

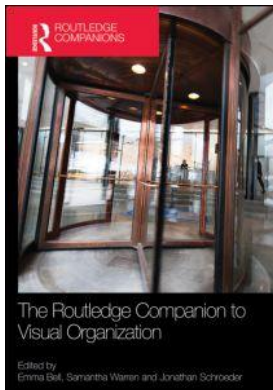
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Cultural production and consumption of images in the marketplace

Laurie A. Meamber

Introduction and overview

In the aesthetic or image economy of today, marketing strategies focus on creating and communicating appealing images of organizational offerings. Consumers respond to these images, and productively consume them in order to mold themselves and their everyday consumption experience. Take, for example, Jim, a 49-year-old executive, married with children, who comments on his visual experience inside a retail store that he likens to an art gallery.

[There was a lot] of the stuff, so you were attracted by the whole kind of ‘gestalt’ of the whole thing. ... But what the guy really made the money on was the small items, the under \$5 items of which he had a lot of, kind of cutesy things that might have been dime store items but in the context suddenly became something else. So [it] was very much kind of a show in there and he was very successful ... Like if you go to an art gallery, you may not buy a picture. If you went to this place, you may not buy that [high-priced artistic piece] but you would buy something else.

(Meamber 1997b)

The purpose of this chapter is to review current scholarship pertaining to the cultural production and visual consumption of images within the market. The specific organizational offerings that are highlighted in the chapter include: advertisements, products (design and material artifacts), brands, and everyday consumption experiences, such as shopping and tourism. The major topics and key questions that will be addressed include: (1) ‘productive consumption’ – what is the association between cultural production and consumption in the marketplace?; (2) ‘aesthetic consumption’ – what is role of aesthetics in productive consumption?; and (3) ‘marketplace image consumption’ – how is the visual content offered by organizations within the market consumed productively by consumers? The chapter concludes with a discussion of future research directions on image production and consumption for the visual organization.

It is essential that research on visual organization takes into account the processes by which images are produced and consumed – i.e. the interdependent and aesthetically driven processes of cultural production and productive consumption. There are numerous participants, roles, and

meanings generated by the cultural actors involved in the creation and interpretation of visual images. Understanding the actors involved in this complex process as well as the issues that arise, such as multiple (and perhaps competing) interpretations of these images by the organizations that use them to create value, the marketers that present them to the marketplace, and the consumers who seek out and transform them to fulfill their own identity projects, is critical for visual scholars.

In the first part of the chapter, I explore the relationship between cultural production and visual consumption. There are many different approaches to cultural production as related to visibility, including critical and strategic approaches. Critical views highlight issues such as power and control of image content. From a strategic perspective, organizations attempt to use images in order to create value, representing themselves and their offerings to various stakeholders and to the market. These images are intended to communicate specific meanings to these audiences. Yet, meanings are never fixed; and the recipients of these images, to some extent, may determine the meanings of these images. While consumers (and visual scholars) may actively and perhaps critically resist the prearranged meanings, organizations nevertheless employ visual content in an attempt to shape their relationship with consumers in the marketplace. Therefore, I ask the following questions in the context of an organization's internal and external strategy. What is cultural production in the realm of the market? How does consumption become productive? How can a consumer be considered both a producer and consumer?

Productive consumption: the cultural production and consumption relationship

Cultural production is the process of creating, transforming, and diffusing cultural products. While some scholars study 'cultural production' and 'cultural products' in the domain of the arts, the broader usage of these terms in this chapter encompasses the production of all products and experiences, such as advertising images, consumer products, brands, and consumption experiences that are created by organizations for the marketplace. The traditional view of cultural production within the market is based on the work of anthropologist Grant McCracken (1986, 1988, 1989, 1993) and Solomon (1988). According to McCracken (1986), producers take pre-existing symbols from culture to create cultural products that are then passed on to cultural intermediaries. Producers in the cultural production process include designers, artists, architects, and others involved in creation of the cultural product, including other image makers, such as website developers, brand advisors, and others. Cultural intermediaries include those involved in the meaning transfer of the cultural products from producers to consumers, such as marketers and communication specialists (see also Bourdieu 1984). These cultural intermediaries generate meanings for these cultural products and communicate them to consumers who, in turn, consume these meanings.

Likewise, in consumer researcher Michael Solomon's (1988) modeling of the cultural production system, the creative subsystem that generates cultural products works in conjunction with the managerial subsystem to select and produce them, and also in tandem with a communication subsystem, which provides suggested meanings. These meanings are expressed to consumers via cultural intermediaries that he names 'cultural gatekeepers.' According to both McCracken and Solomon, consumers take cultural products and receive their intended meaning(s) in the act of consumption. Culture is reified when these consumed meanings are linked back to the culture or symbolic pool that was the genesis of the cultural products.

Therefore, within the cultural production process itself, organizations act as cultural agents in the creation and dissemination of cultural products, such as visual images, in the form of many

marketplace offerings including advertising campaigns, physical products, brands, and shopping and tourism experiences. Organizations seek to develop and manage these cultural products via marketing practices to further organizational objectives. For example, organizations generate attention-getting advertising and develop appealing visual brands to promote the material goods, services, and experiences for sale in the marketplace. Organizations may also use cultural products to advance and communicate organizational identities to internal and external stakeholders (Davenport *et al.* 2009; Schroeder 2011). For example, Schroeder discusses how the Toyota Motor Corporation's Japanese website (as cultural product) visually represents the company to the world – 'its brand, products, dealer showrooms and customer service' (2004: 231). Management studies illustrate the importance of organizational aesthetics (e.g. Warren 2008), and visualization practices through which organizations operate. For example, the chapters in this volume written by Jane Davison and Norah Campbell (Chapters 2 and 8) focus on organizational identity as expressed through websites, annual reports, and corporate communication.

While acknowledging its importance in identifying the participants in the process, including the roles of organizations and their marketing activities, some scholars argue that McCracken and Solomon's work is one-way in orientation; that is, it proposes a top-down process of meaning creation and transfer beginning with an extant 'symbol pool' or 'culturally constituted world' at the beginning of the process, and consumers and consumption at its end. Instead of treating the ad, product, brand, or experience as an active agent in constituting culture, the cultural product is merely constituted with a pre-codified meaning. This viewpoint also ignores the role of consumer agency in determining meaning, as well as the idea that meaning is never fully present until constructed by the consumer (e.g. Borgerson and Schroeder 1997; Scott 1994a, 1994b).

In our research, my co-author and I set forth an alternative perspective of cultural production (Meamber 1997b; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006). In conceptualizing the relationships between art, aesthetics, cultural production, and marketing, we proposed a conceptual model of the cultural production process that was grounded in the institution of marketing. Marketing, because it is concerned with the development of cultural products and their diffusion in the marketplace, as an institution, relies upon the cultural production process (Meamber and Venkatesh 1999). This re-conceptualization of the cultural production process includes cultural producers, cultural intermediaries, and consumers, but, in this model, the relationships between these cultural actors are conceptualized to operate in a dynamic fashion. Therefore, consumers and consumption are no longer at the end of the process, but are actors equal to the other cultural actors and elements of the process. In this model, production and consumption are inextricably linked, and cultural products, organizations, and consumers play constructive roles in the process.

This newer model of cultural production takes into consideration scholarship that suggests that consumers' approach to consumption is productive at several levels – including the individual, organizational, and societal. First, at the individual level, consumption is related to identity formation when consumers select, secure, use, and possess cultural products in part or whole, for their symbolism, and as images for identity formation. Research on the relationship between symbolism, material objects, and meaning finds that consumers purchase and consume products (brands) because of what they mean, in addition to or rather than for their function (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Kozinets 2002; Levy 1959, 1981; Mick 1986; Tharp and Scott 1990; Venkatesh 1992). Consumer researchers maintain that consumption also contributes to identity formation (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Carù and Cova 2007; Ekström and Brembeck 2004; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson *et al.* 1990). In contemporary consumer culture, individual

identities are shaped by consumers' engagement with cultural objects, including images (brands) corresponding to material possessions (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Gergen 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Consumers rework and transform symbolism, signs, and images encoded in marketplace products (such as material goods, brands, retail settings, and other experiences) to further their identity goals as they construct and negotiate their existence.

As Shankar and colleagues (2009) note, identity is no longer thought of as unitary, fixed, or stable, but as a project that is constantly assembled, reassembled, produced, and re-reproduced in the act of consumption. Identity is a social construct, realized through interactions in consumer culture. Consumer culture provides the materials for identity projects, including the symbolism of advertising campaigns that promote a particular lifestyle, products, brands, and consumer experiences.

Therefore, the updated perspective of cultural production challenges the notion that the consumer is a passive recipient of products, experiences, services, and ideas in everyday life (de Certeau 1984; du Gay 1997). In this view, the consumer is an active agent in the cultural production process. Consumers produce culture when they use cultural products and other market-generated content to construct a self-definition. Consumers can create meanings for themselves that incorporate or subvert the cultures of production, in terms of the original intended meanings. This is not to argue that consumer identity is a matter of complete free choice, as consumers may be constrained by age, race, class, and other demographic characteristics (except perhaps in cyberspace) (Schau and Gilly 2003; Turkle 1995), although consumer freedom may be limited by marketers (see Venkatesh *et al.* 1997). The social and historical realities impacting identity projects cannot be completely disregarded either (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), including, for example, the issue of cultural capital constraints on consumption practices (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Rather, in contemporary life, consumers, to some extent, are able to choose symbolic content to construct identity that can also link them to others, including consumer 'tribes' or communities organized around symbolic content or shared meanings, such as brand images (Cova *et al.* 2007; Maffesoli 1996 [1988]; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2000; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schau and Gilly 2003). In this sense, then, consumers are co-producers of meaning, whether it is personal, identity-related meaning and/or group-level meaning, including communities and organizations.

When consumers absorb the intended meaning of the cultural object into their lives, as defined by the 'producers' and cultural intermediaries, they are not only enacting their own sense of identity but also reaffirming the identity of the organization (or of 'corporate brands' as defined by Balmer 2006) from which it came. For example, Björkman (2002), writing on *aura*, says that, in the consumption of the cultural product, such as designer brand clothing, consumers are also appropriating the designer as brand into their lives. Extending this idea, consumers in the act of consuming (wearing) the clothing are incorporating the brand or designer symbolism into their own identities, the meanings of which are subject to (re-)interpretation. In wearing the clothing, consumers communicate its brand symbolism to others, and simultaneously develop, encode, and reinforce the organizational (designer, brand) identity in the marketplace. Consumption, therefore, acts at the organizational level as well as the individual level, and can help establish and maintain the organization and its visuality and organizational image.

However, if consumers choose to construct an alternate meaning for the cultural object, this can also change or even undermine the intended organizational or marketplace identity (Brown 2006; Featherstone 1991; Fiske 1989; Hall 1993; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kozinets 2002; Sürdem 1994). As Sürdem writes, the focus of contemporary culture is reading, watching, seeing, and consuming signs, but consumers can subvert the meanings that are imposed by

others and institutions. Consumers may resist predetermined meanings of an organization and its market offerings, undermining and transforming them into new meanings (Kozinets and Handleman 2004; Thompson 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004). For example, as Thompson and Arsel (2004) mention, consumers who resisted the Starbucks brand developed and promoted the image of 'Frankenbucks' to signify their fear surrounding the organization's use of dairy products containing genetically modified hormones prior to 2008.

At the societal or cultural level, consumption also plays an active role in the constitution of society or culture (Simmel 1971 [1903], 1978 [1900]). Cultural theorists maintain that cultural products are central to the constitution of culture and, therefore, a key premise of cultural production is that culture itself is (re-)constructed by producers, intermediaries, and consumers participating in the process. Culture is the sum of shared meanings, rituals, norms, and traditions (Geertz 1973), and culture can come into being through cultural production. Through the dynamic process of meaning creation, transmission, consumption (including appropriation and/or interpretation) via cultural products, meaning flows at all levels – from individual 'producers' and/or organizations to consumers to the culture at large. Kaplan (2008) illustrates how images of traumatic events (e.g. war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, and artwork by two artists) produce what she terms a 'culture of trauma' in which private and public feelings become intermixed. In this example, the cultural product, consisting of images of trauma created and disseminated by cultural 'producers' and intermediaries, is consumed by members of society (consumers) leading to the creation of personal and public, social and political meanings, which constitute culture.

In summary, the construction of meaning is an active process of cultural production. In the cultural production process within the market, production and consumption are linked, in that production does not end, but, even in consumption, production is taking place. The cultural production process allows consumers to make sense of their cultural world, themselves, and their place in it. Consumers are not conceptualized as being passive receivers of meanings, but are part of the ongoing process of symbolic construction and meaning generation as they productively consume the cultural products offered by organizations in their everyday lives. Meaning is created and negotiated in the consumption experience, as much as it is in the production experience. Therefore, all consumption can be conceptualized as productive, giving rise to the concept of 'productive consumption.' The term productive consumption, in this context, differs from its use in economics to refer to the employment of human labor in the production process. The meaning of productive consumption in the present context refers to the generative nature of consumption for consumers.

Turning specifically to the cultural production process involving image production and consumption, and to the creation of visual culture, and of the visual consumer, what occurs when consumers are engaged in the productive consumption of images, brands, and experiences generated by the organization is an aesthetic process of visualizing their everyday world. Therefore, it is important to step back to position the visual consumer as an aesthetic subject. The following questions will be addressed in the next section of the chapter. What is aesthetics? How are aesthetics and cultural production linked in the consumption of organizational offerings in the marketplace? Why is aesthetics important to our understanding of visual culture and of the visual consumer?

Aesthetic consumption: the current period of productive consumption

Aesthetics is a term that originated in the eighteenth century. Its Greek etymological origin translates to sensory experience. Aesthetic scholars explain that, in its original use, aesthetics refers to any kind of sensory experience, regardless of whether or not it is beautiful. Aesthetics, as a

philosophy or set of philosophies, as explained by organization theorists, then came to mean a concern for art and beauty (Strati 1996; White 1996). Both notions of aesthetics are accepted by scholars. In contemporary usage, aesthetics (or esthetics) has a multiplicity of meanings (Koren 2010; Townsend 1997). One definition concerns sensory experience or response as related to the arts, media, or entertainment including its visual forms (Holbrook and Huber 1979; Holbrook and Zirlin 1985; Schroeder and Borgerson 2002). A second meaning of aesthetics, which extends the first, refers to sensory experiences of everyday objects (Forty 1995 [1986]; Heilbrun 2002). A third use of the term concerns the concepts that often define aesthetics, including visual forms, such as form, expression, harmony, order, symbolism, imagery, and others (Carroll 2001). All three of these definitions are integral to understanding the productive consumption of images.

The idea that aesthetics concerns the sensory engagement with the arts or of everyday objects brings us back to the cultural production process. The production and consumption of cultural objects is premised on use of the senses. Producers, cultural intermediaries, and consumers cannot engage with symbols, signs, or images and create, disseminate, interpret, and construct meaning from them without utilizing one or more of the senses, such as vision. While aesthetics is often explored in the context of the arts, other work has examined sensory experiences involving the arts and of everyday consumption experiences, combining the first and second definitions of aesthetics (Dewey 1934; Dickie 1971).

According to Dewey (1934), aesthetic consumption pertains to all experiences, whether traditionally classified as aesthetic or non-aesthetic, because they have a similar structure. In Dewey's discussion, ordinary experience has an aesthetic component when objects and events arrange themselves in a pattern that is perceived through emotion. Other writers have delineated extraordinary experience as distinct from ordinary experience (Carù and Cova 2003). Nevertheless, in our research, my co-author and I find that aesthetic consumption of either the arts or of everyday experience or of both can contribute to identity formation and the construction of meaning (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). Aesthetics and cultural production are interrelated, in that aesthetics as understood as sensory experience is how cultural actors produce and consume cultural products offered in the market. As discussed in the previous section, cultural products are by definition made up of signs, symbols, and images, making their productive consumption an interpretive process involving the senses.

As noted earlier, the term aesthetics also relates to the constructs that delineate aesthetics or, more accurately, aesthetic content. These terms – form, expression, harmony, order, symbolism, imagery, and so on – originate within the visual art world, and, therefore, one of the common uses of the word aesthetics is the visual content of an artwork or design – i.e. appearance or style (Koren 2010). Consumer scholars have, therefore, used this idea of aesthetics to describe consumers, and what they consume in visual terms, such as clothing, advertisements, and places, among other topics (Schroeder 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Maclaran and Brown 2005). In fact, this notion of the aesthetic as visual content becomes central to understanding life in the present image economy. Aesthetics is important as consumer culture has become more of a visual culture (Schroeder 2002).

Many battles of the brands take place within the visual domain. Design, in particular, depends upon visual understanding and aesthetic expertise. The Web mandates visualizing almost every aspect of corporate strategy, operations and communication; web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and spurred research and thinking about perception and preference of visual displays.

(Schroeder 2006c: 5)

In summary, even an ordinary or everyday experience or object offered by the market can be aesthetic due to its reliance upon a sensory interpretation. Following this logic, aesthetics are part of the everyday experience of consumers, and, therefore, consumers can be called 'aesthetic subjects' (Meamber 1997b; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006, 2008) when they productively consume cultural products as part of how they conduct their lives. The sensory experience of everyday objects, including the consumption of images, includes the symbolic aspects of consumption – i.e. the exchange of symbols, images, signs, and meanings. The aesthetic nature of life (Cova and Svanfeldt 1993; Debord 1983 [1967]) makes it necessary to consider aesthetics and the aesthetic subject, the visual consumer, within the context of everyday activities, that is, of everyday consumption experiences. In the next section of this chapter, I will more formally introduce the concept of the visual consumer and how this visual consumer engages with image consumption in the market. Key questions that I will address are: What is visual consumption? What are some important marketplace domains for the productive consumption of images – including advertising campaigns, products, brands, and experiences?

Marketplace image consumption: the productive consumption of visual content

Visual consumers productively consume images or other visual material and experiences offered by organizations. The etymology of the word 'image' from the Greek indicates that it is a verbal creation of a visual representation of what one sees (in the mind's eye). In conventional usage, Stern and colleagues (2001) find multiple uses of the term in the dictionary and in marketing thought. In the end, these authors conclude that image can be equated with the idea of gestalt, a whole. This whole is more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, the consumption of images is predicated on interpreting in the entire visual message, including its historical, cultural, ideological connotations, which may or may not be obvious.

The concept of visual consumption was established by Schroeder (2002) to discuss the production and consumption of images in consumer culture. As defined by Schroeder: 'Visual consumption, then is a perceptual process of making sense and integration, and a consumer process of gazing, looking and categorizing visual experience' (2011: 138). Visual consumption encompasses such activities as touring, watching, and viewing. Through visual consumption, consumers construct, maintain, and communicate their identities by looking, seeing, observing, and interpreting visual material. In contemporary consumer culture, vision is perhaps the most important of the five senses, although historically vision has always been both elevated and debased as compared to written knowledge in thought and scholarship (Campbell and Schroeder 2011; Jay 1993; Kant 1964 [1791]; Kellner 1990; Scott 1994a; Stern 1989, 1991). In contemporary consumer culture, vision assumes importance because marketers rely upon the visual. This is not to deny the long history and predominance of visual consumption experiences in earlier times, but to acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of images, signs, and symbols in consumers' daily lives, and the visual turn in research on visual consumption issues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In everyday life, consumers are ensconced in visual content that they consume productively in order to mold flexible identities and give meaning to their lives (Ahuvia 2005; Ahuvia and Izberk-Bilgin 2011; Venkatesh *et al.* 2006). Organizations are reliant upon the productive consumption of its signs, symbols, and images in terms of its marketplace offerings. Signs, symbols, and images supersede materiality and use value in terms of their visibility. This is not to argue that cultural products and experience have no functional utility, but that ideas such as function and utility are treated as signs (Askegaard and Firat 1996) and symbols (Levy 1959,

2003) that signal particular meanings that can be appropriated and reinterpreted. This refers to the semiotics or the sign value of a cultural product (Barthes 2000 [1957]; Mick 1986, 1997; Nöth 1988). According to Baudrillard (1988 [1968], 1993 [1976]), consumption in the current period involves the exchange of signs. Image consumption allows consumers to signify aspects of the self to themselves and to others in a complex code of symbolic meaning. Consumers continuously (re-)construct their identities, in part, through the consumption of symbols, images, and signs.

Conferring meaning upon symbols, images, and signs, as articulated in the previous sections of the chapter, is a negotiated, aesthetic (sensory)-oriented, constructivist process of productive consumption. In the case of providing meanings to organizational offerings in the marketplace, the cultural actors are: marketers (producers, cultural intermediaries), consumers, and the cultural product itself. The interaction between these entities gives rise to meaning, but where does this meaning reside? With the marketers that attempt to create and communicate intended meanings? With the consumers who appropriate the signs, symbols, and images to construct their own meanings? With the cultural product itself that can construct culture through the production and consumption process? The answer is all of the above, potentially. Although still open to debate, current thought suggests that cultural products are inscribed with particular meanings and associations that are (initially) formed and circulated by marketers with the conscious attempt to generate desire (Ewen 1988; Lash and Urry 1994). Consumers can consume these suggested meanings, which often come in the form of competing representations and identity positions (Shankar *et al.* 2009) associated with different cultural products in the marketplace. As noted already, consumers can also manipulate and hybridize marketer-created meanings (Muñiz and Schau 2005) and cleverly, and perhaps cynically, resist these meanings (Mikkonen *et al.* 2011). This polysemic nature of meaning (Putoni *et al.* 2010) is the essence of productive consumption, and has been studied extensively in the research on advertising.

The productive consumption of advertising

Image interpretation in advertising and organizational communication, while it may be circumscribed through representational practices that attempt to anchor images with particular meanings, remains unfixed and incomplete. As discussed previously, meaning construction is constrained by a number of forces – including the culture, history, background, and social forces that impact the choices made by consumers. Consumer interpretations of advertising campaigns may also be reduced because of expectations, intentions, and preferences or because of a lack of awareness, attention, or knowledge concerning the background of the image (Schroeder 2004). Yet, signs, symbols, and images are never neutral, but exist within the milieu of extant signs, symbols, images, and meanings – i.e. a system of representation.

Representation constitutes a language, and visual representation is the visual language of visual content. Schroeder (2002) defines ‘consuming representation’ as consumer engagement with signs, symbols, and meaning in the visual marketplace. The visual marketplace can include any cultural product offered in the market, but, traditionally in marketing and consumer research, it is defined as advertisements, products, brands, and marketer-designed consumer experiences (including services). Much of the work on representation relates to the study of advertising campaigns. A number of conceptual, theoretical, and methodological traditions can be employed to the study of representation in advertisements, including but not limited to: psychology, art history, ethics, visual studies, visual criticism, and critical race theory (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002, 2005; Borgerson *et al.* 2009; Schroeder 1998, 2002, 2006b, 2008, 2010; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998, 2005; Schroeder and Zwick 2004).

Many studies draw upon semiotics, as discussed in Norah Campbell's chapter 'The signs and semiotics of advertising' (Chapter 8, this volume). Some work is interdisciplinary, combining several or all of the above, under the rubric of 'critical visual analysis' (Schroeder 2006b), such as the analysis of an advertising campaign for a brand of rum that used the imagery of vampires to communicate meaning (Schroeder 2002). After describing the ad, Schroeder (2002) addresses the possible associations of power, danger, and mystery of the image with the product. He then employs discursive analysis to link vampires with blood, infection, death, and blood diseases like AIDS to show that advertising produces meaning beyond the product, brand, or experience that is being advertised.

Images convey an ideological stance – what consumers notice, attend to, interpret, and value. Advertising campaigns often rely upon photographic images, and therefore research by Schroeder and others on advertising images also notes the linkages between representation, photography, consumption, and identity. As Schroeder (2002) contends, photography is an essential visual information technology in advertising, in particular, and in everyday life, in general. Photographs are often considered objective, visual records, and, with the advent of digital photography, consumers can easily and instantly create and share these photographic experiences that represent their identities with other visual consumers (and organizations). Photography is a powerful agent in shaping consumers' view of the world, yet its power is often invisible to those who use it (Schroeder 2012). For example, Schroeder's (2012) work illuminates how snapshot imagery that portrays consumers in what appears to be real, spontaneously captured, everyday life experiences are, in reality, posed and carefully controlled by the organizations that use the imagery as a strategic tool in the marketplace.

Photographs are, however, constructions that are defined by cultural actors – photographers, advertisers, and consumers and by the culture in which they circulate and re-circulate. This present era, what Baudrillard (1993 [1976]) describes as the 'code-governed' phase of post-industrial capitalism or the third order of simulacra, is a period of reproduction in that signs are created and recycled over and over to signify disparate meanings. Images, signs, and symbols can have histories and can be put to use repeatedly to signify particular meanings for consumers who interpret them, such as in relation to cultural products (e.g., products, brands, and experiences). The act of reproducing images has been made easier with the advent of more and more sophisticated technology. Critical theorist Walter Benjamin (1969) recognizes the implications of the process of reproduction in contemporary culture in his writings; namely, how new technologies, including cinema and photography, transform the traditional notions of originality and the cultural production process itself. These technologies are mediums of representation and reproduction. Berger also notes, 'Consequently, a reproduction, as well as making its own references to the image of its original, becomes itself the reference point for other images' (1972: 29). Today, contemporary organizations appropriate cultural referent systems from the past to develop advertising campaigns, products, brands, or experiences.

In the realm of art, consumption is predicated upon viewing images (Schroeder 2000, 2005, 2006a). Taking Renaissance art as an exemplar, Schroeder and Borgerson (2002) discuss how it, as a technology, enabled viewers to imagine themselves as subjects in artworks, having implications for the personal collection of art and for arts patronage. Renaissance artists appropriated earlier symbols and forms of Christian religious art. Visual theorist John Berger (1972) also traces visual representation from fifteenth-century painting to twentieth-century advertising. Much recent work has focused upon developing a 'visual genealogy' of contemporary images, showing how images can have meaning based on their construction and linkage to earlier images, technologies, and meanings (Borgerson and Schroeder 2003; Schroeder 2004; Schroeder and Borgerson 2002). For example, digital architecture, such as the Internet,

relies upon classical principles of physical architecture (Schroeder 2003), and photography is influenced by the representational conventions of painting (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002). In his analysis of a famous CK One fragrance advertising campaign, Schroeder (2002, 2006b) illustrates how the campaign images combine principles of group portraiture in Dutch painting and of fashion photography to signify a genderless brand and allow for ‘consuming difference’ (such as different multicultural identities and gender relations in advertising and branding campaigns).

Images, whether they are in the form of advertisements, products, brands, or experiences, serve as the ‘face of capitalism’ in the current period (Schroeder 2004). Through advertising, products and brands are linked to the performance of identity and of living (lifestyles), and therefore constructing a brand is a key to product success in the market (Schroeder 2002). In today’s world, consumers act as tourists, seeking out experiences, especially visual experiences, sights, and sensations in terms of their interactions with products, brands, advertising, services, and other types of consumption experiences (Schroeder 1998).

The productive consumption of products and brands

Turning to the role of products and brands in the processes of cultural production and image consumption, vision came to be linked with marketing in the selling of products, especially in the late nineteenth century with the advent of new consumer experiences and visual displays of merchandise. The first department store opened in Paris in 1852, based on outdoor arcades. Engendering desire through vision was central to the Great Exhibition of 1851. Inside the Crystal Palace, 100,000 goods were exhibited to showcase that all human life and cultural endeavor could be represented in manufactured goods (Meamber 1997a; Richards 1990).

Vision continues to assume a primary role in the material products in the marketplace (Meamber 1995, 2001). It is well established that companies, such as Apple, have achieved success over recent decades, in part through their design-based approach to marketing. ‘Design is often misunderstood by marketers or managers, who marginalize it as a cosmetic intervention or face lifting to a product ... With the aestheticization of everyday life, design becomes central to the innovation process’ (Carmagnola 1991, quoted in Cova and Svanfeldt 1993: 307). Koenenn (1997) writes that, in the contemporary world, consumers are sensitive to visual communications and thus design aesthetics is becoming a part of everyday objects. Konicus (2000) notes that home appliances are being designed with aesthetic appeal as a goal. In the current period, product design is concerned with the celebration of the image – ‘It is this image which, represented through the planned interplay of a multitude of signs, then reflects on the surface and becomes the “essence” that the consumer seeks in adopting a product’ (Firat and Venkatesh 1993: 232). In our research, my co-author and I found consumers can articulate the role of design in their purchase and consumption of products (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). The aesthetics of these products becomes a key factor in some consumers’ assessment of value.

Concerning the productive consumption of specific products, Borgerson and Schroeder (2006), for example, examine books as material and design artifacts. They find that used books challenge extant notions of consumer desire through the value consumers place upon the pleasures of consuming the (visual) content that appears outside of organizational (publisher, author) control. Using the Peter Pauper Press as the example, these authors decode these books as representing cultural storytelling during the Cold War era – allowing consumers to explore new cuisines and cultures, and to simultaneously gain cultural capital. While the study discusses many material aspects of book consumption, including collecting, gift giving, and selling, the authors also focus upon the visual consumption of the covers, inside content, and notes

made by other consumers. In particular, they show how owner inscriptions add meaning and aesthetic value to the book.

Physical products, such as the books of Peter Pauper Press are not only material objects that signify meaning, but also, in many instances, are subsumed under ‘brands.’ The word ‘brand’ comes from an Old Norse word meaning ‘to burn.’ Livestock owners mark (burn) their animals to identify them. In marketing, a brand refers to a name, symbol, or design, or combination of these, that distinguishes an organizational offering from others in the marketplace (Keller 2003). A brand, therefore, takes the discussion of product design one step further, in that a brand designates differentiation from other products, and this difference is often based on the brand alone. Yet, brands are more than just ways to identify products or the organizations that own them. Brands, because they are communicative, are also cultural, ideological, and political objects (Askegaard 2006; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006). Brands, especially powerful brands (strong or iconic), become ideological referents that shape culture, such as the way consumers ‘see’ life (Heilbrun 2006; Holt 2004; Schroeder 2009). Images are critical in brand building, and often products or brands are created to reflect particular images (Firat *et al.* 1994; Reynolds and Gutman 1984).

At the individual level, consumers can use the content of brands (images, symbols, signs) to construct, perform, and communicate identities (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Elliott 2004; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Wikström 1996). At the organizational level, brands serve as mediators between organizations and consumers, that is, vehicles by which organizations interact with consumers. Brand imagery colonizes and appropriates existing reference systems within culture, turning signs into myths designed to sell lifestyles (Schroeder 2005). At the cultural level, as Holt (2004) expresses, certain brands become iconic (strong or powerful) in consumer society because they serve as channels for expressing collective desire and for resolving tensions or collective anxiety. For example, research conducted over the last decade on the Hummer brand suggests that it expresses the desire of Americans to feel powerful and yet secure within a wide range of cultural, legal, economic, ecological, political, and social meanings (Luedicke and Giesler 2007; Lukas 2007; Meamber and Sussan 2009; Miller 2007).

Brands, as visual referents, can be, and have been, studied from various perspectives, including managerial, psychological, and interpretive perspectives, and with various tools developed to understand culture, politics, history, aesthetics, and ideology. Most recently, scholars have examined issues and processes that impact the productive consumption of the brand, such as culture, history, and ethics (Schroeder 2009). Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006) have advanced the idea of ‘brand culture’ to focus upon the role of historical and cultural codes that influence branding, its production, its productive consumption, meaning, and value. The study of brand culture, in conjunction with research on brand identity and brand image, provides a more complete portrait of the branding process as related to cultural production and productive consumption.

The brand culture concept occupies the theoretical space between strategic concepts of brand identity and consumer interpretations of brand image, shedding light on the gap often seen between managerial intention and market response, in other words, between strategic goals and consumer perceptions.

(Schroeder 2009: 124)

The productive consumption of everyday consumer experiences

In addition to the negotiation of brand meanings, everyday productive consumption experiences, such as shopping, tourism, and so on, are replete with visual organization issues.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) established that the consumption experience allows consumers to experience fantasy, feelings, and fun. Consumer experiences, much like advertising and branding, are often designed by organizations to engender particular meanings that can be taken and used or re-interpreted for identity projects. In the realm of shopping, research has focused on the nature of the shopping experience as being premised upon the idea of ‘gaze’ or the visual consumption of people and space, and its temporary pleasure (Brottman 1997), on how the space allows for resistance of predetermined meanings (Maclaran and Brown 2005), among other topics. For example, Schroeder (2011) discusses the evolution of self-service retailing and how this retail revolution alters the shopping experience to one that is more visually oriented. Consumers are required to look and recognize brands and products in order to shop and make purchases.

Other groundbreaking work on spatial aesthetics (e.g. Peñaloza 1998; Sherry 1998) examines consumers’ movement through space and interactions with the architecture, photographs, products, and other intertextual shopping displays, providing multi-sensorial but, above all, visual experiences. Shopping environments and other servicescapes often take mythologies and rework them to serve commercial aims and channel consumer experiences along certain lines. For example, Peñaloza’s (1998) paper on Chicago’s Nike Town illustrates how the design of the retail space and the displays produced materials for interpretation, which consumers drew from and productively consumed. Mythologies surrounding competition, peak performance, style, and recreational activity all were on display and readily consumed in the shopping experience.

Work on tourism has also addressed the visual aspects of consumption, such as my and my co-author’s visual ethnographic research on representations of culture and history at Disney, and how these representational practices have been applied at historical sites (Houston and Meamber 2011; Meamber 2011). The tourist experience itself has also been studied in relation to the visual practice of taking photographs (Schroeder 2002) as signaling expertise, insider knowledge, and elite tastes. Also fitting into the study of consumer experiences are papers by Borgerson and Schroeder (1997, 2002) on the marketing representations of Hawaii. These texts contribute to broadening the perspective of marketing to include the packaging of a place, in this case, an entire state. In this work, Borgerson and Schroeder (1997, 2002) discuss Hawaii itself, as a retroscape consisting of signs, sounds, and lifestyle that is visually, acoustically, and sensually consumed. In addition, Borgerson and Schroeder link their discussion to the constitution of culture via consumption. The authors apply critiques from art history and advertising to illustrate the colonizing discourse contained in these visual artifacts. These pieces together deconstruct the marketed image of Hawaii and its power to influence how consumers ‘see’ the place, and to make it attractive as a vacation destination.

Work on visual consumers and visual consumption has expanded in recent years. Yet, much more attention deserves to be paid to the analysis of visual images in marketing, and newer technologies for aesthetic, visual consumption, such as social media. In the final section of this chapter, I ask; what are the avenues for future research on visual consumers?

Image production and consumption: future research directions

Research on visual consumers and visual consumption is far from complete. The discipline of consumer research has examined images as stimuli engendering a consumer response, photography as a data-gathering tool, and, more recently, images themselves and their role in contemporary consumer culture and marketing. The use of images in marketing and consumer research has expanded over the last few decades beyond the subjects touched upon

in this chapter. For example, in the realm of art, in addition to exploring how art functions within the marketing system (Guillet de Monthoux 2000), scholars have used artists and artworks to look at branding and variety of other marketplace and consumption topics (e.g. Belk 1986; Ger and Belk 1995; Schroeder (1992, 2000, 2005, 2006a; Schroeder and Borgerson 2002; Witkowski 1996, 2004, 2010).

Similar to its use in understanding management (e.g. Bell 2008), researchers have often used film as material to unpack consumer behavior (e.g. Hirschman 1992, 1993; Hirschman and Stern 1994; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Kates 2000; Meamber and Sussan 2011), as well as to disseminate knowledge, such as the September 2005 and June 2007 DVD issues of *Consumption Markets & Culture*, and conference film festivals (Belk and Kozinets 2005, 2007). Research methodologies adopted by marketing and consumer scholars have also advanced to include images as data (e.g. Heisley and Levy 1991; Dion *et al.* 2011), images as visual metaphors (e.g. Zaltman 2003), the use of video diaries (e.g. Brown *et al.* 2011), and the use of visual ethnography (e.g. Houston 2007; Houston and Meamber 2011; Meamber 2011; Peñaloza 1998). In-depth discussions of photography and ethnography are also making their way into scholarship, such as Peñaloza and Thompson's chapter in this volume (Chapter 5).

Scholars of visual culture point out that there are many other domains outside of those traditionally addressed by organizational or consumption studies that rely upon the production and consumption of visual images that have yet to be studied. For example, Campbell and Schroeder (2011) identify law, science, technology, and mathematics as areas that deserve further attention. Images in these domains are also sites of productive visual consumption and of negotiated meanings. Already marketing and consumer scholars are redefining traditional ideas such as competition premised on the visual economy. Competition in contemporary consumer culture is predicated on images in the form of advertising, brand images, websites, and social media, all of which merit additional study.

In particular, the concept of value in the marketplace deserves further exploration as related to consumer empowerment versus enslavement (Firat and Dholakia 2006; Izberk-Bilgin 2010). For example, writing on value creation and the visual consumer, Schroeder (2011) highlights that, while scholars maintain that consumers are free to create or co-create the identities and meanings for themselves while engaging with the organizations, brands, and communities to which they belong (Fitchett 2004; Manolis *et al.* 2001; Vargo and Lusch 2004), some work suggests that consumers are 'aesthetic laborers' (or 'working consumers') who work for, and are exploited by, organizations that use consumer-generated images in advertising, on websites, and now through social media, without providing any compensation to these consumers (Cova and Dalli 2009; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Zwick *et al.* 2008). As long as images continue to drive the economy, marketing, and organizations, there are ample subjects for researchers to study.

Summary and conclusion

In summary, organizations employ signs, images, and symbols strategically – to communicate with its public through the images and cultural products offered in the market – including advertising campaigns, products, brands, and consumer experiences. In presenting current scholarship on cultural production and visual consumption of images in the marketplace, this chapter illustrated that meaning is generated through the interactive and interdependent processes of cultural production and what may be termed 'productive consumption,' in which the consumer is simultaneously both a producer and consumer of marketplace images. Productive consumption is an aesthetically oriented, dynamic process that occurs when the consumer

engages with (i.e. senses) organizational images, signs, and symbols and uses these to shape his or her identity and sense of the world. The meaning that the consumer creates depends on the image, sign, or symbol itself, its cultural history, referents, associations, and intended purpose, the organizational goals, as well as the consumer's background, interests, and social constraints. This means that the consumption is a productive act, and to consume is not merely 'to use up' as its etymology and traditional definitions suggest.

In the current era, sources of value for organizations and consumers include the visual, sensory content of cultural products offered within the market. The cultural production and productive consumption of this visual aesthetic material by consumers may be considered of value to both the consumer and the organization. In today's world, the visual dominates our experience of life and how consumers interact with the organization through its offerings. The study of images, and the interactions and power relations between consumers, cultural products, and organizations to produce value is paramount to our understanding of the aesthetic age now, and for the time to come.

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