
MASTER'S RESEARCH PAPER

The Commodification of the Cause:
The Industry of Social Cause Branding

Doing More Harm than Good?

Leslie Wilson

Prof. Colin Mooers

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The Commodification of the Cause: The Industry of Social Cause Branding

What's so wrong with the Corporation as Activist?...Plenty, as it turns out.

Is Social Cause Branding Doing More Harm than Good?

Citizenship and community service are values that have been appropriated by new forms of corporate marketing strategies: corporate social responsibility, cause related marketing, and social cause branding. These trends in branding effectively tie social activism and political participation with consumerism and profit motives. In this paper I attempt to explore the implications of the commodification of social causes, with particular focus on the role of women in marketing strategies, both as subject and object of the social cause branding campaigns.

Historically, market research has indicated that women are more sensitive to corporate social performance (CSP) than men. CSP "includes corporate actions to environmental pollution, corporate philanthropy, and disclosure of social information" (Paul, Zalka, Downes, Perry, and Friday, 1997, p. 408). Women are also the primary consumers of many goods and services, often shopping for the entire household: male partners, dependents and other family members, as well as for themselves. Businesses are discovering that the female demographic is a potentially lucrative one, and women are being aggressively targeted as a result. Given that women are the primary shoppers, and that they report higher concern with social problems than men, they necessarily respond more favourably to marketing that addresses the social causes they deem important. Corporations, of course, are familiar with the statistics of consumption and have tailored their ad campaigns and public relations strategies accordingly—with 'social cause branding' (Paul, et al., pp. 408-9).

Women's access to the public sphere has been restricted to a role as consumer, and their political power exists as buying power. It follows that women are able to feel most effective in addressing social problems within this role as shopper/consumer. Marketers hope that buying decisions are made based not on the inherent use-value of the product or service, but on the emotional ties to the social cause.

Corporate social cause branding campaigns improve public relations and boost the company image, and are designed to reassure the Enron-era consumer that big business isn't all *that* bad. In an information rich culture, consumers are more aware of social issues than ever before and companies have tried to connect the idea of consumption with 'doing a good deed'. In her article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Mary Tannen suggests that:

perhaps residual shame still nudges the customer's conscience. Should she be spending money to paint her lips Hot Apricot when somewhere children are starving? The knowledge that part of those dollars might be going to help battered women or Amazonian hunter-gatherers helps relieve the guilt (2002, p. 60).

As Jody Weiss, founder of Peacekeeper cosmetics, argues: "you become part of the solution by just picking up a product" (Tannen, p. 60). It's that simple!

A second look at the 'warm and fuzzy' fundraising and activism strategies of companies like Avon, Ford, Phillip Morris, M.A.C., Shell Oil, State Farm Insurance, and Nike—to name a very few—can reveal questionable business practices disguised by glossy image campaigns. The role of the corporation in cause branding is more complicated than a simple ad campaign or public relations strategy.

The nature of capitalism is fundamentally exploitative—and most clearly so when it comes to those groups without power (women, children, minorities, etc.) This presents a base level conflict of interest for some corporate-social cause partnerships. I am wary of the dangers of painting all corporate social responsibility with the same cynical brush. I believe that there are companies dedicated to corporate citizenship and good business:

responsible sourcing of raw materials, transparency in business dealings, safe and equitable work environments, etc. However, not all corporate responsibility plans were created equal, and some, I would argue, are doing more harm than good.

This paper addresses the issue of the commodification of social causes, and to illustrate why the role of the corporation in cause branding is more complicated than a simple ad campaign or public relations strategy. I will discuss some of the implications of social cause branding as an aspect of commodity fetishism within the context of the culture industry characteristic of advanced capitalism. The ideology of the culture industry controls revolutionary potential, in order to maintain an efficient flow of labour, capital, and consumption. I will highlight the problematic nature of the 'feel good' marketing strategies that claim to empower women as consumers, but instead function to further distance them from the reality of social causes, and further diminish their role in the public sphere. Women, as the target market for social cause branding, are offered a false sense of empowerment through their role as consumers. This serves as a minimally effective alternative to real political power associated with free choice, participation in the public sphere, and influence over the construction of women's identity and women's issues.

When corporations are able to define and construct solutions to social problems such as breast cancer, self esteem, and domestic violence based on buying their products reinforces an ideology that shopping can be a political act. The power to shape and define issues is taken out of the hands of the community of individuals who are affected by it and therefore entitled to control it. The issue is addressed only within the realm of corporate initiatives—where it has less to do with social conscience, and is more dedicated to profit and consumption values instead. While it is fundamental to a healthy society to encourage charitable donations, voluntarism, and philanthropy on the

one hand, it is also necessary to do so in a way that ensures the issues (and the debate) remain in the public sphere.

Theoretical Framework

BACKGROUND: CULTURE INDUSTRY THEORIES

The concept of the culture industry is grounded in the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theorists, including European intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and Max Horkheimer, who fled Nazi Germany and moved to the United States in the 1930s. The Frankfurt School provided a critique of the failures of Stalinist Russia on the one hand, and of American capitalism on the other. As critical theorists they argued that capitalism served to mask the real conditions of oppression and exploitation in society. Instead of the promise of freedom of choice, the capitalist ideological structure maintains and reproduces the means of production as a "system of the ideas and representations that dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (Althusser, 1971, p. 149).

The Frankfurt School was particularly critical of capitalism's extended reach into areas of art and culture, effectively opening new markets for commodification and exploitation. The underlying economic relations of production and the process of commodification have permeated all aspects of our social and political lives; "the power of monopoly [capital] becomes articulate no longer primarily in the work relationship... but outside it, on the market, and in all realms of political and social life" (Basso, qtd. in Marcuse, 1972, p. 11). Capitalist ideology and the profit motive have subsumed culture into ideology as well, and it is manifested in the culture industry.

In their paper "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (2001 [1972]), Adorno and Horkheimer refer to the commodification of cultural forms: in art, music, film, and literature. The effect of mass production and distribution of culture is one of 'pseudo-culture', where sameness and uniformity exists in all commodities leaving no

room for imagination or critical reflective thought. (p. 71) They argue that the mediated emotion and sensory experience of the marketplace has shifted the emphasis from use-value to exchange-value where objects are imbued with a sense of glamour and excitement. In this sense, consumption had taken on a 'structure of feeling' based on emotional responses, immediate gratification, and libidinal impulses. The exchange value "[does] not bear the slightest relation to factual values, to the meaning of the products themselves", instead it represents the satisfaction one gets through consumption (p. 73). Horkheimer and Adorno saw the commodity as an entirely new category of pleasure.

The Frankfurt School critiqued the social transformation that they believed to be taking place in the U.S. under the influence of the commodity culture. The culture industry, they argued, functions to distract the masses from their real conditions of existence through the consumption of manufactured cultural products aimed at a mass audience (and intended to generate maximum profit). This serves to "deflect criticism from hegemonic power" which undermines class consciousness and destroys the democratic potential of public sphere participation in civil society (Peters, 2003, p. 58).

Horkheimer and Adorno wrote about the Enlightenment goals as they unfolded in a particular historical moment. However, they were decidedly pessimistic in their analysis: they argued that it was the corruption of Enlightenment ideals such as the pursuit of Truth and Reason and the triumph of rationalism and the scientific method that led to the rise of fascism in Europe, and Nazi Germany in particular. "Mass culture", they argued, "serves as an organ of soft domination, as the latest twist in a tale of how the quest for emancipation has enslaved us" (qtd. in Peters, p. 63).

According to the Frankfurt School, the capitalist economic system reproduces its ideology through the exploitation of labour and resources, and through the

commodification of culture. Consumerism acts as an effective means of social control with the promise that capitalism can provide the solution to any problem through the increasing satisfaction of goals. The Culture Industry, according to these theorists, corrupts all art—high and low—and thus does not allow for any true catharsis of feeling, no real experience of pleasure or escape, no intensity of experience, and a “lack of aesthetic totality” (Peters, p. 68). The public is cast adrift in a sea of music, art, movies, and literature characterized by conformist, standardized, apolitical, anaesthetizing, and uninspiring forms.

In “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” (1989 [1967]), Adorno argues that the culture industry creates for the masses socially constructed problems that are solved with pre-fabricated cultural commodities. For Adorno, and the other Frankfurt School theorists, the precondition for a democratic society was the ability of individuals to be autonomous, and engage in free and critical thought. Cultural products such as pop music are defended on the principle that they are responding to a demand in the marketplace. However, Adorno argues that these products are simply “tailored for consumption by the masses... [and] manufactured more or less according to plan” (p. 128). The issue remains that “conformity has replaced consciousness” and these conflicts are solved “only in appearance” (p. 133).

The danger underlying the commodification of culture occurs specifically when the cultural products are no longer an expression of people in their real material conditions (i.e., representing a ‘class consciousness’), but are instead a reproduction of the dominant ideology. The culture industry, using art and entertainment to disguise oppression and lack of choice, and to encourage acceptance of the status quo, becomes a source of influence for the ruling classes. The establishment of new forms of social control through culture leads to the creation of a one-dimensional society, demonstrated

by the dissolution of extreme viewpoints, and the intolerance of alternative opinions. Ultimately, the integration and absorption of all sources of conflict and confrontation can lead to the creation of a society without opposition. Adorno warned that the “total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment” or “mass deception” (1989 [1967], p. 135). Herbert Marcuse echoed that our society “may well be the first people to go Fascist by the democratic vote” (1972, p. 25). This seems like an alarmist position for social theorists, but it reflects the concern that the Frankfurt School felt with the all-encompassing nature of the capitalist ideology, and the stranglehold it exercises over the non-dominant classes. (Marcuse, 1968, pp. 19-23)

Capitalism, they argued, administers the “steered satisfaction of material needs” and provides only “a partial solution of immediate problems” (Marcuse, 1972, p. 14; p. 8). Thus, it is in a constant ‘rhizomatic’ flux in order to define and shape the needs and values of the consumer to preserve the system of the market economy (p. 16). Marcuse argued that the system of capital was so effective because it “reorganizes itself to meet the threat of a revolution” by introducing the commodified solution to the public, in a controlled and packaged answer to social problems that pre-empts the push for a new order (p. 2). Promises of freedom and success and ‘the American Dream’, together with “the increasing satisfaction of needs beyond subsistence” shifts the focus from the real material conditions of control (by the ruling classes), to the ideological belief system that capitalism will provide everyone with the solutions to their problems (p. 9). The promise of the satisfaction of goals, they believe, keeps us from questioning the goals themselves.

Frankfurt School members, and other critical theorists, have postulated that consumerism perpetuates a false consciousness—striving for the elusive ‘American Dream’. This ideology is especially evident in the mass media, particularly advertising

and the social construction of corporate identity, known as branding. Within this system, the control of communications technology is concentrated in the dominant elite groups. This serves to repress the development of class consciousness, and is an effective way to minimize the potential for revolutionary ideas within the population. The Frankfurt group critiqued the advertising form in particular for its commodification of social meaning. They argued, "the commodity culture, while offering a better standard of living and certain comforts and gratifications, in fact encourages social and political apathy" (Dyer, 1982, p. 81).

Marcuse argued that advertising is a manipulation of false needs that "blocks people's ability to recognize that they are being controlled" (Dyer, 1982, p. 81). The so-called 'free choice' that is promised by advertising "does not signify freedom if these goods sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear" (p. 81). According to Marcuse, the process promotes a cycle of alienation by "the absorption of ideology into reality" through "a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood" (Marcuse, 1972, pp. 11-12). Advertising is particularly alienating to its audience because its latent function is to disguise and distort the problems and challenges faced by individuals in their real conditions of existence. Marcuse analyses the language of ads, describing it as hypnotic, suggestive, repetitive, and intimidatory. The spectacular and exciting images in ads are used to complement language and make the overall effect "more dramatic and vivid than reality" (Dyer, 1982, p. 82).

Frankfurt School theorists have been criticized for the negative 'anti-populist' tone and cultural pessimism of their work. They have also been accused of producing elitist and Eurocentric analyses of culture. The transformations described by the authors were based on a philosophical critique, and not on audience reception research or any empirical studies. This privileges the role of the theorist over the subject. Horkheimer

and Adorno focus much of their attention on the hegemonic nature of the culture industry, as it affects different groups in society (based on class, race, gender). However, their discussions left out the idea of human agency. They saw the masses as “active agents in their own duping”, totally lacking agency, while culture is manufactured at them (Peters, 2003, p. 64). In the Culture Industry, people are an afterthought to the primacy of the profit motive.

Of course, not all theories of the effects of mass culture are as pessimistic as the Frankfurt School. Instead of the classic critical theory perspective, which describes people as “ ‘victims’ of the system”, the concept of the ‘active audience’ postulates that the audience plays an active role in choosing what they like to watch, read, or listen to (Ang, 1996, p. 9). The remote control, in fact, can be a tool for enabling active choices, a symbol of “cultural democracy rather than cultural oppression” (Ang, 1996, p. 9). Corporate initiatives regarding the mass media are focussed on competing for audience share. If a product is not displayed in such a way as to capture the public’s attention, then it is ineffective. Interestingly, as a result of audience “diversification, fragmentation and demassification”, the masses are hardly passive consumers; they “must be continuously ‘targeted’ and fought for, grabbed and seduced” (Ang, 1996, p. 10). New technologies such as the VCR, digital and satellite cable, and TiVo have a profound impact on the active audience in their ability to exercise a certain amount of consumer choice and control.

The ideological impacts of advertisements and their influence on people’s lives are significant. Designers use persuasive and rhetorical techniques to convince their audience of the perfect product to keep their house sparklingly clean, their kids happy and healthy, and what to get your mom for Mother’s Day. Ads are especially effective when “both the communicator and the receiver share a common culture or common

frame of reference” and they rely on these cultural overlaps to provide the content of the message (Dyer, 1982, p. 13).

Advertising has also been described as “the folklore of a commodity culture” (Twitchell, 1996, p. 152). In the book *Adcult USA*, Twitchell argues that advertising is not conspiratorial in nature, but that it is imposed, like any mythology, on willing groups of people within a culture. Ads articulate and redirect values, attitudes and beliefs, but they “do not invent behaviour” (p. 152). The advertising industry capitalizes on the myths that still hold resonance for particular groups. However, it has to be able to tap into our collective ‘cultural psyche’ in order to be an effective and successful campaign.

HEGEMONY: GRAMSCI & WILLIAMS

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch in the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

-Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

As previously noted, Culture Industry theorists have been criticized for elitism and Euro-centric analyses of Western society. They were unforgiving in their take on the massification of culture as mass deception, and believed that capitalist society was made up of cultural dupes. They are also known for their claims about the shadow of fascism in consumer culture—understandable, given their personal experiences and the time frame in which they wrote. However, these criticisms point to important limitations. How can we explain the cultural significance of consumption while taking into account human agency and active audience reception?

The late stage of capitalism, (characterized by large corporations, the centrality and significance of images, globalized chains of production, and the importance of the brand), requires a theoretical framework that can incorporate the push and pull of consumer demand and counter-cultural movements, the active audience, and the

subtleties of dominance and deception within the structure of a democratic market economy. Also, theories on consumer culture should account for pluralism, which is different from the hierarchical structures of Marxist base-superstructure struggles (but includes issues regarding the struggles between dominant groups: i.e., business and government). Blurring boundaries between classes allows for new and different actors and “sites of political contestation” (Smith, 1998, p. 17). Consumer culture as we know it is characterized by far more subtle and flattened power relations, trading in a currency of signs and symbols. In this way, a study of Western society needs a framework of analysis that can incorporate these elements. For this, the concept of hegemony is useful.

Political theorist Antonio Gramsci is widely credited with defining the concept of ‘hegemony’ in his famous *Prison Notebooks*, written while he was incarcerated in the late 1920s for his politically threatening ideas and support for the failed Northern Italian revolutionary workers’ movement¹. Gramsci’s work was ahead of its time, and the use of hegemony in social and political writing has seen a resurgence in popularity over the past ten or fifteen years. In addition, these works were not immediately available in English, and scholars in the West did not have access to the translations until the 1970s.

Notoriously difficult to define, ‘hegemony’, according to Gramsci’s writings, is “the achievement of intellectual, moral, and political leadership through the consensual articulation of popular groups... [it is] an activity, not a static formation” (Smith, 1998, p. 16). Other authors have interpreted the concept more simply: as the dominance of the many by the few, “rule via persuasion”, power and influence that is “all-encompassing”, “routine, institutionalized, organized, and generally accepted” (Rutherford, 2000, p. 44; p. 45). Hegemonic constructions of social relations are the dominant force over meanings, values, traditions, senses, expectations, and even language and identity. It is totally

¹ His work was an attempt to account for the failure of the uprising.

saturating to the point where it becomes a taken-for-granted element of culture and everyday life. Hegemony is a particularly useful theoretical concept because it addresses the limits of Marxist ideology and false consciousness (and of the Culture Industry theories based on 'the masses' as cultural dupes, as well). Gramsci accounted for the active and individualized audience, in the specific "interrelationship of agency and structure", and the 'normal' lived experience of balancing the "tension between individual choice and social norm" (Smith, p. 16).

Raymond Williams has famously grappled with these ideas in his work, and defines hegemony as a 'wholeness':

the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living—not only political and economic activity, nor only of manifest social activity, but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense...it is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living (1977, p. 110).

This 'wholeness' that Williams writes about is the theoretical push beyond ideology into a new area of study based on an understanding of a lived, dynamic, fluctuating, and active process, rather than the Marxist 'superstructural' system of relations.

Hegemony does not rely on the state's ability to indoctrinate and manipulate through repressive means, unlike the structure of society described by Marx and feared by the Frankfurt School theorists. Indeed, Williams argues that it "is never either total or exclusive" and can include "alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture... as significant elements in the society" (Williams, p. 113). The idea of consent is important here; individual agency and consciousness are characteristics of lived hegemony. Williams distinguishes between practical and official consciousness: "practical is what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived" (p.131). These elements

are key to the process in the sense that they spark efforts to control, adapt, and co-opt dissent from within:

A lived hegemony is always a process... It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits... It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own (Williams, p. 112).

Hegemony is based on the “use of cultural means to command the political resources of society”, and functions so well because it appears to “work alliances for mutual benefit” (Rutherford, p. 45). Hegemonic influence is both productive and repressive in that the “challenges to cohesion are not simply subsumed but have an effect on the hegemonic formation” (Smith, p. 26). Inequalities and distinctions “give rise to opposition” and “the extension of power seems to provoke resistance, which, in turn, warrants a further exercise of power” as hegemonic structures shift to remain in balance (p. 46). This is a key factor in how dominant groups make use of channels of communication in order to play a stronger part in the ‘war of position’—PR as an industry works on the spin of persuasive messages available to the public, each an effort to convince the audience of their legitimacy and authority as leaders.

There are three key aspects to Gramscian theory, as it relates to this paper and my argument in particular:

- 1) ***The conceptual shape of the political, as influenced by ideology*** (as opposed to its influence within the means of production). Gramsci understood society to be “a matrix of interweaving discourses” between autonomous interest groups (Smith, p. 17). By understanding society as a weave, it is clear how consumption can take on both economic and cultural significance. The force of power is not obviously one directional or consistent, but instead reflects the complexity of social relationships more accurately.

- 2) **Hegemony as 'wholeness' or totality**, a dynamic combination of "social structures, political policy, and everyday cultural norms" (p. 21). Groups competing for hegemonic dominance "are engaged in a 'war of position'". In order to maintain hegemony, the dominant group must "rule... with consent and force... [and] this is an ongoing activity" (p. 20; emphasis added).
- 3) **The quality of leadership** must be such that the person or group is perceived as "an authoritative agent of a discourse", with "superior knowledge, in terms of both quality and quantity" in order to 'sell' ideas to the public (p. 29). For Gramsci, leadership is grounded in education and organization, with an inherent morality and trust imbued in the leader. Leadership, in this sense, can take on the form of a corporate identity.

Gramsci acknowledged the importance of propaganda in maintaining hegemonic influence. In order to be influential, the dominant group obtains consent through persuasion and education of the public. Gramsci argued that social and political "ideas and opinions are not 'born' spontaneously in the brains of each individual; they have had a centre of formation, of radiation, of propaganda, of persuasion" (qtd. in Rutherford, p. 47).

Stuart Hall's analysis of the shift from pre-industrial to post-industrial football leagues in Britain provides an interesting example of hegemonic co-optation by the dominant culture in order to extend its influence onto a subordinate group. Traditional village, or pre-industrial, football in Britain was "highly irregular, unformalised, without standard rules"; in stark contrast to the imposed version of the modern game, which is "highly regulated and systematised, administered centrally and organised according to universally observed and refereed rules" (Hall, 1986, p. 24). This represents a key structural shift in the way people experienced culture: "It has been redesigned for spectatorship rather than participation, the 'tumult' occurring on the terraces rather than

on the field of play” (p. 24). In this way, the cultural pastime of the working class was separated from local communities and regulated from above. This was done in order to reorganize people “under new moral and social auspices... ‘so as not to interfere with the avocation of the industrious part of the community” (p. 24). This shift represents the change from understanding culture “as an expression of local communal lives linked to class identity and more as an apparatus within a larger system of domination” (During, 1993, p. 5).

I am using this example as a metaphor in the context of social cause branding, and the way people experience social problems. What was once something constructed and understood by the group that it affected (the community with inherent ties to the cause) has been separated from that community, co-opted and regulated by businesses for use in marketing campaigns, and repackaged and ‘redesigned for spectatorship rather than participation’. The result is that the debate about social and political issues occurs in the ad copy, and not in the sphere of public discourse.

Cause related marketing and the use of social causes to brand companies is far from revolutionary, and does not change the way people do business. It is created from within the boundaries of consumer society, at once defending and justifying the importance of the right to consume while incorporating the moral imperative of good social conscience within the act of consumption:

The major theoretical problem, with immediate effects on the method of analysis, is to distinguish between alternative and oppositional initiatives and contributions which are made within or against a specific hegemony (which then sets certain limits to them or which can succeed in neutralizing, changing or actually incorporating them) and other kinds of initiative and contribution which are irreducible to the terms of the original or the adaptive hegemony, and are in that sense independent (Williams, 1977, p. 114).

Hegemony allows an analysis of consumer culture to include factors of human agency, the ‘active’ consumer, and accounts for the presence of counter-cultural

movements and resistance to traditional patterns of production and consumption. This aids in an explanation of the shifting demand and supply of corporate advertising and marketing attempts, and the resulting influence of different interest groups.

Instead of setting out a framework of the economy and consumption increasingly encroach upon culture, hegemony goes one step further: the critique is grounded in the problem that consumption is the culture. This concept helps to frame understandings of cause related marketing (CRM) as hegemonic discourse. The balance of power is maintained when the social and political issues (such as the environment, AIDS, or literacy, for example) are constructed as problems “in the *type* of consumption rather than in consumption per se... the crucial radical critique of modern industrial society is effectively sidestepped and productivist discourse maintains its coherence” (Smith, p. 24; author's emphasis).

For women in particular, this is a useful approach to an analysis of more subtle patriarchal functions. Targeted CRM exists within the boundaries of masculinized structures and traditional gendered spheres that allow oppression to occur. The political and social goals of feminism see liberation and empowerment as an opportunity for women to self-actualize. This contradicts the media's use of women's issues to further persuade/educate the public about what is valuable or beautiful or good: feminism is subsumed within an economic frame and based on a reassertion of hegemonic power.

Consumer Culture, Advertising, and Branding

CONSUMER SOCIETY AND THE ROOTS OF CONSUMER CULTURE

Before discussing the nuances of consumer culture, it is important to establish a clear definition of the term. Consumer culture is not the same as consumption, nor is it simply the act of consuming goods and services. Instead, it refers to the cultural significance and meaning associated with consumption. Similar to what the Frankfurt School members argued, commodities represent a realization of one's social identity, relationships with others, and place in the world. A consumer culture is one where consumption is not limited to the economic sphere, but takes on a socio-political importance, facilitating social cohesion and status distinction. People no longer relate to each other in terms of the means of production (i.e., the class system) but in terms of what they own (i.e., an SUV, a diamond ring, designer clothing). Peter Stearns offers a succinct definition that is relevant to the analysis here. Consumer culture is:

A society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or traditional display. They become enmeshed in the process of acquisition—shopping—and take some of their identity from a procession of new items they buy and exhibit. (2002, p. ix, qtd. in Belk, 2004, p. 69)

This definition is particularly useful, given the author's pointed reference to shopping, because it highlights an important aspect of consumer culture: the sense of ritual and pleasure associated with consumption, and the emotional and psychological ties to commodities and consuming.

A Brief History of Advertising

The first role of advertising in the second half of the 19th century was to inform the public about the existence of new products—"the radio, phonograph, car, light bulb and so on"

(Klein, 2000, p. 5). Ads were information based, and served to announce to the masses the newest and most exciting inventions; the production of which had been made possible by industrialization. Advancements in technology and scientific innovation meant that the marketplace was flooded with new material goods (products that were not 'needed', in the traditional sense, for subsistence or survival). Soon enough, producers realized the importance of convincing people that their lives would be far better off with the product they were toting: "advertisements must take into account not only the inherent qualities and attributes of the products they are trying to sell, but also the way in which they can make those properties mean something to us" (Williamson, 1978, p. 12). Thus, in order to demonstrate the importance of owning a car, or a toaster, or a vacuum cleaner, for example, advertisers faced the task of assigning social meaning to the products; and "transforming the language of objects to that of people and vice versa" (Williamson, p. 12).

In this discussion I am taking for granted the important role that advertising plays in the economy. It is a necessary and efficient way to encourage sales, production, employment, prosperity, and to stimulate economic growth. However, I would like to explore for a moment the impact that advertising can have on culture. In the book *Advertising as Communication*, Gillian Dyer argues that an ad "creates the desire it seeks to satisfy" (1982, p. 6). Although this implies an active manipulation on the part of the admakers, advertising does have a significant ideological impact. This certainly raises concerns about the impact on the public good and the repercussions of such a manipulation. The structure of ads is such that they provide a frame for the meanings that organize and define the way we see the world. Commodities and marketing campaigns are integrated into all aspects of our everyday lives as a part of our 'modern mythology'. (Dyer, p. 1-2)

It is this stage of consumerism that marked the widespread reliance on and acceptance of the significance of exchange value over use value, instead of seeing the value of something as based in its utility or the physical properties of the good. As Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*:

The product becomes a commodity, i.e., a mere moment of exchange. The commodity is transferred into exchange value...It obtains, at first only in the head, a double existence. This doubling in the idea proceeds (and must proceed) to the point where the commodity appears double in real exchange: as a natural product on one side, as exchange value on the other" (qtd. in Williamson, 1978, p. 11).

For Marx, this is a major shift in the ideology of capitalism, in terms of people's social identities, by "replacing class with the distinctions made by the consumption of particular goods...Thus instead of being identified by what they produce, people are made to identify themselves with what they consume" (Williamson, p. 13).

The Importance of Meaning in Advertising: The Roaring '20s

The early decades of the 20th century saw the push for what Stuart Ewen refers to as a "new economic philosophy" based on the "eradication of social attitudes which were resistant to consumption" (Ewen, 1976, p. 83). At the time, theories of mass psychology and public opinion were being put to use in achieving political ends, and in the 1920s, these tactics came to be a major influence in advertising as well. The social reality of industrialization was experienced by the masses as the "frustrated passivity of daily life" (p. 84). Advertising was intended to divert attention away from the cultural monotony brought on by mechanization, and to replace the tedium with the excitement and pleasure of consumer goods.

Freudian psychology describes the stimulation of consumption (or commodity fetishism) "as a sublimation of urges"—in other words a safe, controlled, and socially acceptable form of expression (Ewen, p. 85). Fetishism removes the connection

between the commodity and its physical properties, and replaces it with a sense of fantasy. This aids the distribution and consumption of cultural products and “envelops the product with glamour, rather than hiding the labourer’s sweat behind the veil of exchange value” (Peters, 2003, p. 64). This technique of escapism is clearly illustrated in a 1924 advertisement featured in the *Saturday Evening Post*:

Go to a motion picture...and let yourself go...Before you know it, you are living the story—laughing, loving, hating, struggling, winning! All the romance, all the excitement you lack in your daily life are—in Pictures. They take you completely out of yourself into a wonderful new world...Out of the cage of everyday existence! If only for an afternoon or an evening—escape. (Ewen, p. 86)

In this sense, social change is only “symbolically acted out in the public culture” in the form of leisure or entertainment, where it fails to disrupt or pose any real threat to the social order (Ewen, p. 87). Advertising communicates the values of the corporate and industrial worlds, in an effort to portray a worldview where businesses—not the nuisance of revolutionary individuals or disruptive social movements—provide the solutions to the “boredom and social entrapment” that characterize modern industrial life (p. 85).

Marketing practices have also played a significant role in the cultural turn to individualism. People suddenly found themselves in constant judgement of, and tension with, others (based on the discovery of such offensive things as sneaker smell, underarm odour, bad breath, or wrinkled and blemished skin). Marketing campaigns based on paranoia and fear “rob [the public] of the power of action”; and highlight the “absence of positive bonds between people” (Ewen, pp. 98-99). ‘Paranoia’ ads supported the intention that:

Industry hoped not merely to sell goods, but also to capitalize on and conscript the basic emotional structures of people. Even as all else goes wrong, the ads asserted, the corporation will provide for you. (pp. 99-100)

Ewen describes the early selling of 'youth' in the image of the 1920s flapper. This young woman was the embodiment of the:

pure consumer, busy dancing through the world of modern goods. She was youth, marked by energy not judgement. Her clothes, her vehicles, her entire milieu were mass-produced—and she liked it. (p. 149)

In this way, the concept of 'youth' as a romantic ideal (i.e., happiness, carefree living, optimism, full of promise and expectation for the future) was understood as something that could be *bought*. Youth became, for the first time, a "desirable and salable commodity" (Ewen, p. 149).

From Exchange Value to Sign Value: The Rise of the Brand

The purpose of branding, broadly, is "to differentiate your product from all the other cattle on the range" (Heath and Potter, 2004, p. 210). Branding is a way for companies to demonstrate difference between products that are otherwise very similar in use-value. It became difficult to establish any real difference between products that are largely mass-produced in factories by machines. Naomi Klein writes, "within a context of manufactured sameness, image-based difference had to be manufactured along with the product" (Klein, 2000, p. 6). Risk averse consumers could establish a relationship with the brand based on a sense of trust and personal connection with the company and their products.

Post-modern capitalism is characterized by this reliance on the image, represented by the brand and demonstrated by the importance of logos and trademarks in corporate communications strategies. In his article discussing postmodern consumerism, Martin Morris argues that this stage is marked by the "consumption of signs and images rather than products" (Morris, 2001, p. 8). What was originally the replacement of exchange value for use value has been extended to the point where sign

value trumps both: "Thus the use value of a thing is subordinated not only to its exchange value but also *to whatever abstract meaning or sign can be attached to it*" (p. 9; emphasis added). Morris sees this as a new phase in Western economies where "the immateriality of identities, meanings, and cultural signs becomes a tradable thing that can be embodied in, or associated with exchangeable material products" (p. 9). The image of the product becomes entangled with the identity of the individual.

Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that commodification has co-opted "abstract qualities like love, goodness, and knowledge" that are now used as 'value-added' concepts, and are included in the marketplace of exchange value (Connor, 1997, p. 50). Consumer culture makes possible the reification² of all levels of signs: where commodities are created through "the conversion of social relationships into inert and frozen objects" (p. 46-47). The post-modern economy, according to Baudrillard, is a system of signs that are based on constructed or manufactured 'needs' (i.e., needs beyond subsistence).

Consuming becomes a way of "participat[ing] in the symbolic system" (Heath and Potter, p. 104). It is within such a totalizing system of signs that the individual is erased as a subject: consumption becomes the expression of self. The brand confers a sense of distinction and status (aspects of the social hierarchy that were once associated with the class system based on one's relationship to production). Now, the image of the corporation (in the form of the brand) becomes entangled with personal identity, in what Veblen calls "conspicuous consumption" (Morris, p. 12). Consumer culture's system of signs, symbols, and codes allows people to establish an identity and a "public signification facilitated by the commodity and its location in consumerism's system of hierarchical signs" (p. 12)

² Reification occurs when 'the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour' (Lukacs, 1971, p. 85). This is how the products of labour become commodities.

Drawing on Roland Barthes' concept of mythology, Martin Davidson outlines the idea of the brand as anthropology. Within a consumer society, he argues, people "buy values, not things" in the sense that "our products are our culture, because it is in consumerism that we most express our sense of social belonging" (Davidson, 1992, p. 123). The corporate brand is a communicative tool, and the reliance on image, symbols, and emotion-laden structures of feelings associated with it mean that brands occupy a complex and potentially unstable place in our culture—at the crossroads between advertising, anthropology, art, socialization, and politics. Consumer behaviour (much like any social behaviour) is not just logical and cognitive, but also emotional and affective in equal measure (p. 169).

Brands, up to this point, had always been used to differentiate between companies and products, but are now used to associate the constructed exchange value of the material goods (i.e., 'youth', 'freedom', or 'love' for example) with the sign (the brand), to reassure and instill confidence in the consumer. This marks the sign value's triumph over exchange value and the centrality of the brand in marketing campaigns. An important shift in marketing strategy occurred in the 1940s, when companies became aware of the salience of the *corporate* brand in establishing loyalty. The company as a whole began to work on its identity, or "corporate consciousness", and worked to establish itself in the psyche of the consuming public (Klein, p. 7).

During the 1980s branding was "turning a conceptual corner". A number of well-publicized world events (such as the discovery of the hole in the ozone layer, the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, the Dow Chemical disaster in Bhopal and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska) as well as the recession of the early 90s brought a new challenge to advertising. This, coupled with the on going "development of added-value-based marketing, made advertisers more and more adept at absorbing and using intangible

values” (Davidson, p. 91). But first, let me revisit the discussion on the rise of the brand in the early 1980s.

Scott Bedbury, VP Marketing for Starbucks (and formerly of Nike’s ‘Just Do It’ campaign) has summed up the importance of corporate branding:

A great brand raises the bar—it adds a greater sense of purpose to the experience, whether it’s the challenge to do your best in sports and fitness or the affirmation that the cup of coffee you’re drinking really matters (Klein, p. 21).

The post-modern corporation turned its focus (and most of its budget) from manufacturing *products* to manufacturing *meaning*, and then to “creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name” (Klein, p. 22). Branded companies are in the business of marketing, and the product line is incidental to this, seen simply as a marketing tool.

What are the implications of the corporate brand replacing the product? At first, this may seem benign—glossier ad campaigns and more money behind the celebrity spokespeople. However, on closer inspection, the brand has evolved into something like a “cultural sponge soaking up and morphing to its surroundings” (Klein, p. 17). Morris elaborates on this point:

Advertising and sponsorship has always tried to seduce by associating the imagery of positive socio-cultural experiences with its products... Since the late 1980s, however, branding more often seeks to ‘take these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality’... In this way, branding and sponsorship can extend the power of the corporate vision of consumerism into the social and cultural spheres directly, and indeed absorb them (Morris, pp. 15-16).

The Evolution of Social Cause Branding

Business, in North America in particular, has evolved with the shifting pressures of the global and domestic markets. The 1980s and 90s bore witness to what Thomas Frank has dubbed the “business revolution” (Frank, 2000, p.171). No longer run according to the rules of privilege in the ‘old-boy’s-club’, businesses were attempting to appeal more

to the younger generations. The logic of advertising was challenged by the audiences who were “weary of extravagant product claims... trained by years of advertising to distrust what they hear [and thus] developing an immunity to commercials” (Solomon, 1998, p. 58). Marketing managers had to change the focus of their publicity efforts in order to respond to the “stout resistance” of buyers to the fantasy world of advertising; and appeal to the audience on a more sophisticated emotional level (Fowles, 1998, p. 61).

As a response to the cultural climate of the late twentieth century, ads were making use of alternative music, globalization, diversity, and references to revolutionary ideas:

Business wanted us all to know it had changed. It had become cool. It had become sensitive, youthful, soulful... In the nineties business was a truth device; a friend of humanity; a powerful warrior for global democracy; a righteous enemy of pretense and falsehood. (Frank, p. 171)

Ad campaigns began to center on the “corporate quest for social and moral legitimacy” (Frank, p. 223). Corporations were attempting to humanize their operations, to get in touch with their “corporate soul” (p. 229). In order to facilitate this transformation of corporate identity, management went to work on the development of the brand, which was “thought to have something to do with [the company's] innermost identity” (p. 229). The corporate brand was to signify the promise associated with new business: invoking trust, making promises, establishing a comfort level and overall familiarity with the otherwise alienated and fragmented audience. The brand introduced significance and emotion to the product, and to the company as a whole, and made consumption a more meaningful and loyalty-driven experience.

The totality of the brand was extended to engulf the individual as well. In his book, *One Market Under God*, Frank refers to ‘The Brand Called You’ where corporations not only managed to take on humanistic qualities, but “were in some crucial

way more human than us" (Frank, p. 229, author's emphasis). On first read, this may sound slightly alarmist. However, in the fight for relationship building with consumers, branding "has propelled the corporate colonization of new cultural spaces well beyond that achieved by advertising... [where] the overall aim is to convert cultural content and social activity into extensions of the brand itself" (Morris, p. 10; p. 16).

Social Advocacy Advertising and the United Colors of Benetton

Some oft-cited examples of the new corporate personality are the efforts by companies such as Benetton, Kenneth Cole, and The Body Shop to demonstrate their social conscience and their political awareness. While The Body Shop is best known for its stance against animal testing and support of community trade (they do not advertise), Kenneth Cole promotes a social agenda through ads that make use of snappy or ironic one-liners and eye-catching images. He sees "politics as a way of attracting shoppers" (Givhan, 2003, p. C1). One campaign promised a discount on Kenneth Cole shoes to those shoppers who donated a pair of old shoes to the homeless: "Have a heart, give a sole" (p. C1).

The Benetton Project is the 'communications' campaign by Olivieri Toscani and the clothing company The United Colors of Benetton, and it is a seminal example of social advocacy advertising. In the beginning, Benetton ads featured multiracial groups of young people in brightly coloured clothing, in poses evoking feelings of peace and harmony, emphasizing identity and difference in the imagery. In 1989, however, the images in the ads began to take on more provocative content: for example, the picture of a black woman breastfeeding a white newborn infant was seen as both "divisive and thrilling" by its audience (Rutherford, 2000, p. 159). By the early 1990s, Toscani was designing ads that incorporated authentic pictures that had been used in news reports, such as the infamous photograph of David Kirby, the 'Christ-like' AIDS patient, and his

family in his hospital room. Other ads featured the picture of the bloody clothing of a Bosnian soldier who had been killed in the war, as well as images of environmental destruction, capital punishment, and poverty.

Some consider this to be a “progressive approach” to advertising, but many groups have criticized the Benetton Project for being exploitative and for using social issues to sell clothing (Rutherford, p. 164). This form of advertising has since been dubbed ‘cause marketing’ (or cause-related marketing, CRM) and is defined as ads that are designed for “mutual benefit” based on enlightened self-interest: in other words, “an attempt to appropriate the moral strength of propaganda in order to advance a commercial agenda” (p. 165). Benetton has maintained that their intentions are to be “a corporation with a conscience”, in the business of creating a socially conscious “campaign of public communication” to “document social realities rather than promote sales” (Tinic, 1997, p. 8; p. 9). 1992 campaign literature states their aims explicitly:

Among the various means available to achieve the brand recognition that every company must have, we at Benetton believe our strategy for communication to be more effective for the company and more useful to society than would be yet another series of ads showing pretty girls wearing pretty clothes. (qtd. in Giroux, 1994, p. 14)

Their emphasis on political messages and socially useful communication was indeed groundbreaking in the advertising world; and a refreshing change from the standard ‘pretty girls in pretty clothes’ the public was accustomed to. However, the corporate “ideology is explicitly promoted through an implied product”, one which is never actually pictured in the ads, but is tied to the subject matter through the United Colors of Benetton logo (Tinic, p. 4). The bottom-line profit motive orientation of capitalism does not lend well to social activism and altruistic intentions about ‘educating’ the public. In a time when so many companies are under intense scrutiny regarding allegations of labour abuses and sweatshop operations, it seems wise to take a closer

look into the image that companies like Benetton are able to portray to consumers, and the reality behind it—or the reality that they are possibly covering up.

While Paul Rutherford, author of *Endless Propaganda*, acknowledges that it is reasonable to expect corporations to be involved in supporting social causes (especially given the corporate tax breaks and decline in government funding for social programs), he is also critical of the tendency of CRM campaigns to be the subject of fads and fashions, imposing profit motives and sales techniques onto social issues. Rutherford argues that the aestheticization of politics in these campaigns results in commodifying conscience and morality, and undermines real political engagement with the issues.

Benetton and other 'political' companies like The Body Shop have been heavily criticized for their efforts to "recontextualize advertising as social discourse", however, the principles of commerce with a conscience have certainly taken hold, thanks in great part to these industry leaders (Morris, 2001, p. 14). It is important to distinguish between marketing that serves to *reflect* social issues, and marketing that serves to *replace* social discourse, by providing commodified solutions to social problems.

Public Cynicism over the Corporate Social Conscience

Despite all of the effort aimed at controlling the image of the company, marketers know that "the public's distrust in large companies has been growing" (Googins, 2002, p. E4). Even with all of the 'hip' advertising and branding, there still remains an undercurrent of cynicism that "capitalism had violated a deeply held moral economy...and the principles of democracy...including a sense of fairness and justice" (Morris, p. 23). The centrality of the brand and its image made it vulnerable to 'culture jamming'³ and general cultural backlash. Resistance, in the form of anti-consumerist efforts such as *Adbusters*, and

³ Culture jamming is "the act of using existing mass media to comment on those very media themselves, using the original medium's communication method. It is based on the idea that advertising is little more than propaganda for established interests, and that there is little escape from this propaganda in industrialized nations" (Retr. August 18, 2005 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_jamming).

anti-globalization movements like the demonstrations at the WTO meetings in Seattle in 1999 and Quebec City in 2000, along with the widespread popularity of books such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo* have drawn considerable attention to these issues. Crooked business practices are front-page news, and as *Toronto Star* columnist Carol Goar writes, "Globalization has made it risky for companies to hide exploitative labour practices or environmental negligence in distant corners of the world" (2004, p. A22).

The unsettling revelations that multinational corporations such as Nike, GAP, and Shell Oil were employing underage or sweatshop labourers, or destroying land and other resources, or involved in business deals with totalitarian governments in other countries was shocking. Access to these images and information worked to 're-brand' the companies. The most effective resistance to these glaring injustices can be achieved "by revealing and publicizing the glaring contradictions behind the corporate image or brand that the most effective challenges to corporate excess are being achieved" (Morris, p. 26).

THE PUSH FOR A RESPONSIBLE CORPORATE CITIZEN

The idea of corporate responsibility is not a new one: businesses have cycled in and out of public favour since the birth of capitalism, and with each phase of criticism comes the push for more social responsibility in business.

Lobby groups have developed measurement tools such as the Corporate Responsibility Index that "measures the performance of companies that meet globally recognized CSR standards, and aims to facilitate investment in them" (Beckett, 2003, p. 30). According to the Millennium Poll on CSR, of the 25,000 respondents interviewed in 23 countries, most people "want companies to contribute to society beyond making a profit" (Googins, p. E4). The Cone/Roper Corporate Citizenship study shows that 76% of consumers indicated that they would "consider a company's reputation when buying

holiday gifts” (p. E4). In Canada, Ipsos-Reid reported that the majority of consumers (55%) “have rewarded or punished a company for their corporate citizenship in the last year” (*The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2003, p. N1). Seventy-four percent of Canadian shareholders believe that “business executives should expand their responsibilities to embrace a broader social ethic... [including] human rights, the environment, their employees, and local communities” (Canadian Democracy & Corporate Accountability Survey, 2002).

Industry literature continues to sing the praises of the targeted-marketing trends, billed as a “powerful way to build consumer support”; a way to enable companies “to tie into the emotion of your target” (Hessekiel, 2001, p. 35; Fellman, 1999, p. 4). Jeffrey Swartz, president and CEO of Timberland Co., explains: “today’s consumers want to know more about the brand they are buying”, especially given the poor record of so many companies engaged in labour violations, use of sweatshops, unlawful sourcing of raw goods, and environmental destruction (Fellman, 1999, p. 4). In fact, the push for responsible business is coming from all sides. At the World Economic Forum in 1999, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan made a plea to corporations to “embrace, support and enact a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labour standards and environmental practices”—if not for the “self interest” of the company, then “for the good of its reputation” (Beckett, 2003, p. 30).

Public opinion and the recent exposure of irresponsible business practices (of companies such as the Gap, Nike, Shell, as mentioned earlier) has had a significant influence in pressuring businesses for more transparency and accountability for their social, political, and environmental impact. As core public relations literature, many companies are now publishing CSR reports and audits to reassure their customers. Gap Inc. recently released its second annual social responsibility report on factory and labour

conditions, indicating that the company has stepped up its efforts to enforce their vendor code of conduct and prevent labour violations from occurring in their overseas factories:

After years of being targeted by critics pressing for better overseas working conditions, Gap and other apparel and footwear companies have begun providing more details on how they inspect factories and address problems (Merrick, 2005, p. B9).

But 'social responsibility' seems like such an elusive term—what does it mean to be a good corporate citizen? According to the Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR), CSR is:

a company's commitment to operating in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner, while recognizing the interests of its stakeholders, including investors, customers, employees, business partners, local communities, the environment and society at large (www.cbsr.ca).

Other definitions frame CSR in terms of "how companies manage the business processes to produce an overall positive impact on society", and conceptualize the economy (businesses) as intertwined with people and the environment—here businesses turn their focus to what is known as the 'triple bottom line'⁴ (Baker, 2005).

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development uses the following definition:

Corporate Social Responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large. (Baker, 2005)

There are also some interesting cross-cultural differences in conceptualizing CSR. The European model of corporate citizenship is "focussed on operating the core business in a socially responsible way, complemented by investment in communities" and more in line with the definitions outlined above (Baker, 2005). In North America on the other hand, (and particularly the United States) the social role of the corporation is understood in more philanthropic terms. Companies make profits, and fulfill their duty to

⁴ The 'triple bottom line' is "an expanded baseline for measuring performance, adding social and environmental dimensions to the traditional monetary benchmark" (Retr. August 18, 2005 from <http://www.esd.rgs.org/glossary.html>).

pay taxes, at which point it is the government's responsibility to protect the social welfare of communities. 'Social responsibility' is understood by companies to be a voluntary donation of some time, funds, or other resources to charitable causes. It is here where the muddy water between charity and marketing becomes even more murky.

As the 'rule of business' dictates, CSR is supported if it proves to be worth the investment—in terms of publicity, sales, access to markets, etc. However, bottom-line pressures and focus on profit also mean that if the ethical choice is too costly and the company cannot see recouping losses incurred, then it will not make the ethical choice. This is precisely why "many companies have shifted their community spending out of community budgets and into marketing budgets" (Beckett, p. 30). CSR as a business-led initiative "in terms of strategy and principle... is fundamentally flawed" according to Sir Geoffrey Chandler, founder of the Amnesty International Business Group: "doing right because it is right, not because it pays, needs to be the foundation of business" (30).

When giving back to the community that supports your business becomes solely a marketing strategy, the real social impact and the charitable good is lost. Especially when corporate philanthropy evolves into highly publicized cause-related marketing promotional campaigns. In 1999, in the U.S. alone, money invested in CRM came to several billion dollars, with over 4000 corporations claiming to be involved in such initiatives (Mizerski, Mizerski, and Sadler, 2001, p. 26). Marketing professionals coach businesses on how to effectively derive the maximum benefits from their strategic alignment with specific social causes.

However, cause related marketing privileges some causes over others, based not on need or social importance, but on business needs instead. Companies are looking for more instant gratification in their marketing strategy: "tie-ins with social causes [are seen] as ways to generate immediate sales...a way to differentiate

themselves from rivals" (Mizerski, et al., p. 26). David Hessekiel, founder of Matchmaker Marketing, advises his clients to "pick your partners well" because "great allies can open doors for you with advertisers and provide valuable distribution channels... Be sure you know the strengths and weaknesses of a non-profit long before pitching ideas involving them" (2001, p. 36). This allows only well-established, well-funded causes to benefit from corporate attention, based on their ability to make the supposedly 'charitable' partnership mutually beneficial. Equally worthy causes that may not have access to wide distribution channels or celebrity endorsements are effectively excluded from sponsorship, and the problem becomes circular.

In addition, a study conducted in 2001 on the effectiveness of social marketing found that the 'Ambush' marketing strategy (i.e., images relating to social causes without real ties to those causes) can perform just as well as a CRM campaign in terms of generating consumer "goodwill and sales", but the ambush appeal works "without the financial cost of donating" (Mizerski et al, p. 25). Thus, companies only need give the *impression* that they care; they are under no obligation to donate to the cause, as long as the image of the social cause is maintained.

However, there is an important difference between these ideas of **corporate citizenship**, and the **cause related marketing trend** that I refer to here as **social cause branding**. I believe that we are in danger of losing the distinction between corporate responsibility (i.e., the ethical sourcing of materials, environmental sustainability, respect for employees and labour standards, products that are not harmful to society, etc) and the marketing practice of simply throwing money and attention at a social cause intended to divert attention away from underlying issues or problems, and to ensure increased consumption and profits for the company. In the end, everyone loses when business imperatives are imposed on social causes, and where the solutions for one are incompatible with the other.

The Public Sphere

INFORMED CITIZEN OR AVID CONSUMER?

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is a second-generation member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and was a student of both Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. He has been described as “perhaps the last major thinker to embrace the basic project of the Enlightenment”, and his work reflects the influences of Kantian philosophy of rationality and reason⁵ (Stephens, 1994, p. 5).

Habermas diverted from the traditional Frankfurt School theories and has taken a different stance regarding his critical appraisal of Western institutions and rationality. He believes in the concepts of justice and reason, and maintains the Frankfurt critical theory goals of approaching social problems from a philosophical perspective. As a theorist, and as a public intellectual, he is eager to represent and debate his ideas in a public forum and is “one of the dominant voices” in political theory today (Stephens, p. 5).

Habermas is most renowned for his theory of communicative action based on Socratic notions of debate and discussion. One of the most important influences shaping his theories and beliefs can be traced back to his childhood. Raised in Germany, the son of a Nazi sympathizer, he was a member of the Hitler Youth at the age of 15. He grew up knowing only of Nazi society. It wasn't until the revelations of the Nuremberg Trials that he realized he had been living in a politically criminal society. Having faced the horrors of fascism first-hand, Habermas argues passionately for the protection of a democratic platform for debate from an intensely personal viewpoint. He has devoted his life and studies to ensuring a place for humanism, universalism, and reasoned communication.

⁵ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a German philosopher noted for his thoughts on the “Copernican Revolution” among other philosophies. He believed that the human mind was “an active originator of experience rather than just a passive recipient of perception”, or a ‘blank slate’, as it was thought. Perception, to Kant, was *processed* and *recognized*. (Retr, August 18, 2005 from <http://www.friesan.com/kant.htm>)

Habermas' version of humanism maintains that "in our everyday knowledge of how language is properly used we find a common ground among all creatures with a human face" (Stephens, p. 5). The public sphere is realized whenever "private individuals assemble to form a public body" without the restrictions of business or state control, but "with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions" (Habermas, 2003 [1989], p. 102). The ideal public sphere, for Habermas, provides an arena for reasoned communication and formation of public opinion based on the "criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally—and, in periodic elections, formally as well—practices vis-a-vis the ruling structure" (p. 102). The public sphere serves to mediate between society and state, by way of public meetings, opportunities to vote, open court hearings, and through the mass media. Historically, the public sphere organized to relay the bourgeois' (or private individuals') interests to the state authority or nobility.

In his influential book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Habermas argues that the invention of the printing press and dissemination of early newspapers planted the seeds of liberal democracy in 18th century Europe. The burgeoning exchange of goods and expansion of early capitalist markets necessitated a more reliable information exchange. The increased transfer of goods and information made room for the establishment of a group of individuals *separate* from both the church and the state—in other words, the public sphere. The medium of print and the penny press provided a forum for communicating information of 'common interest', and for the first time provided a way to challenge the authority of the church and the state. Habermas argues that the early press and the distribution of newsletters paved the way for further pursuit of Enlightenment goals: deliberative, rational and reasoned debate aimed at establishing a 'common good' as defined by 'the people'.

The structural transformation in the title of Habermas' book refers to the shift in economic priorities that in turn shaped the social relations of those in the merchant or bourgeois class. State authorities were making use of newsletters to disseminate "instructions and ordinances" to their subjects, and in doing so, "the addressees of the authorities' announcements genuinely became 'the public' in the proper sense" (Habermas, 1989, p. 21). The public sphere emerged in response to church and sovereign authority, as a body of private individuals expressing public concern regarding issues in common: such as taxes, duties, regulations, and rights. Habermas describes this reasoned process as a "forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, [and] readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion" (Habermas, 1989, pp. 25-26).

Although he acknowledges the existence of differing styles of publics, Habermas argues for a set of institutional criteria:

- 1) **a sense of "common humanity"** among members, disregarding status and emphasizing equality;
- 2) **the development of a "common concern"**, and a general accessibility to information and culture (this undermined the church/state monopoly on interpretation of meaning and gave rise to the concept of individualism, individual interpretation, reasoning, and communication); and,
- 3) **an inclusive public**, made up of all private people⁶ (Habermas, 1989, pp. 36-37).

Habermas has criticized the current system for what he calls the "refeudalization" of the public sphere, where consensus becomes problematic, given competing interest groups with unequal power and access to money and resources: "large organizations strive for political compromises with the state and with one another, excluding the public

⁶ Unfortunately, this was inequitably represented by the restriction of membership to propertied, educated white males.

sphere whenever possible" (2003 [1989], p. 106). He describes the public body in the 'mass democracy' of the social welfare state as made up of organized private individuals who make use of the channels of public communication. The takeover by "giant corporations" has "transformed it from a site of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity" (Durham and Kellner, 2001, p. 36). Habermas warns of the declining impact of the public sphere at a time when public opinion has transformed into a mass-mediated manufactured opinion, and the active rational citizen has become a passive consumer/spectator:

the citizen became the client, culture was reduced to entertainment, popular participation gave way to mass consumption, public debate was replaced by elite negotiation, public opinion lost out to 'nonpublic opinion'. (Rutherford, 2000, p. 19-20)

Habermas was particularly pessimistic about the shift in the nature of 'publicity'. Originally this meant oral or written speech made public, and debated and discussed in a dialogue. This form of 'critical publicity' was integral to the system of checks and balances between the people and the source of legislative power. However, recently this has taken a turn to what he calls a 'manipulative publicity', where "even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only identifying them" (Habermas, 1991, p. 206, qtd. in Rutherford, p. 20). This allows for propaganda from 'authorized opinions' only, and erases reasoned communication entirely (demonstrated in our cultural reliance on and obsession with public opinion polls as a gauge of the wants and needs of society).

Habermas' vision of the public sphere is useful in as far as it is a conceptual resource, an almost utopian ideal describing the potential of political participation that can be enhanced through deliberation and reasoned communication in a designated arena openly accessible to the public at large. This sphere of communication exists as a separate and distinct entity from the state and from the economy, and therefore the public can be *empowered to be critical* of both the state and the economy. In order for

democracy to be realized, it is integral to maintain the distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations.

Critics on all sides of politics and academia have found fault with this vision, referring specifically to the exclusionary nature of the Habermasian public sphere, its failure to acknowledge either power differentials between competing groups in society, or the class/status/race/gender differences that restrict participation between strong and weak publics. Habermas has often been criticized for his 'idealized version' of the public sphere, and his failure to address the restrictive nature of a public that will only include white, literate, educated and propertied bourgeois males. He does not discuss issues of hegemony or unequal power relations (gender, class, race issues). However, his contribution to the dialogue on critical theory is fundamental, in that he has described the historical moment where the early capitalist economic system together with the printing press revolution in Europe gave impetus to the creation of a *public*, and the concept of *publicity*. This marks the first time that the social body of private individuals gave "direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice" (Durham and Kellner, p. 36).

The Decline of the Public Sphere

Peter Dahlgren (2001) has argued for the importance of a public culture in the preservation of democratic values: "a civic and political life beyond elections that must also measure up to our democratic ideals...anchored in some minimum of shared values and manifested in everyday practices where people can experience themselves as members and potential participants of a democratic society" (p. 65). The fragmentation and exclusion of the public sphere in its current state has brought about the formation of multiple mini-publics, or 'sphericules' as Todd Gitlin calls them—heterogeneous and fragmented competing publics. This contributes to the shrinking civil society of the

postmodern consumer culture, “foster[ing] increasing ‘nichification’ or even ‘neo-tribalism’...as the multiplicity of tastes, interests, and social orientations accelerate” (qtd. in Dahlgren, p. 67). As a result, we witness the depoliticization of society, characterized by decreased party loyalty, lower voter turnouts, and highly individualized needs and wants that are less likely to be satisfied by government. The “central question arises over the political lives of citizens treated as if they were merely consumers waiting to be stimulated and sold like commodities to advertisers and merchants” (Entman and Bennett, 2001, p. 475).

CIVIC ADVOCACY AND CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING:

Propaganda and Persuasion

Although the term ‘propaganda’ is loaded, given its association with fascist, state controlled information campaigns such as Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, Rutherford provides a very straightforward definition of the concept, and one that is particularly useful to this discussion. Propaganda, he argues, is “a synonym for all kinds of mass persuasion”; it is “an intentional and sponsored message, a deliberate kind of ‘symbolic practice’ that seeks to persuade the body politic, or some significant constituency within the public sphere” (Rutherford, p. 7; p. 8).

Rutherford argues that by labeling cause-related marketing and ad campaigns ‘advertising’ or ‘branding’ instead of ‘propaganda’, we are placing it in the realm of commonly understood marketing and promotional context—without acknowledging the pointed political objective of each of these messages. In fact, the implications of this type of advertising are such that the “messages express the wishes of the powerful” and thus can function as an “instrument of domination” (p. 10). Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse also abhorred the use of techniques of propaganda in advertising and promotional material. He argued that the “authoritarian style of language” that has been

widely adopted in PR and communications circles had spread beyond the world of advertising and had become “the voice of command” in public discourse as well (Rutherford, p. 21). He wrote:

It is the word that orders and organizes, that induces people to do, to buy, and to accept... It is transmitted in a style which is a veritable linguistic creation; a syntax in which the structure of the sentence is abridged and condensed in such a way that no tension, no ‘space’ is left between the parts of the sentence. (Marcuse, 1964, qtd. in Rutherford, p. 21)

This brings us back to the earlier discussion on hegemony. The control over the message that is exerted by companies exists in the influence they have over media content. *Adcult* author James Twitchell puts this bluntly: “As a general rule the greater the advertising load, the greater the sponsor’s control of content” (1996, p. 116).

Since the beginnings of the free press, and the reliance on advertising dollars to cover the costs of media production, media outlets have been at the mercy of their corporate sponsors. While freedom of the press may be enshrined in our rights (protecting from state intervention in information dissemination), there is no such protection from the subtle and implied censorship exerted by companies with deep pockets for ad budgets. The extent of corporate control over message content is illustrated very plainly in the example of the tobacco industry. James Twitchell asserts that tobacco companies have “spent about \$4 for every person in the United States on advertising”, and regularly exert pressure on editorial content (for magazines and news shows) restricting stories on the dangers of smoking, or the links between smoking and health problems (p. 118). The University of Michigan study of magazine ads over 25 years found that “magazines carrying tobacco ads were 38 percent less likely to discuss the risks of smoking... [and] Women’s magazines were the worst offenders. They were 50 percent less likely to cover the dangers” (p. 120). Twitchell sums up the contradiction:

What is especially ironic is that good health is primarily the concern of these magazines. When Helen Gurley Brown, impresaria of *Cosmopolitan*, was asked by the *Washington Post* to explain why a magazine so concerned with the well-

being of young women should neglect such a large danger, she candidly said, "Having come from the advertising world myself, I think, 'Who needs somebody you're paying millions of dollars a year to come back and bite you on the ankle?'" (qtd. In Twitchell, p. 120).

With the recent proliferation of the 'advertorial', 'blurmercials', 'infotainment', reliance on press releases from flashy communications firms, and the use of Video News Releases (VNRs) as sponsored news content for the tightly budgeted and time-pressed journalists... it is harder and harder to find the line between 'real' news and corporate propaganda. To this, Twitchell adds:

the two largest advertisers...are liquor and cigarettes. They are also the two chief causes of premature death and loss of work. Together they control 65 percent of newspaper space and 22 percent of television time. (p. 120)

The major problem associated with this type of advertising is that it is grounded in existing structures of power. It both "presumes, and confirms, hierarchy: it is typically a monologue originating on high (from experts, officials, politicians, managers, and the like) but directed below (to young people, adult citizens, minorities, etcetera)" (Rutherford, p. 11). This seems a far cry from the vision of public sphere participation as informed dialogue grounded in democratic ideals and consensus building. Instead, the public sphere is replaced with a one-directional, top-down push to persuade, convince, and 'sell eyeballs'.

In his book, *Endless Propaganda*, Rutherford argues that "marketing is a technology of manufactured opinions" and that companies have learned to "advertise [their] positions only if the public agrees with them" (p. 264). The act of moralizing to sell private goods turns mass democracy into a *market* democracy, where politics and economics are irrevocably intertwined; and those with the deepest pockets can dominate and control the terms of the debate. The power of signs and images is harnessed to sell ideas to the public. However, reliance on the techniques of stereotyping and propaganda

to persuade audiences can do more harm than good—even when it is well-intentioned. Although it can bring much needed media attention to important issues, the propaganda and agenda-setting function of social advocacy campaigns effectively limits and manufactures public opinion according to the logic and needs of the marketplace.

At the point where market relations govern public sphere discourse, “the postmodern public sphere [is] filled with ever-increasing doses of promotion manufactured by a relatively small circle of interests” (Rutherford, p. 259). The fact of propaganda as the dominant form of communications campaigns means that the public sphere is at the mercy of ‘authorized opinions’ cleared by PR managers and originating from those sources able to mobilize enough money and resources to have their message heard. This reinstates a structure of “hierarchy and exclusion” into the public sphere, and undermines the possibility of open access and equal participation in deliberative debate (Rutherford, p. 263).

The widespread use of advertising and branding as a core element of business—evidenced by the growth of advertising and marketing budgets to such a point where they dwarf the production budget of some companies—has become a tool available to elite groups who are in a position of influence, or who have the money and resources to sponsor a major campaign. As a result of cause marketing and social cause branding, political and social issues become subjected to marketing logic; and the ability to engage in meaningful public discourse regarding these issues is undermined by the representation of the “world of affairs as a gathering of problems, products, and solutions, always to support the purposes of selling” (Rutherford, p. xvi). This effectively transforms the public sphere into a (literal) marketplace of goods and ideas, where the role of citizen is understood to mean ‘consumer’, and participation is grounded in consumption instead of in deliberative debate. The democratic ideals outlined by Habermas have been undermined to the point where public issues have been co-opted

into corporate branding schemes, and the space to engage in any effective communicative action is lost.

Chapter Four: Women as Consumer/Citizens

BRANDED CONSUMPTION GIVES YOU A VOICE

In the book, *The Rebel Sell* (2004), authors Heath and Potter discuss how that the idea of the 'rebel consumer' has grown out of Baudrillard's concept of a massified and conformist 'system' that "cannot tolerate exceptions" (p. 105). By extension, and according to this logic, any "nonstandard acts of consumption come to be seen as politically radical...the consumer can disrupt the system simply by refusing to shop where she has been told to" (p. 105). Heath and Potter liken post-industrial consumption patterns to an arm's race: they describe a pattern of defensive and offensive consumption—and argue that "creating new markets of prestige goods like organic tea...exacerbates competitive consumption rather than reduces it" (p. 158). Visual culture, in the form of consumable cultural products, has become the "language of self-expression" for the 21st century (p. 165). Heath and Potter write: "it is through brands that we express who we are and what we value" (p. 212). As such, cultural products—and consumerism in general—"is not politically inert or neutral", in fact, Heath and Potter argue:

In many ways, its success is due to the fact that consumerism manages to engage our central political ideas—freedom, democracy, self-expression—in a way that is accessible, personalized, and immediately gratifying... There is no sovereignty like consumer sovereignty. (pp. 165-166)

Women Consumers: A 'powerful' demographic

Historically, market forces and employment opportunities have served to shape the role of women in public and private life. 'Emancipation', for most women, came in the form of work force participation, and occurred as a result of the need for supplemented family income and cheap labour. Women in the late 19th and early 20th century relied on

consumption and commodities as a kind of access to society and public life, and “advertisers played with language and imagery that associated their [products] with women’s liberation” (Scranton, 2001, p. 26).

Advertisements in the 1920s appropriated feminist ideals of equality and freedom into the jargon of consumption, as illustrated in the following 1929 ad for Hoover vacuum cleaners:

I was the woman whose husband gave her each Christmas some pretty trinket. The woman whose youth was slipping away from her too fast. The woman whose cleaning burdens were too heavy... In one short year I have discovered that youth need not go swiftly—that cleaning duties need not be burdensome. For last Christmas my husband did give me a *Hoover*. (Ewen, 1976, p. 161)

The American Tobacco Company, (in consultation with the psychoanalyst A.A. Brill) sponsored a group of women in the 1929 NYC Easter Parade to engage in “lighting torches of freedom—smoking cigarettes... as a protest against women’s inequality” (pp. 160-161). This strategic campaign aimed at changing the image of women smokers by leveraging the social power and emotional impact of the women’s movement in order to open up an untapped demographic of potential consumers for the tobacco industry. Incidentally, the ‘torches of freedom’ march received nation-wide front-page coverage—a resounding success for a one-time publicity stunt of a group of only ten women.

For the 1920s housewife, the domestic sphere was “defined and demarcated, more and more, by the external priorities of capitalism” in the push to habituate women to the influx of ‘labour-saving’ manufactured and industrial goods, such as toasters, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines (Ewen, p. 163). Women were managers of the home, and in charge of administering to the ‘business of living’; however, the inequality between the sexes remained steadfast—in fact, the “woman [was]...powerful in buying because of her *secondary* position to men” (p. 170). The separation of men and women (public vs. private; producers vs. consumers, etc.) was upheld in spite of, and arguably

because of the tone and rhetoric of the advertisements that linked women's 'new liberated status' to consumer goods and household spending power:

The promise of the new corporate authority was an end to the trap which patriarchy had traditionally imposed for women. Where the patriarchal structure had required the socialization of young girls into an acceptance of drudgery as destiny, the vision of the future of the commodity market dangled before women's eyes resembled that which the feminists among them were already seeing as a possibility: a society in which the patriarchal yoke might be broken and in which women might expect their daughters' lives to transcend the historic limitations of their own. (p. 175)

Although advertising had indeed begun to take notice of some women's issues, this attention was limited to the potential power of their demographic as the spenders of household money. The publicity around issues such as smoking unfortunately did not serve to liberate and empower women in any concrete political way. By catering to the separation of men and women into the public and private spheres of modern social life, advertising campaigns drew attention to issues that could safely be solved through consumption of things such as cigarettes (to represent freedom and social inequality) and use of manufactured goods (to represent the saving of labour and alleviation of domestic chores).

Advertising up to the 1960s was "astonishingly sexist stuff" and it wasn't until much later in the decade that industry leaders began to incorporate the jargon of emancipation into their ads. Marketing executives pictured "women's liberation as a freeing of consuming potential", which was an interesting contradiction "when the product had clearly been developed according to less liberated notions of femininity" (Frank, 1998, p. 172). Consumer goods geared towards the ideal of the 'new woman' opened up markets for things such as vaginal deodorants (marketed as 'freedom spray'), hair dye ('blondes have more fun'), or cigarettes ('you've come a long way, baby'). One of the first TV ads for the Virginia Slims campaign featured the image of an unfortunate old-fashioned ('pre-liberation') woman, accompanied by the male voiceover:

It used to be, lady, you had no rights. No right to vote, no right to property, no right to the wage you earned. That was back when you were laced in, hemmed in, and left with not a whole lot to do. That was back when you had to sneak up to the attic if you wanted a cigarette. Smoke in front of a man? Heaven forbid! (qtd. In Frank, 1998, p. 156).

The ad continues, and the woman has taken a pair of scissors to literally cut away the repressive costume. She reveals her newly liberated self: wearing stylish clothing, putting on makeup and jewelry, and shunning traditional social conventions. Through consumption, the 1960s woman was able to identify with the promise of freedom and gender equality.

In spite of all the increased attention to women in terms of consumption patterns (and shifts in cultural taboos like smoking in public), the marketized version of female liberation still had not empowered women outside the economic sphere. In the decades following its launch in the 1970s, *Ms.* magazine struggled to secure advertisers for their all-female audience. The widely-held assumption was that women's magazines "have nothing to do with journalism" and were "catalogs" that serve only to provide a "supportive editorial atmosphere" and "complementary copy" for cosmetics, cleaning products, and recipe ingredients (Steinem, 1998, p. 138).

Gloria Steinem, the founder of *Ms.*, described the discrepancy between the all-but-completely ignored women's demographic, and the market reports that indicated their buying patterns as ideal customers: "but", she said, "the truth is that women's products—like women's magazines—have never been the subjects of much serious reporting anyway" (p. 151). Women could exercise agency in the market *to a certain limited degree*, and they could address those needs and wants that existed within the hegemonic framework of the market economy:

The mass media molds everyone into more passive roles, into roles of more frantic consuming, into human beings with fragmented views of society. But what it does to everyone, it does to women even more. The traditional societal role for

women is already a passive one, already one of a consumer, already one of an emotional non-intellectual who isn't supposed to think or act beyond the confines of her home. (Embree, 1970, qtd in Frank, 1998, p. 230).

Women's lib ads wanted to tap into the brewing sentiment that women could *buy* just like a man, and as long as the political issues remained consumption-based (and stayed out of the political arena), businesses were all for it.

The 1980s gave rise to an interesting marriage of fashion and feminism, and as women pushed for entrance into the corporate world, designers were shaping women's clothing to look more masculine (complete with padded shoulders and slimmer hip-lines). In the *Consumerist Manifesto*, Martin Davidson argues that fashion "associated strategies of resistance to fixed images of femininity" (1994, p. 187). "Women" he wrote, "have always had a complex relationship to consumption. Potentially both subversive and repressive, it has been represented as an opiate...but it has also been one of the few opportunities for the same women to express power and self assertion" (p. 187). Nike ads played on the feminist movement's attempt to celebrate women's bodies, in ad campaigns that instructed women to "Get Physical". However, the themes of empowerment presented in terms of female sexuality and identity are approached and repackaged by the media in a way that upholds the hegemonic cultural belief system and effectively demoralizes and oppresses women, as it.

But, as marketers pay closer attention to the values and concerns of this demographic, this seems like an important step forward for the status of women. Women are being acknowledged for their buying (and spending) power and are seen as an attractive target market. Market research polls show that "women dominate about 80% of purchase decisions" (Shaw, 2005b, p. FP1). Major clothing chains are closely following the shift in consumer demand of Canada's fastest growing demographic, and

companies such as Jacob, The Gap, and Abercrombie & Fitch are opening stores devoted entirely to clothing for 'women over 35'. (Shaw, 2005a, p. FP1).

Women are even targeted for traditionally 'masculine' goods such as cars, electronics, athletic equipment, and insurance. In an effort to encourage female customers, Home Depot is introducing a registry service, featuring "products for any occasion... You can register for a wedding shower or for Father's Day" (Shaw, 2005b, FP1). Since advertising is such a fundamental issue for the financial support of cultural products, this is an integral step in opening the arena of media and mass communications to include women's perspectives in radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and other cultural products. Businesses are paying closer attention to this demographic, and issues that are of particular interest to women are getting air time in the form of advertising, which can lead to a better understanding and exposure of women's concerns.

Cause Marketing and Social Cause Branding for Women

In his book, *Cause Marketing* (2002), Joe Marconi writes:

Women are becoming increasingly important to marketers, as each year research indicates they are taking on greater responsibility and increasingly assuming the role of decision makers, not only in traditional situations as homemakers, but as managers of small businesses, large companies, entrepreneurships, car pools, and the family budget. Women, more than men, choose cold remedies and brands of soap, and are also more knowledgeable in the comparative quality of big ticket items, from cars to insurance policies, home security systems, and travel.

Marketers recognize the power of women in a broad range of categories (college-educated working mothers, single working mothers as heads of households, stay-at-home moms, soccer moms, managers of home-based businesses, community service volunteers, professional women, women who advise presidents, etc). The modern marketplace is rich with an abundance of women's issues that represent a range of opportunities unimagined not so long ago. (Marconi, p. 148)

More and more strategies are directed towards acquiring female consumer attention, and they are doing so by incorporating social causes that appeal to women in their corporate branding efforts. Even companies not traditionally associated with women's products (for example, Ford Motor Company, CIBC, State Farm Insurance, and Major League Baseball associations) are aligning themselves with the same social causes, such as breast cancer and violence against women, that have become popular within the traditionally female-dominated industries.

Unfortunately, there is a much darker side to social cause branding, that I have referred to throughout this paper. The commodification of the cause puts the construction of social problems in the hands of corporations. This effectively removes the issue from the public sphere. The corporate branding of the social cause, in Adorno's terms, "transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms" (Adorno, 1989 [1967], p. 129). This also has the effect of distancing individuals from their real-life situations, and undermines women's political power by offering them pre-packaged solutions to their problems in the form of consumption, which "blurs the boundary between...the political public and the commodity public" (Warner, 1993, p. 245).

Ford Case Study

As part of the Ford Motor Company's strategy of relationship-building with women buyers, the company "believed it needed to change the way it communicated with women" and wanted to align with a social cause that would "fold women into its brand promise" (Marconi, p. 173). Ford is a major sponsor of the Komen Foundation 'Race for the Cure' events, and has focused its fundraising and marketing efforts on "education and creating public awareness" (p. 175). According to their website, Ford "is proud to be a National Series Sponsor of Komen Race for the Cure":

The Freestar minivan has been making its debut appearances at Race for the Cure events nationwide. So you may have glimpsed how it offers you and your family more versatility, safety and security features than any other minivan.

Meanwhile, Ford has been criticized for the lack of attention (and action) given to the problem of toxic fuel emissions from their vehicles, emissions that have been linked to the incidence of breast and other cancers in the population.

State Farm Insurance Case Study

State Farm received lots of attention for their cause marketing campaign “to end partner violence”, and the company has dedicated “significant resources” to the issue, and “publicly portrays itself as an advocate for battered women” (Otis, 1997, p. 1). Their website states baldly that “Domestic violence is everyone’s business”, and yet according to legislators and victims’ rights groups, behind closed doors State Farm has “fought to remove or weaken language governing property and casualty insurance in state legislative proposals which would ban insurers from underwriting or making other insurance or claims decisions based on abuse status” (p. 1). Evidently, State Farm’s corporate conscience does not extend into an area where their profit margin is being compromised: property casualty insurance accounts for most of their annual premiums written. This is a clear example of some of the conflicting interests inherent in cause related marketing.

THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY AND SOCIAL CAUSE BRANDING

Virginia Postrel refers to the current time period as the ‘Age of Aesthetics’, where style and art are incorporated into all aspects of our lives, most noticeably in our commodities. In her book, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness* (2003), Postrel argues that aesthetics promise

“an enticing, stimulating, diverse, and beautiful world” for the consumer (p. 4). The beauty industry is big business in the Aesthetic Age: making up a large sector of the economy; featured in marketing and branding; adding value to goods; and serving to create and define identities (class, gender, race, status et cetera). (Scranton, 2001, pp. 8-9) The target consumer market for the beauty-business, women ages 18 to 34, has been described as “more socially active and aware than any generation that precedes them” (Giroux, 1994, p. 6). The cosmetics and fashion industry has featured prominently in social cause branding strategies for issues such as breast cancer, AIDS, and domestic violence. The interesting contradiction inherent here is that:

Beauty has advanced modern business at many levels. It represents and projects corporate identities. It has opened entrepreneurial opportunities for women, even as it fosters the exploitation of women's bodies (Scranton, p. 19).

The establishment of beauty and style as an industry changed the role of women “by aligning commercial enterprise with the very ideals of femininity... that had long justified women's exclusion from most lines of work” (Scranton, p. 11). Women have relied on consumption and commodities “as a kind of access to publicness” (Warner, p. 241). “Working women”, an expanding early 20th century demographic, “purchased beauty products to help define their public identities, assert their independence, enjoy themselves, and spend some of the money they were making” (Scranton, p. 67).

Social Cause Branding of Women's Issues

Avon Case Study

Avon Company—originally the California Perfume Company (CPC)—was one of the first businesses to hire women sales representatives, giving them “a foothold in the developing market economy” (Scranton, p. 20). The success of the CPC venture is illustrated by their increased sales during the tough economic times of the Great

Depression. However, it was clear from the beginning that women were considered employable by the company because they offered temporary, low-paying, part-time labour, (with no benefits) and “their social networks could be exploited for selling purposes” (p. 124). The president of the CPC “believed that by hiring women who built customer bases on pre-existing kinship, friendship, and community networks, few, if any complaints or law suits would be lodged against his company” (p. 128).

Today, Avon is one of the largest and longest running cosmetics companies in America. It has maintained a predominantly female sales force, and has developed advertising and marketing that are intended to appeal to the female consumer. Avon has featured prominently in partnerships with social causes such as violence against women and breast cancer research.

Certainly, corporations such as Avon should give back to the community that supports their product, but there is a fundamental conflict of interest when businesses define and construct the issues on the public agenda. Lee Lakeman expressed her disdain regarding corporate social cause marketing, in a response to the announcement regarding the partnership between Avon and YWCA Canada:

The YWCA was there to accept a million dollars for a project to ‘reeducate the public about sexist violence’. The YWCA speaker was to introduce us to the new federal funding plan—‘corporate partners’—and its partner: the Avon Corporation. Together, both Executive Directors explained how their new partnership would advance women’s equality. The Avon Corporation would lend not just money but expertise on various (unimaginable) things to the YWCA, and the YWCA would lend a ‘feminist influence’ to the boardroom of the Avon Corporation. This ridiculous notion of a company that exploited female labour at every level of operations from factory to commission sales women in order to sell make-up to women as a solution to inequality was unspeakable. From the back of the room you could hear the few feminists in attendance shouting ‘Just pay the Avon lady and give us the tax dollars we deserve!’ (Lakeman, 2000, p. 26)

Avon has also been a driving force behind the ‘pink ribbon campaign’ as part of their cause marketing campaign alignment with breast cancer research. Their aim is to show support for the causes that are most important to their consumer audience, as part of

their branding strategy. However, despite its claim of being 'the company for women', Avon has refused to commit to reformulating their products in accordance with EU health standards that ban carcinogens, mutagens and reproductive toxins from cosmetics and other personal care products.

In addition, Breast Cancer Action and the Follow the Money Campaign are working to get companies like Avon and Ford to be more transparent about the money and PR work associated with breast cancer research. Their goal is to encourage these companies to disclose how they raise and use the funds (i.e., are the funds spent on marketing and 'education'? Or do they fund treatment facilities for cancer patients? Or do they support cancer research? And what kind of research?); and to pressure these companies to allow funding for the exploration of environmental connections to breast cancer—which is an area largely ignored by companies who would not like to explore the possibly connection between the commodities they are producing (i.e., toxins in cosmetics, or emissions from automobiles) and causes of cancer.

Peacekeeper Cause-metics Case Study

The new 'corporation as activist' is allowed free rein to define what is important or relevant. Another beauty enterprise that has devoted itself to social cause branding is Peacekeeper Cause-metics. In this case the fundraising efforts go towards stopping domestic violence and violence against women (Tannen, 2002, p. 60). The Peacekeeper Cause-metics website (www.iamapeacekeeper.com) describes the company as "a for profit corporation with a unique charitable and education mission to support women's health advocacy and human rights issues by raising funds through the sale of PEACEKEEPER™ Products". Visitors to the site are encouraged to buy nail polish in colours such as 'Paint Me Non-Violent' and 'Paint Me Grateful'; and to have a "manicure party and help heal the world".

The women's issues receiving attention from the Cause-metics site include infanticide, reproductive cancers, the sex-slave trade, osteoporosis, and female genital mutilation—each with a brief write-up of the issue according to the company. Whether or not one is convinced that a manicure can heal the world, it is inappropriate and extremely difficult to present issues of such socio-cultural complexity such as female genital mutilation in a commodity context of selling beauty products. In addition, nowhere does it indicate where the profits (“after taxes”) will be directed, nor whether any organizations have received money, or even how much has been raised so far. This case study raises not only ethical issues regarding the responsibility of framing social problems, but also the need for transparency and clarity in fundraising.

Dove ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ Case Study

The Dove Self Esteem Fund, as part of their “Campaign for Real Beauty”, encourages consumers to see a new definition of beauty, based on the ‘real’ women featured on the website and poster campaign. We are encouraged to judge “Fat or Fab?”, “Grey or Gorgeous?”, and their t-shirts (free with purchase) remind us that “Everybody has a best feature”, “My beauty **rules**”, and “Be yourself. Be beautiful”. Their television and cinema advertisement features Canadian girls and adolescents aged five through fourteen.

According to the website:

The girls are not professional models or actors. They are real girls who were simply asked to be themselves and share their thoughts and concerns. The result is a glimpse into the thoughts of these Canadian girls.

Dove believes that strong self-esteem is at the heart of feeling beautiful. Women who are truly beautiful feel good about themselves. They are unlikely to feel insecure, compare themselves to others or believe people who put them down. Instead, people who are happy and confident truly embrace life. Dove believes that every woman is entitled to feel this way and to celebrate her own beauty. (www.campaignforrealbeauty.ca)

The sentiment—one assumes—is well intentioned. However, the underlying assumption (and arguably the site of the body image and self-esteem issue) is that

beauty is somehow 'important', and that it remains central to women's identity and role in our culture. This campaign reaffirms the age-old construction that 'beautiful' is equated with a woman's worth. I argue that we are not in need of an expanded definition of beauty; we need to get rid of this equation and preoccupation entirely.

Pasi Falk coined the phrase 'Benetton-Toscani effect' to describe the political aesthetic (or aestheticized political content) in corporate branding. The subsuming of politics into advertising and branding maintains the comfortable relationship of company/producer and audience/consumer. Falk writes, "the targeted audience is always elsewhere, at a sufficient cultural distance even if in (relative) geographical proximity. Thus the evidential presence and realness is turned into just another—albeit more powerful—effect of representation" (Falk, 1996, p. 78). However, the emotional response to the images occurs within the audience/consumer paradigm, and is enough removed from reality to protect the status quo, and to reaffirm that companies and consumption are not immoral. According to Falk's argument, "the aesthetic and spectacular element remains an aspect of the effect which contributes to the reproduction of the basic split keeping the spectator-consumer safe" (p. 79).

Conclusion

"Truths have become commodities made by a few organizations, competing in a general marketplace, and sold to a huge collection of consumer-citizens."

-Paul Rutherford, p. 93

Jean Baudrillard argues that commodification is extended to "abstract qualities, like love, goodness, and knowledge" that are now used as 'value-added' concepts, and are included in the marketplace of exchange value (Connor, 1997, p. 50). Consumer capitalism supports the reification of all levels of signs: where commodities are created through "the conversion of social relationships into inert and frozen objects" (p. 46-7). The evolution of capitalist consumption has taken us to a stage where corporations can define and construct social issues and political agendas. Contrary to what the market would suggest, the answers to social problems do not lie in consumption, and thus citizens are stranded without agency, autonomy, democratic power, or access to the public sphere.

The touchy feely ad campaign aimed at garnering emotional responses to company brands can often be a wolf in sheep's clothing. This marketing trend is less warm and fuzzy and more calculated target practice on a lucrative and highly desirable demographic. The corporate activist is an inherent contradiction: the company's best interests are the first priority. Yes, it is important to encourage business to have a heart; but this can be dangerous when companies freely attach themselves to a 'trend' social cause that they think will help attract more buyers. A sustainable economy is based on a sustainable environment and society, and that means that corporations need to see their role as citizens imbued with the responsibility of ensuring that sustainability, while also being productive and profitable. It is fundamental to this problem to establish the

separation between corporate social responsibility and cause related marketing—these are two very different approaches, and should not be confused with the propaganda of an ‘information’ campaign grounded in hegemonic structures of power.

In *The Rebel Sell*, Heath and Potter outline what they believe to be the most problematic aspects of the ‘rebel sell’. They argue that the more traditional counter-cultural theories are too limited in scope and approach: locating all social problems in the arms of ‘mass society’ (mass production, mass consumption, conformity, repressive sameness of industrialized economies, lack of real choice, etc.). The title of their book refers to the critique of the attempts at “describing cultural products as subversive and revolutionary... [and the way it is] used not only to sell ordinary commercial goods, but also to sell a myth about the way that our culture works” (p. 323). They are particularly critical of the left-wing call for a rejection of the market economy—they feel this is a ‘depressing’ and ‘alienating’ proposition, and impossible in a pluralistic society like Canada’s. “Individual liberty” argue Heath and Potter, “generates more, not less, disagreement”; something they feel we must learn to live with if we are to effectively distinguish between counter-productive social deviance (in the form of rebel consumption patterns and ‘myth-buying’) and a progressive social movement capable of real and effective social change, that can take into account the “inevitability of the market economy” (p. 323; p. 325).

WOMEN’S ACCESS TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Cause related marketing is exploitive of women’s issues, and is fundamentally disempowering when marketing execs are left to define and frame problems and construct solutions. The issue may be brought to light, but only within the boundaries of the corporate culture, and not within the public sphere. The choice of words, decision-

making regarding funding and access, can further marginalize some groups over others, who are likely already at an increased disadvantage.

Social problems are best resolved when addressed at a grassroots level, based on participation of the community affected by the issue and involving all groups in the community in a democratic way. Real empowerment, and push for participatory decision-making at a community level, in order to broaden access to, and protect, women's fundamentally important role in the public sphere.

Businesses may be getting in touch with their 'feminine side', but this appears to be limited to token gestures. For all the talk of equality, empowerment, and respect for women's issues in advertising, women still comprise just 11.2% of board positions and chair only three of the 243 publicly traded companies in the Financial Post 500.

(Stephenson, 2005, p. W10). Carolyn Hannan, Director of the UN Division of the Advancement of Women, argues that women still face:

persistent, and in some cases increasing, incidence of violence against women; the under-representation of women in decision-making in all areas and at all levels; the persistence of discriminatory laws governing marriage, land, property and inheritance; and the fact that women continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty (Hannan, 2005, p. W1)

Voter turnout is at an all time low in the West, especially among young people. It is interesting to note that, in terms of voting patterns, "low-income voters are much less likely to participate than high-income voters. Propaganda and marketing foster a divided public sphere, composed of small clusters of activists and engaged souls—together, a citizen class—and a larger collection of usually passive or indifferent consumers" (Rutherford, p. 274). In Canada, women make up more than 52% of the population, and yet "hold only 21% of the seats in the House of Commons" (Hargrove, 2005, p. FP15).

The corporation, by definition, is mandated to maximize profit-share. It does not and cannot have the best interests of the public at heart, and the social causes that have

been co-opted for advertising are only there as long as they are considered to be profitable—which subjects social causes to the cycles of fashion and trends. The success of CRM is grounded in the political economy of social problems, and is based on the potential spending power of their demographic. Upper middle class white educated professional women with disposable income will find that their 'issues' are addressed in the marketplace, while other issues are simply not attractive or worthy enough for companies to be associated with. For all the awareness and campaigning devoted to cancer or environmental issues, there is no such emphasis on less 'attractive' issues such as drug addiction, homelessness, or the issues of sex-trade workers, for example.

Defining a common cultural and social context for the public through ads “[equates] the consumption of goods with political freedom” (Heath and Potter, p. 89). By structuring solutions according to terms of consumer goods, “political choice was limited to the prescriptions formulated by business and politicized in advertising” (p. 91). ‘Free choice’ is defined by the priorities of businesses, and restricted by decisions regarding profitability above all else.

As long as we allow campaigns to gloss over the real impacts of consumption – be it Ford Motor Company sponsoring breast cancer research but refusing to reduce cancer-causing emissions in their vehicles, or Nike running an ad about women's empowerment while employing their mostly female labour force under sweatshop conditions—these important women's issues will not ever be effectively addressed in the public sphere. By exposing the conflict of interest inherent in cover-up marketing campaigns and insincere social cause branding partnerships, it is possible to bring some real and balanced attention to the issues—and to distinguish between the responsible corporation and the spin campaign.

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