

Consumerism in the 1950's



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Stephanie Wilks His 1050 Sec 201 April 10, 2010 Roland Marchand and Kelly Schrum: Critical Analysis of Consumerism Post WW II American was a place full of optimism and fear. The American people had survived 20 years of depression and war to find new prosperity and an increase in mass production of goods and services that improved quality of life. This meant better times for Americans, but fears over the Cold War, threat of an evermore intrusive American government and loss of individualism existed as well.

These high expectations and anxieties played a great deal into how people consumed. Eventually these factors combined with aggressive advertising marketing, with the help of media (mainly TV), led to the emergence of a whole new market, teenagers. In Roland Marchand's "Visions of Classlessness" and Kelly Schrum's "Making the American Girl", the authors discuss the factors such as, effects of television, mass consumption, and increased income, which led to this new markets and some of the problems that came from it.

In "Visions of Classlessness", the main point that Marchand's make is that after WW II American people envisioned a society where class was no longer an issue. Everyone would be on an equal level with an equal opportunity to achieve as much as they wanted to. Instead of this "dream of a technological utopia" (Marchand, 102) becoming a reality, "the postwar world bought bureaucratic complexity, cold war insecurity, and a shrunken sense of individual mastery" (Marchand, 98). These feelings cause people to turn to popular culture to have a sense of personal control.

Popular culture worked to give a sense of classlessness, or homogeneity as Marchand puts it. Radio, newspapers and television, “ an even more powerful agent of of common popular culture” (Marchand, 99), worked to “ nationalize and homogenize” (Marchand, 100) the American people to make everyone believe that they too were riding a new wave of prosperity, even if they really weren't. While television did lead America toward classlessness, advertising on the television pulled people into redefined classes.

With advertising on the television, every family could see the same products. This was not always true of magazines, where magazines were geared towards specific people (ie Seventeen for teenage girls). But everyone saw the same ads, which caused competition among neighbors. One family would get a new appliance, and then their friends would want to get one as well. This scrambling for position in society created new classes. Not everyone had enough money to buy a new oven or refrigerator, which caused bitterness and widened the gap that was closing between people.

The old classes had been thrown out and new classes replaced them. People were now separated by possessions and in the quest to elevate status, people who couldn't afford these things took out loans they could not afford to back pay, which drove the poor deeper in debt and helped to further establish these new classes. With these new classes that had emerged, there was also a division in fashion, music, and literature tastes among the young and the old. Parents made more money and in turn, they had more money to give to their children.

Advertisers jumped at the chance to encourage this new found market to start spending their incomes on products that they were advertising. Some businessmen were able to foresee the buying power of the teenager market, but no one could see the unexpected results of this new market. Teens soon realized that they were being targets, as were their parents and this unwanted attention led some teens towards delinquency. Others started using their new status to try to make the world a better place.

As delinquency skyrocketed, the media tried to turn this into a profit. They made movies like, *Rebel without a Cause*, to show the angst in the youth of the time. With television as the "vehicle" (Marchand, 106), teenagers helped in the creation of rock'n' roll. This was another escape for teens that mass media used for profit. It also made popular culture aware of teen culture. While the youth thought they were being rebellious with their music and attitudes, they were really selling out or more true to the case, sold out by mass media, who gained huge profits.

Rock ' n' Roll and teen rebel movies were being made for teen and other movies and types of music and movies were being directed at adults. This specialized marketing was just another confirmation of the new classes that were taking shape in America. " Teen culture and rock " n" roll, however, were not the only signs in the late 1950s of a possible countermarch in popular culture away from homogeneity towards segmentation. " (Marchand, 108).

Although Schrum's " Making the American Girl" primarily deals with how Seventeen positioned teenage girls as a viable market to advertisers and

empowering these young woman to be responsible and well informed citizens, Schrum does make similar points in her essay that are found in Marchand's essay. An increase in income for teenagers from their parents, advertisers discovering this new market and targeting it directly and the market, teenagers, revolting against being targeted are strong parallels in both essays.

Schrum even touches on classlessness briefly by pointing out that to be effective in advertising to young women, *Seventeen* had to target a "homogenous readership whose members were likely to purchase similar products" (Schrum, 110). Schrum also goes deeper into how the magazine's advertisements, articles, and photographs attempted to mold the behavior, appearance, and mentality of adolescent girls, forming them into prim and proper young women whose sexuality was controlled and whose professional aspirations were suppressed (Schrum, 119).

The staff of *Seventeen* directed their attention towards female youth who represented a growing market for a range of specifically female teenager products. Concentrating primarily on efforts to socialize and harness the consumer potential of teenage girls, Schrum nevertheless points out that the content of the magazine was open to multiple interpretations and that it did not necessarily reflect the realities of many girls' lives (Schrum, 122). In conclusion, these essays deal with what the new possibilities for American people, especially teenagers, that were available in the postwar era.

Because of the new prosperity adults had, teenagers now had access to more income, which lead a big booming market for advertisers at the time.

The media and advertisers were able to capitalize off of teenagers by providing films and music that spoke to them, as pointed out by Marchand, but they also attempted to shape teenagers into what they thought American teenagers should be like, as pointed out by Schrum. The problems that came from teenagers realizing that they had been targeted were quickly turned into profit for mass media as well.