

Josie and the Pussycats: Commercialism and Synthetic Social Identity

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In this 2001 film, Josie and her band find themselves caught in a whirlwind ascension to the top of the popular music world. Along the way they find that their record label, Mega Records, has been using them in order to brainwash the youths of the world into hyper-consuming machines. Ultimately, Josie defeats the record label and goes on to urge fans of the Pussycats to like them for who they are.¹ The irony is that while the plot preaches a stay-true-to-you attitude, the film contains overt product placement to the point of being absurd. In essence, the film does exactly what its protagonists are fighting against. As light as *Josie and the Pussycats* might be, the film points out larger issues occurring within the realm of popular media. These issues relate to the concepts of hyper-consumption, lifestyle marketing, and social identity. Popular media has positioned itself so that the aesthetic aim of the artwork is eliminated in favor of what is perceived to be a personal relationship with real people. However, the popular artwork has actually become an advertisement that is meant to do more than sell the symbols that allow for inclusion in and identification with a particular lifestyle. The rap song, the horror movie, MTV, poetry by pop artists, and every form of television are marketed in such a way as to promote a specific lifestyle while blurring the distinction between the real and unreal, the artwork and the advertisement, with the aim of creating synthetic social relationships between the consumer and the events occurring within the realm of popular mediums. Our only role in this synthetic relationship can be that of the consumer. It is the creation of a synthetic consuming social role that I will investigate. To do this I will divide the paper into three sections. The first two areas will identify how lifestyle marketing and social identity function as a means of advertising in popular mediums. The third section will explore how these means of

advertising are used to subvert traditional geo-political borders and the sense of identity that they provide in order to create new synthetic identities.

An analysis of lifestyle marketing cannot begin without first determining a working definition for consumerism. Consumerism is, at best, a highly problematic and vague term. Everyday we are all consumers of such things as food, air, water, and many other items that are necessary to our existence. I can gather food, I can make my own shelter, and I can make my own tools in order to make my existence easier and more entertaining. This is admittedly a simplistic reduction of the consumer. However, this definition does present an extremely important point; consumption in the most basic sense is an individual act. The relationship that exists within the realm of consumerism is only truly present between the product and the consumer. Further, a hierarchy is implied between the subject and object that places the needs of the consumer ahead of the creation of the product. The relationship is hierarchical because the product is always at the mercy of the consumer.

A great strain occurs when a third party, the independent producer, is added to the relationship between consumer and product. The third party producer must convince the consumer to purchase their specific product. However, the improvement of the function of a product has a limit, so the producer of the object must rely on other means in order to convince the consumer to purchase their specific product. For example, the fast food hamburger is rather limited in the number of improvements that can be made to it, and yet there are a great number of fast food restaurants, all of which serve the same function. In order to gain an edge, each restaurant must convince the consumer that their burger is somehow superior to the other burgers regardless of how similar the products actually are. One method of doing this is lifestyle marketing.

Lifestyle marketing is the process in which a product's focus becomes less about its function and more about the lifestyle that the product represents. The hamburger is a great way to see the effects of lifestyle marketing due to the simplicity of the sandwich. Because of lack of variance inherent in the hamburger, marketers need something beyond the actual hamburger to make it more marketable than the competition. It should be noted here that there are appeals to the consumer that are still based on the actual quality of the product. However, as George Ritzer points out, the burger world usually defines its quality in rather generic terms describing the burger's size. The Big Mac is big, the Whopper is big, Wendy's burgers can have as many patties as the customer wants, and Hardee's markets the Monster Burger.² However, the consumer is no better off in distinguishing a quality product because each burger is presented as equally enormous. Further, the enormity of the meal does appeal to the lifestyle of an American audience that values largeness as a sign of quality. In advertising, distinctions in the quality between similar products happen beyond the actual function of those products. The current vehicle for advertising these distinctions is through popular media. The ways in which popular mediums are used in lifestyle marketing can be broken into three main categories. The more traditional use of popular media is to provide entertainment long enough to attract a potential consumer to stick around for the advertisement. The second means of lifestyle marketing occurs within an advertisement that is clearly defined as such. Finally, a third and more aggressive form of advertising seeks to blur the line between what is entertainment and what is advertisement.

Television, radio, and newspaper fall into the first category of advertising. In each medium the goal is to sell advertising space. The programming of any particular television station is an appeal to consumers to keep the medium in front of them long enough to see or hear advertisements. This is not a new form of advertising, but there have been innovations in order

to make the marketing of products more effective. Through the mass expanse in channel options on television specialized products are now able to be marketed to specific audiences through niche programming which allows for highly focused advertising. Animal Planet, ESPN, and the Disney Channel are all attempts at creating this niche market by providing programming that appeals to a very specific viewer. Other forms of media operate in much the same way.

Playbills at most major theaters, radio stations, and newspapers offer statistical information about the average patron as a means for assessing which type of advertising would be most effective in those mediums.

The second form of lifestyle marketing to rely on popular mediums is the advertisement that is clearly recognized as such. Nicholas Cooke, in his article *Music and Meaning in the Commercials*, argues that the use of Mozart's overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* in an automobile commercial is intended to show the synthesis of art and machine, a synthesis that might prove attractive to a specific buyer.³ Beer commercials rarely show their product. Instead, they appeal to the sensibilities, and usually the sex drive, of a certain type of man who, being sensible, would drink that particular beer. These commercials are not meant to display the product as a product that functions in a manner superior to its counterparts. In the commercial the consumer relies on music and visual clues in order to better identify what the quality of that product is. The actual function of both beer and car factor very little in their advertisements. .

These two uses of popular media in advertising are the most traditional. There is a newer, more aggressive form of marketing in which the advertisement is contained within the aesthetic event. Here the boundary between what is advertisement and what is the actual event is blurred. Product placement in cinema, music, and other realms that are traditionally considered

works of popular art now become vehicles used to house the advertisement. In other words, the advertisement is no longer advertised.

We will return to the hamburger in order to further examine this means of advertising. In 2005, McDonald's began subsidizing rap artists who would use the word "Big Mac" somewhere in the lyrics of their songs. McDonald's was allowed to have final say in the artist's lyrics, and the artist was paid a commission every time the song received airplay.⁴ McDonald's aim was clear. They were out to prove the superiority of their product not by the merits of the product, but because a certain lifestyle endorsed it. The advertisement was embedded within the artwork causing it to be recognized as an object worthy of artistic mention rather than being something merely for consumption. If the Big Mac is an object of daily hip-hop culture, it then becomes a symbol rather than a product. The advertisement has been embedded within the artwork in such a way that it becomes indistinguishable from the actual artwork.

Josie and the Pussycats is an overt example of this type of advertising. As mentioned, Josie and her band come to recognize that their record label is putting subliminal messages underneath the tracks of their music. By doing this, Mega Records is able to brainwash the children into consuming only the products that are produced by that label. The irony is that while the audience perceives the film as fiction, the entire movie does little more than serve as a platform for advertising Target, MTV, Ford, and too many other real products and means of consumption to be mentioned here. So, we are viewing various products that appeal to our sense of a specific lifestyle even as the movie preaches the evils of the use of such popular mediums as advertisements. Further, the advertisements in *Josie and the Pussycats* are indistinguishable from the story. In this instance, the advertisements have even become a major motivating factor for the plot of the movie.

There is a new forum for this type of advertising that is too important not to mention, TiVo. TiVo presents itself as a means of putting the viewer in complete control of television viewing. The delayed recording of a show happening in real time allows the viewer to fast forward, rewind, and most importantly it allows the viewer to skip advertisements. TiVo has seemingly done away with the first two forms of advertising mentioned because it allows us to skip the overt advertisements and view television for purely entertainment purposes. What TiVo has actually done is pave the way for more advertising to be included directly into the entertainment that we consume. In other words, we are not rescued from the advertisement; the advertisement embeds itself into the popular medium blurring the distinction between what is entertainment and what is advertisement. There is no longer a need to sell a product based on the quality of its function. Now we can see the product functioning in the artworks that display the lifestyles we wish to emulate.

We do this type of advertising little justice when we claim that its success depends on making the consumer want to emulate art. The idea that this new advertising presents fantastical images that we wish to emulate is simply not true. In *Josie and the Pussycats* it is the fact that one understands the parody to be dangerously true that makes it an effective comedy. Indeed, most consumers of popular media are more aware of its commercial potential than of its potential as a product with a real function. The quality of popular music is judged in album sales, the box office is the barometer of a film's success, and the number of hits that a website receives is its indicator of effective use. None of these products are ultimately judged on the basis of any type of lasting artistic merit and every person who consumes popular media knows this. Thus far, this paper has pointed out little that the consumer of popular media did not already know and this is where the new advertising becomes most effective. It has created more than the ability to

purchase a lifestyle. The consumer's relationship with popular mediums has undergone a process of reification in which the consumer begins to believe that the act of consumption, and specifically the act of consuming popular mediums, provides a useful social function. Further, the artwork that one wishes to emulate is no longer presented as an artwork. The aim of popular mediums is to deny the aesthetic altogether in order to present something that the consumer believes to be real with the intention of allowing that consumer to feel a social bond with that medium. In effect, the hierarchy between the consumer and the product that is at the root of all consumption is made to seem no longer apparent. Now, the popular medium and consumer become equals because the medium expects the consumer to enter into a dialogue with it as though it were real. In other words, the lifestyles being presented become factors in motivating our social identity.

The relationship between social identity and lifestyle marketing must be made clear before we can proceed. Lifestyle marketing gives the depiction of a lifestyle and the products that are necessarily involved in that lifestyle. Social identity entails the complexities that are inherent in one's association within a group. As Jan Stets and Peter Burke point out in their article, *Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory*, "Having a social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective."⁵ With this definition, the individual is no longer the focus. Our individuality is able to manifest itself in the roles that we play within our social group. Social roles are unique to the individual and require complimentary and contrasting roles even within the same social group in order to function. The relationship between social identity and social role identity allows for both communal belonging and individual expression. The premise that underlies both theories is the interaction between actual people. The intention of the new lifestyle marketing is

to challenge the idea that real people are necessary for social interactions and roles. This is done by creating popular mediums that are able to promote their products through vehicles which appear to be based in reality and attempt to establish what seems to be a direct connection with the consumer.

The McDonald's hip-hop controversy provides us with our first example. The hip-hop world is obsessed with "keeping it real." One of the primary motivators and justifications for gangsta rap is that it describes the real situations of an oppressed society. While this may have been true, it seems as though the primary motivator today is for the bling. Further, the sign of a legitimate rap artist, or any popular artist, is that the music be a personal representation of something that the artist has experienced. The death of Tupac Shakur is the quintessential blurring between art and reality. His artistic output was marketed as being no different than the life he led. In fact, his death proved to be as lucrative to the industry as was his life. In this sense the aesthetic object, in this case both the rapper and the rap, is both as fake and as real as the lifestyle being presented. To understand gangsta rap is to be a gangster and to align one's self with others who are gangsters. This is more than an instance of enjoying a piece of music and finding shared similarities with others who also enjoy it. There is a very real distinction between having a relationship with people who we can interact with and share similar interests with, and relying on the artistic medium to provide social roles.

The synthetic social interaction that occurs between the artist and the consumer creates a trust between them that, while being based on a false relationship, has the potential for very dangerous consequences. For example, while Tupac Shakur's rap music may have stemmed from real experiences, what happens when a corporation such as McDonald's decides to pay members of that medium, a medium historically known as having maintained a basis in reality,

to advertise items? Further, what is the effect when an album that presents itself as lived experience turns its focus away from the reality it is supposed to be presenting toward purely materialistic endeavors? What happens to the consumer when the obviously false lifestyle of women, violence, and wealth that gangsta rap presents is perceived as an actual lifestyle that one is really able to participate in due to their real relationship with the artist, but can not keep up with the demands of the lifestyle being presented? This is the new aim of lifestyle marketing. Keeping up with the Jones' has become keeping up with the Warner Brothers. Reality television shows us real people, 24-hour news channels show real events relayed to us by real broadcasters, and celebrity gossip tabloids and television allow us to see into the real lives of the stars that we watch every week. So, while we know that *Friends* is not real we follow Jennifer Aniston's failed marriage as if she were a member of our own family. The real life of Jennifer Aniston is both real and aesthetic entertainment at the same time. In this way the distinction that the viewer makes between the real Jennifer Aniston and Rachel, her character on *Friends*, is suddenly lessened because Jennifer and Rachel are equally real and unreal. The balance in distinguishing between the actor and character goes beyond the elderly woman who mistakes the actor for the character they portray. The very fact that our elderly woman makes this mistake is because she is unaware of who the actor really is. In the new popular medium we are meant to see the real actor in the character, so Rachel becomes Jennifer Aniston playing a part and not a character. Further, we begin to attribute what we know about her to the character and *vice versa*. The intent is to present the unknown actor in a way that is similar to watching a family member performing. In this type of performance there is a certain level of closeness between the audience and performer. The problem with applying this type of relationship to Jennifer Aniston is that most

do not know her as being any more real than her characters. It is the intention of popular media to create what seem to be the same personal relationships between the consumer and the product.

As an example, VH1 has just released a show that seeks to blur reality in much the same way as I have described. *So NoTORIous*, starring Tori Spelling as herself, portrays the fictional life of Tori Spelling the character.⁶ In this show the plot is based on the real life of Tori Spelling. It is important to note that this is not a show that follows Tori Spelling around as she lives out her daily routine, although this has also become a popular format for new television shows. *So NoTORIous* presents the real Tori Spelling portraying herself as a fictional character. *Josie and the Pussycats* is equally effective at blurring this distinction. Throughout the movie cameos are made by MTV show hosts who portray themselves. The inclusion of real people within otherwise fictional stories is nothing new. *I Love Lucy* is an early example of a television show in which the main character shares many similarities to the real actor. However, in its new form the actor does not need to step into or out of character. The actor is the character. The distinction between Lucille Ball the person and Lucy the character was always maintained.

The goal of this new lifestyle marketing is to make the consumer feel a responsibility toward the actor because of the perceived bond between the two. Liking the clothes of the character played by Jennifer Aniston, the person whose life we have a vested interest in, is different than liking the clothes of a fictional character. Wanting to keep it real with Tupac is different than wanting to keep it real with the mega-superstar who remains secluded in a mansion somewhere. The mega-superstar is distanced from the consumer in a world that is unknown to most. Tupac is accessible because the music that he produced and that fans identify with is presented as a direct manifestation of himself. Our role, should we choose to identify with him, is to buy his music because this purchase is an affirmation of the shared reality between the rap

artist and the consumer. The aesthetic object is no longer aesthetic. The object is now a part of the person whom the consumer identifies with and owning that object is an affirmation of the relationship between artist and consumer. This can be our only role because in one sense we must feel that we have a role in order to feel socially valued, and in another because the product that we buy is presented to us as an interaction with the artist. He makes the music (or television show, or poster, etc.), the consumer buys it, and because a part of the artist is supposedly in the music what is perceived as a real relationship is established. If Tupac and Jennifer Aniston would like to claim themselves as unknowing innocents who have been merely trying to make a living in the arts, then McDonald's and Tori Spelling have sought to fully exploit the relationships that popular mediums attempt to make by producing false works that masquerade as reality. When the listener establishes a synthetic personal relationship with the artist, a relationship that depends on the two roles of producer and consumer, it is expected that the consumer will maintain this relationship by purchasing the objects that are presented as allowing for identification, even interaction, with that artist and the culture that is represented. This is evidenced by the amount of books that are constantly vying to make Oprah Winfrey's book of the month club. Oprah is a synthetic friend who suggests certain objects, and since there can be no real interaction with this synthetic friend, the only option for interaction becomes buying the items she tells us to; buying Oprah's books is surrogate interaction. The consumer buys the objects that the people they trust and perceive to be real tell them to buy, even when that trust is based on an inaccurate, impersonal, and ultimately synthetic image.

Now, what has been presented is a new form of advertising in which popular mediums wish to present false realities that allow for synthetic relationships to form between the consumer and the product. In these relationships the consumer is able to perceive that their chosen form of

entertainment is simultaneously real and unreal. In other words the audience knows that the entertainment is not actually occurring inside of their radios and televisions, but they do associate what they are seeing with a real occurrence that is happening somewhere.

Advertisements use this blurring in an attempt to create false role identities within the consumer. This is all packaged in a medium that is specifically aimed, through the marketing of lifestyles, at specific types of people.

The reach of this type of marketing is only limited by the reach of mass mediums. Social structures have traditionally been shaped, in part, by ideologies based on geographical and political influences. For example, a child who grew up in a town on the Mississippi River traditionally had social experiences that were shaped by, among other things, the events, people and the industry created by the access to a major river in the middle of the United States. Their social identity is different than that of someone from Langley, British Columbia for this reason. Further, the values of that child have been influenced differently than their Canadian counterparts because they were raised in the United States. Social identity is a complex issue and to reduce it to geo-political influence is an oversimplification. Regardless, geo-political context cannot be ignored as a major factor in contributing to how one is socially identified.

With popular mediums these boundaries are intruded upon and eliminated. The same relationships with the popular artist can be had regardless of location. All that is needed is access to the medium. It has also been made easier to fulfill our role as consumer once we have established a relationship with the popular artist. There is a McDonald's on every corner which not only makes the rap artist's product accessible, but it makes the song personal as well. The physical nearness of the consumer to the product implies a bond with the artist who is also inevitably not far from a McDonald's. Even the Chinese rap fan is now able to attain this bond.

To use a phrase generally reserved for the spread of disease, our social identities and roles have become airborne. We do not need physical, cultural, or political boundaries anymore. Indeed, government officials have become much the same symbol of entertainment as the rap artist and our television and film stars have become governors and even president.

In conclusion, I would like to argue for the re-evaluation of the goals of popular media. It is unarguable that the primary aim of popular media is to make money by providing a vehicle for advertising. However, the methods for doing this are what need to be reassessed. Marketing strategies go beyond trying to get the consumer to spend money on the spectacle of an object that they do not need, or on objects that will define them socially. While these are still prevalent forms of advertisement, I believe new marketing strategies seek to undermine our sense of a social role by blurring the distinction between reality and the unreal with the aim of creating a synthetic sense of social identity that has as its only responsibility the act of consumption.

Notes

¹ *Josie and the Pussycats*, Dir. Deborah Kaplan and Harry Elfont, Perf. Rachael Leigh Cook, Tara Reid, Rosario Dawson, Alan Cumming, Parker Posey, Universal Studios, 2001.

² George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, 2nd Edition, Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2005. Pg. 76.

³ Nicholas Cooke, "Music and Meaning in the Commercials," *Popular Music*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan. 1994), Pg. 27-40.

⁴ Orin Yaniv and Laura Williams, "McHip-Hop Name Drop," *New York Daily News*, March 28, 2005, <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/v-friendly/story/29412p-251806c.html>.

⁵ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep. 2000), Pg. 224-37.

⁶ *So NoTORIous*, Perf. Tori Spelling, VH1, MTV Productions 2006.