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## 'Twas the Night Before Black Friday: A Rhetorical Analysis of Hegemonic Consumerism in Mediated, Consumptive, and Resistance Spaces

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes Black Friday media, consumption, and resistance spaces to interrogate the construction of and opposition to the hegemonic consumer. In order to investigate hegemonic consumerism, my work is divided into three chapters in which I perform a rhetorical critique of Black Friday spaces: mediated space, consumptive space, and resistance space. In the first chapter, I analyze mediated space, offering a close analysis of 10 Black Friday commercials to identify mediated constructions of the hegemonic consumer. In the second chapter, I employ ethnographic research to assess consumptive space, specifically the retail space of Target on Black Friday to engage an analysis of the rhetoric of consumption and enactment of the hegemonic consumer. The third chapter offers a rhetorical critique of “What Would Jesus Buy?,” a documentary featuring anti-consumption activists Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, to examine resistance space that thwarts the mediated and consumptive hegemonic consumer.

The mediated and consumptive spaces simultaneously contribute to the contemporary construct of the hegemonic consumer. In both spaces, the hegemonic consumer demonstrates their cultural values through their consumptive behavior. The resistance space problematizes both the construct and the enactment of the hegemonic consumer. Through the trajectory of three Black Friday textual artifacts, my goal is to identify how the hegemonic consumer occupies mediated, consumptive, and resistance spaces. The mediated hegemonic consumer does more than maintain normative public values; the hegemonic consumer also calls upon subjects to fulfill the role through consumptive enactment. When the hegemonic consumer is resisted and problematized, consumptive acts continue to persist as components to the proposed alternative – Reverend Billy’s ideal consumer still consumes, but does so to aid others and uphold the

nostalgic Christmas. Through media, cultural rituals, and even resistance efforts, consumption is illuminated as an integral public value.

'Twas the night before Black Friday: A Rhetorical Analysis of Hegemonic Consumerism in  
Mediated, Consumptive, & Resistance Spaces

By

Emily Anne Soule

B.A. Nazareth College of Rochester, 2011

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
*Communication and Rhetorical Studies.*

Syracuse University

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## INTRODUCTION

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year,” singer Andy Williams proclaimed in his 1963 pop song describing the Holiday Season. Classic Holiday Season films like *White Christmas*, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, and *It’s a Wonderful Life* as well as popular Holiday Season songs like “Winter Wonderland,” “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” and “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” all illustrate narratives of happy families gathering to celebrate the Holiday Season with presents, holiday feasts, and quality time. These traditional narratives shape viewers’ understandings of the Holiday Season and are frequently echoed in modern mediated discourse. Contemporary media draw from these traditional narratives in order to craft modern guides for Holiday Season cultural rituals that build on viewers’ preconceived schemas about the Holiday Season. Mediated discourse contends that consumptive practices, like Black Friday, are essential to attain the ideal Holiday Season experience. A hegemonic consumer is thereby crafted in mediated discourse as an ideal for viewers to emulate through their participation in consumptive rituals. To counter these efforts, anti-consumption activists engage in cultural performances during the Holiday Season to disrupt the mediated hegemonic consumer and normative consumptive cultural rituals.

In order to investigate hegemonic consumerism, my work is divided into three chapters in which I perform a rhetorical critique of Black Friday spaces: mediated space, consumptive space, and resistance space. The term ‘space’ is employed in a unique fashion specific to each chapter’s textual artifact. In the mediated chapter, space is employed metaphorically to refer to the ongoing instructional discourse offered by contemporary mediated that maintains and further perpetuates hegemonic ideals. The consumptive space chapter uses space in a more literal way as the research investigates the physical design of a retail store. When assessing resistance space in the



last chapter, I am referring to both the metaphorical space created by activists' efforts to thwart the hegemonic consumer and the literal space that activists occupy in resistance performances. In the first chapter, I analyze mediated space, offering a close analysis of 10 Black Friday commercials to identify mediated constructions of the hegemonic consumer. In the second chapter, I employ ethnographic research to assess consumptive space, specifically the retail space of Target on Black Friday to engage an analysis of the rhetoric of consumption and enactment of the hegemonic consumer. The third chapter offers a rhetorical critique of "What Would Jesus Buy?," a documentary featuring anti-consumption activists Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, to examine resistance space that thwarts the mediated and consumptive hegemonic consumer. The mediated and consumptive spaces simultaneously contribute to the contemporary construct of the hegemonic consumer. In both spaces, the hegemonic consumer demonstrates their cultural values through their consumptive behavior. The resistance space problematizes both the construct and the enactment of the hegemonic consumer.

### *Hegemony & the Hegemonic Consumer*

This work begins by contending that mediated depictions of Black Friday are hegemonic narratives that resonate with an image viewers have cultivated through a variety of societal experiences (education, religion, community) and ultimately instruct viewers about how to participate in contemporary cultural traditions. The ideal Holiday Season experience is then protected when the hegemonic consumer is enacted in the consumptive space; the mediated space reminds viewers that consumption is an integral component in attaining the ideal Holiday Season. The rhetorical analyses of textual artifacts within this work are thus grounded in the theory of hegemony. As a result of the myriad scholarly interpretations on hegemony, I ground my usage of the theory in a particular framework that is rooted in Antonio Gramsci's conception

(drawn from Marxism), which asserts that, “through hegemony the dominant faction could control not only the economy but also the political and cultural elements of society. Thus, the dominant faction could align itself with other groups to establish a unified and subtle hegemony of cultural thought” (Zompetti 72). Gramsci’s theory defines a divide between the creators of dominant ideologies and the consumers operate within the confines of hegemony. In order to be sustained, hegemony needs society to function in these categories – those who explain and justify the system and those for whom the explanation is created. Not all people can have the function of the intellectual even though all people are intellectuals (Gramsci 134).

In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci states, “The function of organizing [sic] social hegemony and state domination certainly gives rise to a particular division of labour [sic] and therefore to a whole hierarchy of qualifications in some of which there is no apparent attribution of directive or organizational [sic] functions” (145). The system of domination maintains power through the creation and perpetuation of normative ideologies, which is sustained through the empowerment of those in power. Hegemony maintains its dominance through its ability to influence ideas and beliefs of the subaltern in a manner that limits resistance and cultivates a “desire” by “creating a culture with illusory benefits and superficial democratic ideals” (Zompetti 73). An agreed upon reality is articulated through hegemony and maintained through social institutions and the practices enforced by those institutions.

Post-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argued that individuals are crafted by social practices. In his 1970 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser remarks that social institutions, like the media, mold individuals’ beliefs and desires. He theorizes that, “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (15). This remark emphasizes the limitations of class and influence of social

institutions on the individuals' ideologies. Althusser's conceptions coincide with my argument that media, corporations, and charitable organizations teach consumers how to perform holiday cultural rituals and ultimately inform normative public values. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe state "the general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the 'elements' have not crystallized into 'moments'" (134). The theorists argue that hegemony surfaces through openings in society that allow for dominant articulations.

Cultural hegemony operates on both public and private levels, which James C. Scott details in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (XII). Essentially, there is an imperative differentiation between the hegemonic structure and the messy everyday. The public level of cultural hegemony focuses on the way people publicly act, but does not account for private, or "hidden transcripts," that question and critique hegemonic processes. This thesis primarily attends to the public level of cultural hegemony by analyzing the hegemonic guides articulated in mediated spaces and the hegemonic processes enacted in consumptive spaces. Certainly within these spaces, "hidden transcripts" persist – a single parent, for example, may participate in Black Friday not to subordinately fulfill the role of the hegemonic consumer, but because Holiday gifts are more affordable during the cultural ritual. While the private level of cultural hegemony is a rich and unique site for rhetorical analysis, this work specifically details the public level of cultural hegemony that circulates on and around Black Friday.

My discussion of hegemony specifically interrogates the distribution and reinforcement of normative ideology through popular culture texts. "Media hegemony refers to the dominance

of a certain way of life and thought and to the way in which that dominant concept of reality is diffused throughout public as well as private dimensions of social life” (Altheide 477). I envision hegemony through this light, which views the normative ideologies that bombard the media as persuasively disseminated into society to perpetuate power dynamics. I also contend that the phrase “way of life” is key to my analysis of families because the family typically functions as the core of one’s way of life and values. Thus when media offer portrayals of the ideal holiday, the hegemonic ideals inform viewers’ perceptions of values and lifestyles. “An economically and ideologically biased consciousness perpetuates itself through hegemony, and all of society is dominated by the false logic and consciousness” (Altheide 477). Essentially, the mindset required to maintain specific dominant relations requires that hegemony begin with economic institutions, like contemporary media, which provide support for normative ideologies through hegemonic portrayals. Hegemony repeatedly reasserts itself through economic institutions and the dominant ideologies depicted begin to gain traction.

The linkage of media and hegemony has been effectively addressed in scholarship but continues to be a rich route for analysis as media continue to present hegemonic depictions that are distributed to a mass audience. A key scholar, Dana L. Cloud, accomplishes the task of using hegemony theory to analyze media by detailing hegemonic constructions of race to analyze the widely popular talk show, *Oprah*. The scholar situates her work within a specific conception of hegemony which she describes as “the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of people” (“Hegemony or Concordance?” 117) This description resonates with the hegemonic analysis I strive to create in that it emphasizes the

hegemony functioning as a process that shapes and maintains dominant ideologies that inform society.

Gramscian hegemony is also integrated into rhetorical theory to form sub-theories of hegemony that focus on the specific categories of normative ideologies, like race. Specifically, Phil Chidester applies Whiteness, a form of hegemony, to NBC's hit series *Friends*. "Much of the rhetorical power of whiteness is founded in its ability to avoid any explicit statements about or claims to racial centrality" (Chidester 158). Chidester addresses arguably one of the most persuasive characteristics of the hegemonic process, the sneakiness of the dominant ideologies that seep into mediated discourse without directly oppressing those that do not model normative social identities/personae. By excluding non-Caucasian actors in the cast, *Friends* asserts a hegemonic portrayal that reinforces Whiteness. But as Cloud discussed, hegemony can still persist even when minorities are included in pop culture texts, like *Oprah*, because they can be framed in a way that reinforces dominant ideologies (Cloud "The Limits Of Interpretation" 313). Thus, the mere presence of minorities or any form of counter-hegemony does not necessarily equate to resistance but can actually function as tools for re-appropriating hegemony.

Hegemony scholarship finds traction when employed to analyze and critique sites of normative traditions, like the cultural practices surrounding the Holiday Season that are observed and performed by many. For example, Erika Engstrom and Beth Semic offer scholarship on a key cultural moment to critique reality shows' treatment of marriage and religion, stating, "the creation and existence of continual, repetitive messages by those who adhere to a common world view serves as a basis for hegemony, the creation and maintenance of a dominant ideology within society" (147). The repetition of normative ideals through mass media fulfills the power dynamics of hegemony. Analyzing and critiquing key components of culture, like marriage,

family, and religion, crystallizes the formation and underpinnings of the hegemony theory. The portrayals that reinforce hegemonic ideologies are employed repeatedly by media to bolster the normativity required to maintain and perpetuate power.

A crucial facet of the hegemonic process is the way in which the normative values and beliefs that are created in pop culture prevail and enforce dominant ideologies without the deployment of physical oppression. “Through a series of intertwining social relationships, bourgeois society is able to maintain the conditions for its existence and to reproduce these conditions” (Flank 10). In essence, the maintenance of a power structure is facilitated through hegemonic depictions that influence social relationships. To thrive and maintain power, hegemony is produced and distributed to viewers and consumers who are then influenced by those ideologies. This is the core of the pervasiveness of hegemony; its ability to shape and mold society’s conceptions through seemingly harmless texts, like pop culture.

I view mass media as an integral vehicle for this maintenance due to its ability to reach a wide and diverse audience. Pop culture specifically is a unique phenomenon that captures audiences and has the ability to influence viewers’ ideologies about the world around them. Barry Brummett explains, “popular culture...is made up of those systems of artifacts to which most people are exposed” (33). The ability for pop culture texts, like Black Friday commercials created by large corporations, to reach a large and diverse audience situates their hegemonic portrayals as particularly crucial for rhetorical analysis. Popular culture employs mainstream routes of communication to facilitate instructions for consumers to view and internalize, thus informing their lifestyles and societal ideologies. Extending the role of hegemony beyond its function in media, this work addresses the way mediated hegemony calls viewers to attempt to

become the hegemonic consumer through their participation in consumptive rituals, like Black Friday.

### *Consumption*

Consumption is framed in contemporary media as the key to participating in normative Holiday Season cultural traditions, like Black Friday. Consumption is thus a hegemonic process geared toward fulfilling the unattainable ideal Holiday Season celebration. Consumptive practices operate as the driving force leading the distribution of Black Friday commercials and re-configuration of consumptive spaces during the Holiday Season. Explaining the rise of consumption in U.S. society, Toby Miller explains, “Consumption was first conceived as a legitimate practice in the nineteenth century, with the advent of bourgeois political economy, the Industrial Revolution, and the Knights of Labor, followed in the twentieth century by the National Consumers’ League” (30). Miller articulates the economic shift in U.S. society where consumption became a more integral component of citizens’ practices. As the U.S. began producing more commodities within its territory and citizens’ disposable income grew, consumption developed as a common societal practice. Consumption became an important practice for U.S. citizens. Slavoj Žižek details contemporary consumptive practices as: “we primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful” (52). Žižek’s description emphasizes commodities functioning not merely as meaningless objects, but as tools for enhancing consumers’ livelihood.

The shift from religious tradition and family celebration to consumptive traditions is described in *Unwrapping Christmas* by Daniel Miller as “Christmas was once indeed the pure festival of close family togetherness, but its heart has been lost in the relentless exploitation of its

possibilities by a combination of individual materialism and capitalist profit-taking” (18). In modern Christmas traditions, particularly in mediated portrayals, family time revolves around consumptive practices, like the opening of gifts around the tree on Christmas morning. Mediated spaces instruct consumers how to engage in the consumptive cultural traditions of Christmas by offering portrayals of family gift giving while retail spaces facilitate consumptive practices by strategically offering the products that media articulate as instrumental to Christmas celebrations. Christmas is continually solidified as a consumptive cultural tradition through both mediated and consumptive spaces. Black Friday is a consumption phenomenon and contemporary cultural ritual, as it is a common practice performed by citizens that is repeated annually and encouraged and depicted in the media.

#### *Cultural Ritual & Tradition*

Consumption enables consumers to participate in Holiday Season cultural rituals and consumption itself, as a hegemonic process, has become a Holiday Season cultural ritual (ie. Black Friday). The day after Thanksgiving, designated Black Friday, has become a popular American cultural ritual that marks the beginning of Holiday Season shopping. Beginning as early as midnight, consumers are able to rush through department stores and shopping malls scouring for holiday gifts with slashed prices. Black Friday, a consumptive Holiday Season practice, has become a U.S. cultural ritual. From November through January, Holiday Season traditions are defined and recognized through media and corporations who sell the season to consumers. Robert M. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson explain “...some rituals are unique, attention-grabbing events whereas others become such a normal part of daily life that they seem quite commonplace” (2). The Holiday Season features both of these types of rituals through extravagant celebrations like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and consumptive cultural



rituals, like Holiday Season shopping, that have become so engrained in Holiday Season practices that they are routine consumer experiences. Black Friday is an exaggerated shopping experience, as will be detailed through ethnographic research, that enables consumers to fulfill the hegemonic consumer role by preparing for Holiday Season festivities.

The temporality of cultural traditions and rituals redefines the ideologies that ground the societal practices. During the Holiday Season, values governed by consumptive practices are rearticulated through mediated discourse. “Rituals are not simply patterned behavior but are efforts to use symbols to generate meaning” (Hoffman and Medlock-Klyukovski 393). In essence, while repetition is a key feature, rituals gain traction primarily through their ability to put forth cultural ideologies. Rituals depict moments deemed significant by cultures and is defined by anthropologist Victor Turner as “periodic restatement of the terms in which [people] of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of a coherent social life” (6). The ritual helps to maintain the cultural conventions through citizens’ performance of an ideology-defining phenomenon. The Holiday Season is a prime example for sites of cultural rituals, like Black Friday, that revolve around consumptive practices and are defined by mediated narratives.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Through Holiday Season cultural rituals, like Black Friday, in both mediated and consumptive spaces, hegemony and consumption are wedded to create instructions for consumers’ Holiday Season celebrations that promote normative public values and perpetuate an ideal hegemonic consumer. In a CNBC report from September 2012, reporter Courtney Raegan explained financial experts’ Holiday Season spending forecast for the 2012 Holiday Season: “total holiday sales to climb to between \$920 billion and \$925 billion, or an increase of 3.5 percent to 4 percent over last year.” Hegemonic consumptive practices continue to grow and

evolve in the Holiday Season, which substantiates rhetorical analyses of mediated narratives, consumptive cultural rituals, and the activist work that seeks to oppose the consumption phenomenon. This work strives to interrupt mediated spaces' hegemonic depictions of class, gender, race, and religion in portrayals of Black Friday as a cultural ritual. I will assess the rhetoric of Black Friday consumptive spaces to interrogate their role in manifesting hegemonic ideologies. The resistance work of Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping will assess rhetorical ruptures in hegemonic Holiday Season cultural rituals and mediated portrayals. Through my research's triangulation of hegemony, consumption, and cultural ritual, it is my hope to generate discussion about the public values garnered by the Black Friday cultural ritual through its mediated, consumptive, and resistance spaces.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Mediated Space*

“You will win this,” a petite, White, middle-aged woman intently says to herself in the mirror. She uses a red permanent marker to cross days off her calendar and a stopwatch to time her gift-wrapping speed. The woman athletically prepares for the Target 2-day Sale by doing sit ups on top of a red cement ball outside of the store, weight-lifting Target baskets filled with products, and running down an aisle with a red parachute attached to her back. This Target campaign began in 2010 to promote the Black Friday 2-day Sale, and was also used in the 2011 campaign. The campaign employs humor to create a narrative that features the blonde, blue-eyed woman who excitedly shops through the store searching for great deals. Always dressed in berry red clothes (and even a red jogging suit in the Black Friday 2011 athletic commercial) the woman embraces the Holiday Season as she shops in Target.

This campaign presents a unique approach to selling the ideal Holiday experience by humorously suggesting that Black Friday is a competitive, athletic event that requires training. According to the incongruity theory, an interaction or experience may be considered as humorous because it contradicts experiences, schemas, or expectations (Perks 3). Lisa Perks states that, “the incongruity theory works from a cognitive motivational standpoint, positing that humorous event or joke evokes laughter because it presents the audience with the unexpected” (1). The campaign uses humor to illustrate an incongruous depiction of the Holiday Season shopping experience as an intense athletic competition while framing the female shopper as neurotically prepared for the Holiday Season. The campaign positions the female shopper as a homemaker who passionately participates in the Black Friday consumptive cultural ritual by

shopping at Target. Despite the humorous narrative, this Target campaign presents normative ideas that are echoed in a myriad of Black Friday commercials that will be further investigated in this chapter.

Each year, consumers spend billions of dollars on food, decorations, and gifts to celebrate the Holiday Season, creating a quintessential time for companies to advertise their products and promote their business. In October 2012, US News reported, “American shoppers will spend just under \$750 on average on their holiday purchases this year, with a record percentage of shoppers buying online, according to new estimates from the National Retail Federation” (Kurtzleben). This peak advertising moment often creates a platform for companies to create and disseminate their vision of an ideal Holiday Season celebration. In 2009, Wall Street Journal reporter Suzanne Vranica reported that stores like Target, Walmart, Gap and Kmart would “boost their holiday advertising spending” in comparison to previous years. Additionally, Vranica noted retailers starting their “holiday ad blitz 30 to 40 days in advance of when it started in 2008” identifying a lengthening in advertising’s Holiday Season promotion efforts (“Retailers Boost Spending on Holiday Advertising”). The Holiday Season commercials offer depictions of consumers, consumptive rituals, and Holiday Season celebrations that are imperative to assess as they inform viewers’ Holiday experiences.

Hegemonic depictions of consumers and consumptive rituals are repeatedly utilized in Holiday Season advertising campaigns and are created through rhetorical narrative patterns. In essence, Holiday advertisements frequently employ hegemonic narratives to promote an idealized version of Holiday Season celebrations. Black Friday commercials urge viewers to consume through the construction and presentation of a hegemonic consumer. Normative ideas of race, religion, and gender are perpetuated by the mediated, hegemonic consumer to generate

desirability. Louis Althusser's conception of Interpellation is demonstrated through the media's crafting of the hegemonic consumer: "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects...there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subjects" (19). The dominant ideology is produced for subjects' internalization and adherence, which then instructs their behavior and relationship to society. Furthermore, Althusser's conception of Interpellation explicates the trajectory of the hegemonic consumer's formation and enactment: "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing" (20). Mediated spaces offer a presentation of the hegemonic consumer and thus "hail" viewers to their subject position when they enter consumptive spaces and participate in consumptive cultural rituals.

Critical media scholars assist in identifying how hegemony is generated and perpetuated through mediated texts. Stuart Hall argues that mediated texts are coded with messages that define social practices ("Culture, the media and the 'ideological effect'"). Media actively work to communicate hegemonic ideals and practices thereby espousing societal order. Lawrence Grossberg and Jennifer Daryl Slack describe the function of hegemony stating,

Hegemony is not the always, ever-present, guaranteed position of dominance of a ruling class or a dominant social bloc. Rather it represents the struggle of each bloc to articulate a variety of social and ideological practices...so as to achieve that complex unity of effects which enable a dominant social alliance to exert leadership, direction and authority over a whole social formation (89).

Hegemony is constructed to inform and maintain normative societal practices and ideals. The advertising campaigns that persistently bombard American televisions during the Holiday Season

offer portrayals of consumers and their consumptive experiences that operate as instructions and models for how viewers should celebrate the Holiday Season. More specifically, through Black Friday commercials, the annual retail event is narrativized to deploy a hegemonic consumer through normative portrayals of gender, race, and religion, thereby constructing a hegemonic consumer. Through Holiday Season cultural rituals in mediated spaces, hegemony and consumption are wedded to create and rearticulate instructions for consumers' Holiday Season celebrations that promote normative ideologies and public values.

To investigate the mediated construction of a hegemonic consumer, I analyze televised Black Friday commercials from large, U.S. corporations and categorize my findings into the following areas: race, religion, and gender. Commercials produced and distributed by larger corporations serve as the primary sources for analysis as their campaigns are more wide reaching than smaller, local companies. Specifically, I analyze three Target commercials, two Macy's commercials, and one commercial from Oldnavy, Kohl's, and Guitar Center. I am primarily interested in these companies because of their ability to reach a large audience, which positions the hegemonic portrayals created through narratives as potentially influential portrayals of Holiday Season traditions and values. All of the analyzed commercials are accessible via YouTube. Two of the Target commercials discussed in this work (from 2010 and 2011, both titled '2-day Sale') feature the same female shopper preparing for Black Friday. The third analyzed Target commercial, titled "Gifts for You, Gifts for Me" is from the 2012 Black Friday campaign and features a different cast. Both Macy's commercials analyzed in this work employ celebrities: the 2012 Macy's Black Friday commercial stars Justin Beiber and the 2010 Macy's Black Friday commercial stars Jessica Simpson. A 2012 Oldnavy commercial, titled "Cheermageddon" is analyzed in addition to a 2012 Guitar Center Black Friday commercial.

Lastly, a 2011 Kohl's commercial titled "Black Friday 'Friday'" is discussed in the gender section of the analysis.

The commercials analyzed in this work depict ideal Holiday Season moments and Black Friday experiences, rather than product promotions. These types of commercials are the focus of this analysis because instead of selling a specific product, the commercials are creating a hegemonic consumer and informing viewers' involvement in the Black Friday consumptive ritual. I intend to problematize the hegemonic portrayals in these commercials, arguing that they create a desire for something viewers do not already have, which is an unattainable ideal narrative of the Holiday Season experience. The hegemonic portrayals of race, gender, and religion are presented through Holiday Season advertising campaigns and function as how-to-guides for viewers' performance of the ideal Holiday Season experience, which is ultimately an adoption of normative public values. In this way, mediated hegemony gains traction through the teaching of viewers about how they too can *attempt* fulfill the unattainable ideal Holiday Season celebrations illustrated in mediated spaces.

Through this rhetorical analysis, I intend to explore the following research questions: How is the hegemonic consumer constructed in mediated spaces? What qualities and public values are portrayed? How do the narratives of Holiday Season advertising campaigns depict normative cultural rituals, specifically the Black Friday consumptive ritual? I developed these questions because of the heightened prevalence of advertising during the Holiday Season that offers narrative representations of Holiday Season traditions and practices. I am curious about the way in which commercials instruct consumers through visual rhetoric that produces normative public values. Jonathan E. Schroeder offers a theoretical approach to critiquing advertising and branding that describes influential role advertising plays in culture: "The brand

culture perspective acknowledges brands' representational and rhetorical power both as valuable cultural artifacts and as engaging and deceptive bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes" (124). Essentially, mediated articulations of brands present viewers and consumers with cultural tools to manage their societal practices. Linda Scott explains the communicative quality of images in advertising stating, "Consumers draw on a learned vocabulary of pictorial symbols and employ complex cognitive skills even in the simplest response. Thus, advertising images can be understood as a discursive form, like writing, capable of subtle nuances in communication, or like numbers, capable of facilitating abstraction and analysis" (264). Essentially, mediated texts offer understated yet persuasive concepts for viewers to internalize, which I argue enables mediated messages' perpetuation of normative values. Through my analysis of selected commercials, I seek to investigate the mediated construction of the hegemonic consumer and consumptive cultural ritual that is repeatedly featured in Holiday Season commercials. The conversation that I am entering through these questions interrogates how media intersects with cultural ideologies and the ways in which media create and perpetuate hegemonic portrayals of cultural rituals and public values.

### **The Mediated Hegemonic Consumer**

Within mediated spaces, particularly Holiday Season texts, hegemony operates by constructing a hegemonic consumer and a hegemonic Black Friday cultural ritual. Through strategic narrations of class, gender, religion, and race, Black Friday commercials espouse a rhetorical pattern that promotes normative ideas of who participates in Black Friday, for what purpose, and in particular ways. Specifically, the commercials analyzed for this work repeatedly feature a middle-aged, White, female consumer who employs Herculean efforts to fulfill the role of the caregiver. The rhetoric of the commercials idealizes the hegemonic consumer and links a



store and its products with consumers' domestic success. "More and more the commercials tell stories to sell their products, stories which play a lot with the spectator's imagination and capacity to complete the information" (Rausell 131). The mediated pattern of the hegemonic consumer situates females as the keepers of the Holiday Season, meaning that they are often depicted as responsible for purchasing gifts, food, and décor during consumptive rituals, like Black Friday, to facilitate their family's Holiday Season celebration. Black Friday thus becomes the consumptive cultural ritual that engages Holiday Season preparatory practices. The mediated space articulates this hegemonic consumer to instigate viewers' desire to fulfill that role by entering consumptive spaces and participating in cultural rituals, like Black Friday.

The hegemonic consumer is portrayed as engaging in the ideal consumptive ritual through mediated spaces that become instructions for viewers to internalize and ultimately perform for their own Holiday Season celebrations. "Advertising is [also] a form of communication that interacts with other forms within a specific cultural and social context" (Bianchi 260). Black Friday commercials engage normative understandings of Holiday Season traditions and practices to position retailers and their commodities as fruitful resources to be employed for preparation. A repeated hegemonic narrative employed in Black Friday commercials features female consumers strategically planning their Black Friday shopping experience and/or attaining a consumptive goal, like finding the perfect present for a family member, or finishing their Holiday Season shopping, or acquiring an ideal commodity at a discounted price. Thus not only do mediated spaces construct a hegemonic consumer, they also construct a hegemonic consumptive process for viewers to view, internalize, and attempt to replicate in their own Black Friday consumptive ritual experience.

The commercials emphasize the importance of thoroughly preparing for Black Friday in order for consumers to fully furnish their families' Holiday Season experience. Jenkins uses Apple commercials as an artifact and asserts that the commercials attempt to cultivate a cult following through the purchase and usage of their products. Analyzing Apple commercials, Eric Jenkins discusses the rhetorical moves made in mediated messages that generate and sustain normative cultural values stating, "the iPod advertisements suggest that "you, too" can experience the divine immersion in music if only you participate in the appropriate rituals" demonstrating that Apple commercials push past the boundary of merely promoting a product to *show* and *teach* consumers how to replicate Apple's version of the ideal music experience (481). The Black Friday commercials that I dissect also function as instructional cultural tools that provide a guideline to preparing for and celebrating the Holiday Season. Essentially, the commercials offer not only an idealized hegemonic consumer, but also an idealized hegemonic consumptive process for viewers to process and attempt to replicate, thereby maintaining a normative set of social values.

### **Public Values**

To discuss the portrayal of cultural values in mediated spaces, I turn to Jack Z. Sissors who states "I believe that one thing advertising is able to do is to widely disseminate news about the majority's value systems to a huge audience, some of whom perhaps, are not aware of them. In a sense then, advertising informs some parts of our culture what the predominant value system is, as reflected through advertising copy and layout" (30). Sissors' remarks support the work I intend to do in my analysis by describing the expansiveness of advertising's ability to reach a large audience and shape consumers' knowledge and understanding of public values. Consumption scholarship positions consumptive practices as integral to consumers' lifestyles

and participation in social institutions. “We can view advertising as a cultural intermediary akin to self-help books” Allison Pugh describes of the guiding relationship between advertising and consumption behavior (730). Advertising instructs and informs consumers’ consumptive practices. Cultural consumption is ubiquitous and utilizes social practices, specifically education, to sustain and flourish the economic process. The hegemonic portrayals that exist within Holiday Season advertising campaigns work to generate normative representations of consumers, consumptive cultural rituals, and the Holiday Season to uphold normative public values.

By distilling the portrayal of the hegemonic consumer and the way in which stereotypes of race, religion and gender are used in Holiday Season advertising campaigns to generate desirability, the normative cultural values that weave throughout the commercials become crystallized. Corporations teach viewers what to consume, how to consumer, who to spend their Holiday Season with, and how to celebrate in order to create the ideal Holiday Season that is perpetually glamorized in mediated spaces. In this way, Black Friday commercials become influential sites of culture that capture and depict the way consumers celebrate the Holiday Season. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe state, “it is the result of hegemonic moves on the part of specific social forces which have been able to implement a profound transformation in the relations between capitalist corporations and nation-states” (17). Through capitalist entities, hegemony is constructed and perpetuated thereby maintaining a set of social values. The Holiday Season commercials knit capitalism and cultural values together through mediated portrayals of the hegemonic consumer and consumptive cultural ritual. As the commercials are distributed to a mass audience, cultural values become normalized when hegemonic narratives are continually repeated. Thus, Holiday Season advertising campaigns create hegemonic depictions through repetitive narratives that highlight normative cultural values and ultimately instruct viewers

about how to replicate the idealized Holiday Season through consumption. This ideal is somewhat unattainable by viewers and thus the consumption of certain products offers an attempt at creating the ideal Holiday Season that is really only possible in fictional and commercialized narratives.

A prime example of a normative public value emphasized in mediated spaces is family and familial celebrations. Dana Cloud states, “the nuclear family as a normative ideal is a modern historical development that emerged as the family form of the rising bourgeoisie in the modern era” (393). Mediated portrayals of families assist in articulating the makeup of the hegemonic family and solidifying the public values that uphold the normative family. The commercials analyzed for this study primarily depict the casts preparing for family celebrations of the Holiday Season, but lack discussions or portrayals of celebrations with friends, co-workers, or community members. The commercials also do not depict people celebrating the Holiday Season by themselves. This suggests that culturally, we accept the Holiday Season as an intimate time for families to be together. Repeated family depictions in Holiday Season commercials also suggest that those who do not spend their Holiday Season with family are breaking a normative cultural value. The commercials emphasize the value of family time where families exchange gifts, prepare for the season, and enjoy each other’s company. Therefore, the Holiday Season commercials demonstrate *family* as a normative cultural value that is particularly important during the Holiday Season.

Additionally, the Holiday Season commercials repeatedly illustrate the value of gift giving as integral in celebrating the Holiday Season. Casts gather around Christmas trees to exchange presents and are often depicted shopping for the perfect gift. These depictions emphasize the importance of material goods and suggest that the time spent with family during

the Holiday Season should revolve around the giving and receiving of gifts. Interestingly, even though the commercials use Christmas themes, they deploy commercial depictions of Christmas instead of religious depictions of Christmas. For instance, none of the analyzed commercials depict the casts attending a Christmas mass, but most depict the actors spending money on the Holiday Season by purchasing goods to prepare their home or celebrate with gifts. While perpetuating the hegemonic perception of the Holiday Season belonging to the Christian faith, the Holiday Season commercials predominantly illustrate commercial celebrations of the Holiday Season. In this way, the value of gift giving is perpetuated and normalized through Holiday Season advertising campaigns in a manner that elicits a Christian Holiday for commercial purposes instead of the religious principles upon which the Holiday was established.

#### **Hegemony & Cultural Values: Analysis of Holiday Advertising Campaigns**

Through this analysis, I intend to critique hegemonic portrayals of cultural values in Black Friday advertising campaigns. While there is a lack of rhetorical scholarship engaging Holiday Season mediated texts, Ellen Rooney Martin offers one example, on a smaller scale, of the work that I strive to put forth. Martin studied Target's Holiday advertising campaign and demonstrated how the company incorporated classic Christmas tradition with themes like 'A Christmas Carol.' Martin discusses how the campaign illustrates the company's focus on Christmas, which is a commonly celebrated Holiday, but the focus overlooks other Holidays from different religious affiliations that occur during the season. Martin's reading situates Target's portrayal of religion as hegemonic through the privileging of Christianity, which disempowers other religions that also observe Holidays during the same season. I aim to identify hegemonic narrative trends, as Martin does, to posit implications of Holiday Season commercials.

Advertising campaigns, especially Holiday Season campaigns, employ a plethora of media to promote their company and reach consumers. However, this study focuses specifically on televised commercials, while a more comprehensive study could incorporate more artifacts, like catalogs, flyers, emails, print advertisements, radio commercials, and even Holiday decorations used at a variety of establishments. The commercials selected for this analysis create hegemonic portrayals of consumers, the consumptive experience, and ultimately public values through repeated narrative patterns. While the analysis is divided into four sections (the hegemonic consumer, and the 3 cultural stereotypes: race, religion, and gender) some of the commercials will be discussed in more than one section as they pertain to multiple hegemonic portrayals. For example, a Target commercial is applicable to race, class, *and* religion through overlapping portrayals of hegemony. By placing the commercials' hegemonic components in dialogue, the narrative patterns employed to construct a hegemonic consumer and idealized Black Friday experience are crystallized. Thus, the following categories are employed to assist in dissecting the hegemonic portrayals but will most likely overlap for certain commercials that present more than one type of hegemonic construction. The rhetorical layering of hegemony demonstrates how mediated spaces maintain a set of social values through the construction of a hegemonic consumer.

### *The Hegemonic Consumer*

Mediated spaces suggest that the hegemonic consumer is financially able to participate in Black Friday and happily busies themselves with the task of strategically acquiring a variety of Holiday Season commodities. Black Friday commercials construct a hegemonic consumer and employ 3 cultural stereotypes, race, religion, and gender, to function as the justification for becoming a consumer. Viewers are called upon to be something desirable, the hegemonic

consumer, and mediated spaces provide guides to fulfilling that role thereby enacting what media position as their civic responsibility. Toby Miller offers three “zones” of citizenship: political, economic, and cultural, which assist in understanding the role of the consumer-citizen (35). Americans can participate in consumptive practices to fulfill these zones of citizenship and enact civic responsibility. Consumption threads through the three zones of citizenship as a key practice of citizens and establishes consumers’ agency as American citizens. Miller claims, “the consumer is sovereign. The fetishization of the consumer’s work through an active-audience media address renders the work invisible and makes the consumer easily oppressed” (135). In other words, the citizen asserts power through consumption while simultaneously working within the ideology created and perpetuated by media.

Social institutions cultivate and engage and foster the role of the consumer-citizen and perpetuate consumptive cultural rituals. Consuming certain products then functions as a demonstration of citizenship and a fulfillment of the mediated hegemonic consumer. “Mass-consumer culture integrates consumerism into all aspects of life from birth to death, including, but not limited to, education, leisure time activities, the popular arts, the home, travel, and personal imagination” (Spring 1). In these terms, cultural consumption is ubiquitous and utilizes social practices, like media and education, to sustain and flourish the economic process. The mediated hegemonic consumer informs citizens’ obligation to consume and take part in Holiday Season consumptive rituals.

The enhancement of consumption serves as primary purpose for creating advertisements, through retailers’ encouragement of consumers to spend money on the advertised text. Holiday Season advertisements, in particular, emphasize wealth and affluence as they vie for consumers’ attention and money during one of the busiest times of the shopping year. Commercials often

illustrate gift giving as a common Holiday Season practice, thus suggesting that purchasing gifts, often with steep price tags, is an integral piece of the Holiday Season. Black Friday commercials in particular highlight commodities as quintessential components of the Holiday Season and position the shopping ritual as the necessary practice to acquire gifts. This common narrative employed frequently in Black Friday commercials largely excludes any individuals who do not celebrate the Holiday Season in commercial ways, or those who simply cannot afford to purchase mountains of presents for their loved ones, friends, neighbors, and colleagues as the commercials instruct them to do.

In a 2012 Target Black Friday commercial, a White female Target shopper is flipping through the Black Friday flyer and drawing hearts around the items that interest her. Two Target promoters, a White man and White woman stand beside her donning Target-red clothing (the male is wearing a red scarf with the Target bullseye) and sing about the sale. They are singing to the tune of 'Deck The Halls' but the lyrics describe the commodities in the Target flyer. The Target shopper excitedly marks the commodities she wants to purchase for various family members and friends in red marker. This depiction positions Black Friday as a shopping ritual that assists shoppers in Holiday Season preparations, primarily through consumptive practices. In a 2012 Oldnavy Black Friday commercial, George Takei (an Asian actor) sings about Oldnavy's Black Friday event, called 'Cheermageddon', to the tune of Aerosmith's 'Don't Want to Miss a Thing'. Takei's song replaces the Aerosmith lyrics with descriptions of the clothing offered by the retailer and the Oldnavy Black Friday experience stating, "A Black Friday without aggression," "I don't want to miss doorbusters and I don't want to miss good deals," "Cheermageddon's going to rule". The lyrics explicitly associate Holiday Season cheer with consumption as a practice and with individual commodities. Consumers are taught that gift



giving is an integral component to the celebration of the Holidays and by consuming specific goods, they will be one step closer to attaining the ideal Holiday Season experience. The hegemonic consumer is constructed in mediated spaces through cultural stereotypes to instill viewers with an obligation to consume and ultimately, an identity to consume.

### *Race*

Through mediated texts analyzed for this work, the trend in racial representation suggests that the hegemonic consumer is White. This is demonstrated through repeated usages of White actors as consumers featured shopping on Black Friday. Furthermore, a trend in these commercials is the depiction of minority characters as workers assisting the White shoppers. An example of problematic inclusions of non-White characters can be seen in a 2012 Walmart commercial in which a White woman approaches a Black male employee and asks him to read her shopping list. When the employee states “it’s all crossed out” the woman replies “that’s because I got everything on it, BOOM!” Similarly, in a 2009 Sears commercial, a Black male employee explains Black Friday deals to a White female shopper. Minorities represented as workers is also seen in a 2012 Macy’s commercial in which Justin Bieber tells a variety of people about the Macy’s Black Friday sale. When he informs his Black driver, the man screams in a high-pitched voice. In this particular scene of the commercial, the working role of the Black actor is emphasized as he is seated in the driver’s seat wearing a black sport coat, and takes directions from the singer when he enters the car. The high-pitched-scream response is repeated by the rest of the cast, including two White male stock room workers (wearing gray uniforms), a Hispanic male stock room worker, and two male store employees, as reactions to seeing Justin. The commercial incongruously demonstrates men screeching in pre-recorded female voices when they encounter Justin Bieber at Macy’s. Finally, in a 2012 Guitar Center Black Friday commercial, the only minority included is a Black male who is working behind the cash register

and helping a White customer. In these four commercials, the minorities depicted are actually working, not shopping as the White actors are featured.

The preceding four commercials perpetuate hegemonic depictions of race by including minorities in the casts, but representing them as workers and employees. Thus, the mediated space constructs a hegemonic consumer who is White and assisted by minorities who function as store employees. In a 2009 study on race and sex in television, Nancy Signorielli found: “one in five characters are people of color and most of these characters are Blacks.” (346). In “Representations of Race in Television Commercials” Dana E. Mastro and Susannah R. Stern explain that in their content analysis of 2,880 commercials, 83.3% of the characters were White, 12.4% were Black, 2.3% were Asian, .4% were Native American, and .5% were categorized as “other” (642). These studies demonstrate a lack of racial diversity in television, which is congruent with the current work’s analysis of Black Friday commercials. The commercials analyzed for this work demonstrate a lack of racial diversity and hegemonically suggest that most Black Friday shopping and Christmas preparation rituals are completed by White consumers. These depictions collectively indicate that White consumers are the primary participants in Holiday Season festivities and if minorities are present, then they are working in some capacity. The lack of diverse racial representation and cultural stereotyping of Blacks as workers within the analyzed Black Friday commercials situate the race of the hegemonic consumer and enforce the desirability of the idealized role.

### *Religion*

Mediated spaces construct a White hegemonic consumer who demonstrates an adherence to Christian practices through their consumptive preparations for Christmas. The Holiday Season includes a number of religious holidays from a variety of faiths, including Christmas, Hanukkah,

and Kwanzaa. Yet, Holiday Season commercials largely focus on depicting the Christian Holiday of Christmas. More specifically, Black Friday commercials identify the consumptive ritual as the essential shopping experience that enables consumers' prep work for Christmas celebrations. Out of the ten commercials analyzed, all ten depict the casts either implicitly or explicitly celebrating Christmas. This is done with visuals of Christmas trees, stockings, and Santa, frequent use of the colors red and green (commonly accepted Christmas colors), and verbal references to Christmas. For example, in a 2011 Macy's commercial, pop singer and designer Jessica Simpson functions as an early morning alarm clock who sings "All I want for Christmas" to a couple as they wake up for the Black Friday sale. The lyrical reference to Christmas suggests that the couple will be shopping and preparing for Christmas gifts when they visit Macy's on Black Friday.

The Christian portrayals in Holiday Season commercials often also operate as how-to-guides for consumers. The commercial teaches viewers how to shop during the Holiday Season for their friends and loved ones and informs consumers that Black Friday is an integral component of Christmas preparation. The how-to commercials emphasize the importance of gift giving on the Christian Holiday. However, the religious significance of Christmas is that it marks the day Jesus was born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. As described in the Christian faith, three kings brought gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) to the manger where the baby was born. While the presentation of gifts was not the central component of the first Christmas, as described by Christianity, gift giving has become a key feature of Christmas in American homes, particularly in the morning. In this way, the analysis of religion and class blend through Black Friday commercials' dominant portrayal of families preparing for and celebrating Christmas through commodities. For example, the previously described 2012 Target commercial features a

woman excitedly marking a Black Friday flyer and circling commodities she intends to purchase for family, friends, and herself. Not only does this normative portrayal largely ignore other religious holidays that occur during the Holiday Season, the portrayal also hegemonically reinforces the idea that the consumption and giving of gifts is an essential component of the Christian holiday.

The contemporary Christmas that has been popularized by movies, television shows, and Holiday Season advertisements suggests that a Christmas tree surrounded by many presents is a staple in the celebration. Hegemony functions throughout Black Friday commercials to empower those who celebrate the Christian Holiday and disempower the many faiths that do not observe Christmas, and even people who do not affiliate with any religion that does or does not celebrate a Holiday in the month of December. Simultaneously, these representations of Christmas focus on the commercial traditions of Christmas while ignoring the religious significance of the Holiday. The commercials teach consumers that affluence is not only central to the celebration of the Holidays, but also to the participation in faith practices. Essentially, the mediated portrayals of religion signal that the hegemonic consumer is Christian (in addition to being White and affluent) and utilizes Black Friday as an integral consumptive ritual that enables the Holiday Season preparatory work.

### *Gender*

Perhaps the most easily identifiable quality of the hegemonic consumer constructed in mediated spaces is the gender; the hegemonic consumer is a female who strategically takes up a domesticated role during the Holiday Season by shopping for a variety of Holiday Season commodities. The repeated narrative that is employed in Holiday commercials depicts a female as a mother who is responsible for purchasing gifts for the family and friends. This narrative

suggests an ethic of care tied to the consumptive Black Friday Ritual; shopping is completed as a motherly responsibility to facilitate families' Holiday Season celebrations. The mother is thus a caretaker who enacts the hegemonic consumer as a means of supporting family. In this way, the consumptive ritual is a ritual of care that entails the purchasing of toys for children, gifts for spouses, and décor for the home.

The commercials analyzed for this work frequently utilize a White female lead whose Christmas shopping experience is depicted to position her as the sole provider of Christmas gifts for her immediate and extended family, friends, and co-workers. In the Target, Sears, and Walmart commercials described earlier in this analysis, the women are depicted purchasing Holiday gifts at discounted prices and taking advantage of promoted deals. These portrayals promote hegemonic views of gender by domesticating females to position them as homemakers who prepare for the Holiday Season by filling the house with presents, decorations, and festive food. For example, in a 2011 Kohl's Black Friday commercial, a White, thirty-something woman sings about the store's 12:00 A.M. opening, waiting in line since the previous day, and blocking other shoppers as she enters the store. She is seen pushing her shopping cart through the store while picking up a variety of gifts, like toys, tech gadgets, and clothing. The female shopper even retrieves an item from another shopper's cart and places it in her own as she moves through the store. This commercial not only exemplifies the gendered narrative of the caretaker, hegemonic consumer, it also suggests that Black Friday is a competitive ritual in which consumers block one another from entering the store and steal commodities from each other's shopping carts.

This narrative is repeated in the previously described Target 2-day Sale commercial in which a blonde, middle-aged White woman athletically trains for Black Friday Shopping. In 2010 Black Friday Target commercial featuring the same female shopper, the woman stands in

front of Target wearing a red polo and khakis. She explains to the camera that when she wears the outfit (which matches Target employees' uniforms), she is able to move to the front of the line. She places a stolen Target name-card on her chest and tells the audience, "if you see me there, call me Derek." The commercial humorously suggests that Black Friday shopping requires strategic planning and preparation. The Target 2-day Sale campaign and the Kohl's commercial employ this narrative while featuring White, middle-aged women as the primary Black Friday shoppers. The ethic of care is highlighted through these commercials by demonstrating how the caretaker becomes the hegemonic consumer through participation in the intense consumptive cultural ritual to furnish their family's Holiday Season experience.

### **Conclusion**

Through the analysis of Black Friday commercials from large, U.S. corporations, the employment of hegemony is illuminated as a mechanism for creating idealized Holiday Season celebrations that are grounded in normative cultural values. These values and hegemonic depictions largely ignore many individuals who do not fit within the mold that is constructed to represent the ideal Holiday Season experience. Consumers are instructed how to participate in the Holiday Season and encouraged to attempt to attain the ideal Holiday Season experience that is repeatedly depicted in Black Friday commercials. The ads function to create the idealized position of the hegemonic consumer in the light of other hegemonic values regarding race, religion, and gender. Therefore, the ads create the consumer as a subject position and idealize other hegemonic forces, which further perpetuates a hegemonic landscape. In the next chapter, the ethnographic study of Black Friday retail spaces illustrates how there is an action that has to be actively completed for the ideal mediated hegemonic consumer to be maintained. Viewers

have to enact the subject position presented in the mediated space by entering the consumptive space and engaging in the ritual.

While class, gender, religion, and race are all components of consumers' identities that are relatively fixed, hegemonic consumerism offers flexibility. Even if consumers do not fit within the limiting constraints of the idealized hegemonic consumer, participating in the consumptive ritual creates potential to fulfill the promise made in mediated discourse.

Consumers are taught to participate in the Holiday Season through the portrayals in Black Friday commercials that perpetuate normative public values and hegemonic views of race, religion, and gender. The hegemonic consumer is identified as a White, wealthy, Christian, female who masters Holiday Season celebration preparations by advantageously participating in Black Friday consumptive rituals. To engage how viewers take up this mediated hegemonic consumer by participating in Black Friday, I will next discuss the rhetoric of Black Friday consumptive spaces as the site where consumers emulate the hegemonic constructions presented to them in mediated spaces.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Consumptive Space*

The day after Thanksgiving, designated Black Friday by retailers, has become a popular cultural ritual that marks the beginning of Holiday Season shopping. Typically starting at midnight (although some stores, like Target, opened as early as 9pm on Thanksgiving this past November), consumers rush through department stores and shopping malls scouring for Holiday gifts with slashed prices. From November through January, Holiday Season traditions are defined and recognized through media and corporations who sell the Season to consumers and promote consumptive cultural rituals. The popularized name, Black Friday, has been traced to “the early 1960s, Philadelphia cops [who] used the term to describe the intense crowds of shoppers and traffic that poured into center city on the day after Thanksgiving...by the mid 1970s, newspapers in and around Philadelphia used it to refer to the start of holiday shopping” (Koehn). By the 1980s, businesses and marketers reframed the negative connotations associated with the name by identifying the shopping day as “the day when retailers historically came out of the red and went into the black by beginning to turn a profit” (Koehn). Descriptions of contemporary Black Friday commercials explicated in the previous chapter exemplify the way in which marketers highlight, sometimes comically, the intensity of the Black Friday shopping experience in mediated spaces. The consumptive space facilitates the cultural ritual that is normatively designed in mediated spaces as an intense and integral Holiday Season preparatory practice.

Black Friday, a consumptive Holiday Season practice, has become an American cultural ritual in which philosopher Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”



remarks on ideology illuminate the role of ritual: “The ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions...it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions...This ideology talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*” (18). A subjects’ behavior exhibits ideology and perpetuates dominant ideas through participation. Thus, the hegemonic consumer who is presented in mediated spaces becomes solidified through subjects’ enactment in consumptive spaces. The mediated depiction of the hegemonic consumer prompts the consumer to be “hailed” to their subject position in consumptive spaces. In other words, the consumptive space enables subjects to fulfill the mediated desire constructed through the portrayal of the hegemonic consumer. In the mediated space, the hegemonic consumer is crafted and in the consumptive space, the hegemonic consumer is performed.

The repeated mediated narrative of the hegemonic consumer, discussed in the preceding chapter’s analysis of Black Friday commercials, is enacted through performative participation in the consumptive cultural ritual. Althusser’s conception of Ideology and Interpellation, as well as Gramsci’s theory of hegemony offer productive tools for assessing media’s role in societal practice. Hegemony

provides a framework for examining the mass media's ideological role by focusing on the relationship between the mass media and power. As an analytical construct, hegemony also highlights the media's relationship to social and political change, especially the interaction between media institutions and alternative social movements that challenge the political order (Caragee 331).

Critical media scholars, like Stuart Hall, employ these conceptions to explicate the construction and perpetuation of normative ideas and practices: “Althusser reminds us that ideas don’t just float around in empty space. We know they are there because they are materialized in, they inform, social practices” (103). Ideology thus takes shape in material ways, through tangible ‘apparatuses’, like media, that inform subjects. Mediated Black Friday texts operate as ‘apparatuses’ that produce a hegemonic consumer for viewers to emulate in the physical consumptive space. “While recognizing the role of cultural practices in shaping meanings and values, hegemony as an analytical construct stresses that issues of domination and subordination must be confronted in analyses of cultural production” (Carragee 331). Consumers view mediated depictions of Black Friday and the Holiday Season and glean from those texts their role and responsibilities for participating. Within the consumptive space, consumers fulfill their hailed subject positions, and are thus granted access to the promise of the ideal Holiday that is constructed through the mediated space. The Black Friday ritual maintains a set of social values consumers are instructed to uphold by mediated texts. Strategically generating a space in which consumers can attempt to embody the mediated hegemonic consumer is a task retailers take up that perpetuates the unattainable-Holiday-ideal-promise of the consumptive cultural ritual.

### **Marked Everyday Spaces**

On Black Friday, the hyped retail event transforms everyday spaces. Target, for instance, transforms the store’s interior to accommodate and feature Black Friday commodities. While portions of the space remain the same, such as the toiletries and food aisles, the rhetoric of the retail space shifts to mark a significant event. In “Joe's Rhetoric Finding Authenticity at Starbucks,” Greg Dickinson details the rhetoric of a seemingly everyday space:

The force of an everyday space arises out of the subtle interconnected ways in which the spaces are “accidentally” constructed and, just as importantly, in the ways that these banal spaces of the everyday are visited in nearly non-conscious ways. It is in the interstices of the everyday, it is in the littlest actions of our daily lives, that we most thoroughly materialize our selves and our bodies (6).

Essentially, within everyday spaces and seemingly mundane routines, the self is continuously ritualizing and produced through “the homogenization of social space” and “practices of production” (Dickinson 8). I’d like to offer a contribution to Dickinson’s argument by analyzing the rhetorical work of everyday spaces that are marked for special events and seasons. I contend that everyday spaces, like Target on Black Friday, become exaggerated and dressed up to become a non-everyday space. These spaces visibly mark a cultural shift that acknowledges events and occasions, like the Holiday Season. Yet the everyday space is already, in its ‘natural’ state, an exaggerated space. Thus, the dressed-up-everyday-space becomes an exaggeration of an already exaggerated space.

A small, yet relevant, example of the marking of the everyday to signal a cultural event and instigate a shift in everyday spaces is the Starbucks Holiday cup. Majority of the year, Starbucks delivers their caffeinated concoctions to customers in white cups with a green logo. The regular cup is the product of an everyday space that consumers carry with them as they leave the coffeehouse chain. The everyday object is marked and dressed up to signal the celebration of the Holiday Season beginning in late November when Starbucks releases their Holiday cups. The cups vary each year, but typically employ traditional Holiday Season colors, like red and green, and feature images of snowflakes and sentimental Holiday messages, such as “when we’re together, every day is a snow day” and “come together.” Starbucks refers to the employment of

Holiday cups from November through New Year's Day as "Pass the Cheer" and stylize their typical product to reflect cultural on-goings. Dickinson claims that everyday rituals, like ordering a cup of coffee at Starbucks, represents "rituals in the midst of post-ritualistic, post-traditional society" that "can provide a nostalgic reenactment of missing rituals" (21). The Starbucks-ordering-subject copes with the mundane, everyday through luxurious rituals. Thus, when the everyday ritual is marked for non-everyday occasions, like the Holiday Season, the already exaggerated ritual is visibly marked and the promise of ideal Holiday celebration is presented as attainable through consumption.

### **Cultural Ritual & Consumption**

As a consumptive cultural ritual, Black Friday is an exaggeration of the everyday shopping experience. Consumers engage in a heightened performative narrative when attending Black Friday. Instead of simply shopping in the retail space at their convenience during the everyday shopping ritual, consumers are guided and instructed by corporations and media (through commercials, social media updates, website guides, and emails) as to how they can properly prepare and participate in the non-everyday Black Friday ritual. The temporality of non-everyday cultural rituals, like Black Friday, is imperative in redefining the ideologies that ground societal practices. During the Holiday Season, values governed by consumptive practices are rearticulated through cultural rituals, which gain traction primarily through their ability to put forth cultural ideologies. The ritual helps to maintain the cultural conventions through citizens' performance of an ideology-defining phenomenon. The notion of privilege is worth acknowledging here in that consumers have multiple ways of accessing Black Friday. For example, Black Friday may be the only time a single parent has to shop for Christmas gifts. Some consumers may participate in Black Friday to take advantage of the low prices, while

others may simply want to be a part of the spectacle-esque cultural ritual. As addressed in the introduction of this work through James C. Scott's work in *Domination & the Arts of Resistance*, participation in this consumptive cultural ritual does not necessarily indicate agreement.

The contemporary Holiday Season has been influenced by a variety of societal traditions and symbols commonly acknowledged as Christmas components. For example, sociologist David Yosifon explains the evolution of the Christmas icon, Santa Claus who "entered the Christmas season only in the nineteenth century, as an infantilized proletarian, a figure who both represented and contributed to the transformation of Christmas from a carnivalesque, public, and potentially dangerous celebration, to a private, domestic, and safe family affair" (231). Holiday Season traditions and symbols, like Santa Claus (the easily identifiable symbol of the commercialized Christmas), are repeatedly articulated in mediated and consumptive spaces through narratives that frame consumption as the key to obtaining the idealized Holiday Season experience. Yosifon additionally raises a point about the "carnivalesque" nature of the Holiday being tamed through domestication. Yet I would argue that contemporary retail spaces re-carnivalize the Holiday Season through consumptive cultural rituals, like Black Friday. Consumers are encouraged to participate in the hustle and bustle of public consumptive preparatory practices in order to achieve the ideal, private Holiday. Thus, consumptive cultural rituals, like Black Friday, claim to fulfill the traditional ideals of the Holiday Season by offering a consumptive space that enables the hegemonic consumer to fulfill its media-constructed subject position.

Temporality and ephemerality are key to consider when theoretically assessing non-everyday cultural rituals. Through Black Friday, there is a marking of the past, present, and future in the fleeting yet momentous cultural ritual. Angela C. Ray states, "ritual performances

invoke the past, mark the present and affect the future” (15). Ray defines the temporal quality of ritual as it assists cultures in marking time by repeating a common practice in the present that has been preformed in years past and also indicates that the ritual will occur in the future.

Temporality is a key component in understanding Black Friday as a cultural ritual because the retail holiday always occurs on the Friday following Thanksgiving. Retailers and consumers collectively anticipate Black Friday in a temporal way, particularly because of the immediacy established through store openings. In other words, retailers promote the time of their stores’ opening on Black Friday and incentivize consumers to wait in line for the promoted prices and doorbusters that are typically only available in limited quantities. Commodities and temporality thus become linked on Black Friday as access to products is granted through specific, temporal participation in the consumptive cultural ritual.

Cultural rituals greatly inform collective public values through “the concentration of an identity through the community of its recipients” and through rituals’ “capacity to be constantly reconstructed in relation to the current situation” (Kukkonen 263). In other words, a shared experience assists in the cementing of a communal identity and is capable of both solidifying the past through a recreation that is suiting for its contemporary context. “Erving Goffman defined ritual in two ways: as the smooth running of everyday encounters and as the honoring of the selves who people them” (Manning 365). Essentially, Goffman explains the ritualistic nature of everyday social interactions that sustains societal organization. Robert Hariman and John Lucaites detail the relationship between the individual and the collective stating,

“Because the public is a discursively organized body of strangers constituted solely by the acts of being addressed and paying attention, it can only acquire self-awareness and historical agency if individual auditors “see themselves” in the collective representations

that are the materials of public culture. Visual practices in the public media play an important role at precisely this point” (36)

Cultural rituals are a viable context for individuals to engage in the collective. Additionally, the visual components employed to promote such cultural rituals assist in encouraging individuals’ participation. Thus, Black Friday, as a cultural ritual invites individuals to participate in the collective through consumptive practices that are guided and shaped by visual promotional tools, like flyers and commercials. Black Friday functions as a cultural ritual that performatively marks the traditional Holiday Season by providing a literal outlet for the hegemonic consumer to be enacted in a physical space.

### **Rhetoric of Retail Space**

Carefully constructed retail spaces strive to rhetorically embody corporate values, promote profit, and guide consumers through their shopping experience. “Space cannot be assumed as an undefined void: it is always qualitatively related to the human environment and also very closely related to the human experience and behavior” (Lagrange 257). In an attempt to positively influence consumers’ experience within their retail space to encourage consumption and future visits, corporations strategically design their spaces to facilitate ease and comfort. When reshaped to accommodate events and Holidays, the everyday retail space generates a new rhetorical relationship between the consumer and the space. “The social construction of space is the actual transformation of space — through peoples’ social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting — into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning” (Low 24). Through Holiday themed signage, color schemes, and displays, retail spaces signal a cultural celebration of the Holiday Season that informs individual consumers’ Holiday Season experience and enables the hegemonic consumer to narratively perform their role.

The rhetoric of retail space generates a hegemonic relationship between the consumer and the corporation that constructs the space. “Space as a means of production, includes social relations, and is used by social and political (state) forces with the aim to exercise power, control, and domination” (Lagopolous 132). With strategically designed spaces, corporations aim to supply consumers with products that will fulfill their wants and needs and prompt repeated shopping visits. Target explains their approach to design stating, “We apply our design philosophy to everything from our visually appealing building exteriors, to easy-to-navigate store layouts, to innovative tools and systems. It all comes together to create a great guest experience.” The retailer emphasizes both ease and a contemporary shopping experience as fundamental elements of their space. The everyday retail spaces are updated frequently to accommodate the changing seasons, but Black Friday in particular, is a retail event that corporations redesign their spaces for, thereby constructing a specialized version of the everyday space.

### **Black Friday Ethnography**

Retailers and advertisers promote Black Friday as a shopping experience designated for the preparation of Holiday Season gatherings and festivities that incorporate gift giving. This strategically designed consumptive ritual is better understood through ethnographic research, which engages the cultural work occurring in the retail spaces. Communication scholars, like Andrew Wood who labeled his role “participant-observer” when studying tourist environments in Las Vegas, utilize ethnography as a methodological approach suitable for enhancing scholars’ understandings of places, events, and rituals (317). Similarly, Jessie Stewart and Greg Dickinson conduct a spacial investigation of FlatIron Mall in Colorado to discuss “the materiality of the everyday” (282). While the authors do not classify their research as ethnography, they do offer a focused description of their trip to the mall and personal experience in the space in a similar



fashion to the work I put forth in this analysis. Ethnographic research is particularly relevant for this analysis seeing that Black Friday is an ephemeral cultural ritual and annual retail event that takes place in a consumptive space. The researcher was thus able to observe shoppers' and employees' behaviors, the rhetoric of the space, and the makeup of the ritual by participating in the event. To investigate the Black Friday cultural ritual, I conducted an ethnographic study on November 22, 2012 in which I attended the Target Black Friday 2-day Sale.

I arrived at a Central New York Target at 8:30pm on Thanksgiving night and waited in line with consumers preparing for the store's 9pm opening. Before attending the cultural ritual, I collected and noted the retailer's flyer provided in local newspapers and uploaded digitally on Target's website. The background of the flyer and store map is black and the banner is red. The banner text is illuminated, mirroring the effect of a lit up sign. The text reads, "It's on! Black Friday Sale" and is preceded by the Target logo. The 'Black Friday' text is in yellow, and the 'It's on' and 'Sale' text are in red. Doorbusters are highlighted with green text. The color scheme and text emphasize the immediacy and ephemerality of the cultural ritual. The bold and bright colors layered over the black background evoke an intensity, which is emphasized by the 'It's on' text, which signals the start of the cultural ritual. These preparatory documents aid in framing the cultural ritual as ephemeral while simultaneously suggesting a rhetoric of preparedness required for those who participate.

To identify the Black Friday products and promote lower prices, Target, like many retailers, distributes a weekly advertisement that informs consumers about what to expect when they attend the cultural ritual. Out of 33 pages total, the first eight pages of the weekly advertisement, which is inserted in local newspapers, feature electronic products. The next six pages include children's toys, followed by two pages of outdoor gear (tents, bikes, etc). The

placement and length of the electronics and toy features suggests that those products are the most sought after commodities that consumers seek to purchase on Black Friday. The retailer's emphasis on certain commodities, like toys and electronics, creates a correlation between the Holiday Season and particular products. In other words, certain commodities become marked as essential Holiday Season gifts. Additionally, Target prepares consumers for Black Friday with the following statement posted on a segment of their website, which is dedicated entirely to promoting the Black Friday 2-day Sale:

Shoppers' favorite sale is always the day after Thanksgiving sale, a.k.a. Black Friday. Make your holiday shopping list now and get ready! Buy the newspaper or pick it up off the front porch to find the Black Friday circular from Target and check out all the Black Friday deals. Are these deals good? No, these deals are great. So, turn on the TV and watch all the fun Black Friday ads. Because now that Thanksgiving is done, Christmas is coming, and all the Christmas deals are at Target: holiday décor, lights, cards and Christmas trees.

The weekly advertisement, store map, and website exemplify the preparatory work involved in consumers' participation in the Black Friday ritual. The retailer provides tools, like the flyer and store map, to encourage consumers' participation and guide their experience. The quote identifies the importance of temporality in the consumptive cultural ritual by identifying the end of Thanksgiving as the beginning of Holiday Season shopping. Additionally, consumers are instructed to "get ready" for the ephemeral event, which promotes a rhetoric of preparation and temporality that are instrumental in consumers' participation in the cultural ritual.

A key facet of the Black Friday experience that marks the cultural shift of an everyday space is the store opening. As an everyday space, Target has routine hours in which consumers

can come and go as they please to complete their shopping. However, as a non-everyday space for Black Friday, Target opens late at night as consumers wait in line outside of the store and, when in the store, follow regimented directions from employees about how to navigate the store, purchase products, and exit the store. On the evening of the 2-day Sale store opening, consumers waited in a line that was monitored by Target employees and extended to the doors of a neighboring grocery store. Employees distributed store maps locating the Black Friday products. I observed consumers cupping energy drinks and coffee as they waited in line. Customers stood in line in small groups or in pairs. I stood in line alone to observe. Customers browsed the store map, distributed by a Target employee, while waiting in line. Customers discussed what they were going to purchase, their Thanksgiving dinners, and plans for the rest of the weekend. Security officers, dressed in either navy uniforms or red jackets with “security” printed on the back, stood at the entrance, exit, and in a variety of locations around the store (mostly in high traffic areas, like where TVs were sold). An employee greeted customers at the door, while another employee monitored the line (in addition to the employee handing out maps). A security guard let customers in, 20 at a time, and the line continued outside of the store even 45 minutes after opening at 9pm.

Target employees directed customers throughout the store, holding signs, answering questions, and explaining locations of specific items and the checkout line. Employees instructed consumers on the checkout process: a separate line was provided for “redcard users” (the Target credit card), a general line was offered for all other customers. The general line began in aisle 50 at the opposite end of the store from the registers and wove throughout the beauty/cleaning supplies/and toiletries aisles. Customers were asked to follow blue tape that was stuck on the floor. One employee loudly explained to customers, “Folks, follow the blue line.” The

employees' navigation of consumers and layout of the line demonstrates a regimented and ritualized consumptive process.

The regimented entrance procedure, increase in security guards and employees, and strategically designed retail space indicate a highly ritualized event that surpasses the everyday ritualized shopping experience. Darryl Hattenhauer explains the persuasive nature of space stating: "Architecture not only communicates, but also communicates rhetorically. Churches and shopping malls, doors and stairs—these architectural items not only tell us their meaning and function, but also influence our behavior. Architecture is rhetorical because it induces us to do what others would have us do. Architecture, then, is a persuasive phenomenon" (71). Essentially, as an everyday shopping space, Target occupies a persuasive capacity to guide and instruct consumers. Thus, as a non-everyday Black Friday space, the persuasiveness of the space multiplies as consumers engage in a regimented shopping experience. The increase in personnel, whose presence and directions to consumers constructs and maintains order, exemplifies the way in which Black Friday operates as an exaggeration of the everyday shopping experience.

To differentiate between Black Friday commodities and regularly offered products, Target employed strategic signage, placement, and shelving. Black Friday doorbusters (like pajamas, DVDs, socks, etc.) were located at the end of aisles in Black cardboard shelves with red signs at the top with the words "Black Friday" accompanied by the Target logo. These shelves and signage employed the same color scheme, text, and logo utilized in the weekly advertisement and store map. This repetitive usage of signage emphasized signaled the key Black Friday components to the consumers and assisted in guiding consumers' shopping experience. Promoted electronic items, like TVs, were located in a variety of places throughout the store, not just in the electronic section. For example, some flat screen TVs were located in the women's clothing

section. Holiday items were also located in green cardboard Christmas tree stations – these included stocking stuffer ideas (like socks and nail polish) and were typically next to the Black Friday items. The shelving and signage assisted in identifying “Holiday” commodities and thereby informing consumers’ gift giving experience. By separating these products, they become designated Holiday Season commodities; this perpetuates retailers’ instructional role for gift giving.

I observed that the toy and technology sections were the most crowded throughout the store. Thus, the flyer and website’s emphasis on these commodities proved fruitful as many consumers focused their shopping experience on the acquiring of toys and/or electronics. The holiday aisles with décor, food, ornaments, etc. were much less crowded than the toy and technology section – indicating a focus on gift items rather than holiday preparation items. This suggests that when consumers participate in Black Friday, their primary goal is not to gather Holiday Season decorations and home-goods; rather consumers strive to purchase popular and high-priced commodities, like toys and electronics. Toys are popularized traditional Christmas commodities given to children, while electronics are newer commodities, often featured in media as the ultimate gift to give and receive during the Holiday Season.

### **Conclusion: Commodification of Public Values**

The ethnographic study of Target’s Black Friday retail space, exemplifies consumptive rituals’ capacity to create a critical public value around consumerism. Through Black Friday, the commodification of collective public values reconstructs our perception of the past by both conserving and producing ideas about the Holiday Season. Traditional practices are affirmed through the consumptive cultural ritual and new components are added to situate the cultural ritual in its contemporary context. The traditional practice of gift giving, for example, is affirmed

as a Holiday Season practice. The commodities, like electronics, vary to situate and adjust to the contemporary context. Black Friday is a cultural ritual that reifies the traditional practice of gift giving and simultaneously produces a new type of collective comfort fitting for the modern Holiday Season. Certain commodities have become iconic because of their repeated and popularized usage in cultural rituals. When included in the non-everyday ritual, commodities, like the ritual, become marked as symbolic of a significant event or cultural shift.

Specific commodities become emblematic of events and/or places, which facilitate their ability to evoke certain emotions that inform collective memory. Investigating the relationship between consumption and collective memory in *Tourists of History*, Marita Sturken analyzes the usage of teddy bears to commemorate events like 9/11 stating “Comfort culture and the consumerism of kitsch objects of emotional reassurance are deeply connected to the renewed investment in the notion of American innocence” (7). Essentially, Sturken contends that the teddy bear, as a commodified form of collective memory, comforts consumers by invoking innocence. The fear, sadness, and anger generated by 9/11 is reinscribed by the teddy bear’s notion of innocence. In the case of Black Friday, the Holiday Season is commemorated and traditional ideas of Christmas are preserved. Thus the commodification of the Holiday Season, serves to reproduce and uphold normative values and practices. The commercialized Christmas invokes the innocence of the Victorian Christmas through classic commodities, like toys, while also engaging a contemporary, commodity comfort through modern commodities, like electronics.

Consumptive spaces rhetorically generate cultural work through ritual, particularly when everyday spaces are marked to embody non-everyday events. Black Friday, as a consumptive cultural ritual, prompts a transformation of everyday retail spaces and provides a space for the

hegemonic consumer to fulfill the ideal Holiday constructed in mediated spaces. In these consumer spaces, the media-informed consumer engages in performative rituals that enact the narratives explicated in mediated spaces. Within these everyday turned non-everyday spaces, consumers ritualize their role in Holiday Season celebrations and reinforce public values.

“Architecture that represents values and beliefs is rhetorical because it induces ritual behavior. By ritual I mean our rhythmic, repetitive behaviors that dramatize meanings. Thus commercial and biological acts can be rituals, reminding us of our identity and place in the cosmos, community, family, and workplace” (Hauttenhaur 74). Essentially, in consumptive spaces, consumers take up the subject positions created for them in mediated spaces and perform the narrative that ritually perpetuates normative public values. The next chapter turns to resistance space, cultivated by anti-consumption activist efforts employed to rupture the hegemonic consumer who is created and maintained in mediated space and enacted in consumptive space. The analysis of a documentary that follows an anti-consumption activist group illustrates how the hegemonic consumer has been problematized and resisted.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Resistance Space*

While many consumers flood retailers on Black Friday, anti-consumption activists Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping infiltrate popular stores to resist the commercialized Christmas. The activist performance group promotes social change by operating as a religious group with Reverend Billy leading the choir, who sing and dance to advocate their anti-consumption message. Since The Church of Stop Shopping began its activist efforts in 1999, the group has been the subject of four documentaries, and has traveled internationally to conduct anti-consumption performances. The Church describes their vision stating, “We use theatrical forms to build a surprisingly moving, powerful critique of economic systems and environmental practices and instill a sense of responsibility in our audiences, leading them to simple actions they can take immediately” (*Reverend Billy*). The Church of Stop Shopping implores Americans to focus on the religious traditions of Christmas instead of the consumptive practices encouraged by retailers and mass media. The activist group shares its message through street theatre, targeting shoppers who consume products created by large corporations like Macys, Starbucks, Toys R Us, etc.

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping perform credit card exorcisms at retailers’ cash registers, profess their message through anti-consumption lyrics sung in lobbies of shopping malls and retail parking lots, and protest with performances in which Reverend Billy gives sermons and the choir sings gospel music from their album ‘The Shopocalypse’. In this chapter, I will be investigating the rhetorical work of Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping presented in the documentary “What Would Jesus Buy?” to assess anti-consumption



activism's creation of a rupture in hegemonic Holiday Season consumptive practices through documentary activism.

In order to analyze the rhetorical work of Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, I will utilize the documentary "What would Jesus Buy?" as a textual artifact that details the anti-consumption activists on a cross-country mission. The documentary features the activist group's performances in retail stores, urban streets, and parking lots, which will allow me to discuss how the group presents their message to the general public. As I assess the rhetorical strategies employed in these textual artifacts, I will focus my analysis by answering key research questions: How does the Church of Stop Shopping posit a call for action through their status as a performative post-religious group? What rhetorical strategies are employed in the documentary to produce effects that respond to the anti-consumption activist work? Through what devices does the anti-consumption activist group's work unsettle normative American Holiday Season consumptive cultural rituals? By engaging these questions, my rhetorical analysis seeks to illuminate the rhetorical strategies deployed by The Church of Stop Shopping in the "What Would Jesus Buy?" documentary to assess how the anti-consumption activists explicate their central contention and illustrate their solution with the goal of creating ruptures in normative consumptive cultural rituals.

The mediated hegemonic consumer enacted in consumptive spaces is resisted through anti-consumption activism, as demonstrated in the "What Would Jesus Buy?" documentary. The hegemonic consumer is problematized through the documentary as the vehicle through which the commercialized Christmas is perpetuated and maintained. In "What Would Jesus Buy?" Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping strive to thwart normative representations of Holiday Season consumption. Dana Cloud interrogates mediated creations of hegemony and the

counter-hegemony that responds stating, “popular texts offer viewers multiplicitous but *structured* meaning system in which instances of multivocality are complementary parts of the system’s overall hegemonic design” (313). Cloud pinpoints the ability of hegemonic structures to formulate normative ideals that become adopted by audiences in indirect yet tactic ways. “What Would Jesus Buy?” resists hegemonic portrayals presented by mediated spaces and enacted in consumptive spaces to advocate for Holiday Season celebrations that do not rely on excessive consumptive habits.

I elucidate three rhetorical strategies posited by the documentary: (1) a narrative pattern is employed in which consumer interviews are starkly contrasted by expert interviews to frame the commercialized Christmas as the problem and the Church of Stop Shopping as the solution to hegemonic practices, (2) the anti-consumption activists parody religious traditions, making their work more identifiable and ultimately incongruous to rhetorically problematize the modernized Christmas, and lastly (3) the Church of Stop Shopping glorifies a nostalgic Christmas celebration that emphasizes a simplistic form of consumption. Through these rhetorical tactics, the documentary poses a problem by exemplifying the ramifications of the contemporary commercialized Christmas and situates the Church of Stop Shopping as the solution and saviors of the nostalgic Christmas.

### **Documentary Style**

Rhetorically, the documentary style enables activism strategies that are not accessible in live performances and demonstrations, but can be illuminated through interviews and footage of the activists explaining their work. In “Fixing Feminism: Women’s Liberation and the Rhetoric of Television Documentary” Bonnie Dow discusses the form of the documentary stating, “there is a general consensus that documentary is a vehicle for social commentary” (59). The “What

“What Would Jesus Buy?” documentary facilitates a social conversation about capitalism, the U.S. market, and most specifically, the commercialized Christmas. In *The Rhetoric of the New Political Documentary*, Thomas Benson and Brian Snee explain, “documentaries have always held the power to influence public opinion” (2) and “rhetoric and politics have remained at the core of documentary and documentary scholarship” (5). “What Would Jesus Buy?” seeks to thwart the commercialized Christmas by reshaping consumers’ understandings of their shopping habits, globalization, and materialism. Steve Thomas gives background to the documentary style: “the documentary tradition has been propelled by the desire for social progress. Because of its perceived special relationship to ‘the real’, documentary in its earliest form was placed alongside the discourses of science and the humanities” (134). The documentary form offers a mediated relationship between the audience and social change, in which viewers are exposed to the inner-workings of a social movement through ‘real’ events.

To stress the need for scholarship to interrogate the documentary style and its effect on democracy, rhetorician Ross Singer critiques spectacle and the rhetorical body in the 2004 documentary “Super Size Me” stating, “Communication and media scholars have just begun to make sense of the role of these films in a democracy, with little attention given thus far to a host of films targeting corporate power” (135). “What Would Jesus Buy?” exemplifies the type of documentary Singer implores scholars to assess through its questioning of consumer practices and anti-consumption activism that critiques corporate outsourcing. Investigating the effects of documentaries on social change, David Whiteman claims, “Social movements continually struggle to create public space for discussion of the issues they think are important, and films can become a crucial part of that struggle. Film can be used to create a space in which citizens can encounter issues” (55). Essentially, documentaries are capable of generating public discourse on

social issues through presentations of activists' work. "What Would Jesus Buy?" encourages consumers to consider the Church of Stop Shopping's activism in relation to their own consumer behaviors.

The format of the documentary is crucial to dissect in order to understand the rhetorical moves being made through the text. Carol Wilder offers a standard format employed in documentaries: "the narration—invisible or overt; voiceless or voiceover—builds the argument through a steady stream of ironies and contradictions that lead the viewer inexorably toward the synthesis that is the filmmaker's preordained audience destination" (58). Essentially, the documentary's argument is constructed through its narration style. "What Would Jesus Buy?" triangulates the key figures of the anti-consumption movement – the activists, the experts, and the consumers – to illustrate and elucidate the primary goal of the Church of Stop Shopping. This narrative triangulation is imperative in positioning of the Church of Stop Shopping's resistant message to the commercialized Christmas and illuminating the activists' message driving the group's parodies.

### **Parodying the Commercialized Christmas**

The documentary style enables the Church of Stop Shopping to position its work as oppositional to the commercialized Christmas, but not dismissive of traditional religious practices. Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping advantageously utilize identifiable religious images, themes, and practices to construct a parody that problematizes not Christmas, but the commercialized Christmas. "Parody, as negative critique, is not up to the task of undermining the parodist's own purchase on the Truth as it maintains both a hierarchy of language and the protestor's role as revealer. Parody derides the content of what it sees as oppressive rhetoric" (Harold 191). By employing parody, the Church critiques the

commercialized Christmas and those who participate in it as their focus on consumption grows and focus on religious tradition lessens. Through interviews with the Reverend Billy, choir members, footage of meetings and rehearsals, the documentary gives voice to the anti-consumption activists, who explain the function of parody within their performances and goal of their work: “we try to complexify the moment of purchase, to snap people out their hypnosis and back into the mystery of being human. We remind people that things come from somewhere, that products have a resource past, a labor past” (*Reverend Billy*). The Church challenges the commodification of Christmas and encourages Americans to question their own consumptive behaviors by parodying the commercialized Christmas.

The rhetorical work of the Church of Stop Shopping demonstrates a mixing of traditional and easily identifiable religious practices with humor, sarcasm, and parody to elucidate the group’s upholding of dominant religious ideologies and simultaneous resistance of the commercialized Christmas. “Parody installs and subverts the meaning-making conventions and processes (rhetorical practices) of our culture (modernism) and thereby exposes those conventions while simultaneously inviting an interrogation of these taken-for- granted conventions” (McClure, Laidlaw-McClure 81). Essentially, parody unsettles dominant ideas and practices through comedy. Visually, the group is immediately identifiable as a religious group, due to their leader’s clerical uniform and choir robes worn by the remainder of the activists, and this signals an agreement with religious traditions and practices. Yet the group employs religious practices to parody the commercialized Christmas and explicate their dissent toward the commercialization of Christmas. Heather J. Carmack, who critiques activists’ use of parody to elicit social change, explains, “Parodic reversal, as a form of perspective by incongruity, places groups in roles that are usually incongruous to them” (37). For example, Reverend Billy preaches

as a Christian priest or minister would speak to their congregation, but instead of preaching about faith, Reverend Billy preaches about what he calls the Shopocalypse and the ramifications of the Christmas consumer culture. The “What Would Jesus Buy?” documentary illuminates the Church of Stop Shopping’s employment of humor to reify traditional religious practices and defy contemporary consumptive practices.

### **Analysis: What Would Jesus Buy?**

Directed by Rob VanAlkemade and released in 2007, *What Would Jesus Buy* is a documentary that problematizes the commercialization of Christmas by following Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping on their cross-country tour to end the “Shopocalypse.” The full documentary was posted on YouTube in June 2012 by Reverend Billy himself and has been viewed 60,378 times by April 2013. The documentary was perceived as successful for positing the activists’ message, as demonstrated by New York Times movie reviewer Laura Kern explains: “Reverend Billy is zany and energetic enough to hold the attention of those he’s preaching to — average to extreme shoppers, many clueless as to what globalization means — long enough for them to consider his crusade...the film might make a viewer think twice about that next purchase at the Gap” (“The Gospel of Stop Shopping”). In the documentary, viewers see the activists in choir rehearsals, traveling on their tour bus, preaching to Stop Shopping parishioners, occupying consumptive spaces, and even getting arrested for their anti-consumption protests. Charismatic leader, Reverend Billy, is framed by the documentary as the starter of a social movement. His family is interviewed and explains that Billy’s musical talent that began at an early age. His sisters express no surprise that Billy grew up to spread a political message through music and performance. The Reverend preaches and performs in a white suit with a black shirt and clerical collar with his signature bleach blonde hair that viewers see him

style with hairspray as he preps for performances. The choir typically performs in red choir robes, particularly during the Holiday Season. The activists' wardrobe substantiates their role as a "post religious church" as stated on their website. By conducting theatrical performances inside and on the doorstep of consumptive spaces the activists' illuminate their mission to promote social and political change through a religious identity.

### *Consumers vs. Experts*

The documentary frontloads expertise on the commercialization of Christmas by interviewing a variety of professionals who explain contemporary American consumptive practices, thereby enhancing the ethos of the anti-consumption activists' mission. Beginning with Dr. Peter Whybrow, a scholar and author of *American Mania*, the experts demonstrate the severity of the commercialized Christmas through their areas of specialty. The documentary also employs commentary from a shopping addiction therapist, a child psychiatrist, a historian, a senator, and the author of *Credit Card Nation*. Dr. Peter Whybrow states, "Most of the togetherness is now created around the gift-giving...Christmas combines commercialism with love and affection." The Church of Stop Shopping problematizes this practice by preaching to consumers that gifts do not equate love. Thus, the documentary sets up a narrative pattern that employs expert testimony to substantiate the Church of Stop Shopping's activism. This intellectual discussion is followed by consumer commentary, which is strategically positioned within the documentary's narrative pattern as examples of the problematic consumptive practices. "Narrative Practices describe the processes of "channeling" the beginnings of communality as well as the skills built through communicative spaces, to produce a common understanding of struggle" (Funke, Robe, Wolfson 22). This type of narrative strategy utilized in

documentaries can facilitate a richer understanding of the social issue through the layering of voices and perspective – experts, consumers, activists – who detail their relationship to the issue.

Contrasted to the expertise of scholars, authors, politicians, and mental health professionals are the consumers interviewed outside of consumptive spaces. In the documentary the consumers interviewed discuss what they want for Christmas, the amount of debt they accrue during the holiday season, the importance of gifts on Christmas, their lack of attention to where products are made, and the consumptive practices they participate in during the Holiday Season. One middle-aged woman explains to the camera that she would not celebrate Christmas “if there were no gifts.” A teenager discusses how much she enjoys the mall and even claims that if she could she would “live in the mall.” Through this consumer commentary, the documentary frames consumers as mindless spenders who cannot resist maxing out their credit cards. The severity of the commercialization of Christmas is heightened through both consumers’ commentary and through the experts’ discussion of the ramifications of such spending. Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping are thus framed as the solution to Americans’ consumptive habits. Reverend Billy explains to a news crew, “we are on a mission to save Christmas from over consumption.” Through these types of statements to the press and through their public performances and the anti-consumption activists position themselves as the heroic rescuers of Christmas that will save consumers from their problematic shopping habits.

To emphasize the economic ramifications of the commercialized Christmas and cultural work done to maintain children’s Holiday fantasies, the documentary interviews a middle-aged mother who describes her debt accrued through Christmas shopping. To discursively explain the woman as her interview begins, text appears in the bottom left-hand corner of the documentary stating her first name, Carrie, and label her as “Overspent Mom” – this text is placed inside of a



price tag. She explains that she “didn’t get to have nice stuff growing up” and she wants her children “to have everything, I want them to grow up having name brand stuff and all the cool toys so that when their friends comes over, they can say they have it.” She states that her husband created a budget for their family’s holiday spending and does not know how much she spends each year. She receives a new credit card in the mail and explains that it “will be maxed out by the end of the day.” Not only does this commentary exemplify the problematic spending that the Church of Stop Shopping seeks to quell, it also substantiates the expert testimony provided by a Christmas historian. Dr. Steven Nissenbaum states, “our parents go to such immense trouble to make it seem to children that nobody shopped for Christmas, the presents were all brought by Santa Claus who made them each by hand to disguise the fact that the gift they bought for their kids have in fact come out of shops and come out of a season of anxiety and sometimes frantic desperation.” The commentary provided by both the “Overspent Mom” and Christmas historian demonstrates the documentary’s advocacy tactic of exemplifying the commercialized Christmas as a problem and framing the Church of Stop Shopping as the solution.

The “Overspent Mom” interview is employed in the documentary to illuminate American families financial struggles experienced during and as a result of the Holiday Season. Her excessive use of credit cards and purposeful omission of discussion with her husband about their debt serves as a prime example of the commercialized Christmas that the Church of Stop Shopping strives to problematize. Assessing personal narrative in “An Inconvenient Truth,” Thomas Rosteck and Thomas S. Frenzt explain, “The personal narrative encourages our identification with the quest” (14). In other words, personal narratives from consumers, like the Overspent Mom, promote viewers’ identification and ability to understand the activists’ mission.

By positioning this interview in conjunction with expert interviews, like Dr. Nissenbaum's remarks, the consumers' behaviors are framed as the problem and the Church of Stop Shopping's anti-consumption activism is framed as the solution. In other words, by including interviews with consumers who narrate their Holiday Season consumptive practices and contrasting them with intellectuals' remarks, the documentary rhetorically offers evidence of the problematic commercialized Christmas that Reverend Billy preaches about and positions his anti-consumption activist group's work as the solution to that problem.

Through this narrative process, consumers are framed as mindless shoppers unable to manage their own money and in need of the Church of Stop Shopping's redemptive work. The consumers are simultaneously framed as the problem and the solution as the Church of Stop Shopping critiques consumer behaviors and at the same time calls upon consumers to change. Kathryn Thomas Flannery explains this type of simultaneous argumentation: "Polemic depends on both a recognition of traditional grounds of argumentation and at the same time comes into being to make evident the inadequacy of those grounds" (118). In other words, normative practices are both critiqued and employed to produce change and pinpoint flaws. Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping implore anti-consumption resistance polemically by simultaneously problematizing the consumer behavior conducted by the very same people whom they seek to impact and persuade to abandon the commercialized Christmas.

### *Religion, Comedy, & Activism*

The anti-consumption activists insist on presenting a crucial social message through theatrical and even comedic performances. A member of the choir, Laura explained "To do serious political work in creative fun ways is incredible. It's like nothing I expected." Laura's commentary exemplifies the group's humorous approach to social change as a means for

connecting with audiences and gaining attention. Yet, the group simultaneously battles unflattering portrayals that stem from their dramatic performances. Choir member Quilty describes this stating, “My fear is that we’ll be perceived as weirdos.” In a CNN report on the Church of Stop Shopping, a reporter speaks with Billy and jovially states “you strike me as someone who’s not entirely serious” to which Reverend Billy laughs and responds,

Oh, you think so? Well, we have to have a sense of humor about it, we can’t get too serious. We have to be serious enough that if there’s an American consumer listening to us right at this moment...and they’re tempted to get in their SUV and go on the highway and go to a Big-Box store somewhere, that person might reconsider hearing us here talking.

Reverend Billy’s comments demonstrate a desire to maintain a comedic approach to activism in the hopes of changing Americans’ consumptive practices. This comedic approach is consistent in both their congregation gatherings and in their public performances, which model the incongruity theory of humor. According to the incongruity theory, an interaction or experience may be considered as humorous because it contradicts experiences, schemas, or expectations. “Perspective by incongruity is a strategy that can be used to look at aspects of the social world in new ways” (Rockler 18). The Church of Stop Shopping models this by blending the traditional, and thus expected, religious practices with unconventional and unexpected comedic tactics.

The Church of Stopping Shopping employs traditional practices and infuses their resistant message through their music and performances. For example, the choir preaches the “stop shopping” message through traditional gospel music by changing the lyrics. In one particular song, the lead vocalist sings “I’m gonna put that Starbucks done and stop shopping,” then the choir repeats the vocalist’s lyrics in response. In this way, the traditional practice of

singing gospel music in a Christian mass is juxtaposed with the infusion of anti-consumption messages. In a public performance, the group employs a traditional holiday practice by walking through an affluent neighborhood caroling. But, the lyrics of the traditional holiday songs, like Jingle Bells, are changed to messages of anti-consumption and resistance. When people open their front doors expecting to hear traditional holiday carols, they are provided with a copy of the anti-consumption lyrics and asked to sing along. The Church of Stop Shopping is thus contrasting traditional holiday practices and messages with dissentious messages about the commercialization of Christmas that are infused into traditional practices.

A salient example of the documentary's juxtaposition of traditional religious symbols and commercialized Christmas images can be seen in the animations utilized as the opening credits and transitions between the varying segments of the documentary. For example, to introduce the "malling of America" segment, the documentary features a brief animation in which Jesus floats above a concrete parking lot filled with Hummers and he is cradling a Hummer in his arms. The animation parodies a religious figure to visually problematize the commodification of Christmas. The Church of Stop Shopping discursively implores consumers to abandon the commercialized Christmas and instead celebrate the religious traditions of Christmas. The animations non-discursively echo this message by parodying religious images.

In their discussion of the social controversy over fur, Kathryn M. Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight describe the persuasiveness of advocates utilizing both discursive and non-discursive elements. The anti-fur advocates' campaign exemplifies a blend of visual and written/spoken arguments, which Olson and Goodnight claim strengthens the rhetorical power of their argument and message thereby enhancing the activists' ability to inform and influence public discourse. The documentary's animations non-discursively support and illuminate the Church of Stop

Shopping's discursive message through parody, which replicates and cements the anti-consumption activists approach to activist work. In other words, by using parody in both discursive and non-discursive presentations, the activists construct and maintain a cohesive identity and rhetorical style that advantageously juxtaposes traditional religious practices with comedic problematizations of the commercialized Christmas. Additionally, the documentary form provides a viable platform for the dissemination of both discursive and non-discursive rhetorical elements, specifically through the interviews (discursive) and the moving images of protests and parodied religious practices (non-discursive). In this way, the documentary enriches the embedment of the Church of Stop Shopping's anti-consumption message.

### *Nostalgic Christmas*

The Church of Stop Shopping advocates for a simplified Christmas, that still involves gift giving, but does not rely on "big box" stores or involve conspicuous consumption in ways exemplified by interviewed consumers. The documentary includes interviews with several elderly people who explain their "simple" Christmases, which did not involve an excess of gifts. One woman in particular began to cry as she discussed how her father cared for his family and showed his affection on Christmas by spending quality time with his children and giving them a few gifts, like oranges and socks in their stockings. The nostalgic Christmas ideal presented through these interviews enforces the Church of Stop Shopping's mission to problematize the link between love and consumption. Alastair Bonnett states, "modernity is the condition of nostalgia, it provokes and shapes it. Around nostalgia accrue many of the discordant and creative practices that excite and disturb modern audiences. Nostalgia disturbs modern life" (11). "What Would Jesus Buy?" offers a nostalgic Christmas that abandons modern consumptive practices to focus on traditional qualities of religious celebration like faith, family, and love.

Maryland State Senator Gloria Lawlah, age 73, explained in an interview in the documentary, “When I was a girl, there was no plastic. When I was a girl, your credit was really just a matter of a handshake. I think my dad used to tell me...you know I’m gonna pay the country store when I get paid.” The Senator’s comment suggests a moral ethic of responsibility in correlation with the nostalgic Christmas that is no longer present in the modern Christmas. Svetlana Boym, author of *The Future of Nostalgia*, explains, “modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of a mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (8). “What Would Jesus Buy?” identifies past Christmas celebrations as the ideal through commentary, like the senator’s remarks, which insinuate that contemporary consumers are not responsible and thoughtful spenders like consumers used to be before the creation of the credit card.

On a shopping trip in Iowa, before conducting a funeral for small town America at a graveyard near the Walmart headquarters, Reverend Billy and his wife visit a small, locally-owned and operated store. Billy’s wife states, “We look for things that are made in America. Then we try to shop in places where the money we spend will go back into the local communities, into local economies.” Billy searches for a new sweater in the store and explains to the owner that he only buys products if they have been produced in America. The storeowner explains that he believes “Walmart is killing small town America” in response to Billy asking him about how the presence of Walmart in his town has affected his store. He explains that he did not encourage his two sons to continue running the store when he retires because “there’s no future here.” He goes on to explain the role his store has played in the community and how that has dwindled as consumers turn to what Reverend Billy calls “big box” stores for the cheapest prices. This is contrasted by an interview with a Walmart executive who explains that

“globalization doesn’t mean that America is losing, it means that America is shifting...it means that maybe the workers are not making as much in salary, and they’re losing insurance and retirement benefits, which only says that nothing is guaranteed anymore.” The executive’s comments are problematized by an interview immediately following with a Walmart worker who cannot remember any benefits that she receives from the corporation. The worker and executive’s interviews are employed to highlight the negative implications of the contemporary American market and encourage a shifting back to small town America.

While striving to invoke social change, the Church of Stop Shopping promotes a nostalgic ideal of consumer behaviors. “As consumption has come to play an increasingly central role in contemporary society, consumer movements have arisen to challenge and transform aspects of it by propagating ideologies of consumption that radicalize mainstream views” (Kozinets and Handelman 691). In the case of the Church of Stop Shopping, the mainstream commercialized Christmas is challenged and a return to a simplified holiday is encouraged. When assessing *Adbusters*, Joseph Rumbo highlights the lack of resistant messages presented to consumers stating, “advertising messages legitimate consumerism by controlling a mass-media industry that is virtually devoid of space for the articulation of dissenting views” (129). The Church of Stop Shopping’s activism rhetorically counters dominant ideologies presented by advertisers through media to advocate for a simplified and nostalgic Christmas that avoids large corporations and commercialism. The narrative pattern of the documentary cements the Church of Stop Shopping’s positioning of the nostalgic Christmas as the solution to problematic consumer behaviors that become heightened during the Holiday Season.

## **Conclusion**

Through a strategic narrative pattern, in which expert testimony is used to support the anti-consumption activists' work and consumer commentary is employed as evidence of the problematic commercialized Christmas created by large corporations, "What Would Jesus Buy?" rhetorically layers perspective of the experts, consumers, and activists. The anti-consumption activists incongruously employ traditional religious symbols and practices to comedically present their message and encourage resistance. Through parody, the Church of Stop Shopping explicates a nostalgic ideal Christmas holiday that does not engage in commercialized Christmas practices. In *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture*, Jo Littler describes specific examples of anti-consumption activism and considers the role of the consumer activist in relation to corporate, hegemonic ideologies of ethical consumption by analyzing groups like Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. She argues that "the more relationally reflective anti-consumerist texts are, the better, as it renders them the more open to making more, and more egalitarian alliances" (90). Littler emphasizes the importance of analyzing anti-consumerist discourse in terms of its reflectivity and ability to affectively counter hegemonic practices. Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping strive to rupture hegemonic consumer practices, specifically during the Holiday Season. The "What Would Jesus Buy?" documentary enables a reflexivity that advances the Church of Stop Shopping's resistant message through a strategic narrative pattern, parodies of traditional religious practices, and an endorsement of a nostalgic Christmas that resists mainstream and commercialized practices.



## CONCLUSION

After Black Friday in November 2012, Forbes reported “more than 35 million Americans visited retailers’ stores and websites Thursday – up from 29 million in 2011. Odds are that more stores opening even earlier this year than last helped the cause but that jump in traffic points to more consumers looking to stretch their dollars and for big deals” (Versace). In addition to the growing number of participants, the Black Friday cultural ritual is lengthening as retailers vie for consumers’ attention by opening their doors as early as Thanksgiving evening. The cultural ritual is now seeping into the U.S. annual Thanksgiving holiday as many consumers embrace the *Thursday* start to the *Black Friday* event. IBM explains, “2012 marked a banner year on a number of fronts with mobile traffic growing by more than 67% and Thanksgiving turning out to be a huge shopping day for consumers as they responded to retailers’ early Black Friday promotions” (“Black Friday Results 2012”). To properly conduct the ethnographic research explained in the consumptive spaces chapter, I, like many U.S. consumers, left my family’s Thanksgiving celebration a bit early and stood in line waiting for the retail doors to open. The hegemonic consumer embraces this process – the shortened Thanksgiving festivities, the waiting in line, the strategic purchasing of discounted items – hegemonic consumerism instills in dominant societal practices this value of consumption as an integral responsibility capable of granting access to the idealized Holiday Season experience.

Promoting an alternative consumer responsibility, Reverend Billy urges “Sharing, not shopping” in a conversation with New York Times writer Andrew Revkin the week before Black Friday 2012. Reverend Billy goes on to say “Hurricane Sandy makes us into givers not buyers, we have gift economies now” (Revkin). Without elaborating on what precisely he means by “sharing” to assist in natural disaster relief efforts, Reverend Billy insists on a social

responsibility to economically support people and communities affected by Hurricane Sandy. Slavoj Zizek explains this type of consumption stating, “we are not merely buying and consuming, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a global project” (54). This type of consumption suggests that consumers do not purchase products simply for their own usage, but to aid and assist other citizens. Tania Lewis states, “Consumption practices of ordinary people can be linked to the broader emergence of a hegemonic culture of devolved self-governance. A central feature of the neoliberal focus on self-regulation involves the displacement of questions of social responsibility away from government and corporations onto individuals and their lifestyle” (227). Essentially, ethical consumption is positioned as an act of self-sovereignty in which consumers contribute to society through their individual consumptive practices, as Reverend Billy preaches in his activist work. While he strives to disrupt hegemonic consumerism and the commercialized Christmas, Reverend Billy’s resistance endorses consumer practices that involve “sharing” and enabling societal responsibility.

### *Implications*

This work has argued that a hegemonic consumer is crafted in mediated space, enacted in consumptive space, and thwarted in resistance space. Through my analysis of commercials in the mediated space chapter, I argued that a hegemonic consumer is generated and idealized to show viewers that the ideal Holiday Season experience is maintained through consumption. Through their participation in consumption cultural rituals, consumers demonstrate their adherence to normative public values; both the mediated space and consumptive space facilitate this process symbiotically. The organization of this work’s chapters is not intended to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between the mediated and consumptive spaces. Rather, I argue that the

maintenance of the hegemonic consumer occurs simultaneously as consumers interact with both mediated and consumptive spaces. The hegemonic consumer is idealized in mediated spaces and emulated in consumptive spaces. The Black Friday cultural ritual creates a critical public value around consumerism.

The resistance space chapter analyzed a rupture in hegemonic consumerism generated by the documentary “What Would Jesus Buy?” through anti-consumption activism. In this resistance space, the hegemonic consumer is challenged through both mediated discourse (the documentary) and anti-consumption enactment conducted by activists Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. I ultimately argued that the documentary employed strategic rhetorical strategies to problematize the commercialized Christmas, resist the hegemonic consumer, and boast a solution: a simplified, nostalgic Christmas. All three spaces analyzed in this work grapple with hegemonic consumerism and the public values inserted through consumptive cultural rituals. In the light of other hegemonic values (of gender, race, and religion), an idealized position is crafted by hegemonic consumerism that is portrayed in media, enacted in retail space, and resisted by anti-consumption activists.

This work has attended to the public level of cultural hegemony, with little attention paid to the private level and “hidden transcripts” that speculate about dominant systems and ideologies. James C. Scott’s work with private transcripts offers a viable resource for deepening the rhetorical analysis to explore how and why people respond to the mediated and consumptive spaces. There are a myriad of reasons why consumers participate in Black Friday – for the spectacle, for the discounted prices, for quality time with family/friends who shop as a group – and investigating the private transcript could detail the relationship between the private thoughts and public actions. While the public level of cultural hegemony is crucial to analyze for its

articulation of normative ideas and practices, “The public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations” (Scott 2). Incorporating an analysis of the private level can assist in generating a fuller understanding of consumers’ behaviors and the Black Friday cultural ritual.

### *Future Studies*

This thesis has focused specifically on Black Friday media, consumption, and resistance spaces to interrogate the construction of and opposition to the hegemonic consumer. The focus on Black Friday textual artifacts is attributed to the need to narrow the scope of this work, which was initially proposed as a broader study of the Holiday Season. Future studies could analyze how the hegemonic consumer is treated within different holiday contexts to broaden the rhetorical analysis of cultural rituals. Interrogating the triangulation of hegemony, consumption rituals, and resistance through an analysis of different holidays could further elaborate the implications of this work and enhance rhetoricians’ understandings of public values. For example, an analysis of Halloween textual artifacts could investigate the public values prompted by the ritual of trick-or-treating and the mediated perpetuation of the consumer-citizen who participates in the autumn Holiday.

A broader study could focus on a particular space and analyze hegemonic consumerism by employing the content analysis research method. For example, a future study could collect and categorize a larger selection of Holiday Season commercials to offer findings that detail the race, religion, and gender representations contributing to the construction of the hegemonic consumer. Instead of conducting a larger content analysis of Black Friday commercials, the mediated spaces chapter in this work offered a close analysis of a small selection of commercials. This choice enabled me to incorporate the additional consumptive space and

resistance space chapters, which triangulated the work of hegemonic consumerism. Selecting one space to assess through content analysis could offer relevant inferences about the mediated discourse that produces and perpetuates the idealized hegemonic consumer. As consumption continues to be a central feature of U.S. cultural rituals, further critical scholarship can be composed to interrogate this blending of media, consumption, and citizenship by extending research on Black Friday cultural rituals or analyzing other types of cultural rituals that also rely on consumptive practices.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

As a consumer and rhetorical critic of media, this thesis is relevant for both my scholarship and personal participation in cultural rituals. I believe holidays are rich with cultural traditions and articulations of public values and thus imperative sites for rhetorical analysis. Through the trajectory of three Black Friday textual artifacts, my goal has been to identify how the hegemonic consumer occupies mediated, consumptive, and resistance spaces. The mediated hegemonic consumer does more than maintain normative public values; the hegemonic consumer also calls upon subjects to fulfill the role through consumptive enactment. When the hegemonic consumer is resisted and problematized, consumptive acts continue to persist as components to the proposed alternative – Reverend Billy’s ideal consumer still consumes, but does so to aid others and uphold the nostalgic Christmas. Through media, cultural rituals, and even resistance efforts, consumption is illuminated as an integral public value. Analyzing holiday traditions and rituals offers essential discourse about public values and the way they are articulated and sustained through varying public entities (media, corporations, education, etc.). Scholarship addressing the rhetoric of public values and the formation of normative societal

ideals has much to gain from close readings of holiday celebrations as portrayed in media, enacted in cultural ritual, and resisted in activism.

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*Sigma Tau Delta: International English Honor Society*

## Research Interests

*Rhetorical theory, Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, Visual Rhetoric*

## Awards & Grants

Conference Travel Grant, Syracuse University, Spring 2013

Public Visualities Honorarium, Syracuse University, Fall 2012.

Conference Travel Grant, Syracuse University, Fall 2011.

Excellence in Leadership Award, Nazareth College Undergraduate Association, Spring 2011.

Senior Class Connector, Nazareth College Undergraduate Association, Spring 2011



### **Conference Experience**

“Anti-Consumption Activism: Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping.” Camp Rhetoric, Pennsylvania State University, PA, February 2013. (Works in Progress Presenter).

National Communication Association, Orlando, FL, November 2012. (Attendee).

Public Visualities: A Summer Seminar in Visual Culture, Blue Mountain Lake, NY. Sponsored by the Visual Arts and Culture Cluster of the Mellon CNY Humanities Corridor, August 2012. (Participant).

“Making Prejudice Palatable: Narrative Revulsion and Resolution on *The Office*,” National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA, November 2011.

"*The Princess and the Frog* Presents Hegemonic Ideologies of Class"  
Rochester Institute of Technology, Conference for Undergraduate Research in Communication, Rochester, NY, April 2011

Conference on Activism, Rhetoric, and Research, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, May 2012. (Attendee).

### **Guest Colloquium Presentation Experience**

“Professional and Everyday Critics Interpret Michael Scott” Nazareth College of Rochester, Guest Presenter, Rochester, NY, September 2012.

### **Guest Lecture Experience**

Syracuse University, CRS 225: Public Advocacy, October 2012.

Syracuse University, CRS 181: Concepts & Perspectives in Communication Studies, November 2011.

## **Pedagogical Experience**

### **CRS 225 Public Advocacy**

**Syracuse University** (Teaching Assistant & Recitation Instructor) Fall 2012

Enhances student capacity to respond appropriately to a variety of speaking situations. Principles, practice, and criticism of informative, persuasive, and ceremonial speeches are examined and executed in this course.

### **CRS 325 Advanced Presentational Speaking**

**Syracuse University** (Stand Alone Instructor) Spring 2012 & 2013

Examines the conceptual and practical dimensions of formal presentations in organizational settings—analysis, adaption, strategic arrangement and development of ideas, verbal and nonverbal presentational skills.

### **CRS 181 Concepts & Perspectives in Communication Studies**

**Syracuse University** (Teaching Assistant & Recitation Instructor) Fall 2011

Overviews everyday interaction and extent to which content and forms of communication shape social realities. Broad introduction to field of communication.

**Future Professoriate Program (FPP).** Syracuse University's Future Professoriate Program is a model for teaching assistants providing year-round teaching services, seminars, and web resources. Upon graduation I will receive a Certificate in University Teaching from the Graduate School.

### **Exploration Summer Program, Yale University, New Haven, CT**

Residential Director & Instructor (*Summer 2011*), Courses Taught: Print Journalism  
Residential Advisor & Instructor (*Summer 2009, 2010*), Courses Taught: Advertising & Marketing, Personal Essay Writing

### **The Writing Center, Nazareth College, Rochester, NY (Fall 2008-Spring 2011)**

*Writing Tutor* - Provided academic assistance to both undergraduate and graduate students.

**Research Experience**

**Co-Author/Research Assistant**, Dr. Lisa Perks, Nazareth College (January 2011-Present)

**Research Assistant**, Dr. Cynthia Gordon, Syracuse University, Spring 2012

**Research Assistant**, Dr. Bradford Vivian, Syracuse University, Spring 2013

**Rhetoric & Citizenship Research Trip**, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

Sponsored by Syracuse University's Communication & Rhetorical Studies Department, Spring 2012.

**Service**

**Graduate Representative** for Syracuse University's Communication & Rhetorical Studies Department, Spring 2012-Fall 2012

**Graduate Representative** for Syracuse University's Communication & Rhetorical Studies Department, Tenure & Faculty Review Committee, Spring 2012-Fall 2012

**College of Visual & Performing Arts Blogger** for the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, Fall 2011

**Editor in Chief** of Nazareth College's Undergraduate Newspaper, Fall 2010-Spring 2011

**Memberships**

National Communication Association, Fall 2011-present.

Rhetoric Society of America, Fall 2011-present.

**Relevant Graduate Coursework**

**Public Memory**, Dr. Bradford Vivian (2012) Syracuse University

**Feminist Narratives**, Dr. Minnie Bruce Pratt (2012) Syracuse University

**Rhetoric of Social Change**, Dr. Erin Rand (2012) Syracuse University

**Rhetoric & Continental Philosophy**, Dr. Bradford Vivian (2012) Syracuse University

**Rhetoric & Citizenship**, Dr. Kendall Phillips (2012) Syracuse University

**American Public Address**, Dr. Bradford Vivian, (2012) Syracuse University

**Communication and Cosmopolitan Studies**, Dr. Erin Rand, (2011) Syracuse University

**Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric**, Dr. Anne Demo (2010) Syracuse University