The Consumption of Anticonsumption

Consumption is a problem. One of the most interesting aspects of our consumer culture is that this statement really requires no argument. Consumer culture itself proclaims consumption to be a problem. For example, we are inundated with advertising that attacks the absurdity of advertising, people buy books that condemn consumption, and, indeed, as we will argue later in this chapter, products are often consumed to express disdain for consumption.

Whatever the problem, advertising has tried to position a product as its solution—not simply for the personal problems of halitosis, shyness, or unattractiveness, but also for social problems such as oppression or inequality. For example, advertising has always portrayed itself as on the side of liberation, especially from everything old and traditional. This usually takes the form of liberation from old commodities in favor of new and improved commodities, but there has sometimes been an actual political component. For example, advertisements for cigarettes were early public proclamations for women’s equality. A leading advertiser of the 1920s described an advertising-inspired parade where, with the support of a prominent feminist, some young women lit “torches of freedom” (i.e., cigarettes) “as a protest against woman’s inequality” (Ewen 1976, 161). Gender inequality could be solved by buying the right brand of cigarettes, the right toys for little girls, the right suit for the businesswoman.

By the middle of the 1950s, consumer culture and advertising were increasingly seen as parts of the problem rather than as
solutions. People were beginning to realize that if there is any connection between increased consumption and happiness, it is a negative one (see table 3.1). A common theme of popular magazine articles, movies, and sermons, as well as of academic writing was the problem of conformity, of consumerism, and the loss of the work ethic. The appearance of this theme shows the

Table 3.1 Consumption and Happiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in Consumption</th>
<th>Changes in Quality of Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In 1992, people were, on average, 4.5 times richer than their great-grandparents at the turn of the century.</td>
<td>Percent of Americans reporting that they were “very happy” were no more numerous in 1991 than in 1957.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median size of a new house built in the United States: 1949: 1,100 square feet 1973: 1,385 square feet 1993: 2,060 square feet</td>
<td>51 percent decrease in quality of life in the United States since 1970, as measured by the index of Social Health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americans can choose from: Over 25,000 supermarket items 200 kinds of cereals 11,092 magazines</td>
<td>75 percent of American workers ages twenty-five to forty-nine report that they would like to see a return to a simpler society with less emphasis on material wealth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In 1987, the number of shopping centers in the United States (32,563) surpassed the number of high schools.</td>
<td>99 percent of American teenage girls report store-hopping as favorite activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>By the time they graduate from high school, American teenagers are typically exposed to 360,000 advertisements.</td>
<td>Employed Americans spent 163 hours more per year on the job in 1991 than they did in 1969.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Since 1960, the daily average number of hours spent viewing television has risen by 39 percent.</td>
<td>Doctors comprise the highest income group in the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors and lawyers comprise the professions with the highest proportion of unhappy people.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>American parents spent 40 percent less time with their children in 1991 than they did in 1965.</td>
<td>69 percent of Americans would like to “slow down and live a more relaxed life.”</td>
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protean ingenuity of consumer culture in that advertising was able to present even this problem as solvable by more consumption. Because this innovation was so important to the spread of consumer culture, we will examine it in detail.

Hip Consumerism

Thomas Frank, in The Conquest of Cool (1997), has described changes in advertising as one of the most important processes behind the counterculture of the 1960s. Frank’s main thesis is that the counterculture received its impetus from the momentous transformation that advertising underwent in the early 1960s. Advertising made the hatred of consumer culture one of its own themes and presented the consumer as a rebel against the “establishment” and conformity.

The counterculture of the 1960s was deeply critical of consumer culture. One of the founding documents of the counterculture, the Port Huron Statement, condemned marketing techniques intended to “create pseudo-needs in consumers” and to make “wasteful ‘planned obsolescence’ . . . a permanent feature of business strategy” (Miller 1987, 339). However, both critics and admirers have commented on the deep connections between consumer culture and the counterculture of the 1960s. Both promulgated a doctrine of hedonism, liberation, and continual transgression. Frank makes sense of this contradiction by demonstrating that consumer culture was itself critical of consumer culture, and the counterculture was, to a large extent, a reflection of that.

The central theme that gives coherence to American advertising of both the early and late sixties is this: Consumer culture is a gigantic fraud. It demands that you act like everyone else, that you restrain yourself, that you fit in with the crowd, when you are in fact an individual. Consumer culture lies and seeks to sell you shoddy products that will fall apart or be out of style in a few years; but you crave authenticity and are too smart to fall for that Madison Avenue stuff (your neighbors may not be). Above all, consumer culture fosters conventions that are repressive and unfulfilling; but with the help of hip trends you can smash through those, create a new world in which
people can be themselves, pretense has vanished, and healthy appetites are liberated from the stultifying mores of the past. (1997, 136)

In other words, consumer culture presented consumption as a solution to its own problems.

The generally accepted story of the relation between the 1960s counterculture and consumer culture is that the latter co-opted the former. In the beginning, the story goes, there was an authentic counterculture that was in opposition to capitalism and corporate culture. However, this authentic movement either sold out or was effectively mimicked by a mass-produced counterfeit culture of groovy, psychedelic products that captured the youth market and subverted the real counterculture's threat. Frank contends that the mass-produced counterfeit culture was "not so much evidence of co-optation, but rather evidence of the counterculture's roots in consumer culture" (1997, 27).

Of course, few would deny the connection between the counterculture and the popular music and "rebel" celebrities of consumer culture. Furthermore, the role of television and popular magazines in advertising the "summer of love" and the entire hippie phenomena is unquestioned. Frank's argument goes further than this to claim that it was in the heart of the beast, in advertising itself, that the first changes occurred that triggered the counterculture and the hippie movement: "The changes here were, if anything, even more remarkable, more significant, and took place slightly earlier than those in music and youth culture" (1997, 27).

Frank's study of advertisers in the late 1950s and early 1960s shows that they were developing their own counterculture. A new generation of advertisers was growing tired of the repetitive, "scientific" advertisements of the 1950s and was finding success with advertisements that were ironic, rebellious, and that attacked or made fun of consumer culture itself.

In 1960, the advertising company Doyle Dane Bernbach launched a campaign that was to define hip consumerism (see profile of William Bernbach in chapter 6). It was for the Volkswagen beetle (see description of Volkswagen Beetle in chapter 6). It is no accident that the commodity most identified with the 1960s counterculture is the Volkswagen.

Most car advertising before the 1960s consisted of beautiful fantasies of some sort: a verdant green countryside, elegantly dressed models, and gleaming metal; or a racetrack, skimpily dressed models, and more gleaming metal. Its photography
grabbed you, and its text labored powerfully to extol the virtues of the car. The Volkswagen advertisement, in contrast, was simple, not flashy; self-deprecating, not self-congratulatory; and funny, not serious. It was the opposite of the advertising that everyone was used to. One of the first advertisements was a full page of mostly white space with a small picture of the car in the upper corner, a small headline toward the bottom saying “Think Small,” and a couple of paragraphs that described how strange the car was.

Most significantly, the Volkswagen advertisements made fun of the product, of advertising, and of consumer culture. It was the advertisements that first called the car a “beetle” and said that the station wagon “looked like a shoebox.” But it was at consumer culture itself that the advertisements aimed their sharpest barbs. They ridiculed the use of cars as status symbols. They poked fun at dealers’ sales tactics. They pilloried the faddishness and planned obsolescence of the fashionable commodity.

These new advertisements were extremely successful and initiated a revolt in advertising against the hard sell that still dominated the industry. In this “revolution,” the new generation of advertisers saw the emerging counterculture “not as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years” (Frank 1997, 9). This partnership changed consumer culture.

Almost no American car manufacturers were still using the idealized, white-family-at-play motif by that year [1965]. And with the exception of luxury lines (Cadillac, Lincoln, Chrysler), virtually every car being marketed in America introduced its 1966 model year as an implement of nonconformity, of instant youthfulness, of mockery toward traditional Detroit-suckers, or of distinction from the mass society herd…. The critique of mass society, leveled by the American automakers was noticeably different from that of Volkswagen and Volvo. The ads of the Big Three automakers were not concerned with evading planned obsolescence, but with discovering for annual style changes a more compelling meaning. Where Volkswagen and Volvo emphasized authenticity and durability, Detroit stressed escape, excitement, carnival,
nonconformity, and individualism. It is a cleavage that goes to the heart of the commercial revolution of the sixties: every brand claimed to be bored, disgusted, and alienated, but for some these meant the never-changing Volkswagen and blue jeans; they steered others toward the Pontiac Breakaway and the Peacock Revolution [see description of Peacock Revolution in chapter 6]. (Frank 1997, 156–157)

What we see then is not the emergence of a movement that opposed consumer culture and was then co-opted and defeated by it, but rather a change within consumer culture itself. In the 1960s, consumer culture entered a new phase that Frank calls "hip consumerism." It is now more resistant to criticisms, because it is able to transform those very criticisms into reasons to consume. Hip consumerism uses the ambivalence, the contradictions, and the disappointments due to advertising's constantly broken promises as further inducements to buy more. The protests against manipulation, conformity, and loss of meaning are transformed into reasons to consume. Disgust with consumerism is turned into the fuel that feeds consumerism because we express our disgust with consumer culture through consumption.

Advertising no longer sells a commodity so much as a rebellious stance. For example, Benetton advertisements have not used pictures of its products since 1989. Instead, their advertisements feature shocking images of AIDS victims, racism, war, and death-row inmates. Oliviero Toscani, Benetton's head of advertising, sees these advertisements as a criticism of consumer culture: "The advertising industry has corrupted society. It persuades people that they are respected for what they consume, that they are only worth what they possess" (Ticnic 1997, 9). This is not the head of the politburo speaking, but the head of advertising at a major international company.

Hip consumers are anticonsumption, but they have been taught to express their attitudes through what they buy. They are rebels, but they have been taught to rebel against last year's fashions and especially to rebel against the old-fashioned Puritanism and frugality of their parents. They crave traditions and are willing to buy the latest tradition. They want authenticity and will pay for its simulation.

What changed during the sixties, it now seems, were the strategies of consumerism, the ideology by which
business explained its domination of the national life. Now products existed to facilitate our rebellion against the soul-deadening world of products, to put us in touch with our authentic selves, to distinguish us from the mass-produced herd, to express our outrage at the stifling world of economic necessity. (Frank 1997, 229)

Hip consumerism has become the latest and strongest version of consumer culture. Both the critique of consumption and the solution to the problems of consumption are now contained within consumer culture. In other words, consumer culture presents itself as a problem that only more consumption can solve. Advertisements that incorporate ironic attacks on consumer culture are themselves protected from those attacks because they have positioned themselves on the side of the skeptical viewer.

Advertisements that promote rebellion, mock authority, and promise a mass-produced nonconformity are now ubiquitous. For example, one of the main targets of the counterculture's and of feminists' critique of consumer culture was the cosmetics industry, which was taken to be the epitome of artificiality and conformity to mass-produced standards of beauty. However, hip consumerism has revamped these commodities as signs of ironic artificiality, defiance, and nonconformity. A case in point, one company, significantly named Urban Decay, offers cosmetics with names like Plague, Demise, Rat, Roach, and Asphyxia.

**New Age Consumerism**

In addition to buying to express nonconformity and rebellion, consumers also buy to express an interest in living a simple life, a concern about the environment, and as a declaration of spirituality. For instance, those who seek the simple life can choose among more than 100 models of sleeping bags. They can peruse the advertisements in *Real Simple*, "the magazine devoted to simplifying your life." They can buy an SUV to get off-road and closer to nature. They can furnish their home with the latest craze in traditional crafts. They can, if they possess the money, have custom-made, one-of-a-kind clothes fashioned for them out of hand-spun fabric.

We can call this variant of the hip consumer the New Age consumer. A forthcoming article by Sam Binkley discusses the *Whole*
Earth Catalog, one of the most important documents of the change from hip consumption to New Age consumption. This strange mix of a Sears Roebuck catalog and opinionated Consumer Reports put together by dropouts from the counterculture used its lists of commodities to carry the 1960s rebellious spirit into the spiritual environmentalism that characterizes the New Age consumer.

The hip consumer responds to the contradictions of consumer culture through consumption that emphasizes artifice, irony, and nonconformity. The New Age consumer responds to these same contradictions also with consumption, but they prefer commodities that represent a noncommercial and more spiritual life. The New Age consumer prefers boutiques to national chains, gentrified neighborhood centers to shopping malls. However, even the mall-based chain store can be sold to the New Age consumer if it is properly marketed, as Anita Roddick proved when she introduced the environmentally friendly, politically correct chain, The Body Shop.

New Age consumers demonstrate through their consumption that they are earth-friendly, socially responsible, enlightened global citizens in tune with nature. They prefer natural wood, natural fibers, natural ingredients, organic food, and herbal body-care products. All of these are sold as remedies for the problems of consumer culture.

Kimberly Lau provides an interesting case of New Age consumerism in her study of New Age Capitalism (2000). She covers a number of examples including the spread of yoga and macrobiotic diets, but most germane is her examination of the marketing of aromatherapy. In the marketing of aromatherapy, we see many of the attributes of hip consumption that Frank described, but with a New Age twist.

Horst Rechelbacher, the founder of Aveda, introduced aromatherapy to the American public in 1978. Since Aveda's success, others have followed suit, including specialty stores such as The Body Shop, Garden Botanika, and H2O. In addition, noncosmetic but hip retailers such as The Gap, The Limited, Eddie Bauer, Urban Outfitters, Banana Republic, Pier 1 Imports, and The Nature Company have all introduced aromatherapy products. Lau estimates the annual sale of aromatherapy products to be $300 to $500 million, with an annual growth rate of approximately 30 percent (2000, 34).

Lau describes three characteristics of the aromatherapy advertising campaign that appeals to the New Age consumer: (1) it
is presented as ecologically friendly; (2) it is a remedy for the psychic ills of modern civilization; and (3) it is able to function as a hip consumer’s status symbol.

As Lau informs us, “everyone from aromatherapists to essential oil suppliers and aroma researchers praises the earth-friendly nature of aromatherapy, but no one articulates the precise nature of its environmentalism” (2000, 39–40). Finding no evidence for its ecological beneficence, Lau can only surmise the following formula: “The association seems as simple as plants=green=earth-friendly” (2000, 40).

In addition, aromatherapy is associated with ancient and contemporary cultures that are portrayed as unsullied by the problems of modern consumer culture. It is variously associated with the ancient practices of Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, and China. In addition, Aveda advertises that some of its ingredients are obtained from the Yawanawa, who live in the rain forests of western Brazil. Lau sees this identification of aromatherapy with ancient and nonindustrialized cultures as “part of an attempt to counter modernity and the techno-industrial capitalist system it signifies” (2000, 30). In other words, advertising positions this product outside of consumer culture, as an alternative and even an antidote.

Of course, this alternative to consumer culture can only be consumed by those able to afford it. This allows Aveda products, like most hip commodities, to function both as a status symbol and as an antistatus symbol. It represents both the material resources to buy expensive body-care products and a criticism of Western materialism.

Aveda makes available for purchase the idea of participating in cultural critique, of living according to ancient philosophies, of living an alternative lifestyle. . . . Consumption becomes a mode of addressing social, political, and cultural disenchantment, although the very processes enabling consumption are what characterize modernity, itself the cause of the disenchantment being critiqued. (Lau 2000, 133)

Furthermore, all of the New Age commodities discussed by Lau claim to remedy the fragmentation that Daniel Bell, in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, predicted would destroy consumer culture. Reconnecting mind, body, and spirit is a primary theme of these products. They are all, at least in name, holistic.
Here, too, the contradictions of our consumer culture function as another reason to consume. Not only do these products turn anticonsumption into a reason for more consumption, but it is arguable that they co-opt any real opposition to consumer culture.

Each product comes with a tag, an address, a lifestyle. The act of purchase locates the individual within a tribe, and in this way, fashion functions to regulate lifestyles and produce the belief that every consumer choice is a free choice, a way in which individuals invent themselves. Such practices can co-opt self-identifying groups into the consumer cycle, even those who may be politically and ethically opposed to it—for example, those targeted by the new niche markets in anti-fashions, eco-sensitive clothing, and products from recycled materials. (Finkelstein 1995, 232)

**Cheesy Consumerism**

For those unable to believe any longer in consumer culture’s promises of nostalgic simplicity or ancient spirituality, there is yet another variant of the hip consumer, the “antihip” or the cheesy consumer. The hip consumer responds to the contradictions of consumer culture by stressing artifice and nonconformity. The New Age consumer responds by “buying” into a fantasy of nostalgic simplicity. This new variation, the cheesy consumer, stresses the artifice of the fantasy of nostalgic simplicity.

We see the cheesy sensibility in the popularity of reruns of *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*. One cable company is running these with faux retro commercials, but we can see such cheesy advertisements throughout our consumer culture. Old Navy seems to specialize in them, and cheese is the motif in Britney Spears’s retro Pepsi commercials. David Letterman and especially his fakehipster bandleader, Paul Schafer, is the epitome of cheese.

Cheese is a kind of manufactured camp (see chapter 4 for a discussion of camp). However, while camp aficionados must rummage through the near past for marginal figures, cheese is ready-made. Also, while camp has a subversive bite to it, the cheese attitude is simply sarcastic.

Michiko Kakutani (1992) explains the appeal of cheese to the
jaded consumer. According to Kakutani, the current generation is one that “grew up suspicious of sincerity; wary of making emotional, political, or artistic commitments; and whose cynical, defensive mantra is, ‘Hey, I’m cool, you’re cool, and we won’t endanger our coolness by ever admitting to a genuine emotion or serious ambition’” (C1).

The cheesy consumer wants to believe in families like the Brady Bunch and, of course, all of the consumer products that made them the happy family that they were, but he cannot. Cheese is a way to indulge in the fantasy, but now in a skeptical, ironic mode. Cheesy commercials allow the viewer to both enjoy the fantasy and feel smugly superior to it. In addition, they position the advertiser on the side of the skeptical consumer so that both can smirk at consumer culture even as they indulge in it.
Conclusion

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, we have been encouraged to buy in order to establish our individuality in a mass-produced culture, to express our disgust with consumption by more consumption, to purchase the latest improved traditions. In the context of globalization, the consumption of anticonsumption is given a new twist. Now people are encouraged to buy to express their rejection of homogenized Americanization. Our disgust with the homogenized Americanization of McDonald’s is used to expand the underlying process of McDonaldization. Our disgust with global consumer culture is used to strengthen and spread it.
The Consumption of Anticonsumption

Far from creating a crisis, the problems of consumer culture have made it more resilient. This is because our dissatisfaction with the culture is expressed through more consumption. Consumption has become our model for dissent, our model for freedom, our model for political activity. All alternatives to consumer culture—the simple life, the spiritual, the traditional, the local—become variant consumer fantasies. Consumption is a social problem and it is offered as its own solution.

Note

1. It is not necessary to invoke ancient and nonindustrialized cultures to position a product outside of consumer culture. Passamai describes how New Age consumers invoke science fiction and fantasy stories to position commodities outside of consumer culture (2002).

References


