ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

American Self-Enhancement Culture and the Cyborg Consumer: Consumer Identity Construction Beyond the Dominance of Authenticity

Markus Giesler, York University, Canada

Marius K. Luedicke, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Berrin Ozergin, University of Witten / Herdecke

Social critics of American self-enhancement culture often lament that it draws individuals in a biomedical consumerism that frustrates the construction of genuine self-identity. This "lost authenticity" critique ignores that consumers can forge their identity in narrative terms not dominated by modernist questions regarding inauthentic vs. authentic. Americans injecting Botox for self-enhancement purposes draw from a new model: the cyborg consumer. We develop this conception to analyze how consumers partially and inconsistently transcend historically established dualities–nature vs. technology, authentic vs. inauthentic–to create consistent "stories of the self." We profile an emerging historical discontinuity between a modernist identity protocol prescribing self-authenticity as the ultimate goal and a competing protocol challenging this authority by prescribing unlimited agency through technological self-enhancement.

Does Authenticity Matter? The Importance and Interplay of Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Tandy D. Chalmers, University of Arizona, USA
Linda L. Price, University of Arizona, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Authenticity is argued to be the new business imperative and 'buzz word' of the 21st century (Gilmore and Pine 2007) and "consumers' search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry Jr. 2003 p. 21). Consuming and communicating authenticity are recurrent themes in academic research and consumer research approaches the topic in several ways. First, consumer research has examined the authenticity of referents such as objects, persons, and experiences (Arnould and Price 1999; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Second, consumer researchers have examined authentic representations of objects, persons, and experiences, such as photographs, reenactments, and ads (e.g. Belk and Costa 1998). In both cases, research examines how to create authentic referents and representations of referents (e.g. Holt 2004) and how these are viewed by observers (Rose and Wood 2005). An important underlying assumption of this work is that authenticity is an important and positive outcome.

This privileging of authenticity has resulted in the neglect of an equally important construct: inauthenticity. Trilling (1972) notes authenticity is a polemical concept, usually only thought about when called into question, with the focus on something being either authentic or inauthentic. Much of consumer life, however, is represented by situations where both authenticity and inauthenticity co-exist (Benjamin 1969; Grayson and Martinec 2004). The purpose of this symposium is to explore the interplay between authenticity and inauthenticity.

First, Markus Giesler and Marius Luedicke discuss how consumers paradoxically create an authentic self by enhancing their physical selves with market offerings, such as Botox, that are often perceived as creating an inauthentic self. Next, Tandy Chalmers and Linda Price show how consumers negotiate authenticity and inauthenticity in an advertisement context and demonstrate a complex interplay between the two, uncovering how this authentication process is linked to ad liking. Finally, Jay Handelman and Robert Kozinets present work showing how consumers' desire to create authentic identities often overrides the negative aspects of inauthentic production techniques. They also highlight how corporations actively try to restore an image of authenticity while activists work to debunk these efforts. In each of these papers, consumers negotiate between seemingly inauthentic aspects of consumption (e.g. artificial body enhancement, blatant reproductions with a persuasive purpose, and mass production) in reaching conclusions about authenticity in their consumption choices and evaluations.

The objectives of this session are three-fold: to examine (1) the paradoxes inherent in how authenticity operates in consumers' lives and marketers' practices, (2) the different manifestations of authenticity and inauthenticity in the marketplace, such as self-authenticity, advertisement authenticity, and brand and product authenticity and, (3) how these authenticity domains all benefit from an analytic perspective highlighting the interplay between authenticity and inauthenticity as a co-production of meanings between the market and consumers.

Given the broad theoretical significance of authenticity and the multi-method focus of this symposium, it should appeal to a wide range of ACR attendees. These include CCT and other researchers interested in authenticity, inauthenticity, and its relation to identity, public policy oriented researchers interested in consumer resistance, and advertising and social identity scholars interested in the relationship between the self, authenticity, and advertising responses.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"American Self-Enhancement Culture and the Cyborg Consumer: Consumer Identity Construction Beyond the Dominance of Authenticity"

Markus Giesler, York University, Canada
Marius K. Luedicke, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Why do Americans place so much emphasis on individual identity and self-fulfillment? Does the skyrocketing consumption of Viagra, Botox, Prozac, Propecia and countless surgical enhancements make them more true to a "real" self, or does it make them frauds? Social critics of American self-enhancement culture commonly charge that it indoctrinates individuals into a biomedical consumerism that frustrates the construction of a genuine self-identity (Elliott 2004; Kass 2004). Following this popular "lost authenticity" thesis, Americans today-members of the middle-class in particular-are replete with deep conflicts between the relentless pursuit of self-fulfillment and high performance and the insistent yearnings for authenticity and a genuine self. In one perspective, they worry that changing their bodies through biomedical intervention might make their body and their very identity inauthentic. But they also understand that they have a duty to pursue happiness and status by perfecting themselves according to the latest biomedical research and trends (Kass 2004). Sadly, Americans can look up to no authority to resolve this fundamental identity crisis. Their only escape from "anxious dislocation" is to "follow fashion" and "listen to the reigning experts" (Lawler 2005, 3).

However, reducing self-enhancement culture to pathological consumerism turns a blind eye to the potential to construct a coherent "narrative of the self" through the consumption of biomedical products and services. For example, consumer researchers have long recognized the creative role of consumption-including the use of aesthetic plastic surgery (Schouten 1991)-in people's quest for self-identity. In this perspective, Americans may partially and inconsistently transcend the entrenched dichotomy between artificial technology and the natural body to reach unprecedented levels of enhanced self, thereby challenging the modernist quest for authenticity. These heretical self-experiments and their underlying cultural incompatibility to authenticating appeals may inspire unprecedented agentic possibilities.

To give greater consideration to this alternative account, we present the concept of the cyborg consumer. Grounded in critical feminism and cultural studies (Haraway 1991; Hayles 1999; Davis 1999), the cyborg consumer illustrates how entrenched narrative dualisms–nature versus technology, authentic versus inauthentic–are partially and inconsistently transcended to construct hybrid stories of the self that challenge the modernist primacy of self-authenticity and instead aspire to an emerging ideal of unlimited agency through technological self-enhancement. From this standpoint, the social critics who are railing about consumerist inauthenticity may be expressing less of a relevant social comment than an emerging historical discontinuity between their cultural

lens and an emerging experimental cyborg episteme. For Botox consumers, being inauthentic is not the driving issue. As we will demonstrate, their ideological mandate is the duty for biomedical self-enhancement by any available means.

Our analysis is threefold. After reviewing the ideological groundwork of American self-enhancement culture, we analyze the self-narratives of individual Botox users. In distinction to the classic "lost authenticity" thesis, we build the case that Botox consumption is steeped in a complex ideology of the enhanced body and that Botox consumers' routine confrontations with authenticity-inspired assessments of their bodies intensify and augment their experiences of enhanced self and its agentic possibilities. We then summarize our findings by documenting an emerging historical discontinuity between the modernist paradigm of authentic self-identity and the emerging cyborg consumer episteme and draw out implications of the cyborg consumer model for dualism-inspired theoretical debates on the body (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), and consumer identity construction (Holt and Thompson 2005; Kozinets 2002; Arnould and Price 2000). We also develop the implications of our cyborg consumer model for the critical cyborg model, as pioneered by Donna Haraway (1991).

This analysis is part of a larger ethnographic research exploring self-enhancement consumption using the Botox biomarket as an empirical context (www.doingbotox.com). We conducted depth interviews with 20 Botox consumers (6 male) in Chicago, New York, Buffalo, and Toronto. Informants hailed from a range of middle-class backgrounds and had received up to 9 cosmetic Botox shots. With the exception of two telephone and one Skype conversation, all interviews were held either at the informants' homes, in coffee shops, or during and after a Botox injection at the dermatologist's practice. To ensure that interview narratives had a broader resonance, we compared them to user entries on online Botox forums (Kozinets 2001). In addition to these netnographic procedures, one author also analyzed introspective journal notes on a Botox injection he received "in situ" during a Botox party (Gould 1991). The complete data set was analyzed using a hermeneutical process (Thompson 1997). Interpretations were formed, fed back to our informants through the research website and via email, and revised in relation to a broader network of theoretical concerns until sufficient interpretive convergence was achieved.

"Perceptions of Authenticity in Advertisements: Negotiating the Inauthentic"

Tandy D. Chalmers, University of Arizona, USA
Linda L. Price, University of Arizona, USA

Advertisements are a powerful tool through which companies can communicate authenticity to stakeholders. Successful communication of authenticity is presumed to be linked to positive downstream responses such as brand identification, loyalty, and sales (Botterill 2007), with authenticity viewed as a key mechanism for seducing consumers. Despite this rhetoric of importance, little is empirically known about how consumers respond to advertisements designed to communicate authenticity, or if authenticity even matters in an advertisement context.

The purpose of this study is to explore consumer perceptions of and reactions to ads designed to be authentic. Stern (1994) defines authentic ads as those that "convey the illusion of the reality of ordinary life in reference to a consumption situation" (388). The key premise of Stern's conceptualization of ad authenticity is a link between everyday experiences and ad content: implying a self-referencing process where consumers relate their own experiences to an ad when evaluating it (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). The consequence of this process should, theoretically, be increased ad liking. In contrast, if an ad is deemed inauthentic, it can be presumed that consumers will dislike the ad. The paradoxical nature of authentic ads, however, convolutes this linear relationship: an ad, a representation by definition, cannot be something authentic or real, even if it creates a convincing illusion of something that is real (Stern 1994). Thus, even 'authentic' ads contain elements of inauthenticity (Benjamin 1969; Stern 1994).

Rose and Wood (2005), for example, find that reality television viewers negotiate between authentic and inauthentic elements of shows, with viewers deciding the entertainment value of the show is worth forgoing some aspects of authenticity. In the case of reality television, consumers are motivated to enjoy the show and seek out reasons to overlook the inauthentic. In the case of ads, however, consumers may approach the representation with skepticism (Friestad and Wright 1994) and be less willing to overlook inauthentic elements. Thus, the question of how consumers negotiate between authentic and inauthentic elements of advertisements remains unclear: do consumers seek out reasons to reject the representation as inauthentic or instead look for ways they can affirm the advertisement's authenticity? And how do consumers' general attitudes toward advertising influence these authenticity judgments?

These questions are explored in a two-study, multi-method inquiry into consumer perceptions of ad authenticity and inauthenticity. The first study, consisting of stimuli based in-depth interviews with 28 distance runners, examines if and how authenticity perceptions emerge naturally in consumer assessments of ads. Running was chosen as the study's context as there are an abundance of ads in this area depicting everyday life. During the interviews, informants were shown 15 running themed ads, each of which fit Stern's 'authenticity' requirement, and were asked what they thought of the ads. The second study consisted of a survey administered to 88 undergraduate students enrolled in an upper-level marketing class. Participants responded to one of four advertisements that seemed realistic (and therefore authentic) but also contained unrealistic undertones and elements of the outrageous. For example, an Axe Body Wash ad depicts a young man standing outside a shower with a towel showing a picture of a woman's legs around his waist, creating the illusion of a real woman straddling the man. Participants assessed the authenticity and their liking of the ad. Afterwards, both authors engaged participants in a discussion about the ads to gauge their more nuanced reactions.

The findings from both studies contribute to our understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity in an advertisement context. A clear negotiation between authentic and inauthentic elements of the ads emerged. Informant discussions in study 1 show consumers naturally evaluate ads in terms of both authenticity and inauthenticity, with these evaluations linked to ad liking. In addition, discussions show an interesting interplay between authenticity and inauthenticity perceptions when ads contained elements of both. Sometimes, ads were viewed as being simultaneously authentic and inauthentic, with informants jostling between the two sets of perceptions when making final evaluations of the ads: moving between thinking the ad is authentic to thinking it is inauthentic, and vise versa. Throughout these authentication processes, consumers engage in both self- and other-referencing. A series of counterintuitive findings also emerged were consumers deemed an ad to be authentic, related to it, but did not like the ad. This occurred when consumers engaged in 'looking-glass self' referencing where they disliked how imagined others would view them based on what is depicted in the ads (Cooley 1902/1922).

Study 2 findings confirm the importance of authenticity and inauthenticity perceptions in ad liking, but also give rise to an additional authenticity structure: advertisements viewed as authentically inauthentic. In some cases, vastly exaggerated claims are

viewed as having a reflective legitimacy in relationship to the advertised product that engenders ad liking without strong links to self- or other- referencing. That is, ads may be paradoxically high in both authenticity and inauthenticity. Combining the findings from the two studies, we illustrate a set of relationships between authenticity, inauthenticity, self-, other-, and looking-glass self-referencing, and ad liking. These relationships highlight the importance of ad authenticity and inauthenticity perceptions, demonstrate the complexities and nuances of the advertisement evaluation process, and illustrate how the authentic and inauthentic are negotiated by consumers.

"The Cultural Privileging of Personal Authenticity: A Critical Postmodern Perspective"

Jay M. Handelman, Queen's University, Canada
Robert V. Kozinets, York University, Canada

The quest for personal authenticity stands as an appeal to one's potentiality for self-cultivation, self-direction, creativity, identity, and individuality–a type of human re-enchantment whereby the individual is able to find meaning in life, creativity, playfulness, sensuality, and morality (Berman 1970; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In their quest for personal authenticity, consumers are deemed to be sovereign in their creative, playful, artful employment of branded products as core ingredients in their self-identity projects (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The consumer dissolves the illusory separation between the physical product and the imaginary as mass produced products are transformed into symbolic meaning systems, freeing the consumer from the hegemony of the marketplace (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

However, this postmodern privileging of consumers' imaginative, creative, hedonic play conceals the fact that the physical product and its material consequences still exists. News stories about tainted products, documentaries and film clips such as *Mardis Gras Made in China* and *The Story of Stuff,* and amateur *YouTube* video footage revealing abhorrent working conditions in the factories that produce the products we consume, remind consumers that Taylorism is alive and well; that the physical resources extracted to produce consumer goods are becoming scarcer and more costly; that the environmental consequences associated with the production, use and disposal of these goods are becoming graver.

Far from a natural, inevitable evolution, our cultural privileging of consumer personal authenticity over the consequences of production occurs in the context of a socially constructed ideological framework (Berman 1970). In this paper, we examine the paradoxical essence that seems to cut to the core of our consumption-based society. In this paradox, the act of being a consumer comes to be associated with all things moral-human and economic development, re-enchantment, aesthetic experience, knowledge, skills, and even activism and social change (Heath and Potter 2004). Yet, the potential human and environmental denigration associated with the often out-sourced production feeding our consumption is downplayed or outright ignored.

We draw on Critical Postmodernism to capture a glimpse into the social construction that comes to privilege consumer personal authenticity over the material consequences associated with consumption. Critical postmodernism is the unlikely combination of critical theory and postmodernism (Alvesson and Deetz 1996), providing a potent lens through which to examine the hybridity of contemporary consumer life characterized by the interpenetration of modernist production and postmodern consumption practices (Boje 2006). By examining the interplay between marketers, activists and consumers, we present the cultural privileging of the aesthetic nature of consumption as a hotly contested and problematized social phenomenon.

Method: We draw on three empirical sites for our data collection. First, we examine a variety of tactical maneuvers deployed by consumer activists from three different activist movements (anti-advertising, anti-brand, and anti-toxin activists). Through our participation in activist organized protest events, in-person meetings, and telephone interviews with activists from across North America, we report on the depth interviews with thirteen consumer activists who stood out as highly engaged in their protest against consumer society over the decade (1996–2006) that we examined them. Second, providing insights into marketer responses, we report on in-person (five) and telephone (six) depth interviews with eleven corporate marketers. These senior marketers were drawn from eleven different North American based multinational companies that had all been the target of consumer activist campaigns. Finally, we deployed the method of netnography to study a variety of controversy-laden online consumer discussion forum (such as <alt.politics> and <misc.activism.progressive>) and corporate blogs. In total we examined over 5,000 postings that ran from April 1999 to June 2006.

Theme 1-De-Sanctifying the Consumer: Activists rework consumer brands by recoupling them with their physical, production origins. Activists associate production, and the ensuing human and environmental consequences, with the "true" source of ethics and morality. Here, activists de-sanctify, or de-privilege, the consumer's quest for personal authenticity as an immoral, self-indulgent endeavor completely decoupled from its production origins. As such, decoupling of production does not only conceal the commercial motives of the company, but it also serves to sanctify, or privilege, the consumer as removed from the product's controversial human and environmental consequences. *Theme 2-Sanctifying the Consumer Through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):* Faced with a threat not only to themselves, but also to the sanctity of their consumers, marketers work to re-sanctify, or re-privilege, the consumer through acts of CSR by infusing consumption with claims of morality, ethics, and community well-being. *Theme 3-Mutual De-Sanctification:* Corporate blogs foster a type of mutual de-sanctification where consumers and companies inadvertently de-sanctify, or de-privilege, each other by recoupling the brand to its production sources. This mutual de-sanctification emerges as an enactment of the critical postmodern perspective whereby symbolic meanings of brands are celebrated, but tempered by a challenge to the power relationships that have come to privilege the consumer's authenticity desires over the material consequences associated with production.

Discussion: The paper concludes with a discussion around two particular issues. First we explore the implications of branding in a critical postmodern context. Second, we discuss consumer re-enchantment not through consumption, but through *Consumer* Social Responsibility. Traditional *Corporate* Social Responsibility is critiqued as an ideological veil that works to maintain the extant power balance that privileges consumers and the companies that market to them. We reveal a type of consumer enchantment that comes through embracing the production consequences underlying the products that are consumed.

REFERENCES

Alvesson, Mats and Stanley Deetz (1996), "Critical Theory and Postmodern Approaches to Organizational Studies," in Stewart R. Clegg, Cynthia Hardy and Walter R. Nord (Eds), *Handbook of Organization Studies*, Sage: London, 191-217.

Arnould, Eric J. and Linda L. Price (1999), "Authenticating Acts and Authoritative Performances: Questing for Self and Community," in *The Why of Consumption: Contemporary Perspectives on Consumer Motives, Goals, and Desires*, ed. S. Ratneshwar and David Mick and Cynthia Huffman, New York: Routledge.

Belk, Russell W. and Janeen Arnold Costa (1998), "The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (December), 218-40.

Benjamin, Walter (1969), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken, 217-52.

Berman, Marshall (1970), *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, Atheneum: New York.

Boje, David M. (2006), "What Happened on the Way to Postmodern?" *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 1 (1), 22-40.

Botterill, Jacqueline (2007), "Cowboys, Outlaws, and Artists: The Rhetoric of Authenticity and Contemporary Jeans and Sneaker Advertisements," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7 (1), 105-25.

Brown, Stephen, Robert V. Kozinets, and John F. Sherry Jr. (2003), "Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning," *Journal of Marketing*, 67 (July), 19-33.

Burnkrant, Robert E. and H. Rao Unnava (1995), "Effects of Self-Referencing on Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (June), 17-26.

Cooley, Charles H. (1902/1922), *Human Nature and the Social Order*, New York, NY: Scribner.

Davis. Erik (1998), *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information,* 1st edn, Harmony Books, New York.

Elliott, Carl (2004), *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*, Norton & Company.

Friestad, Marian and Peter Wright (1994), "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (June), 1-31.

Firat, A. Fuat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (December), 239-267.

Grayson, Kent and Radan Martinec (2004), "Consumer Perceptions of Iconicity and Indexicality and Their Influence on Assessments of Authentic Market Offerings," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (September), 296-312.

Grayson, Kent and David Shulman (2000), "Indexicality and the Verification Function of Irreplaceable Possessions: A Semiotic Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (June), 17-30.

Haraway, Donna J. (1991), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* Routledge, New York.

Hayles, N. K. (1999), *How we Became Posthuman : Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill.

Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter (2004), *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.: Toronto, Canada

Holt, Douglas B. and Craig J. Thompson (2005), "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption", *Journal of Consumer Research,* vol. 31, 2, 425.

Holt, Douglas B. (2004), *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Kass, Leon (2004), *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, New York: AEI Press.

Kozinets, Robert V. (2002), "Can Consumers Escape the Market?: Emancipatory Illuminations From Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29 (June), 20-38.

Lawler, Peter A. (2005), "Enhancement Technologies," *Modern Age*, Spring.

Rose, Randall L. and Stacy L. Wood (2005), "Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (September), 284-96.

Schouten, John W. (1991), "Selves in Transition: Symbolic Consumption in Personal Rites of Passage and Identity Reconstruction," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17, (March), 412-425.

Schouten, John W. and James H. McAlexander (1995), "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (June), 43-61.

Stern, Barbara (1994), "Authenticity and the Textual Persona: Postmodern Paradoxes in Advertising Narrative," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 11, 387-400.

Thompson, Craig J, Hirschman and Elizabeth C. (1995), "Understanding the Socialized Body: A Poststructuralist Analysis of Consumers' Self-Conceptions, Body Images, and Self-Care Practices", *Journal of Consumer Research,* vol. 22, 2, 139.

Trilling, Lionel (1972), *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.