SPECIALTY MAGAZINES AND FLIGHTS OF FANCY: FEEDING THE DESIRE TO DESIRE

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ABSTRACT - An increasing profusion of specialty consumer magazines crowds the newstands, supermarkets, and mailboxes of the more economically developed world. Based on qualitative interviews and journals investigating how we use these magazines, this study presents a simple, but compelling and important finding: we use specialty magazines to inflame our consumer desires. Quite at variance with marketer concerns about breaking through consumers' perceptual barriers in a world of advertising clutter, the present findings suggest that readers seek out, relish, study, and dwell upon both the advertising and consumption-focused editorial material of specialty magazines, expressly in order to find new objects to wish for, long for, and desire. In doing so, these readers also celebrate their commitment to an intense specialized consumption interest and to the virtual community of others who share this passion. This study explores this cultivation of desire and considers the revisions it necessitates in our understandings of consumption.

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An increasing profusion of specialty consumer magazines crowds the newstands, supermarkets, and mailboxes of the more economically developed world. Based on qualitative interviews and journals investigating how we use these magazines, this study presents a simple, but compelling and important finding: we use specialty magazines to inflame our consumer desires. Quite at variance with marketer concerns about breaking through consumers' perceptual barriers in a world of advertising clutter, the present findings suggest that readers seek out, relish, study, and dwell upon both the advertising and consumption-focused editorial material of specialty magazines, expressly in order to find new objects to wish for, long for, and desire. In doing so, these readers also celebrate their commitment to an intense specialized consumption interest and to the virtual community of others who share this passion. This study explores this cultivation of desire and considers the revisions it necessitates in our understandings of consumption.

Lastly Criminale would turn to the advertisement pages, which for some reason seemed to give him the greatest delight. 'Sale at Bloomingdales,' he would suddenly announce. 'Sepulchra, look, a big deal on bras I think would very much interest you.' 'Not like these,' he would say, 'Ah, special offer on garden recliners.' 'No garden,' Sepulchra would say. 'Ninety-nine cents off tin of peas,' he would say, 'Life of Michael Dukakis reduced. Ah, shopping, shopping, shopping.' 'You seem very interested in shopping,' I risked saying once, looking up from some article on the growing Gulf crisis that I was reading. 'Of course,' he said, 'At the theoretical level only.' 'He never buys a thing,' said Sepulchra. 'You see, now sexual eroticism is exhausted, this is the one eroticism we have left. ...we know so much about the body now it has nothing else left to give. But shopping, now that is different.'(Bradbury, 1992).

The observation that consumer desire is a state of enjoyable frustration and longing (Campbell 1987, p. 86) and a key form of contemporary eroticism suggests that as consumers we have a "desire for desire" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 394) and accordingly strive to multiply, expand, and deepen our desires for consumer goods. Desires to desire are sometimes called second-order desires and are thought by Frankurti (1971) to be an essential feature distinguishing between persons and other creatures. Sontag (1978, p. 45) precedes Campbell (1987) in suggesting that these intense longings to feel desire are born of contemporary romanticism, prompted by our feared inabilities to feel any emotion at all. Prominent ways to intensify consumer desires include window shopping (Benjamin 1970; Bowby 1985), browsing (Bloch and Richins 1983b; Bloch, Ridgway, and Sherrell 1989), film viewing (Doane 1987; Friedberg 1993), pondering the "wish books" of mail order catalogues (Carrier 1995; Schlerieth 1989), Internet surfing (Miller and Slater 2000), and contemplating consumer magazines with advertisements and articles about our areas of special interest (Bloch and Richins 1983a; Graham 1985). Although all of these sources of stimulation continue to fire our imaginations and consumption fantasies, my focus in this study is on specialty magazine consumption in the United States. Jarrell (1992) observes:

When one finishes reading Holiday or Harper's Bazaar or House and Garden or The New Yorker or High Fidelity or Road and
The vicarious fantasy mode of consumption is an anticipatory phase that Rudnick (1989, p. 145) calls "brain shopping." The specialty magazine seems a near-perfect vehicle for such fantasizing because its periodical nature, together with "the cult of the new" (Leach 1993), can continually serve to invigorate, enrich, and renew our desires with ever more objects for further wishes. A general hunger for more and better is crystallized into a vivid fantasy involving specific new goods.

Starting a century ago, popular American consumer magazines helped fuel consumer desires for new fashions, furnishings, foods, homes, and entertainments, as more Americans joined the middle class consumer society in which they were increasingly embedded. These general interest magazines focusing on home, family, women, youth, and popular culture, helped provide images of more luxurious and conspicuous consumption for the new middle class to emulate, while nourishing a dream of pervasive abundance (Belk and Pollay 1985; Lears 1994; Schneier 1994). They instructed people "how to dress, to furnish a home, the wines to put away, the cheeses to cultivate" (Bell 1957, p. 283).

But predictably, in a later period of increased affluence, market fragmentation, and niche marketing, thousands of specialty magazines have emerged to cater to the interests of narrower consumer subcultures. Whether the consumer's interest lies in personal computers, sports cars, mountain bikes, classical music, camcorders, tennis, tattoos, Barbie Dolls, needlepoint, guitars, gourmet foods, snowboarding, or African art, there are numerous periodicals to serve, cultivate, and nourish these interests. By 1969 there were already over 22,000 such publications (Ford 1969) and by 1997 there were 40,000 in the U.S. alone. Moreover, readers of these publications are eager, thorough, and ardent consumers of the articles, photographs, and advertisements so lavishly presented in their favorite specialty magazines. Once we learned from general circulation magazines how to embrace a general culture of consumption, we now learn from specialty magazines how to embrace specialized consumption communities.

In order to investigate such uses of specialty magazines, I first had 32 undergraduate and 25 graduate university students write their specialty magazine readership autobiographies addressing a skeletal agenda of topics involving their use of these magazines. The students (trained in depth interviewing procedures) then conducted, recorded, and transcribed interviews covering a related agenda with a convenience sample of non-student readers of special interest magazines. The resulting sample of 196 (combining autobiographies and journal transcriptions) is biased toward young males with nearly half in their twenties and 61% male. Both past and present magazine reading were probed, but this analysis concentrates on present reading. Although the consumption of specialty magazines was found to serve multiple purposes including enhancing knowledge, ideas, skills, and self-definition, as well as providing vicarious enjoyment and hero worship opportunities, the focus of this paper is on the role of these magazines in stimulating our desires to purchase equipment, services, and accessories in the area of focal interest. This role was found to be pervasive among the present sample of readers.

SOME CONSUMER USES OF SPECIALTY MAGAZINES

Reading magazines devoted to an activity or topic that is the reader's major area of avocational interest, is an enthralling and engrossing act. It is far more powerful, emotional, and all-embracing than envisioned by cognitive models that frame magazine reading as an attempt to gain information to facilitate better product choices. Instead, readers relish, absorb, read, and re-read these magazines with joyful and studied enthusiasm. Many claim that they read every word in multiple periodicals in their area of special interest, and then save these magazines for years of future use. Reading them is a favorite leisure activity and is often used as a self-reward or regarded as a treasured time for self. In reading these publications people feel part of a "virtual community" (Reingold 1993) of those who share their enthusiasm, even if they do not personally know anyone with similar interests. Reading can also be seen as a ritual act of identification, an attempted acquisition of esoteric cult knowledge, and a veneration of cult heroes and sacred secular objects featured in the magazine. In this process of study and worship, it appears that desire is born, reborn, nourished, and sustained. Three types of emergent consumer desires were detected in this study: hopeful fantasies, hopeless fantasies, and enchanted illusions.

Hopeful Fantasies

For almost all readers to some degree and for some more than others, reading magazines in their area of special interest is an exercise in fantasy consumption that they hope will translate into actual consumption some day in the future. For example, one single woman who is now 19- years-old has been reading Bride magazine since she was 14, all the while using it to plan her wedding. She keeps a bridal file of clipped pictures of dresses, flowers, and hairstyles, although a bridegroom has not yet appeared. The use of the specialty magazine in this case was to plan a magical wedding by constructing a specific material wish list. Forming such wish lists, whether implicitly or explicitly, appears to be a significant but neglected process of consumer behavior (Belk 1988; Belk and Zhou 1987; Fournier and Guiry 1993).

In another case a 24-year-old woman saw her use of fashion magazines as

For some people the purchase desires are beyond their current economic grasp, that is part of the attraction. As a woman who is an avid reader of bicycle publications explained, she likes the advertisements for outrageously unaffordable bikes "because they help you to dream big."
In part, there is simply a keen interest in improving equipment and performance shown here. For example, another mountaineer explained that:

Mountaineering equipment is becoming increasingly high-tech, both in materials and design. I take my hobby very seriously.
But even in this pragmatic account, note the naturalizing transformation of wishes and wants to needs. Such transformations appear common in a consumer society (Finkelstein 1989, p. 119; Shabad 1993). Others read advertising and equipment reviews to reduce cognitive dissonance about purchases they have already made (a form of reenchantment). Besides reading advertising for brands they have purchased, they look for photographs or other media using "their" brands and equipment reviews that obfusciously flatter these brands and those who buy them. One man who reads mountain bike magazines even reported using a magnifying glass to try to discern the brand of sunglasses being worn by riders shown when he thinks it may be the brand he wears.

For many however, the main point of reading these magazines is to find new things to desire and buy; new sources of anticipated pleasure. One woman estimates that her purchase rate of compact discs has doubled since she started subscribing to Rolling Stone magazine. The desire to desire was most evident in those who seek "neat stuff" to buy. People with an avid interest in an activity like skiing, woodworking, or mountain biking are not satisfied simply to buy equipment and enjoy using it with no further purchases. Instead the association of buying equipment with deriving great pleasure from using it, seems to lead these enthusiasts to try to replicate this pleasure with further purchases of additional equipment, accessories, and embellishments. The equipment, transformed by brand advertising and laudatory reviews, comes to be seen as the key to transcendental pleasure. A further way to implement this formula is to upgrade equipment. If buying a low or mid-priced piece of equipment provided pleasure, the inference seems to be that buying more expensive equipment will provide even greater ecstasy by enhancing performance, elevating status, or simply relying the enthusiasts' love for their special interest. It provides something to yearn for and believe in. It brings the buyer that much closer to perceived perfection in both equipment and self. At the same time, a purchase in the reader's field of special interest is an act of affirmation, commitment, and devotion. Martin, a 58-year-old avocational duck hunter, recently bought an expensive new shotgun and a duck sculpture he had seen in the duck hunting magazine whose logo is emblazoned on both of these objects. He explained that, "These publications reflect everything I live for at this moment in my life." If having a special interest infuses consumption with meaning and joy, then to buy things that serve this interest is to live. Conversely, to stop buying is to allow the interest, and perhaps the person, to wither and die.

As a result of such an outlook, a number of those studied are self-admitted "gear heads" or "equipment freaks." They cannot get enough "neat stuff." And once their immediate desires have been fulfilled by buying these things, they can count on still more and better "neat stuff" in the next issue. One 25-year-old bicycle enthusiast who also works in a bicycle store recognized that his interest had become an obsession: "That's why I quit reading bike magazines. It got too expensive to need all that nice stuff." He also described a male customer of 30 who had come into the store recently asking, "Do you have any really trick new gear that is outrageously expensive and that I just have to have?" This customer seemed to feel that the more he spent the greater was his act of devotion; the greater would be his pleasure from using the object, and the greater would be the admiration and envy of other devotees. For many others who come into this bike shop, their desires are already fixed on a certain "trick" new component that has caught their fancy in a bicycle magazine article, review, or advertisement. They come to temporarily quench these aroused desires.

Metaphors of Desire

The desire in such cases is described by some as not unlike sexual arousal (see Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996). Heart rate and blood pressure increase and pupils dilate in looking at images and reading descriptions of the latest goodies. For the men and women who seek out images of the desiderata in their areas of special desire, no pornography or romantic story could be any more exciting than the "neat stuff" they covet. These objects act as "yuppie porn" (Handy 1988) for those who have sought them out in specialty magazines. Recall the man who by-passes pornography stores in order to stop at the local outdoors store after work, where he can "lust, drool, and fantasize" about equipment he has seen in the latest outdoors magazine and Sepulchra's view of shopping as eroticism in this article's epigraph. The male gaze and tourist gaze (Urry 1990) are replaced in consumer gaze, and specialty magazines become vehicles for consumer auto-eroticism.

A second frequent metaphor for the consumer desire inspired by these magazines is thirst or hunger. Hal, a 48-year-old computer enthusiast explained that computer magazines are his nourishment: "It is food for the spirit. We need to eat for our stomach, so we need knowledge for our brain." Others spoke of "devouring" the latest issues of specialty magazines and of "drooling over," "thirsting for," and "hungering for" the objects found within. Besides sexual arousal and thirst or hunger, a third appetitive metaphor used in describing the desires formed in specialty magazine reading is addiction. This is seen for instance in the bicycle store employee who had to quit reading bike magazines in order to avoid uncontrollably spending all of his income on bike paraphernalia and in the woman who is so powerfully drawn to magazine racks in search of new issues of fashion magazines every mid-month. The magazines in these instances act as a fix rather than as a more positively characterized excitation to lust or hunger. And a final set of metaphors for desire which emerged is that of religious and secular love, devotion, and worship. Readership rituals, feelings of symbolic communion with other aficionados, and loving acts of reverence and sacrifice, suggest that specialty magazines often serve as inspiring sacred texts. In this instance, however, the sacred text is rewritten each month and new objects of devotion are continually revealed and heralded.

CONCLUSION

While hopeless fantasies reflect the possibility of disillusionment and the addiction metaphor suggests enslavement to desires, these negative aspects of specialty magazine readership are the exception rather than the rule. Because the specialty magazines that rose to prominence in the Twenty-First-Century are focussed on people using "their" magazine through personal interest or on enhancing personal appearance, they virtually all (including even exercise and Sadium/Masochism publications) emphasize the general theme that indulgence and pleasure are good. The person who buys these magazines implicitly subscribes to and endorses this pleasure ethic. While reading and poring over each issue is pleasurable, it is for most readers not enough. It only whets their appetite for more; indeed fulfilling appetitive desires is the raison d'être for many to read the magazine. The whetted appetite is also not sufficiently slackened by simply engaging in the focal activity. For readers in our consumer society, a key part of the worship ritual within their area of recreational interest is desiring and buying the "neat stuff" encountered in the latest issue of their favorite magazine.

And if the consumer desires stimulated cannot quite be afforded, this may be better still. For the state of desire and longing is exciting, stimulating, and, for most, is a state of hopeful anticipation which, when it is ultimately realized, will soon be rekindled by a new object of desire that surely awaits in a forthcoming issue. During the interim state of unfulfilled desire, consumer scan vicariously rehearse the bliss that they hope will one day be theirs, actively plan for accomplishing this magical purchase, and enjoy the sacrifices that may be needed to do so. For this is the magical dream state sought by readers like the woman who reads advertisements in bicycle magazines because they help her to "dream big." Through creating intense excitement, consumer fantasies, and the illusion of purchasable pleasure, the specialty magazine has come to act as a perpetually renewable fountain of desire. Far from being feared as an evil enticement to lust, gluttony, avarice, and covetousness, we buy and subscribe to these magazines expressly to cultivate these desires. Thus do the impassioned rhetoric and luscious visual images of these magazines, express, nourish, and sustain our desire to desire. Although some prior treatments have focused on the effect of magazines in stimulating women's desires (e.g., Beetham 1996; Currie 1999; McCracken 1993, Scanlon 1995, Winslip 1987), this study suggests that men are equally susceptible.
It cannot be ascertained from the present purposive sample of specialty magazine readers how prevalent the self-cultivation of consumer desires through such magazines may be. But of the 57 students completing the journal portion of the study, only two had difficulty identifying specialty magazines that they read. The portion who reported intentionally discovering and avidly wanting products encountered in these magazines was about three of every four. Whether or not such numbers are representative of specialty magazine readers generally, it is clear that intentional auto-awfulness of consumer desires in this way is widespread. This accords with work on self-gifts (e.g., Mick and DeMoss 1990; Mick 1996; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1995), but it challenges dominant views that see consumers as either searching for information only when needed for a planned purchase or else developing strategies to resist the temptations that confront them (e.g., Ainsley 1985; Hoch and Lowenstein 1991). Far from resisting temptations, these consumers read specialty magazines (and no doubt use other sources of stimulation as well) specifically in order to find new and better things to wish for, want, and own. Far from resisting advertisers’ appeals and ignoring their messages, they hang on every word and image and return to these ads repeatedly, as if they were religious scholars studying a sacred text. And far from a cultivated equilibrium of consumer satisfaction balanced between rationality and passion (Sherry 1990), they seek a frenzied madness in the market and relish allowing their desires to run wild (see Bakhtin 1984; Buttimer and Kavanagh 1995). All of this suggests revision in dominant understandings of consumption and further work on consumer fantasies, dreams, wishes, and illusions. In an affluent postmodern consumer society, we find our inspiration for these fantasies not only in specialty magazines, but in other media as well as theme parks, shopping malls, and gambling meccas (Belk 1996; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Rook 1988). Accordingly, investigating the processes through which our consumption fantasies are acquired, nourished, sustained, fulfilled, and frustrated should be an important part of our agenda in consumer research.

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