

**What is meant by ‘commodity fetishism’?  
What role do the media play in attaching extrinsic value to brand objects?**

Commodity fetishism is concerned with how extrinsic values are attached to consumer goods and how this in turn moves their value further from the natural resources they were made from and how and where they were produced. I wish to look closely at the term commodity fetishism, then move on to look at the concept of the brand and how advertising and marketing are crucial for the process of attaching these extrinsic values to consumer goods.

The fetishism of the commodity in modern society is strategically manipulated in the practices of packaging, promotion and advertising. Through these, goods are fitted with masks specifically designed to manipulate the possible relations between things on the one hand, and human wants, needs and emotions on the other. One of the first, if not *the* first, thinker to write about commodity fetishism was Marx. ‘*A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.*’ (Marx, 1995, p.42).

Many theorists since Marx have drawn on his ideas of commodity fetishism. Here, Lury (1996) expresses Marx’s ideas in a simple manner. ‘*Marx used the term fetishism of commodities to describe the disguising or masking of commodities whereby the appearance of goods hides the story of those who made them and how they made them.*’ (Lury, 1996, p.41).

In the process of consumption, Marx suggests we become estranged from the literal nature of things, their construction from natural materials, but also from the *use value* of consumer goods. Marx saw that capitalism was driven by people’s desire for objects of inflated value, luxury goods. Classes defined themselves by conspicuous consumption; factory owners grew richer by being able to command inflated prices for goods. Marx wanted to indicate the suffering that existed in commodity production for the manual labourers. This is still an area of concern for writers today, especially Naomi Klein in her book *No Logo*, which I will look at later. To Marx, the *real* value of an object could only be estimated on the basis of the labour value that

went into its production. His use of the term *fetishism* was anthropological in origin, as he saw commodities as the (then) modern equivalent of ancient objects of worship, for example, crucifixes and the Bible.

Baudrillard has also written using Marxist ideas of fetishism. *'If needs were the singular, concrete expression of the subject, it would be absurd to speak of fetishism. But when needs erect themselves more and more into an abstract system, regulated by a principle of equivalence and general combinatory, then certainly the same fetishism is in play.'* (Baudrillard, 1988, p.23). Consumer needs, wants and desires are for sure not in the singular. People are greedy, consuming far beyond basic human needs for food, shelter, clothing and so on.

Through the increasing fetishism of commodities, the branding of goods has taken over, and some what masked, commodities real value. Human qualities and emotions have been attached to commodities, giving rise to brand personality. The act of branding allows the manufactures to inflate the prices of their goods. Klein discusses *Starbucks* as being one of these companies who can inflate the price of goods due to their brand image. She interviewed the CEO, Howard Shultz, about the *Starbucks* brand and customer experience, Shultz suggests: *'It's the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbuck's stores.'* (Klein, 2000, p20).

Klein (2000) has extensively discussed the concept of the brand. *'What these companies produced primarily were not things, they said, but images of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing. This formula, needless to say, has proved enormously profitable, and its success has companies competing in a race towards weightlessness: whoever owns the least, has the fewest employees on the payroll and produces the most powerful images, as opposed to products, wins the race.'* (Klein, 2000, p.4).

Richard Branson's *Virgin Group* has branded joint ventures in everything from music to bridal gowns to airlines to cola to financial services. This Englishman evidently has huge amounts of entrepreneurial skill and a total grasp of how creating a solid and reputable brand image can indeed allow you to diverse into all the different avenues in

the consumer maze. Branson works on the Japanese term, *keiretsus*, meaning a network of linked corporations. This is also known as *'The Asian Trick'*. In Branson's own words, he aims to *'...build brands not around products but around reputation. The great Asian names [Sony, Panasonic and so on] imply quality, price and innovation rather than a specific item. I call these 'attribute' brands: They do not relate directly to one product – such as a Mars bar or a Coca-Cola – but instead to a set of values.'* (Klein, 2000, p.24).

The *Virgin Group* then, is based on a set of values that are carried over into the many different consumer markets, or pies, Branson has his fingers in. Although the many *Virgin* companies offer different products, due to the *Virgin* brand name being reputable and recognised easily, consumers know they are in the hands of a *trusted* brand. If a consumer bought all their DVDs and CDs at a *Virgin Megastores*, they may be more likely to go with *Virgin Mobile* for their mobile phone contract, as they have already experienced happy consumer experiences with this brand.

Laura Oswald's (2003) journal article, *Branding the American Family*, looks at how changes in consumer behaviour have impacted on the family unit and structures in America. Increased consumer choice is apparent in all commodity sectors. This has impacted especially on family values when looking at increased variety and therefore, consumer choice, of food, as Oswald suggests here: *'They may eat dinner as a member of the family, but not necessarily. Today, some families actually order separate take-out meals for different family members, once again dividing up the family by individualized consumer behaviour.'* (Oswald, 2003, p.312).

Segmenting family meals has not been the only damaging effect of consumer culture for the family. As consumer markets are broken down into individual types of consumer, instead of types of consumer families or groups, this in turn puts individuals into a selfish mindset. *'...in the 1980s – aptly called the "me generation" (Tom Wolfe) – the needs and wants of the individual were increasingly put before the needs and wants of the group.'* (Oswald, 2003, p.320).

I wish to take a closer look at two of the worlds most famous brands now, *Disney* and *Nike*. *Disney* is in fact, for Oswald (2003) especially, a very powerful brand for the

family. This brand, the *Disney* brand, does not market itself to the individual like most commodities now a days, rather to the family unit. Their television adverts depict families, not a lone child, parent or grandfather. *'This entertainment strategy effectively deconstructs the alienating boundaries segmenting families in consumer culture, not only generating good feelings and goodwill toward the Disney brand, but satisfying unmet needs in the individual to feel the warm, fuzzy, secure feelings associated with the earliest memories of a nurturing parent.'* (Oswald, 2003, p.332).

The other world famous brand I wish to mention is *Nike*. In 1971 an art student was hired, for a mere \$35, to design the infamous *swoosh*. *Nike* wanted a logo to attach to their company name to aid brand identity, which is still used today. The *swoosh* suggests movement and speed, unlike competitors such as *Puma* and *Adidas* who use more functionally structured logos. *Nike's* advertising agency is the main force behind first, producing then maintaining *Nike's* brand identity, and occasionally reinventing it. *Wieden and Kennedy* is the advertising agency responsible for upholding *Nike's* brand image as standing for, in their words, athletic excellence, determination, streetwiseness and having a playful self-awareness.

Returning now to the concerns of how products have been moved so far away from their *roots* (who made them, where, how, in what conditions) via the values added onto them by advertising. *Nike* has been target for much scandal about their commodity production, mainly in Asian sweatshops. As Klein highlights, *'Nike's sweatshop scandals have been the subject of over 1,500 news articles and opinion columns. Its Asian factories have been probed by cameras from nearly every major media organization, from CBS to Disney's sports station, ESPN. On top of all that, it has been the subject of a series of Doonesbury cartoon strips and the butt of Michael Moore's documentary The Big One.'* (Klein, 2000, p.366).

Brands may have found a very profitable way to make a lot of money via attaching extrinsic values, however, consumer are not passive and have concerns over the conditions that their consumer goods are being manufactured in. Yet, *Nike* and all the other worldwide brands are still selling goods, regardless of the lives they are ruining in the places they manufacture their goods. Some of the scandal slogans used by anti-

Nike protestors have been rather cunning: *Just Don't Do It, The Swooshtika, Just Boycott It and Ban the Swoosh*. (Klein, 2000, p366-367).

As we have seen with the Nike brand identity, advertising plays a huge part in attaching values to commodities. As Klein notes, in the contemporary consumer world '...today's best known manufactures no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and 'brand' them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images.' (Klein, 2000, p.5). The self-proclaimed inventor of Public Relations, a part of the advertising and marketing mix, is Edward Bernays. Contrary to his life's work in this field, he wished to stay relatively non-descript in the media world, fame was not his aim. With a family tree including Sigmund Freud, *the father of psychoanalysis*, Bernays became central in the social and psychological movement, which examined the change in consumption patterns being desire instead of needs led.

Bernays made use of his famous uncle, Freud's ideas of *The Ego* – our sense of self, *Super Ego* – keeping a lid on desire and *Id* – housing our sexual desire. Foremost, however, Bernays wanted to use Freud's idea of *Id* as a means of manipulating mass desire, *the collective Id*. During the 1920s, Bernays biggest client was tobacco magnate George Washington Hill. Selling *Lucky Strike* cigarettes to women was Bernays' task in a social climate where only 12% of cigarette sales came from women. The increasing trend to be a slim female gave Hill and Bernays a starting point for the underlying theme for this advertising campaign. This was to suggest that smoking was a slimming aid. Bernays was able to exploit female desire, their *Id* in Freudian terms. The advertising slogan came to be '*Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.*'

We buy and we use commodities in order to define ourselves. The connotations of products are attached mainly via advertising. '*The commodity form is essentially the mechanism through which advertising creates meaning and ideology.*' (Edwards, 2000, p.64). Advertising, is seen, in the first instance, to structure wider social meanings so that they produce commodity sign value. Adverts take on human values or emotions and this in turn is transferred to the commodity being advertised. Secondly, as the underlying commodity form or mechanisms of advertising are

already known to them, the audience are themselves drawn into a cycle of producing, rather than merely reading, commodity sign values.

However, advertising has not always been used to attach extrinsic value to commodities. In the past, consumer products have been such great inventions that their existence itself was advertising enough, for example, the car taking over the wagon and the emergence of telephones. Then when consumer products became an over populated market, with multiple brands for each good, for example many different brands of cars and telephones, there was a need for this extrinsic value to be added to set one companies product part from the competition. Here Klein discusses this shift: *'So the role of advertising changed from delivering product news bulletins to building an image around a particular brand-name version of a product.'* (Klein, 2000, p.6).

Edwards (2000), cites the work of Robert Goldman (1992) on perfume advertising, in Goldman's book *Reading Ads Socially*. Goldman suggests that there is commodity fetishism at play in these adverts. That these adverts *'play on women's increased independence or sexual autonomy, or alternatively their anxiety and stress in playing the role 'superwoman', as illustrative of a 'commodity feminism' where control over such factors as one's appearance is equated with control over one's life and future.'* (Edwards, 2000, p.65). This can be related back to the idea of the Freudian *Id*, as these perfume adverts are also maximising the benefits of exploiting human desire to sell their products.

*'.....shopping and consumption are increasingly constructive of identity, that is to say, people are increasingly defined according to their consumption patterns.'* (Edwards, 2000, p.118). Edwards notes how the marketing of commodities is increasingly centred on *'complex notions of personality and lifestyle types'* (Edwards, 2000, p.118). For example, an advert for a car, showing a family having a great time travelling within it, the children are happily entertained by the in-car cinema system and Dad is making use of the satellite navigation system, to get them to their holiday destination without getting lost.

The possible consumer sees this idyllic situation and they aspire to have that kind of family holiday, so they believe – on a subconscious level perhaps, that the only way to achieve this tranquil dream is to buy the car advertised. *‘Possessions can be used to express, transform, even create identity, but this creation is not to be taken seriously – it is only play – and thus does not contradict the belief that we are who we are no matter what we possess.’* (Lury, 1996, p.239). It seems that a lifestyle is more like a genre: whilst movie directors can choose to make a romance, or a western, or a horror story, we as *directors* of our own life narrative, can choose a metropolitan or a rural lifestyle, a lifestyle focused on success in work, or one centred on clubbing, sport, romance or sexual conquests.

*‘Product personality, is an almost anthropomorphic transformation of a product into a type of person...’* (Edwards, 2000, p.57). For consumers to purchase an item they feel will add to or change their own identity, the item has to have the desired attributes itself. Advertising and marketing are the prime channels for these supposed product personalities and attributes to be attached to commodities. Advertising in particular is able to exploit this freedom to attach images of romance, exotica, fulfilment, or the good life to mundane consumer goods such as soap, shoes and clothes.

After looking at the brands *Nike* and *Disney* and how these and other brands have used advertising to reinforce their brand identity, I want to discuss an advert found in a recent woman’s magazine. This advert [see Image One located at the back of this essay] is for *Lux* shower gel. Here we see actress Sarah Jessica Parker (SJP), of *Sex and the City* fame (an American television programme that became very successful in the UK), endorsing the product. Already this gives connotations of this product being classy, for the beautiful people and to be viewed as a VIP shower gel. The slogan they have chosen to use here is *‘Brings out the star in you’*, which reinforces what the image of SJP is connoting. It is ludicrous to think that using a shower gel could turn you into a star, yet this does not stop the extrinsic values of stardom, fame, luxury being used to advertise *Lux*.

As a potential consumer of this product, we see SJP dressed as fantastically as her *Sex and the City* character Carrie Bradshaw getting out of what looks to be a limousine,

another connotation of fame, luxury and class. The other block of text on the advert suggests ‘*It’s the pearls of rich fruit oils in our new shower gel that add a little opening night radiance to any girl’s skin.*’ This is yet again reinforcing their brand image as being all about the expensive things in life. The message is simple, you may not be a star or go to opening night premieres, yet if you chose to buy and use *Lux* shower gel, you can feel how the stars feel, you can have skin as radiant as theirs and feel you are worthy of attending opening night parties.

In a celebrity-obsessed society, using SJP to endorse this product will surely have worked wonders. Even though SJP herself has probably never even used *Lux* shower gel, consumers see the advert and perhaps imagine for themselves that she uses it everyday, even though the advert does not show her physically using the product. The arrangement of the advert itself suggests that the physical product is the least important element to the advert, as the image of the product is placed in the bottom right corner, far smaller than the image of SJP. The important image is SJP looking fabulous and radiant, as these are the values *Lux* wish to attach to their product. Therefore the image of the product itself is a small, added detail at the bottom of the advert, mainly there so consumers can spot it on the shelf the next time they are in the supermarket.

By looking at some different brands, *Starbucks*, *Virgin Group*, *Disney*, *Nike*, *Lucky Strike* and *Lux*, we can see that the role the media play in attaching extrinsic value to brand objects is through advertising principally. Radio, print and televised adverts mostly take on human like emotions and characteristics that are in turn associated with the product they are trying to sell. Commodity fetishism is the way in which products are not looked at for what they really are, in their natural form, instead what they connote to the consumer. Commodity fetishism is fuelled by the concept of brand and the adverts that express the attached values that lead to product personality.