idea of stimulating the economy. Unknowingly, consumers are taught to accept the values of consumer culture without questioning them and then, they are constrained by them. Even though, at firsthand, consumer ideology appears to increase freedom and fulfillment, ultimately because stylized objects are regulated culturally, the promise of happiness through consumption is never entirely fulfilled. Consumer culture tries to condition us to desire wealth, social status and glamour. The consumer is pressured to believe that if one cannot attain these legitimately, at least one should try to emulate the fictitious ideal and pretend to be on one's way to attaining these goals.

Simmel's emulation theory and Goffman's presentation of self has helped to explain why people acquire status symbols. The problem with emulation theory is that it presupposes that everyone wants to be part of the social elite. Meanwhile, it does not explain why the 'street' look has gone on to becoming high fashion. Nor does it explain why the elite cannot control and predict which fashions will be taken up by the lower

classes. True, these are weaknesses that do not explain why fashion responds to social and political change rather than just mirroring the rich. The meanings attached to fashion and stylized objects are what catch the attention of consumers. Thus, marketing picks up on other meanings that marketers package in various objects and so marketing is not always about elitism.

However, the theory of emulation is still pertinent to some extent because this phenomenon works at the same time as others do. For instance, while some may be interested in designer looks because they want to be part of the elite, others much prefer the “grunge” look. Marketing does not project only one message or meaning to its objects, however all of them which are projected share a common denomination. They all socialize the consumer to buy, buy, buy.

Another aspect of this social problem is that there is a lack of awareness of the spectrum and breadth of marketing’s power. People understand that marketing’s role is to encourage them to buy, but the complexities of how this is done, is often overlooked. I submit that consumers should be made aware of the impact of marketing on consumer culture and on all other forms of culture. This could be achieved through the education curriculum at the high school or college level. Teaching people at a young age to reflect on the power of marketing will allow us to measure up to Kantian morality.

This leads to another issue that is problematic and needs to be addressed. This issue is that of personal agency and forms of resistance. Michel de Certeau conceives of the consumer as a traveler and he claims that consumptive choices can be viewed as a strategy. He argues that: “consumption is no longer victimization by the culture industry or irrational conformity to mass society but a play of heterogeneity, a disruptive

intervention in the smooth operations of the system” (cited in Poster, 1997; 124). It provides a starting point for a new way of conceptualizing consumption as an active rather than a passive act. In my opinion, expanding on this theory would help equilibrate between these two opposing views since neither constitute the whole truth. It is rather a combination of false empowerment, active and passive participation, active and passive resistance. It is very complex, but it all works in favor of the system.

In the last section of this chapter, I argued that once self-identity becomes dependent on consumer goods, it is also subjected to stylization. Some become so dependent that they are willing to label themselves as though their identity can be packaged for a concise target market. We are taught to gain satisfaction when our self-image replicates a socially prescribed look, so we try to conform to a socially regulated image. The problem is while style is imposed, people lose the freedom to determine their own style and so we end up all looking like people who fit in a particular mold.

Moreover, as our self-identity becomes increasingly dependent on stylized objects, our inner core begins to feel empty because our identity is void of any authenticity. We are, in a sense, alienated from our self. This is the main social problem which I am concerned with and which I developed further in the last chapter.

Lastly, I ask the following question. What are the consequences of this dependence on consumer objects? I reiterate that if dependence on consumer objects alienates us from our self, then logically, it must also alienate us from others. The degradation of self-identity leads us to misrepresent the self in the public sphere thereby creating simulated social relations.

I began this last chapter similarly to the second by comparing the past with the present in order to explore the changes that have occurred since industrialization. In traditional society, social identity was directly related to the prescribed role assigned by the community. While, in the city, social identity is anonymous because the community knows nothing about our identity. As a result, people believe that they determine their own identity and inform others through fashion apparel. However, I argue the reality of the modern age is that our self-identity is reduced to an image and it is determined by social institutions, economic agencies as well as the market and fashion. These agencies take the place of the community in prescribing a script that determines our identity through social control. In sum, I repeat my argument that relying on consumer goods to tell others who we are does not mean that we are free.

I also submit that marketing is simply a means of promoting the values of the script which uphold society's economic agenda. It is merely one of the socializing messages sent out to encourage people to be good consumers. Although, it is not the only social message sent out to consumers, the meritorious social script is the dominant theme that begins at an early age with the education system. The social script that prescribes a meritorious life relates that adherence to the script is demonstrated through material consumption and impression management; eventually leaving people alienated from meaningful social relations.

Meanwhile, to live up to this socially prescribed script, we often engage in impression management in public settings in order to control the signals we give off that others read to determine who we are. Based on the premise that social status determines how others will treat us, status symbols help authenticate our status or "chosen" identity.

As such, Goffman argues that everyone is being read by the signs that they give off. I argue that credit helps us compete for luxuries that give off signs; so for those who cannot afford to keep up, their performance is maintained through credit, for example, fashion designer labels which are used as signposts. Although fashion designer labels are marketed as truthful signs of status, the reality is that it is always possible to misrepresent our self with consumer objects.

The central argument of this chapter is that the credit card industry is the ultimate tool in the art of impression management because it allows many of us to live beyond our means. It falsely leads people to believe that the average person can easily measure up to the social scripts and thus allows us all as a society to carry on with a façade as we pretend to have the means to consume at the rate that suits marketing cycles. In sum, since the marketing industry works hand-in-hand with the credit card industry in order to promote consumerism, it is guilty of misleading many into debt.

Moreover, as the self becomes increasingly accustomed to staging an act of better social status, prestige and or wealth, the self begins to feel entirely artificial and without substance. When the persona that is performed on the “frontstage” is entirely false, then a person comes to experience a kind of alienation from self. The act of building a sense of self that is externally manifests results in feelings of emotional void, insecurity and emptiness, not to mention depression, addictions and compulsive behaviors. Blaming the individual for indebtedness or psychological illnesses, avoids the broader issue; that is the effect of the credit card industry on our social structure. I argue that in light of all the marketing pressure to consume, the individual cannot be entirely responsible for misuse of credit cards. Thus, I strongly believe that we need to make the credit card industry

accountable for encouraging the use of credit cards, for soliciting young adults to get credit cards and generally speaking, for simply making it look too easy.

Finally, I cited Marx who argued that: “the devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in values to the world of things...” (Dant,1999:11). Throughout this research, I stated in many different ways that marketing promotes the material world at the expense of the human world and if this continues people will more often experience psychological problems that pertain to insecurities as we fail to measure up to the social script that dictates our achievements and successes according to our adherence to the consumer ideology. If the self is constantly misrepresented to fit in to this mold, we will lose a part of our self-identity and during this process marketing will try to authenticate a pre-packaged identity to sell to an already alienated consumer. I argue that the end result is that social relations will become artificial as people measure one another to this standard of consumption.

Thus, consumer culture, with the help of marketing and advertising, is altering how we construct our identity in a way that is detrimental to our well-being because it leaves most of us vulnerable to acceding to the pressure of the marketing strategies. Moreover, through consumer culture, marketing works hard to promote democratized fashion because by blurring the social divisions between people, it allows people to falsely believe that they can buy anything they want. While social divisions are less apparent, people of lower classes can feel good about buying an item that is usually for the upper classes. There will probably be significant differences in quality between the products but the consumer will be encouraged to ignore this. Since the objective for marketers is to sell to the consumer without him or her questioning their means to buy,

they are not encouraged to doubt the integrity of marketing practices, nor think about how the economic system works as a whole.

In the last few decades, we have witnessed the upsurge of marketing strategies that promote stylized consumption. By stylizing everything from clothing to home apparel and style of living, people believe that all they must do to look like the Joneses is buy the right image. If everything in our life is stylized, then, we are considered to be refined and encouraged to believe that we have a life that is “put together” or in other words, that we have control over everything in our life. However, as the proverb says: “appearances can be deceiving”. If the marketing industry would like us to look “cool” and in control, there is an ulterior motive. In order to keep up with the latest lifestyle images, one must spend continually and this will only fuel the economy.

Fortunately, it is not yet the majority of consumers who fall into this stereotype of a consumer who loses all will power to marketing campaigns. However, teenagers are considered to be one of the largest consumer segments. They are a generation of consumers that are used to affluence, within whom marketers mold a perhaps innate eagerness to buy. Marketers count on this eagerness, once nurtured to subsist, as teenagers get older, they continue to be an ideal target market. Where does all this stylized consumption lead us? It is difficult to know, but perhaps impression management will become a widely known skill. The future implications would require further research. I would suggest a focus group that would compare attitudes and opinions between those who practice impression management and those who do not. The importance in distinguishing between those who feel the need to control the opinion of

others versus those who do not, lies in the fact that the latter cannot be manipulated as easily by marketing campaigns.

The final point of this research is that the consumer of all ages should be made aware of the socialization process of consumption. Social awareness is the only way to expose them to the dangers of listening too seriously to the marketing and credit industry. Whether we want to straighten out our social problems linked to body image or make amends to personal finances, many of the root causes can be linked to the media and the marketing industry. As such, understanding the impact of these industries on our daily lives is the key to a better future.



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