

Foucault's concept of the incitement: magazine analysis



Section One: Definitions

1) Commodification

Commodification occurs through a system of production that transforms goods and services without economic value into something that can be bought and/or sold. It is associated with a breakdown of differentiation whereby things that were once seen as unique are now viewed as standard and unexceptional. Essentially anything can be commodified such as products, labour, and social relationships (Mosco, 2009). An example of the commodification process is Hermes Birkin bags. These iconic purses have been around for decades and are sold at a range of prices from \$12, 000 to \$300, 000 at the company's retail stores. Spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a handbag may seem outrageous, but what's more is when compared to production costs, the profit of the future market value is tremendous. The manufacturing price of these bags can be categorized into materials, labour and transportation costs which estimably comes to a total of \$800 to make each bag. As consumers, we are so caught up in the status or label of a product that we do not realize how little some products cost to manufacture and the shockingly high prices we are willing to spend on them.

2)Pseudo Individuality

Pseudo individuality is a concept addressed within the theory of the ' culture industry' where individuals are given the illusion of choice. It is suggested that the culture industry disguises the eternal sameness of products and as consumers we are only given the impression of an original product through advertisers use of different images and slogans (Adorno & Horkheimer, <https://assignbuster.com/foucaults-concept-of-the-incitement-magazine-analysis/>

1979). In the case of popular culture and advertisements, an example of pseudo individuality can be seen with smartphones. Smartphones such as the iPhone, Samsung Galaxy or Google Pixel, are all disguising uniformity and sameness with the promise of innovation and improvement.

Smartphones are a product, mass-produced by large corporations who, each year, add a little new design or feature. These additions are made in the interest of getting the consumer to continuously spend money on the company's products, while also satisfying them with the idea that this product is unique and essential. Pseudo-Individualism affirms that advertisers are selling us a sense of independence and choice that are significant to our identities, "you can have whatever you want as long as it is on the menu" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979). Not only are we made to believe that we have a choice in our selections, but we are also socially predetermined to make these choices as well as urged to think that over time, we are in fact seeing products that have drastically upgraded from the model that came before it.

Section two: Short Answer

Quote:

"As with traditional labor, which the literature on work demonstrates brings a wide range of responses to the point of production, from full compliance to withholding labor power, the audience exercises power, but also like labor, it is power circumscribed within terms largely set by capital."

Vincent Mosco argues that the rise of capitalist control attempts to convert all labour processes into a unitary mode of production. By eliminating
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alternatives and forcing labour into a social relationship, it proceeds to take on the status of a commodity. In the chapter of his book entitled "Commodification: Content, Audiences, Labor" (2009), Mosco writes that "As with traditional labor, which the literature on work demonstrates brings a wide range of responses to the point of production, from full compliance to withholding labor power, the audience exercises power, but also like labor, its power is circumscribed within terms largely set by capital" (Mosco, pp. 138). In this quote, Mosco explains how although audiences and labour can decide when and how to activate their power, it is strategically limited to the conditions assigned by capitalist media industries who, also, use their programming to construct audiences. These companies produce audiences in specific demographically desirable forms for advertisers, advertisers then pay for and essentially have audiences delivered to them. This quote serves Mosco's argument because he wants to argue that labor is an active component in the process of commodification and part of that is one's ability to withhold it in a variety of individual or collective ways. However, they are actually under the ideological control of capital who convince markets to threaten audiences with the consequences of losing social contacts and being deprived of information from the media if they were to refuse their labour power. Therefore, Mosco maintains that consumers may think they have a choice when it comes to production labour, but, fundamentally, capital does have total authority over their decision making.

Section 3: Essay

" Apply Foucault's concept of the incitement to discourse to describe how a magazine of your choice simultaneously (a) subjugates the reader by
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prescribing a manner in which one must conduct oneself as a good subject and (b) allows the reader a sense of personal empowerment by inviting them to take up and express one's identity through the provided framework."

Repressive discourses have been circulating in western culture for centuries. Often, these discourses are devoted to female audiences, and many are based on how they can be the "ideal" woman. Magazines, along with countless other platforms in popular culture, issue advice on sex and relationships as a provocative form of public discourse. The meanings behind this advice become of interest in society as they contribute to the social interpretation of gender and sexuality. Through the lens of Michael Foucault's "Incitement to Discourse," this paper will analyze the advice columns on the topics of love, sex, and relationships from the iconic magazine, *Cosmopolitan*.

Foucault sees the "Incitement to Discourse" as a critical process in the history of sexuality, with separate systems in place. These include tactics to motivate people into talking about sex and new technologies that provided experts on the topic with the ability to address the sexuality of separate individuals. In this chapter of "The History of Sexuality," he states that the repression of sexuality first began in the seventeenth century. It ignited a restriction which caused even using the word sex, when referencing sexuality, to not be socially accepted. Within the spoken as well as written word, censorship was playing a more significant role than it ever had before." Where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 18). It <https://assignbuster.com/foucaults-concept-of-the-incitement-magazine-analysis/>

was expected that individuals would keep specific topics off limits and maintain the social norm to only speak about them in places and to people where it was deemed acceptable.

Confession, within Catholicism, is also discussed. The century-old ritual began to include what is now known as 'confessions of the flesh.' "Sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications...everything had to be told" (Foucault, 1987, pp. 19). Confession is a significant part of any culture and has a massive influence on one's actions and behaviour. The need to confess or express one's sins is a very powerful compulsion, which, along within the Catholic Church, can now be seen throughout peoples everyday routine.

The form of communication used within advice columns is that of questions and answers, one that is seen quite regularly throughout society. An anonymous inquiry is asked which discloses a problem and further information must be revealed for the question to be answered and the problem to be solved. Specifically, issues that surround the topic of sex expose a person's private fantasies, affairs, and desires; this admission of one's secrets very much mimics the structure of a church confessional. Foucault argues that confession plays a part in the most ordinary matters of daily life. Previously, sex was considered an object and was codified within a language of decency, as an authorized vocabulary, employing "a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor" (Foucault. 1978, pp. 17). Today, people confess their innermost thoughts, troubles and whatever else is difficult to discuss with their parents, loved ones, or a therapist. One admits things that <https://assignbuster.com/foucaults-concept-of-the-incitement-magazine-analysis/>

would otherwise be impossible to tell anyone else, things that people would write books or ask advice columnists about.

Examples from some Cosmopolitan issues are: " I had sex with my best friends boyfriend, and now we are in love. What should I do?" (Cosmopolitan, 2017), " I broke up with my boyfriend because his penis was too small, am I a monster?" (Cosmopolitan, 2018), " My boyfriend hinted that I should wear something racier in bed, but I am afraid he will not find lingerie sexy on me. What should I do?" (Cosmopolitan, 2016).

Avid readers of the magazine confess a multitude of private or secret issues to advice columnists. As they unburden themselves, the act of confessing allows topics like sex and relationships to be reconstructed. Customarily, the act of confession is made to a religious authority figure who will intervene by giving forgiveness, punishments, or judgments. This position of authority is assumed by advice columnists who adopt the expert role on a specific topic. Foucault states that institutions of societal power are encouraging more people to talk about sex, listen to discussions on the topic of sex, and are very much inclined to transform the discourse on sex. Confession makes ones sexual secrets known and then given to the columnist who will provide the reader with advice, an analysis, or a solution. When it comes to the advice given, some can be quite uplifting and positive. On the other hand, readers at times are told that they lack in certain areas and then will be prescribed to conduct themselves according to the advice given. In some instances, readers are encouraged to objectify themselves by placing their bodies on display for their partner.

This concept can be applied to how a magazine like Cosmopolitan would provide a framework of a topic such as sex within relationships. Most women are interested in engaging in sexual intercourse whether it be in a relationship that is casual or serious. Cosmo will frequently include articles and cover stories on the category of sexual intercourse and how to be your best at it. Cosmo's strategies of incorporating this type of information is not a coincidence; their goal is to reach a vast audience of women, specifically the "self-conscious woman" presuming the reader will prescribe themselves as such once they have read the articles. It is not uncommon to know that most women will pick up a magazine and instantly compare themselves to what they see or read. In the case of Cosmopolitan magazine, stories such as "Are You Satisfying His Burning Sex Needs?" or "So You Ate a Cupcake? 5 Moves To Burn It Off Fast!" not only appeal to the "self-conscious woman," but they construct her identity by highlighting the things she is most insecure about.

The many question and answer advice columns in Cosmo emphasize Foucault's point that "surely no other type of society has ever accumulated...a similar quantity of discourses concerned with sex. It may well be that we talk about sex more than anything else" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 33). The incitement to discourse on sex becomes a public confessional within the printed columns. Readers are given a peephole into another's sexual life. Collected in the pages of a socially accepted women's magazine, these racy advice pages are a form of communication in which sex can be discussed and analyzed publicly in the context of seeking guidance.

In conclusion, Foucault's discourses, when it comes to sex, correlate directly with how a woman's magazine such as Cosmo can create a precise framework for their female readers to express their identity through. Legitimized through the presence of a specialist or guide, advice columns enable individuals to convert otherwise taboo sexual matters into appropriate issues for a public discussion. Prescriptive discourses within Cosmo can be sufficient motivation for individuals to conform to meet the sexual expectations of an "ideal woman." However, according to Foucault, no one has absolute power. He argues that it should be the reader who decides how they will live and control their life. Therefore, though Cosmopolitan magazine is famous for their advice on sex and relationships, the reader, as the active subject, should have the power to ignore the guidelines for what a magazine is proclaiming to be the "perfect" woman.

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