Identity and Iteration: Marketing Images and the Constitution of Consuming Subjects

Proposal for Critical Marketing Stream

‘Visibility, Inclusivity, Captivity’

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Jonathan E. Schroeder
Senior Lecturer
Department of Industrial Economics and Management
Royal Institute of Technology
S-100 44 Stockholm, Sweden
Telephone +46 733 42 19 93
Fax +46 8 20 72 68
Email: jonathan.schroeder@lector.kth.se

Janet L. Borgerson
Lecturer
School of Business
Stockholm University
S-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
Telephone +46 708 18 49 94
Marketing communications depict consumer society as a fountain of personal freedom and satisfaction, where citizen and consumer are almost interchangeable expressions of identity. That consumers construct identities with brands, images, and market choices has provided a basic starting point for much marketing and consumer research in recent years. A paradox of identity construction, or subject constitution, emerges, however, when the consuming subject, in constructing identities, draws upon a repertoire of iterated, or pre-existing identities provided by marketing, advertising images and consumer culture. In this paper, we problematize the notion that “the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliot 1997, p. 285). This stance assumes that ads make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction. We do not disagree that ads interact with identity. Nor, do we purport to resolve this complex issue here. However, we contend that marketing communications, including advertising, corporate web pages, annual reports, brochures, and so on, repeat–or iterate–identities that are circumscribed and limited by tacit interpretation processes as well as stereotypical iterations of consumer subjectivity. In other words, consumers are captives of iterative processes informed by the marketing initiative.

In this paper, we employ philosopher Judith Butler’s phenomenological theory to illuminate the interstices of identity, marketing, and consumer culture (Butler 1993; 1997; 1999; 2002). We theorize marketing communication through the notion of iteration – as repetition of performative identities – and critically discuss how iterations construct subjectivity within ads, drawing on recent philosophical approaches to subjectivity (Butler 1999; Derrida 1978). Iteration expresses a continued occurrence or pattern without assuming that there was at some point in time an original instance, natural state or ideal of which the continued instances are simply re-iterations. Thus, iteration calls attention to the lack of an original, ‘natural’, or ideal category – such as the Subject or Femininity – that exists prior to an appearance and iteration. In this way, the iterative normativity of ads contributes to the construction of ideal categories—such as male, female, black, white, European, immigrant, straight, gay, rich, poor—that circulate in society. As iterations, marketing communications play a powerful role in constructing, maintaining, and endlessly re-creating normative values and identities made available to and existing in tandem with the subject in consumer culture.

We move away from emergent models of relationships between consumers and ads in order to discuss how identities are constructed within ads themselves, much like brands have been conceptualized as having personality, character, or identity. We argue that it is not only the subject that performs identity, but ads, as iterations of normative subject positions, perform identities as well. We use gender as our main example of an identity category, but our analysis is relevant for others issues of identity, including race and culture.
Ads uphold certain visions of identity and lifestyle, and invoking their iterative power, affect consumer identities and behaviors. Butler’s work on subject identity constitution – via gender roles, for example – demonstrates that performative iterations are not simply the playing out of natural or pre-existing ways of being in the world, but rather each iteration plays the role of recreating and maintaining the illusion of natural categories of identity, in a process of “recombinant culture” (Hirschman and Thompson 1997).

Consumers may draw on ad identities, yet we argue that the stock of identity is not always liberatory, not fully deconstructed. We suggest that identities that are iterated and made available via ads are much more powerful in constructing concepts of an ideal category than the identities that individual consumers are said to be able to construct, either by imagining their ideal identity in an ad, or through consumption processes (cf. Holt 2002). Our contribution is to show how contemporary philosopher Judith Butler’s influential work on subject constitution, in conjunction with social attribution processes, illuminates the relationship between advertising and identity within the context of consumer culture.

We join recent work that discusses advertising as discourse (e.g., Berger 2000; Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Domzal and Kernan 1993; Kates and Shaw-Garlock 1999; Pearce 1999; Ritson and Elliot 1999). Whereas Butler has profoundly influenced contemporary theory, few studies within marketing have used a developed notion of Butler’s philosophical thought; Butler, although critical of status quo institutions, rarely discusses advertising and visual representation. We focus attention on how ads themselves perform identity within cultural discourses. Research on what we call “tacit interpretation,” framed within theoretical concepts of identity construction, suggests that given the prevalence of particular versions of identities in advertisements, represented iterations often reproduce a limited realm for identity construction within consumer culture. We introduce several examples to illustrate the concepts of tacit interpretation and iteration. As researchers increasingly acknowledge cultural codes, consumer response, and deconstruction as essential in understanding how marketing produces meaning, our multidisciplinary approach aims toward integrating knowledge from psychological and philosophical research to situate marketing within perception and culture.
References


