

Consumer Identities

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Agency, Media, and Digital Culture

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Section II

Emerging Dynamics in Contemporary Consumerism

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As I sat in my office on the Monday morning following Super Bowl LII, coveted football championship and one of the most watched events in American television, colleagues variably popped in to congratulate me on the win of my beloved Philadelphia Eagles. I beamed with pride each time, as though I personally had caught the unbelievable trick-play pass to score on fourth down. Without delving too deeply into the long-explored motivations and behavioral gratifications of sports fans, suffice to say that I was experiencing a good deal of personal satisfaction and bliss even though I hadn't played in the game myself, or even attended the event in person. Much research in sport fandom has shown positive effects in psychological health and pro-social behaviors related to "harmonious passion" in spectator sports (Vallerand et al. 2008). Because I identified so strongly with the Philadelphia Eagles, their victory is my victory (Wann and Branscombe 1993). Their loss would have been (and on many prior occasions, has been) my loss. My identity is bound up to a certain extent to the identity of this team, and people in my social circles with enough familiarity know this about me. Even more interesting than my individual experience is the transitive effect onto a whole city of individuals, that the identity of Philadelphia itself is bound up with the identity of the local professional football team — and vice versa.

One conversation with a colleague centered on the identity of Philadelphia as an "underdog" city and the way that residents and fans, players and media alike had embraced and perpetuated this narrative throughout the lead up to the Super Bowl. After winning the penultimate game that would lead them to the Super Bowl, a few Eagles players took to the field (and national television) donning latex dog masks, further stoking the imagery. "Philadelphia stands on the precipice of an identity crisis," writes Saska (2018), providing historical background about the underdog mythos of Philadelphia while also arguing that this reputation may be changing. Before the win, Saska and other writers, sports journalists and cultural critics pondered how the (then hypothetical) win might change the tone of the city. What would Philadelphia be without a chip on its shoulder? After the win, the underdog mantra continued in full force. Victory speeches called out detractors and all those who underestimated the Eagles. The story of the win wasn't the story of just one game or even of the single season but the legacy of an entire city. Headlines touted the "miracle" win; *Bleacher Report* referred to the city sanctioned celebration as not just for Eagles fans but for "all underdogs everywhere" (Tanier 2018).

One football championship certainly won't erase Philadelphia's status as the most underachieving sports town in the United States (Paine 2018) nor will it suddenly

eliminate the shadow from the neighboring East Coast American cities like New York and Washington, DC, considered more elite by almost every economic metric. The case of the Eagles “miracle underdog” victory, however, is a very strong association of consumer identity and the potential evolution thereof. In this case a sports team and its fans exhibit a strong transactional relationship with the surrounding metropolis, with city, team, and fans all internalizing a shared sense of identity, not to say identical but interactive and overlapping.

Along with the fans and the object of their fandom, the third actor in this consumer identity triangle is the role of the corporate agent, in this case the National Football League (NFL). Fans as well as players are acting within the larger structure of the League, which is ultimately part of even larger structures of consumer media and entertainment. This consumer network has become even more engaged over the past year as NFL players staged protests and spoke out about racial injustice in America. Through behaviors such as kneeling, raising fists, or locking arms during pregame performances of the national anthem, players expressed their solidarity with Black Lives Matter and the broader cause of racial justice. NFL staff, owners, and PR representatives were forced to make decisions and public comments concerning the protests. Fans weighed in, some by voicing support for the players and some by threatening to boycott specific teams or the entire league. Kido Lopez and Kido Lopez discuss activist potential within fan groups as a way for “fans to use their affective relationships and fannish undertakings in service of social justice [...] [and] broader injustice or inequality that extends beyond the realm of the fan object” (2017: 317). In engaging with these practices — whether through vocal support, boycotting, or ignoring — they were forced to reckon with their identity as a sports fan compared to their political identities, revealing a potential tension in the consumer-citizen role.

While Pande (Chapter 8, this book) discusses fan protest and activism in greater detail in Section III, the example of professional sports fans above is a good exemplar of the interplay of consumer identity, and overarching media structures is further explored through each of the case studies in the upcoming chapters. Section II builds on the historical pathways of Section I to drill further into an array of audiences and grapple more directly with specific, contemporary interstices of consumption and identity. Continuing the earlier discussion of Dunn’s view of identity, this section delineates the different “subjective spaces” (2008: 13) of consumption from which identity manifests; essentially this amounts to a dichotomy between consumer as actor and consumer as agent. Consumer agents serve profit structures of mass culture, while consumer actors serve their own needs using material culture and media. However, as Dunn ultimately argues and as this book seeks to build on, consumer identities are far from a binary of either Horkheimer and Adorno’s mass-mediated deception (2006) or de Certeau’s consumer reappropriation of goods (1998). Schor (2007) also warns consumer critics against falling too steadfastly in either camp and instead provides a framework by which different cases can be evaluated through economic and social angles. The authors here detail cases where identity can be understood as both as a sociocultural attribution and as a self-aware distinction.

The following case studies are drawn from the film, television, and music industries. Spanò offers a comparative analysis of *Mad Men* (2007–15) viewers from New Zealand and

from Italy, examining the ways in which national identity affects viewer experience and the relations between the production side and the audience. Chapter 5 traces the origins of paracinematic viewership where Donegan grounds a study in oppositional viewing and interrogates the reasons audiences engage in what they deem low-quality film and television. Pattwell furthers the discussion of fandom by exploring the ways that fans use digital spaces for mourning celebrities and how that mourning is tied to fan identity construction. In a close reading of *The Lego Movie* (2014), Guinta discusses the competing facets of a film that is very nearly a feature-length advertisement but also a subversion of typical children's cinema. Each of these works provides another avenue for the apex of consumer as actor and consumer as agent.

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Thus far, this book has traced the evolution of consumer culture into the digital era by providing historical examples as well as contemporary case studies of identity as mediated through various forms of consumption. Many of the cases have explored different tensions that emerge throughout the creation and maintenance of consumer identity. Consumer identity is built around the individual's own self-perception but in conjunction with other actors and agents in the sociocultural landscape, and thus there are many different branches of consumerism in which consumer identities can come into conflict. As Jenkins (2006) illustrates, convergence affects relations along social, technical, and economic divides, and thus tensions can arise at each of these divisions. The preceding chapters present conflict between consumers and media creators, between artists and producers, between academic and industry perspectives, between individuals and their surrounding communities, and intrapersonally as consumers try to resolve these tensions within themselves.

In the first section, Blanke describes the development of modern consumer culture as an ideological tension for citizens caught between pre-industrial values and the onset of mass production. In addition to explaining competing schools of thought within cultural studies scholarship, Blanke offers the work of Cecil B. DeMille as a critique of the conflicts between consumers, film-makers, and the executives in the Hollywood studio system era. Donegan (Chapter 5) and Guinta (Chapter 7) also discuss tensions within the film industry. *The Lego Movie* (2014), itself an unabashed advertisement for the titular consumer goods, presents in its narrative a tension between encouraging children to think for themselves and shilling consumer goods (Guinta, Chapter 7). Like Guinta's close reading, Donegan is also concerned with film and television content and how viewers qualitatively assess what is "good" versus "bad"; in his examination of paracinematic viewership, Donegan investigates the discord between film-maker intent and viewer motivation for ultimately watching what they deem "bad" movies. Sometimes the tensions arise within consumers themselves, whether examining their own reasons for watching "trash" TV or when publicly mourning the loss of their favorite celebrities. Pattwell outlines several strains of conflict that surround the death of famous people, and in addition to fans, this network of conflicting forces includes journalists and paparazzi, surviving families, and the industry representatives. Because social media has contributed to further publicizing an activity as intimate as mourning, fans who take to Twitter or Facebook to grieve must contend not only with their identity management but all the aforementioned actors in this process and with shifting cultural norms around what is considered acceptable behavior of mourning.

Offering a big picture perspective on the study and practice of fans, Booth historicizes fandom as one prominent type of consumer identity. He uses the metaphor of the PushmiPullu to illustrate the different forces that compete for fan attention and investment; the modern fan is often pulled between corporate efforts to commodify fan behaviors and the fans' own interest in resisting this corporatization through "critical and resistant consumption" (Chapter 2, this book). The case of protests in the National Football League, as briefly outlined in the previous interlude, offers another viewpoint of the different actors and agents involved in commodity structures. Further evidence of the PushmiPullu of fandom can be seen in Ray's ethnography of the MySpace fandom of musician Lily Allen (Chapter 3, this book) and in Spanò's comparison of Italian and American fans for AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–15). Ray explores the multi-directional tensions between music fans, artists, and agents brought on by technological shifts in music distribution while Spanò looks at efforts by the AMC corporation to engage *Mad Men* viewers through different types of transmedia content. Lily Allen represents a successful example of a content creator resolving some of these tensions through the use of a social media platform. In the case of *Mad Men*, corporate efforts to engage fans through paratextual content were more successful with American viewers than Italian viewers, who are more likely to engage in what Booth refers to as critical consumption than their American counterparts.

The last section deals with tension that is more explicitly framed as the dialectic of structure and agency. The conflict here is about the individual as possessing a self-controlled identity compared to the dynamic of being conscribed within a larger system. To add to the discussion introduced in the opening pages and bolstered through each case study, this section creates a space for investigating consumer identity in conjunction with what might be called subjectivity or subjecthood. While identity and subjectivity has been continually debated within media studies and cultural studies for a century, more recent scholarship suggests that consumerism is a fertile ground for comparing these concepts (Leslie 1999). The purpose of this book, by and large, is not to settle the debate once and for all but rather to illustrate specific ways in which identity is a valuable framework for examining consumer culture and furthermore that it is not mutually exclusive to the understanding of the structural forces that act upon consumers. Identity here does not refute or replace subjectivity; it makes use of earlier critiques of mass culture while also employing the psychosocial models of self-concept and identity management strategies in order to better understand consumer behavior in the digital era. As Schor (2007) argues, the notion of agency is no longer representative of power that belongs exclusively to the consumer and is "increasingly being constructed by producers, rather than deployed against them" (25). In keeping with the theme of convergence to explore the blurring boundaries, identity remains the focus because it allows for the examination of both structure and agency in tandem.

Interrogating more explicitly the tension of structure and agency and its impact on consumer identities, the final three chapters take a future-oriented approach. Further, each author showcases a different set of methodological tools. As with the historical and contemporary research in the first two sections, the last chapters each provide a specific

case in which to explore consumer identities and also represent wider issues of relevance for consumer identity studies moving forward. Jansen (Chapter 10) considers the effectiveness of consumer contract law to protect consumers who embrace ethical consumption habits as part of their identities; she uses the European Union and Belgian policy to exemplify some successful, ethical consumer practices upheld through judicial structures. How much can and should consumers rely on legal contracts to regulate their consumptions? In Chapter 9, Seroka presents another issue that has been wrought with emergent ethical concerns, the gathering of consumer data for research purposes. While offering suggestions for best methodological practices for researchers, Seroka considers the ethics of a capitalistic system that attempts to use identity-based data to drive profit margins and often dismisses vulnerable consumer populations in the process. How can consumers remain abreast of safety concerns around data sharing? Diverse and marginalized groups are also the focus of Pande's (Chapter 8) research, which circles back to fan studies with a critique of fan activist networks and the inequity in representation of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minority communities. How do consumer communities represent themselves in the face of inequity?

Each of the three cases poses important questions about the responsibility and capability of the consumer as tethered to the accountability of corporate and other structural forces. Further, each features timely, forward-thinking research that represents necessary avenues for exploration in an increasingly digital and global media landscape.

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