

# Postmodern Advertising and Consumerism: a Paradox

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*Endeavouring to better understand postmodern advertising and the resultant puzzle of consumerism of why consumers relinquish commodities which supply their existing satisfactions, this paper compares modern consumer behaviour terminology with Lysias' thesis about love in Plato's Phaedrus. A striking parallel emerges, evoked through the paradox of gratification for physical desire. Our introspection suggests that modern consumerism is simply humankind's turning towards the primitive - to reinhabit core experiences. Understanding the way this phenomenon plays itself out in contemporary life helps us to put together the puzzle of consumerism.*

**Key words:** POSTMODERN ADVERTISING, PUZZLE OF CONSUMERISM, PHAEDRUS, GRATIFICATION FOR PHYSICAL DESIRE, CORE EXPERIENCES

## Introduction

*Driven by passion - Fiat  
Born out of obsession - VW's Passat  
For the man in search of perfection - Yves Saint Laurent*

Endeavouring to enhance our understanding of postmodern advertising and the resultant puzzle of consumerism of why consumers relinquish commodities which supply their existing satisfactions, this paper compares modern consumer behaviour terminology with Lysias' thesis about love in Plato's *Phaedrus* (1979) which expounds a lover's preference for a suiter who offers *gratification of physical desire* rather than genuine love. As we shall demonstrate, a striking similarity is found between the postmodern consumer and Socrates' lover: a man not in his sober senses consumed by passion.

*Thus the fact that wants are continually being indulged should not cause us to overlook the fact that they are also continually being created, with the consequence that 'frustration' is a permanent state. Admittedly, the purchase and/or use of a particularly long-desired product may yield such delight as to temporarily obscure this fact, but it is assuredly the case that an awareness of unsatisfied wants will quickly surface (Cambel 1995:95).*

## Consumers and commodities

The relation between consumers and commodities in a postmodern society is an encounter between self and the world (Bergson 1991) which is embodied and affective. The commodity usually appeals to us through our emotional and sensual responses: what Merleau-Ponty speaks of as 'taking-up' or 'living' a situation (1962:157); enunciated by the many slogans thrown around by advertisers-'sloganeers', who 'promote clichés that consumers must not be allowed to forget' (Redfern 1989:115):

*Feast your eyes, your senses have a memory. - Roche Bobois (furniture)  
Anytime, anyplace, anywhere. Ah! the joys of inspiration. - Dulux*

*The Ultimate Riding Machine. - BMW  
Drive your ambition. - MG*

Such an experience unsettles the conception of a 'subject that already knows its objects and controls its relations with the world' (Irigaray 1993:185):

*You've never seen this company.  
You don't even know what it does.  
But you already know what it stands for. - INTEGRA Business  
Furniture For Individuals*

Commodities offer experience and the consumer-commodity relation is constitutive to that experience. A bar of soap becomes a *scent-sational body bar containing natural exfoliating extracts... to smooth your skin as well as perfume it* - Sainsbury's Lavender Soap; Intel is more than communication - it is an *Intel Create & Share Camera Pack*; and digital mobile phones become *A touch simpler* - NOKIA, or *Resist the usual* - Mitsubishi.

Because the commodity and consumer affect each other in the encounter there is no ultimate possession or end of knowledge (Irigaray 1993). Consequently, our desire for commodities persists - a *Cixousian* desire of stasis-movement, of having without holding (Cixous 1992:56-9), perpetuated through new commodities to replace the old:

*Someday all watches will be made this way. - Seiko kinetic*

The average consumer is not surprised at his purchase of the commodity not redeeming the promise of the advertisement, for this is what he is used to in life: 'the individual's pursuit of happiness and success is usually in vain. But the fantasy is his to keep' (Vestergaard and Schroeder 1992:118).

*Strolling within the sculpture that is Bermuda's  
coral arches, your thoughts drift back to last evening  
on the ship, when the sommelier gently decanted a 1985  
Château Talbot over a candle's dancing flame. - CUNARD*

Unquestionably, modern advertising is intimately associated with promulgating hedonism, or better said, *modern autonomous hedonism* (Cambell 1995: 85). Different to traditional *hedonism* which was concerned with sensations:

*Socrates: As if that wasn't enough, the hedonist is also committed to the claim that someone who happens to be feeling pain rather than pleasure is, as long as the pain lasts, a bad man, even if he is in fact the most virtuous man in the world; and again, that someone feeling pleasure, is as long as the pleasure lasts, a better person in proportion to the intensity of his pleasure. (Plato, Philebus 55b).*

modern hedonism relies on daydreaming or imagination to create emotions:

*The key to the development of modern hedonism lies in the shift of primary concern from sensations to emotions, for it is only through the medium of the latter that powerful and prolonged stimulation can be combined with any significant degree of autonomous control, something which arises directly from the fact that an emotion links mental images with physical stimuli (Cambel 1995: 69):*

*This Cartier love bangle is absolutely beautiful. You have to screw it on, so its a permanent reminder of that special someone who gave it to you. - Cartier*

In spite of this shift of concern, the presumed desire to experience pleasure which has to be generated, remains central to both forms:

*Socrates ...pleasure is always a generation and has no 'existence' at all... if pleasure is a process of generation, it is bound to occur in order that something might exist... (Plato, Philebus 53c-54c).*

*...the spirit of modern consumerism is anything but materialistic... Their (consumers) basic motivation is the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable drama which they have already enjoyed in imagination, and each new product is seen as offering a possibility of realising this ambition (Cambel 1995: 89).*

### Lysias' speech

Much speculation has been made on the authenticity of Lysias' treatise on Love: whether it is a genuine production of Lysias or an invention by Plato (see De Vries 1969). No definite answer to the question has been attained. Regardless of conclusions, the speech underpins concern for kinds of rhetoric. And it is precisely in this concern of Plato's, his criticism of contemporary rhetoric, which allows us to draw a parallel of paradoxes which we demonstrate by correlating modern consumer behaviour terminology (Mohen 1985:645-622) with Lysias' description of love.

Lysias' paradoxical speech contains six main arguments which describe phases of an evolving relationship between lovers. Transposed into the world of postmodern consumerism, the lovers become the consumer (object) and commodity advertised (subject/suitor). We give below each of Lysias' arguments (without the antithesis - for those who are not in love), followed by corresponding modern consumer behaviour terminology with definitions.

*Lovers repent the kindness they have shown when their passion abates... lovers bring into account not only the kindness they have shown but also the losses they have incurred in their own affairs on account of their passion, and when they add to this the trouble they have undergone they consider that the debt they owe to their favourites has been discharged long ago.*

- *Emotional dissatisfaction*: a postpurchase state that occurs when the actual performance is perceived to be lower than expected performance.
- *Buyer's regret*: a postpurchase phenomenon in which the preference for a chosen alternative actually falls below that of a rejected alternative.
- *Decreasing marginal utility*: as a consumer obtains more of something, each additional unit brings less utility or satisfaction.
- *Cognitive dissonance*: buyer discomfort caused by postpurchase discomfort.
- *Customer satisfaction*: customer satisfaction with a purchase depends on a product's performance relative to a buyer's expectations.

*...whoever they are in love with has a supreme claim on their friendship... they will value any new love in future more than the old, and even be ready to inflict an injury on the old love if the new love requires it.*

- *Adoption*: the decision by an individual to become a regular user of the product.
- *Priming*: when a small amount of exposure to a stimulus leads to an increased drive in the presence of the stimulus.
- *Respondent conditioning*: the process of classically conditioning an organism.
- *Selective exposure*: the concept that consumers will expose themselves to some stimuli and not others.

*Lovers themselves admit that they are mad, not sane, and that they know they are not in their right mind but cannot help themselves. How then can one expect that designs formed in such a condition will meet with their approval when they come to their senses*

- *Intrinsic satisfaction*: satisfaction that results from one's own interest in doing something rather than from the external benefits of doing it.
- *Mood State*: a temporary state characterised by positive or negative feelings.

- *Drive*: the physiological arousal when a need is felt.
- *Hedonic consumption*: the consumption of commodities and services based primarily on the desire to experience pleasure and happiness.
- *Experiential perspective*: when consumers make purchases principally because of strong positive feelings rather than because of a decision process or strong environmental pressures.

*Now if you were afraid that public opinion will condemn you when men hear of your love affairs, reflect that the lover, believing that others will envy his good fortune as much as he values it himself, is likely in a state of elation and gratified pride to publish generally the fact that his efforts have gone unrewarded...*

- *Self-concept*: self-image of the complex mental images people have of themselves.
- *Perceptual contrast*: the perceptual phenomenon in which a stimulus acts as an anchor and causes other stimuli to be viewed more extreme than they really are. Used to explain consumer brand loyalty (Markentreueheit); the fictitious security of the advert which tells the consumer he did right (to buy the commodity): a tap on the shoulder.

*...friendships are easily broken, and if that happens the greater part of the harm will fall on you, who have sacrificed your dearest possession, whereas a quarrel in other circumstances is a misfortune shared by both parties equally. ...you have all the more reason to be afraid of those who are in love with you; they can be hurt in such a variety of ways and are apt to interpret anything as a personal slight.*

- *Reactance*: a motivational state that results when a person believes his or her behavioural freedom to be threatened.
- *State anxiety*: a temporary or transitory emotional state resulting from a specific situation. Independent health insurance (BUPA, PPP Health Care Plan) suggests to us that by not taking out the health insurance we run the risk of becoming ill. By not taking out A VISA CARD, AMERICAN EXPRESS or BARCLAYS BANK CARD will we become poor? Will your dandruff return if you don't us *Head and Shoulders* every day?

*Lovers approve words and actions that are far from excellent...their passion impairs their judgements... One of love's feats is this: it makes lovers, when they are out of luck, treat as grievances things which cause no pain to ordinary men; when they are fortunate it compels them to bestow praise on things which do not deserve even the name of pleasant.*

- *Selective distortion*: The tendency of people to adapt information to personal meanings.
- *Impulse buying*: buying action undertaken without a problem previously having been consciously recognised, or a buying intention formed prior to entering the store.
- *State anxiety*: a temporary or transitional emotional state resulting from a specific situation. It is exactly this lack of criteria that enables modern advertising to function.

### Concluding Discussion

Advertising as a social construction or product - recorded culture, possess new problems in terms of meaning and interpretation. Its reception involves a contextualised and creative process of interpretation in which consumers draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of the messages they receive. Any understanding of advertising should, therefore, include the notion of 'cultural schemata' that enable agents to mobilise 'sets of resources that empower and constrain social action' (Sewel 1992). *This* is becoming more and more difficult as substantial research on consumer behaviour gives evidence of increased variability in conformity to culture by consumers. In fact, our postmodern society emphasises the very destandardisation of the life course (Buchmann 1989), and because of

this, individuals believe they are able to direct their own lives. The range of acceptable behaviours has increased, and there is no longer a standard life pattern. Consequently, the resultant puzzle of consumerism (and advertising) to be resolved involves 'not only the question of where new wants originate, or why there appears to be an inexhaustible supply, but also *how it is that individuals become detached from those products and services which supply their existing satisfactions*' (Cambel 1995:88).

In quest for an answer to this puzzle, we have drawn a parallel between the paradox of physical gratification as expounded in Lysias' thesis of love and modern consumer behaviour represented by different standard terminology used. Fittingly, only a paradox seems to offer a solution to the puzzle of postmodern consumerism, 'for the cultural logic of modernity is not merely that of rationality as expressed in the activities of calculation and experiment; it is also that of passion, and the creative dreaming born of longing' (Cambel 1995:227).

In her book *Primitive Passions* Marianna Torgovnick (1997) investigated the numerous ways humankind has turned towards the primitive out of spiritual hunger for such deeply human experiences - a hunger that could once be satisfied within the West's own mystical traditions but that often no longer can be. A spiritual hunger for a deep human primitive experience - primitivism, 'which inhabits thinking about origins and pure states... informs desires for known beginnings and, by extension for predictable ends, the utopian desire to go back and recover irreducible features of the psyche, body, land and community - to reinhabit core experiences' (Torgovnick 1997:5). The heart of the book is what she calls the phenomenon of *merging* as it plays itself out through primitivism in contemporary life. In a similar way, through our comparison of postmodern consumer behaviour and Lysias' paradoxical speech on love, we have suggested that modern autonomous hedonism is simply humankind's turning towards the primitive played out through the consumer commodity. This is the paradox of postmodern consumerism: a ceaseless merging through primitivism.

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## POSTMODERNO REKLAMIRANJE I POTROŠAČKO DRUŠTVO: PARADOKS

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*Sa ciljem boljeg razumijevanja postmodernog reklamiranja i rješavanja krajnje zagonetke potrošačkog društva o tome kako individualci odbacuju potrošačke artikle koji zadovoljavaju njihove potrebe, ovaj rad uspoređuje terminologiju iz potrošačkog ponašanja sa Lizijasovom tezom o ljubavi iz Platónovog Fedrusa. Iz ove usporedbe proizlazi očita sličnost kao rezultat paradoksa zahvalnosti fizičke želje. Naše razmatranje pokazuje da je suvremeno potrošačko društvo naprosto čovjekov osvrt prema prapočetku - prema iskonskim iskustvima. Razumijevajući kako se sa taj fenomen odigrava u suvremenom životu riješimo zagonetku potrošačkog društva.*