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Brand culture has created ideologies in society whether we knowingly choose to participate in them or not. Consumer goods have become much more than just the objects themselves. Brands market themselves to promote a societal understanding of what owning their products will do for the consumer. Brands sell a sense of inclusivity for the individual. They have become ways we view ourselves and others. A person expresses self identity through self alignment with a brand. When a consumer buys into the ideology of a brand, including corporate personality and corporate ethos, they embrace that ideology as a form of consumer citizenship, brand loyalty, and cultural, socio-economic inclusion. Using concepts of interpellation, social media culture, “lack” with regard to desire, semiotics, normative ideology, status quo and viewer position. I will unpack how brand marketing strategies are realized through visual representation and the construction of desire in the consumer.

In order to understand mainstream brand culture and advertising, it is important to know the evolution. Anne McClintock, the writer of *Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising* noted this about the cultural beginnings, “In the eighteenth century the commodity was a little more than a mundane object to be bought and used. By the late nineteenth century, however, the commodity has taken its privileged place not only as the fundamental form of a new industrial economy, but also as the new fundamental form of a new culture system for representing social value” (p. 507). The idea of consumption became how we displayed our own worth to others. For example, in 1851 the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace became a new form of consumption. Consumers could window shop for all of life’s luxuries, all the while being spectated from far off observers. People wanted to be seen doing something that portrayed a sense of class. The World Exhibition defined a new type of ideology, consumerism. From this,

advertising became a force of brand evolution in the nineteenth century. Soap is a product that many associate with the beginnings of modern advertising. In the nineteenth century companies such as Procter & Gamble and Pears began branding soap. The company drew people in on the ethos of the time, which was cleanliness being related to holiness. Labels were adorned with children bathing to promote an ideology of purity and youth when you use Pears soap. From that point brands have grown into intricate cultural operations. In the twentieth century, means of advertising have become limitless with television, color printing and especially social media.

Brands have become much more than just images that pop up on your television screen. They are an integration of visual elements with catchy slogans as well as data collectors that analyze consumption patterns and psychological impacts of consumers. Brand culture forms a basis for experience for the consumer. When corporations are successful they get consumers to engage with, use and develop a relationship with their brand identity. Marketers want to promote a sense of belonging, authenticity and community with their brand. However in reality, these products cannot fill those emotional aspects of a person's life. Regardless, products are advertised as a means by which people can develop emotional bonds to others, and through which families and friends can stay connected. Jaques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, developed a theory that suggests desire and “lack” are central motivating forces in our lives. We all experience something missing from our life that we seek. We try to fill this lack, but it is never really satisfied, even when our basic needs are met. Because of this concept that we are always missing something, advertising can speak to our desires. But it is important to remember this lack will never be fulfilled. Because of this feeling, we continually repeat the process in search to feel whole. In consumer culture, lack keeps brands thriving. Brands such as Apple and Coca-Cola thrive off of these ideals. Coca-Cola promotes the ideology of the perfect family connection.

Coke launched their “Share a Coke” campaign in 2014, where it swapped out its iconic logo with the world's 250 most popular names. Obviously, consumers found this engaging and it held a personal meaning to the individual. Coke also capitalized on the social media culture by encouraging consumers to share their bottles with friends and family, then tweet about their experience with the hashtag share a coke.

Social media crazed teens are undeniably the most sought after consumer group for corporate America. For millennials social media isn't just a fad it is a way of life. Young adults are easy to access and are free of any financial obligations. Teenagers have more disposable income than any other demographic. A gold mine for corporations. Brands conduct copious amounts of marketing research to identify what the young adults will buy and ultimately deem ‘cool’. And more often than not, what is considered ‘cool’ is based off of fads on social media. The average person encounters upwards of 5,000 ads per day, and a majority is online. Therefore, it is crucial to make those advertisements as effective as possible. In the video *Merchants of Cool*, marketing professionals present the idea of cool hunting. Cool hunters make observations and predictions in changes of new or existing cultural fads or trends. A majority of the research is observed through popular social media influencers. Research is based around studying the consumer and the social group they may associate with. For instance, the Sprite company became notorious for intertwining Sprite soda with the hip-hop art movement. Early on, Sprite developed relationships with hip hop artists and began selling the idea that they understood the ideologies of the subculture and lifestyle. In 1986 Sprite cast rapper Kurtis Blow in a commercial, making it one of the first mainstream national ads to feature hip hop artists. Sprite wanted to advertise themselves based on authenticity and gain the respect of the youth culture. With that being said, Sprite didn't go after mainstream artists either. The soda company began to promote

underground artists who had not yet gained the discovered by mainstream influencers. The relationship became a marriage of corporation and culture in peoples' everyday life. Sprite completely changed their viewer position of those who had seen through the basic marketing tactics. Sprite became more of a cultural icon than just the beverage itself. Recently, in 2017 Sprite cans were designed to feature lyrics of new talent from up and coming rappers such as Lil Yachty and Vince Staples. Rappers were honored to be a part of this cultural phenomenon and consumers see through the efforts. Sprite's brand culture invites a sense of inclusivity into a world a little less mainstream. People of the hip-hop community feel that sense of belonging with the brand, and mainstream consumers buy into that idea as well.

Sarah Banet-Weiser proposes that brands operate as cultures. Brands have infiltrated most aspects of our life including religion, family and self-identity. Weiser also termed consumer citizenship. Consumer citizenship is ways in which human subjects' sense of national and community belonging increasingly are constructed through participation in brand culture. Companies make advertisements pull at our hearts and make us feel understood. Consumers invite brands into their homes and integrate into daily life. To grow closer to our desire, brands formulate a set of corporate ethos. Ethos are considered the guiding beliefs and sentiments of the institution. Corporate ethos are intended to give the customers something to care about. Toms shoes, for example, promotes the one for one campaign. For every pair of shoes purchased they will donate another pair to a child in need. Because of this campaign, consumers express self identity through self alignment with the brand. From that moment on, when consumers wear Toms shoes they are actively participating in humanitarian brand culture. In turn, consumers are more likely to refer friends or shop there again because it fulfills a sense of self within them.

Some corporations take a more controversial route in hopes to gain mainstream attention. For example, Nike put out a #justdoit ad in 2018 featuring NFL star Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick notably acted in peaceful protests during the national anthem at football games because of his views against the treatment of minorities in America. By supporting Kaepernick, Nike stood with stance, which at the time, was heavily controversial. It was a bold move for the sports brand to say the least. It was bold because it jumped on America's faults regarding race, sports and patriotism. In terms of marketing it preached purpose, and the people that loved it will now and forever stand for the brand. Nike will empower millions. Every consumer if the NFL sport is aware of who Kaepernick is and what he stands for during this time. Just being a football fan already influences consumers to buy the best of sportswear, Nike. Now with the brand supporting the movement, they will welcome in a whole new batch of consumers that want to show their own support. After this campaign Nike saw a 31% boost in sales and saw a \$6 million brand increase. With Kaepernick, Nike and consumers fought against normative ideologies in America of the time. Their brand identity shifted to something much more meaningful in people's lives. Consumers either loved it or hated it, but it meant something to everyone. As consumers it is crucial we are aware of the visual culture behind the thousands of advertisements and marketing strategies we see day to day. A part of being human means that we desire for a sense of belonging in the lack that we often feel. Behind the sense of inclusivity and mainstream culture, brands just want to make money. With the aid of social media and technology, shopping has never been easier or more desirable.

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