ABSTRACT

HAVE IT YOUR WAY: AUDIENCE AND BRAND IDENTITY IN USER-GENERATED ADVERTISING

by Grant Lucas Gerlock

Digital media and Web 2.0 media properties have democratized the authorship of mass culture. At the same time sophisticated marketing strategies have harnessed the creative energy of users to contribute to tasks such as brand building. Through a critical analysis of user generated advertising, this thesis argues that users serve both a cultural and economic function. While users are empowered to create media and engage in social networks, their participation is also harnessed as the basis of the value of commercial web properties. Amateur web videos are analyzed in which users adopt the identity of the Burger King mascot. It is argued that the users’ performances serve their own cultural interests in manipulating mass images but also serve commercial interests in social branding. Future studies should further examine the socialization of users into participatory cultures and the blending of individuals and brands in digital identities.
HAVE IT YOUR WAY:
AUDIENCE AND BRAND IDENTITY IN
USER-GENERATED ADVERTISING

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CHAPTER 1: THE PLEASURE AND WORK OF USER-GENERATED ADVERTISING

The King is gone, but not forgotten. After a seven year revival as the face of the Burger King brand, the King mascot was again retired in May 2011 as the world’s second largest fast-food burger chain ended a marketing strategy publicized for its provocative imagery in order to adopt a more mainstream, product-based approach (Walker). In its time, The King was part of a marketing campaign that tested the boundaries of decency in advertising but was perhaps most notable for marking a paradigm shift in the way advertisers interact with audiences and how American consumers relate to brands.

In 2006, Time magazine decided its person-of-the-year was “You” (Grossman). The magazine was identifying the rise of Web 2.0 and its emphasis on interactivity and social networking. It was a nod to the rise of YouTube, MySpace, Wikipedia, and other sites where the content is user-generated. As Time’s Lev Grossman saw it, the trend was “about the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.” While many observers focused on the empowerment of users to create their own media, it took longer to notice something Burger King had already recognized in practice - that the democratization of media also meant users could be a powerful force for advertising. Burger King showed that creative users could be harnessed for the purposes of building the burger chain’s brand.

When Crispin Porter & Bogusky became Burger King’s lead ad agency in 2004, it set a new tone for the brand and made Burger King an innovator in online advertising. The Miami-based ad house brought back the King mascot from the 1970s, but with a new personality (Janoff). The former King was a family-friendly spokesman, similar to McDonald’s Ronald McDonald. The updated King of 2004-2011 was Ronald’s antagonist in every way. Instead of friendly, the new King might be described as creepy. It targeted young, millennial men with a crude, self-aware, and self-deprecating masculinity. This was the image expressed in a series of television ads. But from the time of its introduction, Crispin’s King also developed a following online where that same brand identity was reproduced in user-generated ads. Users have performed the King character in dozens of amateur videos across the web which now extend the King’s identity beyond its time as Burger King’s official brand image.
The example of the King is important because it represents an advance in the cultural and economic relationship among media industries, advertisers, and audiences. First, it demonstrates a change in the transaction between media producers and consumers. As the roles of producer and consumer have converged online, this transaction has reorganized around an ideology of participation. Second, the King videos reveal branding as a social process. The meaning of a brand image is less often simply a corporate creation. It is increasingly the result of a process of co-creation between advertisers and consumers within a structure of managed interpretation. Finally, the King videos and user-generated advertising illuminate the normalization of the “user” as a material consumer identity. It is an identity constituted by the ritual of participation and by an association with brands not just as symbols in daily life, but as part of a collage of digital self-representation.

The role of the user online is as often media producer as it is media consumer. Users are great creators of content from blogs and discussion forums, to Facebook groups and the vast user-generated video archives of YouTube. It is within this environment that the transaction conducted by the user has evolved from that of the traditional broadcast audience to one based on participation rather than consumption. The practice of user-generated advertising can be understood as an illustrative component of the participatory online media environment.

The television audience is constituted as a receptive commodity, primarily a consumer of advertising messages. Writing about television, Dallas Smythe details commercial media as a system where the audience is constituted as a commodity (253). Smythe argues the product sold by media corporations is not meaning or culture, but the attention of audiences attracted by television programs. Audiences are packaged as demographic segments of a consumer population and sold to advertisers interested in influencing the direction of their purchasing power. Sut Jhally and Bill Livant consider the act of watching on the part of the audience a form of productive economic labor. Until the audience watches there is no value in a television program (126). The work of watching constitutes the television audience commodity and creates the value of the audience’s attention as purchased by advertisers.

By comparison, the Internet user is constituted as a productive commodity, an active creator and connector of content. YouTube and Facebook sell advertising space in the same way television networks sell advertising time. Advertising continues to serve a role in structuring commercial media online. But the user is put in a different position than the broadcast audience.
Users are immersed in a social environment where they are empowered by digital media to not only consume media, but to create their own and to engage in a complete cycle of media and meaning making. It is an environment where greater levels of activity and participation come with social and cultural rewards for users, and economic rewards for their hosts. As Christian Fuchs argues, the productivity of the user is central to the user’s value in the new economic structure of commercial media online:

That producers conduct surplus-generating labour can also be seen by imagining what would happen if they were to stop using platforms like YouTube, MySpace and Facebook: the numbers of users would drop, advertisers would stop investing in them because no objects for their advertising messages and therefore no potential customers for their products could be found, the profits of the new media corporations would drop and they would go bankrupt. (148)

The Internet user performs the work of watching as well as the creative work of producing more content to be watched, and the work of networking that content across social media. The productive online audience has a direct hand in its own constitution as a commodity.

The shift in the transaction between media producers and consumers can be understood through the difference between the audience for a 30 second Burger King ad and the user who has created a 3 minute video as the King. The 30 second spot represents the moment at which the monetization of the television audience is complete and their attention has paid off for the advertiser. The user-generated video on the other hand represents both the user’s empowerment as a cultural agent through digital media and the user’s complete immersion within a commercial media structure where commodification is achieved through participation.

The next advance shown through the King videos relates to the symbolic exchange they represent. The videos are examples of not only how the meaning of a brand is constructed socially, but also how marketing strategies are designed to manage users’ interpretations of a brand.

In user-generated advertising, amateur media producers appropriate themes, motifs, slogans, and other aspects of brands and advertisements for their own cultural expression. As cultural icons, brands are part of the language of popular culture, imbued with meaning as symbols of social status but remade, as John Fiske describes, by audiences synthesizing mass culture into something of their own:
Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture. (*Understanding* 24)

For Fiske, the pleasure found in popular culture is for subordinate groups (such as the audience) to take the privilege of meaning-making away from dominant groups (such as media corporations) by relating a text to their everyday experiences. But as described above, the balance has shifted.

As in the case of the King, advertisers have demonstrated that they are willing to concede a degree of control over a brand in order to harness a degree of the cultural momentum that can be generated through user activity. Adam Arvidsson argues control over a brand’s interpretation limits that symbol’s value, because a brand’s value comes through its co-creation through social interpretation (35). This is what is accomplished through the King videos. As users perform their own interpretations of the King as a character and a brand, they sometimes contradict the codes and narratives put forth by the corporation itself but they nonetheless contribute to the social meaning of the brand and its position within the flow of meaningful cultural images.

User-generated content can be considered empowering for users as makers of their own media. User-generated *advertising* adds another layer. Or perhaps it is in user-generated advertising that the layers collapse. In user-generated advertising, in particular, there is what Mark Deuze calls a “continuous blurring between the boundaries of work, life and play, as well as between production and consumption” (259). While users are putting their own spins on popular images from the mass media, they are also practicing within a commercial media system that would commodify their work not only to generate advertising revenue but also to regenerate a brand’s social standing.

The last area where the King videos show an important advance in the relationship between users and brands is in the integration of brands in the performance of a material consumer identity online. The self-representation of a user is increasingly constituted around the demonstration of not only social engagement but economic engagement. Users own digital representations are formed around not only who they talk to but what they report buying, what they report liking, and where they report shopping.
Jhally and Livant call advertising perhaps the most influential institution for socialization into consumer culture based on the role of advertising in structuring the commercial media landscape and advertising’s influence in nearly every arena of life from sports to politics (127). Advertising is the space most identified with the communication of the symbolic identity of consumer objects. As Susan Willis argues, those objects are exchanged as much for their symbolic value as their actual use value (334). In many ways their symbolic representations have lost connection with their actual value as utilities of daily life. Instead consumer objects have been packaged as an exchange of symbols used to indicate something about an individual’s social status. Those symbols become part of an audience’s own understanding of how they relate to the things they consume, how they make their own meaning of consumer culture, and how brands and other media texts become wrapped up in personal consumer identities.

This is also demonstrated in user-generated advertising where there is an element of performance to the user’s reproduction and reinterpretation of brand images and advertising styles. Central to the Burger King videos that are analyzed in this thesis is the performance of an advertising character, a performance that begins to blur distinctions between self/brand, author/text, and consumer/commodity. This goes to the issue of how identities are constructed in consumer culture and how the positions of brands in every day life are normalized among the users who produced the videos. As users organize around Web 2.0 principles of participation, they are immersed within an environment designed to encourage and reward regular reporting of consumer activity (i.e. what I like, what I recommend, where I ate, what I’m reading). Such indicators not only endorse the reported brands but assist host sites in targeting advertising and show how the sites are structured around privileging particular expressions of consumer identity.

In examining user-generated advertising, one must recognize rewards of cultural production for users who create their own content. Likewise, one must identify the economic function of the users’ creations. While users appropriate brand images to their own ends as an active expression of popular culture, corporations also appropriate the productive capacity of users to capitalize on their cultural work. In this thesis I will examine user-generated advertising as an example of convergence culture, consider how it demonstrates the changing position of the audience as a commodity, and further analyze the tensions that arise in issues of authenticity, authorship, self, brand, identity, and commodity.
Cultural Studies and Political Economy

As new relationships between users and brands break down traditional categories of producer and consumer, traditional divides within the field of media studies also break down. Cultural studies and political economy both offer informative perspectives on these new relationships, but in order to gain a complete view of the user’s position in an evolving media environment one must draw from both disciplines to form a more nuanced view of the cultural and economic functions users serve, particularly through practices such as user-generated advertising.

Traditional roles of broadcaster and audience have collapsed into modes of digital participation online. At the same time, some aspects of the traditional roles of advertiser and consumer are being reconstituted for an online audience. These shifts have not gone unnoticed by media scholars, but scholarship tends to continue to fall across traditional divides in the field. Cultural theorists detail the increasing empowerment of Internet users as their own producers of media and culture. Political economists have shown new ways in which Internet media corporations exploit audiences as sources of marketing data and producers of content. If cultural studies scholars tend to see participatory media as empowering media users to create culture, political economists tend to see participatory media as a way for corporations to create market value from the creativity of users. This thesis approaches the problem of describing the position of the audience in a web-based, participatory media landscape from both cultural and economic perspectives.

The direct engagement of Internet users is fundamental to the way Web 2.0 social media giants such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter do business. Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins calls it “convergence culture,” a system of user practices based upon a preconceived anticipation for openness, an expectation for interactivity, and a desire for participation:

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public. (Convergence 18-19)
Jenkins views the emerging online environment of participatory culture as a battleground where technology is used as a democratizing tool to drive a bottom up development of media which give users more control over access and content.

But as participation has become a defining element of online media, other scholars have critiqued the way online media have made user participation the basis of their economic structure. Mark Andrejevic asks whether expectations that the Internet might be controlled from the bottom-up ignore the influence media corporations have had on the formation of Web 2.0. He describes a productive exchange between online services and their users:

> Capturing the value of user-generated activity, in this context, entails enclosing the means of its production: that is to say, the networks and databases upon which such activity relies. Ownership of the infrastructure for online communication, shopping, socializing, and information access allows companies like Google, Amazon.com, Facebook and so on, to set the terms of access whereby users surrender control over personal information.

(“Critical” 47)

Andrejevic suggests that the means of participatory culture appear to users as services when they are actually exchanges of access for information. For Andrejevic, the bright light of interactivity obscures the realignment of online economic structures to reflect those of “old” broadcast media where audiences are managed as commodities.

So are Internet users in charge or being taken advantage of? Are users the new masters of the Internet or are they indentured workers for a master who is never satisfied by the quantity or quality of their work? These dichotomies illustrate how from these polarized perspectives, both cultural studies and political economy break down in the analysis of a complex realignment of cultural and economic interests through participatory Web 2.0 media.

The Web 2.0 culture of participation, engagement, and connectedness is at once a paradigm and a paradox. On the one hand, it provides new ways for users to engage culturally. Web 2.0 is the way users make communities online. On Facebook, users have access to make “friends,” make identities, and form groups around common interests. YouTube serves as a forum of user expression where media texts are manipulated and archived by users who upload, consume, and comment. On the other hand, Web 2.0 provides new ways commercial media to monetize user activity. It is a way of commerce where users’ preferences, interests, and activities are mined for their demographic value to be used in narrowly targeted advertising and marketing
strategies. The sites where users find the greatest opportunity for participation and interactivity are often managed by the media companies that are able to take the most value from their activity.

Scholars must adopt a broader view to recognize both the economic and cultural aspects of user activity online. Detlev Zwick et al. begin to capture both the economic and cultural perspectives of Web 2.0 when they describe the relationship between users and online media companies as co-creation, a system that encourages an active, creative, participatory culture among internet users while working to place it under a corporate structure where it can be harnessed for its economic productivity (168). While user productivity is often expressed as a form of resistance against a dominant producer/consumer relationship or a way for media audiences to make their own space for creativity, Zwick et al. suggest marketers have shifted their strategy to turn the oppositional productivity of users into a creative resource for media corporations.

Web 2.0 media properties and their users operate under what you might consider a series of cultural and economic terms and conditions that go beyond democratization and exploitation. Users will only accept conditions which recognize them as active cultural agents, while host sites set terms of access which allow them to manage that cultural activity to accommodate their economic interests. The system balances on the unique convergence of these economic and cultural forces.

In a system of “old media” such as television, scholars differed on whether audiences were a commodity created by media corporations, or a phantom demographic that made its own meanings from what it was given in mass culture. In new media this dialectic is renewed as scholars differ on whether users are a creative threat to media companies or whether they are an exploited cultural commodity. In the case of the King videos, this raises questions of whether the users who created the videos are empowered by Web 2.0 media in the circulation of their own interpretation of the brand or exploited by Burger King in its unpaid promotion. Rather, these videos represent the complex balance between the cultural and economic embodied in the user as both cultural and economic agents. To trace the line these users walk I will draw from both cultural studies and political economy in order to come to a fuller perspective.
Literature Review

As user-generated content has become part of the mainstream vernacular of Internet users, media scholars have worked to take account of its implications for mass communication. Some describe Internet users as taking control of production and user-generated content as a practice with democratic potential, freeing authorship from the dominant classes and opening new channels of communication and sharing among people.\(^1\) Others have been skeptical of this view, focusing on how these new media practices are intertwined with shifting economic and power structures in media and culture production.\(^2\) The views put the concept of an active audience against the idea of a commodity audience. But more recent work recognizes that both concepts serve a role in describing the current online media environment.

Henry Jenkins includes user-generated content as an example of convergence culture. What is so exciting and profound to Jenkins is the extent to which users are able to exert control over their media environment. Jenkins describes the Internet as a tool which users utilize to shape their own media experience: organizing content, giving feedback and reacting to the feedback of others, networking around issues of importance, and sharing entirely new forms of creative work. For Jenkins, participation is political. It means a shift from corporate to individual control, a shift from a top-down to a bottom-up flow of information and culture. While he recognizes concerns over media conglomeration and consolidating powers over intellectual property, he believes the collective and communal power of media consumers has the potential to disrupt the concentrated powers of the media industries (*Convergence* 259).

Axel Bruns also finds democratic opportunities in a media system where users have more control over what they see and how they see it. He terms it *produsage*, where the “production of ideas takes place in a collaborative, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users and well as producers of information and knowledge (“Towards Produsage” 276). Bruns even imagines a produsage politics where a collective political sensibility could undermine the concentrated power of modern political parties (“Produsage” 27-29). Bruns admits these to be utopian ideals and not foregone conclusions of participatory culture online. But he does see them as models

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\(^1\) For examples see Jenkins, *Convergence* 17; Bruns, “Towards Produsage” 275; Muñiz, Jr. and Schau 35.

\(^2\) For examples see Andrejevic, “Critical” 36; Fuchs 142; and Zwick et al. 185.
worth pursuing, and possible to achieve through broad-based, grassroots participatory movements.

Under these models, user-generated advertising could be seen as a challenge to a top-down consumer culture. Corporate branding narratives could be undermined as consumers construct their own cultural meanings for brands and products. Users could appropriate brand images from mass media, manipulating them with their own digital media technologies to create alternate versions, refracted through their own personal consumer lenses. An alternative consumer consciousness could be organized to deconstruct dominant corporate images through collective knowledge and action.

Such utopian predictions have come under attack from scholars like Mark Andrejevic who argues it is wrong to suggest that a transformation in the consumer media environment should lead to a transformation in social relations. Drawing from Bruno Latour, Andrejevic suggests that as modes of resistance shift, so too may the strategies for control to the point where forms of “challenge, suspicion, and deconstruction that once posed a threat now help to fuel strategies of control” (“Critical” 37). Forms of resistance may serve to reinforce the status quo. Therefore, Andrejevic suggests that instead of looking at the ways interactivity empowers Internet users, scholars should examine how media industries use interactivity to “manage audiences and channel their activities” (“Critical” 42).

Fuchs, and Zwick et al. each describe strategies which they classify as examples of the exploitation of consumers’ creative labor through participatory practices. Zwick et al. describe a system of co-creation, a re-organization of corporate power where marketers embrace the empowered consumer and create new platforms for managed participatory consumer activity. What may appear to be oriented to comply with consumers’ demands of access and interactivity is actually designed to leverage consumer creativity and innovation (168). Fuchs points out that mainstream web sites which depend on user-generated content (i.e. MySpace, Facebook, YouTube) are also commercial media companies. For such sites, revenue is directly associated with the activity of users. As users are more engaged in producing and consuming content, sites can charge more for advertising. Fuchs argues this creates a category of media consumer that “does not signify a democratization of the media toward participatory systems, but the total commodification of human creativity” (149).
From this perspective user-generated advertising takes on an entirely different timbre. Using digital media technologies to repurpose a corporate brand for a consumer media production may actually create more value for the brand. Participatory culture is identified as a possible strategy for consumer management, not a grassroots power grab. Empowerment is tied to exploitation rather than resistance.

To a large degree the different positions media scholars have taken on user-generated content and participatory culture online are drawn from traditional divisions in the field of media studies between the study of the reception and the study of the production of media and culture. While cultural studies research commonly focuses on the interpretive stance of the active audience, political economy has often focused on the position of the audience commodity.

The active audience is central to the cultural studies tradition. John Fiske defines popular culture as the meaning consumers make from mass media texts on an everyday basis. In *Reading the Popular*, Fiske argues that the culture industries do not impose mass culture, they provide a collection of texts from which consumers actively select in order to construct their own. It is an act of resistance in which the subordinate “exert control over the meanings of their lives” (10). For Fiske, the power of symbols and language exceeds the economic power of products and commodities. Fiske’s arguments on the politics of consumption draw from the work of theorists like Stuart Hall, Pierre Boudieu, and Michel de Certeau. Hall describes the audience as an active body of media consumers always interpreting mass media from the contexts of their everyday experiences (166). De Certeau articulates the importance of understanding the culture of everyday life; finding cultural value in the mundane, not just the resistive cultural practices of subordinate groups (431). Bourdieu critiques the distinctions drawn between high and low culture and the power taken by dominant institutions to legitimize certain artifacts and practices as culturally valuable (483). They sought to make a break in theory to locate the varied, unpredictable, even counter-intuitive ways audiences make culture and make use of mass media in their daily lives.

Henry Jenkins takes up the politics of consumption in his work describing forms of participatory culture and fandom. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins breaks from de Certeau’s distinction between producer and consumer and description of reading as transient production. Jenkins argues that as audiences consume texts they become producers themselves (*Textual* 24). This is quite literal in the case of fan fiction where complete narratives are created by fans
outside the realm of the media industry. In the fandom experience described by Jenkins, the barrier between producer and consumer is dissolved and reading becomes not only productive, but communal. Like Fiske, Jenkins considers the culture industries as the providers of the “semiotic raw materials” fans use to create their own cultures (49). Jenkins does not describe the media industry and the audience as groups that are in opposition. He proposes that their relationship is largely symbiotic. There is a “degree of compatibility between the ideological construction of the text and the ideological commitments of the fans…” (34). Jenkins rejects the idea that fans can be considered a commodity of mass culture and insists that as fans poach from the products of the mass media, they actively interpret the images to construct meanings for themselves.

Just as the active audience has been central to cultural studies, the audience commodity is a central component of the political economy of mass communication. Nicholas Garnham argues the goal of the study of the political economy of communication is to understand the relationship between producer and consumer as first and foremost an economic transaction (30). Garnham’s point is that cultural exchange through mass media occurs in a specifically capitalist system: “Indeed, one of the key features of the mass media within monopoly capitalism has been the exercise of political, and ideological domination through the economic” (30). He argues that there cannot be an engagement with cultural products without a consideration of the material realities of the economic context in which they are produced and consumed.

To this end, Dallas Smythe enumerated the audience commodity as the primary product of commercial media. Rather than just culture or ideology, Smythe argues commercial media are structured to construct audiences, and sell audiences to advertisers as demographic groups of consumers (256). Sut Jhally and Bill Livant extend this argument to suggest that, if audiences are the commodity sold by the media industries, then the act of watching television is itself an act of labor in the sense that it generates the use value of an audience to an advertiser. They argue that when watching becomes work, “the central problem for the media is not simply to get people to watch but to get them to watch extra” (127). The goal is for audiences to watch/work more for less.

Shawn Shimpach foregrounds labor as “a constituent condition of being an audience” (359). He argues that watching is the least audiences do, and suggests that audience work is not the passive labor of consumption, but the active labor of production. In particular, new media
have extended the active engagement of audiences, and in turn the productive labor of those audiences (354). In this way, user-generated content can be seen as an extension of audience work. But Tiziana Terranova warns to focus on the process, not the product (“Producing” 48). Audience work online is not contained in the content, but in the activity that content represents. As Terranova argues, it is not enough “to produce a good Web site, you need to update it continuously to maintain interest and fight off obsolescence” (“Producing” 48). It is the “free labor,” as she calls it, of Internet users which generates value for commercial web sites where more user activity means more advertising revenue. In television, audiences are constructed around content produced and distributed by the media industries to be sold to advertisers. On the Internet, the audience commodity is constituted by users’ continual activity of consuming and re-producing digital content, hosted by the media industries.

So the audience has been described in cultural studies as an active collection of individuals interpreting mass media, making personal relationships with media in their lives and taking their own meanings from what they offer. In political economy the same audience has been seen as one part of a commercial system that also includes media industries and advertisers. Audience members conduct labor through the time and effort of watching, activities which add capital value to that system. Both views offer valuable analyses of a vast and complex system of relations between media producers and consumers, but the divide between cultural studies and political economy has become increasingly untenable as new media collapse the traditional dualism of producer/consumer. Perhaps the work of the active audience produces both culture and capital. But is the commodification of the online audience exploitative? Do users have more power to shape the way they are constituted as an audience on the Internet? Emerging scholarship reflects these questions.

The space between the empowered audience and the audience as commodity has been addressed recently as new media collapse traditional ideas of cultural production and consumption, and scholars move to take account of the cultural and economic aspects of participatory culture. Mark Deuze restates the dilemma:

Convergence culture thus serves both as a mechanism to increase revenue and further the agenda of industry, while at the same time enabling people – in terms of their identities as producers and consumers, professionals as well as amateurs – to enact some kind of agency regarding the omnipresent messages and commodities of the industry. (247)
New media open channels where users can experiment with cultural forms and express personal agendas, but such activity is also tied to the economic structures of commercial media. Deuze argues media research should shift from questions of how media use audiences and audiences use media, to a more central question of how “media work” is done. He asks what it means that professional media workers lose the privilege of authorship as amateur media workers take on their own positions of privilege in a media environment where active users are celebrated.

Josè van Dijck also offers a nuanced view of the “user” in user-generated content, deconstructing generalized descriptions of prosumers from both a cultural and economic perspective (45). Culturally, van Dijck points out that among web sites that are driven by user-generated content, the level of engagement from user to user varies widely. Some create all the time. Others just take in what others provide. He also indicates that the sites can be designed to steer users to particular levels and forms of interactivity. Economically, he argues that all users provide value regardless of their necessary level of activity, in part because they provide both content and data. Van Dijck stresses that the “real value added by users – generating meta-data on the social behaviour of a profitable consumer segment – remains highly invisible and unaccounted for” (49). He argues for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of user agency drawing from cultural theory, political economy, empirical sociology, and even technology design.

Brooke Erin Duffy writes of complex relationships among creativity, authenticity, and empowerment in her ethnographic study of user-generated advertising and feminist marketing in an online campaign from the soap company, Dove (40). Duffy found that contributors to an online ad contest arrived with different levels of engagement with the brand, from different perspectives toward the brand’s meaning, and with different ideas of how the brand relates to the concepts of woman and self. These studies take apart preconceived notions of user and text, to show the complexity of relations among media, audiences, and commodities online.

A great deal of research on convergence and user-generated content extends traditional descriptions of the active audience and audience commodity, but recent scholarship aims to bridge these positions by interrogating both the economic and cultural implications of user-generated content and the empowered producer/consumer. This thesis aims to continue that project by asking how the cultural and economic aspects of user-generated advertising interact.
Analyzing the space between the empowered user and exploited consumer also raises questions about the role of the user in consumer culture and the formation of a consumer identity. Answers to those questions begin with Judith Bulter’s work on the materialization of identity, and Jean Baudrillard’s description of the extension of the individual as a carrier of consumer culture. In her theorization of identity, Butler lays out a process by which gender is “materialized” through the continual citation of social norms, and “performative” as a ritual expression (95). It is, as she describes it, a process of pushing against discursive barriers and being constrained by internalized social forces. While cultural theorists claim the liberation of the audience through user-generated media, the practice of user-generated advertising appears to manifest the social constraints of internalized consumer culture upon some forms of user creativity. The performance of a consumer identity follows the advancement of consumerism into all aspects of daily life. As Baudrillard describes it, even a person’s body has been made into a space for the prolific expression of different aspects of consumerism (277). Bodies are manipulated to demonstrate (perform) social status, cultural relationships, and associations with popular culture. What often goes unseen is the work required to create the consumer body and the cultural conditioning behind its construction.

As users engage in participatory cultures online they encounter a digital realm with few barriers to the manipulation of self representations and media content. But just like Baudrillard’s terrestrial consumer, the digital user performs constraints related to the forces of social norms and established relationships between brands, consumers, and media. User-generated advertising is just such a performance. These perspectives on consumer identity, active audience, audience commodity, and participatory culture will all be important in the following chapters to deconstruct the evolving position of engaged online users.

**Scope and Method**

The transition to participatory culture online, where audiences both consume and produce media, has been accompanied by a transition in the way users themselves are constituted as an audience commodity. As user-generated content takes hold as a mainstream media form, it is important to take account of the way audiences organize as producers and consumers of their own media and how commercial media organize around new economic structures based on user-generated content. User-generated advertising is a particularly interesting component because
advertising is a specific media form with its own genres, motifs, clichés, tropes, and narratives. But it is also a specific cultural form that seeks to organize viewers for a specific economic purpose – to manage demand for consumer products. For users to take on the media form of advertising raises questions about how the cultural form is adopted or distorted through their appropriation.

To approach these issues of production/consumption and audience/commodity I will examine user-generated advertising through a critical cultural and economic analysis. I will specifically look at a group of user produced videos uploaded to the web featuring the users’ own interpretations of The King, a character created by Burger King as part of a revamped advertising campaign. In November 2005, Burger King partnered with Heavy.com, a website dominated by promotional entertainment directed toward 18 to 35 year-old men, to request amateur videos featuring The King (Oser and MacArthur). Heavy distributed some masks to site users with a request for videos. The project was not promoted on television. It was narrowcast toward the typical Heavy user, the young men Burger King describes as its “Super Fans” (“2006 Annual Report).

The response was significant for its numbers and its implications. Over 4 million users reportedly responded to a single video uploaded by a user to Heavy.com, in which a disrobing woman turns out to be “The King” (Oser and MacArthur). Dozens of videos were submitted to Heavy.com. Dozens more were also uploaded to other video hosting sites such as YouTube, Google Video, and MySpace, videos which were not produced to compete in the Heavy.com promotion but nonetheless share thematic and stylistic elements.

To analyze user-generated advertising and the King videos I will draw from cultural studies and political economy to take a more nuanced approach recognizing the intrinsic cultural and economic functions they serve. This analysis is not an ethnographic study of a fast-food subculture. While there are some elements of fandom among the King videos, their creators have not organized as a cohesive community as people have around other media properties. What they represent is both more mundane and more pervasive. As an everyday practice, users engage with brand images such as the King and adopt them in their own media creations. While political economy relates this practice directly to the commercial structure of the Internet, cultural studies provides an important perspective toward how such practices relate to the web’s cultural structure.
Using both cultural studies and political economy will be necessary for a full view of the cultural and economic functions of user-generated advertising. Culture is a term that is used to point to a “particular way of life,” as Raymond Williams puts it (48). It is a term that “expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (48). De Certeau points out that the ordinary can be extraordinary (430). There is a politics to the practice of every day life. In fact there is political significance in the way media content is used – or created – and how that activity relates one to others. In this sense I will offer a cultural analysis of user-generated advertising, how it is made part of users’ regular media activity, how it relates users to others, and how it relates users to brands and consumer culture.

But such an analysis would be incomplete without an understanding of the economic structure in which the activity is taking place. Nicholas Garnham posits the “exercise of political and ideological domination through the economic” as a central concern of political economists (30). The persistent presence of the King as an advertising icon secures the videos within a commercial media system that values users not only for their capacity for media consumption, but also their capacity for cultural production. Drawing from political economy I will examine the relationship between the cultural production of an active Internet audience and the economic production of the media industries.

In the following chapters I will discuss the economic and cultural underpinnings of user-generated advertising, the performance of commodity in user-generated advertising, and the construction of the working audience online. A cultural analysis of user-generated advertising would be incomplete without and equal understanding of its cultural and economic functions. In chapter two, “Understanding User-generated Advertising,” I will define user-generated advertising and place it within the context of ongoing cultural and economic shifts taking place among the media industries and media audiences as they relate to media production and consumption online. I will also locate user-generated advertising as it relates to changes in the advertising industry and the way it relates to consumers as producers of media and culture. Here it will be important to answer certain questions. What is user-generated advertising? Who is contributing content to the web? How have media companies moved to capitalize on user-generated content? How does user-generated advertising relate to other advertising strategies online? Answering these questions will help set the stage for an analysis of user-generated
advertising as a performative practice that, as it breaks down barriers between production/consumption, also blurs lines between commodity/identity.

In chapter three, “Performing a Concealed Commodity,” I will look at this issue further by closely analyzing user-generated advertisements featuring The King, a branding icon of Burger King. I will study how the users’ appropriations may deviate and/or conform to dominant representations. I will compare the users’ representations of The King to representations from traditional ad campaigns to judge what happens when such an image is appropriated by users in their own media creations. In this area I will discuss questions raised by the ads about the significance of users taking greater control over a free flow of media images, and what it means for those images to also be symbols of consumer culture. How does it serve the users and how does it serve the advertisers? Are there limits to the manipulation of brands in user-generated advertising? How does that relate to what has been theorized on empowerment and control in convergence culture?

Finally, in chapter four, “Constructing a Working Audience,” I will discuss further implications for the study of the creative audiences of new media. How does the King constitute a participatory audience online? What does that say about how audiences are constituted in convergence culture? What does it mean for consumers to create their own advertisements as part of the mainstream culture and commerce of online media? How do you describe the space between the empowerment and the exploitation of Internet audiences? These are questions that I will discuss and present as important for the future study of Internet audiences as unique bodies of media users, entering a productive exchange with the media industries.

Conclusion

Digital media take culture creation to the grass roots as users borrow commercial images as the source material for their own creativity. But the cultural shift this represents should not overshadow the economic context of the consumers' creations. What I will stress in this thesis is that the cultural power of users drives the economic engine of Web 2.0 media. This is not a matter of claiming exploitation over revolution, but it is a matter of drawing out concealed structures of power which seek to normalize and prioritize specific models of user activity and specific user and consumer identities.
My goal is to explain how the story of the development of a participatory culture in Web 2.0 is also the story of the development of a commercial media system online which is based upon principles of commodified engagement. It is a system in which user power may not be overtly controlled, but is implicitly managed as a marketable resource supporting ad-based properties. As Eileen Meehan suggests regarding fan subcultures, active audiences “are deeply immersed in the duality of culture and commodity that constitutes the media product” (89). In this study I will navigate that duality between cultural and commodity production as it is embodied in user-generated Burger King videos.

In the remaining chapters of this thesis I will describe the phenomenon of participatory culture and user-generated advertising, analyze the interplay of identity and commodity in user-generated advertising, and take account of possible areas further research that could also begin to bridge gaps between cultural studies and political economy in the study of online audiences.
CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING
USER-GENERATED ADVERTISING

The contemporary Internet has a varied history. It is the story of hackers, pirates, viruses, virtual worlds and the counterculture of the web. But it is also the story of Amazon, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, and YouTube – the corporate monograms that define the entrepreneurial business culture of the web. It is a story that has been and will continue to be written through the interactions of individuals and industries.

User-generated content relates directly to the mode of production associated with the Internet's foundation when the Internet’s users were its creators, establishing a culture of ownership, authorship, and participation. Beyond ARPANET and before the World Wide Web launched in 1990, amateur and professional computer programmers constructed bulletin board systems and a whole community of networked academic, government, and commercial users (Castells 13). It was a technical structure designed with social goals of decentralizing communication and knowledge (Wessels 20). By the mid 1990s, Netscape and Microsoft were engaged in the “browser wars” as millions of new consumers/users jumped to a World Wide Web that was becoming increasingly crowded in the exuberance of the dot.com era (Streeter 302). After the financial bubble burst, new life was breathed into the web through the development of commercial ventures supporting interactive social networking services commonly placed under the catchall of Web 2.0. The expansion of high-speed broadband Internet made it technically feasible and economically profitable for more users to become contributors of content.

In 2002, only 16 percent of users had contributed content to a website, and among those contributors 80 percent were of a “broadband elite” demographic – white, male, and well educated (Horrigan, “Home Broadband 2006” 12). By 2009, around 44 percent of Americans with home Internet had become contributors (sharing media, writing blogs, etc.) and the privileged demographics of the broadband elite had largely been dispersed among a broader cross section of users (“User-Generated Content”). This change is related to the emergence into mass culture of websites which host and capitalize upon users as content producers. Sites such as MySpace, YouTube, Blogger, and Flickr became part of users’ everyday media experiences.
Users produce content. An activity once shared among an elite set of highly educated and highly skilled programmers has become fundamental to the mainstream culture of the web.

But the focus here is not just user-generated content, but user-generated advertising. It can be difficult to give a precise definition for advertising given its broad range of forms and styles. James Twitchell begins by connecting the practice to its purpose.

Advertising is the educational program of capitalism, the sponsored art of capitalism, the language of capitalism, the pornography of capitalism. Most of all, for all the high-sounding phrases, advertising is the culture developed to expedite the central problem of capitalism: the distribution of surplus goods. (41)

Advertising, then, is about selling, but it is not just about objects. Whether presented as a 30 second spot, product placement, a full magazine spread, or a flash game online, advertising sells products. But advertising also sells the culture of consumption.

From this perspective user-generated advertising can be defined as content created by amateur media producers that connects people and objects in consumer culture. Users do not necessarily take on the same economic mission as corporate advertisers to expedite the consumption of retail products. But users, as ad producers, often borrow from the same cultural language of advertising, a language “not just about objects to be consumed but about the consumers of the objects” (Twitchell 13). Just as popular culture has been described as the way audiences make meaning of their relationship to mass media, user-generated advertising can be described as the way Internet users make meaning of their position in a consumer culture. User-generated advertising is a manifestation of a consumer culture that is also a producer culture, where the relationship between a consumer and a brand is as much a tacit financial compulsion as it is a dynamic cultural expression. While the opportunities are incredibly broad (user comments on product reviews, blogs about purchases, “likes” on Facebook), the space of user-generated advertising can be limited to those actual media contents contributed by amateur producers. These are their creative contributions in text, image, and video to the advertising saturated environments in which they are immersed.

Through this chapter I’ll show how user-generated advertising relates to the growth of user-generated content and the evolution of forms of online advertising. I’ll discuss the position of user-generated advertising as a cultural practice with an economic function on the Internet. First, user-generated advertising comes from the prevailing culture of participation in Web 2.0. It
exists in the flow of user-generated media that is created as users build and maintain online communities. Second, user-generated advertising is an example of the prevailing working role of users in Web 2.0. As a contribution to the flow of user-generated content, user-generated advertising is part of the continual regeneration of content creating value for ad supported web media companies. Finally, as a form of online advertising, user-generated advertising connects with efforts to make brands more socially interactive. The focus of online branding moving forward is to depart from traditional models of presentation, and to make users part of the social construction of brands as a process of co-creation.

**User-generated Advertising and Web 2.0**

User-generated advertising is indicative of the productive initiative among users to make their own content. The creative output of users is the basis of a wave of services described as Web 2.0, defined by the way they are collaboratively built by software developers and the sites’ own users. “Web 2.0” was coined by Tim O’Reilly in 2005 to differentiate the changing web landscape following the boom and bust of the dot.com era. What O’Reilly observes is a crop of innovative web companies based around dynamic sites affected by user contributions. This departed, he says, from a more transmission based model of the Internet translated from traditional broadcast media as the web first gained prominence in what would be considered “Web 1.0” (“What is Web 2.0”). The new services were enhanced by greater user participation and interactivity. As Emily Wessels indicates, it’s the engagement of dynamic social networks that makes Web 2.0 applications distinctive (26). It’s not just putting music online, but sharing music piece by piece through BitTorrent. It’s not just publishing, but giving readers the ability to edit or give feedback on what they are reading as in the case of Wikipedia. It’s not just posting photos online, but providing avenues for viewers to share images and build social interaction around them on Flickr. Henry Jenkins calls this convergence culture, where users take ownership in the creation and sharing of online content (Convergence 18).

Web 2.0 also becomes the site of competing interests as users claim an ownership role in their collaborations with commercial media companies. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green lay out, the legal, economic, and creative possibilities are in many ways still not entirely defined:

Through each act of participation or attempted influence, whether in YouTube or elsewhere, participatory culture is being co-created every day by vloggers, marketers,
artists, audiences, lawyers, designers, critics, educators, librarians, journalists, technologists, entrepreneurs – and even academics. (108)

Power, ownership, and control will persist as sites of struggle as patterns of participatory culture continue to penetrate the daily Internet activities of regular users. User communities built around ideals of openness and accessibility toward media, culture, and communication feel threatened by the deepening commercialization of participatory services. And building profitable networks of services around the voluntary contributions and networked activities of users raises questions about the working role of users (Wessels 26).

The advancement of convergence, or participatory, culture in Web 2.0 is facilitated in part by the expansion of high-speed Internet access. In 2000, 3 percent of Internet users in the United States had high-speed broadband connections. Thirty-four percent had dial-up. But by 2010, 66 percent of users were going online using broadband networks, and only 5 percent dial-up (Horrigan, “Home Broadband 2010” 6). In 2010 the Internet is faster, and instead of being based around an immobile home desktop it is more likely to be accessed through a mobile, wireless device accessing cloud computing services in which the hardware/software infrastructure is based on outside servers and storage (Raine 2).

In 2005, only 8 percent of adult Internet users had used a social networking service like MySpace or Facebook. By April 2009, 46 percent had used social networking media (Smith 8). Some of the divides that were first apparent as social media were adopted have largely gone away. More rural users have turned to social media. Women now outnumber men on the sites. Education levels mostly match national demographics (9).

As broadband has become more common, trends have shown an increased adoption of user-generated practices. In 2009, 51 percent of users reported sharing some kind of content they had created on the web, whether photos, videos, artwork, or blogs. In addition, 15 percent of users reported taking an existing media product and remixing it to share online as their own artistic creation (Smith 11). About 14 percent of adult Internet users have actually contributed their own video content to the web, mostly to social networking sites like Facebook or video hosting sites like YouTube. That’s up from only 8 percent in 2007 (Purcell 7). Younger users are more likely to add their video, although gender is not a factor. Broadband access is a defining characteristic. About 91 percent of video contributors have broadband at home (8).
David Croteau writes that affordable digital equipment, more efficient broadband Internet networking, and the growth of specialized distribution and hosting websites have all interacted to create an online environment that favors independent consumer media production more than in past alternative production movements (341). But Henry Jenkins argues the convergence culture that has been developed across social media and user-generated platforms is firmly established in traditions of folk, DIY (Do It Yourself), and fan cultures (“What Happened” 139). Technology did not itself make the culture of Web 2.0. Not all user-generated content comes from fans, from a particular mass media text, or from DIY communities. But Jenkins believes those roots of folk culture inform today’s appropriation and repurposing of materials from mass culture:

The Web has made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory culture and commercial culture to coexist throughout much of the twentieth century. Nobody minded, really, if you photocopied a few stories and circulated them within your fan club….Corporations might know, abstractly, that such transactions were occurring all around them, every day, but they didn’t know, concretely, who was doing it. (“What Happened” 141)

As convergence culture takes hold in Web 2.0, those participatory practices become open and explicit. What would have once been “private media consumption and cultural production are now a legitimate part of the cultural public sphere” (Burgess and Green 26).” Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue against casting content from sites like YouTube as an overabundance of disposable culture – simple, homemade, video clips with little apparent value in terms of talent or personal expression. Rather, they suggest, these user-generated contributions may be considered mundane, but they should also be seen as part of a longer history of “vernacular creativity” (25). Things like family photo albums, 8mm home movies, even personal journals, or group crafts may have been relegated to a private sphere in the past. Now vernacular media (a category in which you might include user-generated content like blogs, videos, photo collections, even user-generated advertisements) fill the servers of Web 2.0 companies. The content drives traffic to their sites, creating value for their advertising assets. At the same time, giving users the power to publish their own content validates even the mundane cultural productivity of regular users.
When users adopt the image of the King in their own videos they are expressing the legitimacy of their own cultural agency. The King, as one among many mass media images up for grabs, is drawn into the popular vernacular of images utilized and shared by users.

From the perspective of user-generated advertising, brands may be seen as a sort of vernacular of consumer culture. Adam Arvidsson considers brands co-created commodities, formed by the balance of consumers’ experiences with a product in their regular life. Arvidsson says brands “rely on the productivity of consumers not only for the realization, but for the actual co-production of the values that they promise” (35). The cultural production of a brand depends on its adoption in the regular cultural life of consumers. Brands, as much as any other media text, are part of users’ daily navigation through a media and advertising saturated environment online and offline. As such, they become part of the normal language of signs that informs the creative production of social networks and media which continually regenerate Web 2.0 sites. This is the basis of user-generated advertising. Brand images become part of the same creative flow and social connectivity as other media texts (vernacular media, DIY productions, fan fictions) that contribute to the everyday convergence culture of user-generated content on Web 2.0.

Innovations in high-speed internet and social web design have given users increased range to contribute content and form online communities and social networks around collective, user-generated databases. At the same time, participatory traditions that pre-date the web have transferred online and informed new online practices as the vernacular creativity of daily life, including consumer life, is adapted as user-generated content. Web 2.0 sites like Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube may in one sense support the concept of a gift economy where cultural products are exchanged openly with no expectation for compensation. But user activity also serves to support commercial media which operate under strategies of capitalization.

**User-generated Advertising and Immaterial Labor**

The commercialization of user-generated content and participatory culture in Web 2.0 is an example of the way labor, including creative labor, is affected by the expansion of mediated lifestyles and livelihoods. Amateur content mingles with commercial content, and advertising on user-generated web pages. The sites become a mashup of amateur, professional, and commercial media texts. Henry Jenkins writes that YouTube, for instance, draws on the tenets of free cultural exchange in participatory culture, but also “seeks to transform the free exchange of cultural
‘gifts’ into an attention economy monetized through advertising revenue” (“What Happened” 141). In a similar way, brands themselves become interactive, collaborative, formations of marketing strategy and consumer appropriation (Arvidsson 68).

Web 2.0 is big business. It is a business where user-generated content becomes a point of consolidation and acquisition. In 2006, Google paid $1.65 billion to acquire YouTube after selling stock in an initial public offering (IPO) that garnered $1.67 billion in investment capital for the search company (Sorkin). User-generated content also becomes a site of corporate litigation over intellectual property rights and fair use as companies protect their media assets from being folded in with amateur content. Viacom launched a billion dollar copyright infringement lawsuit against Google for thousands of videos uploaded to YouTube by users (Helft, “Judge Sides with Google”). A company “not interested in owning or creating content,” is a big target for a company that is built to create, own, and protect content (Carr). User empowerment is perceived as a threat to established media corporations when unchecked (Burgess and Green 30). But for companies built around harnessing the productive convergence culture of Web 2.0, user empowerment is a lucrative way to regenerate content and build networks of users.

Participation is the defining cultural mode of Web 2.0 companies, but it is a defining economic mode as well. Companies that offer more access, greater range for creativity, more interactivity, and greater opportunity for social networking gain economic advantage by normalizing the productive activity of users. As Christian Fuchs argues, more user activity means user-generated services are themselves able to generate more revenue through advertising. Fuchs considers what would happen if the user activity on such sites was to come to a halt. Without users regenerating the content on sites like YouTube, Facebook, or Flickr the “number of users would drop, advertisers would stop investing in them… the profits of the new media corporations would drop and they would go bankrupt” (148).

The content created by these users, Fuchs suggests, is a form of knowledge work, or immaterial labor. Immaterial labor is a term used to describe work that produces information, aesthetic, social, or cultural products such as are generated in user-generated content and social networking. Like other advertising supported media, web companies sell audiences to advertisers. A television network or film studio constructs an audience around content in which the company has invested production capital. Where Web 2.0 sites are dominated by user-generated content,
the production capital is contributed by users through their free, immaterial labor – their time, effort, and their creative and technical resources.

The productive value of user-generated content connects with an extended history of free, volunteer labor in the development of the Internet and Internet applications. Tiziana Terranova describes the deliberately open architectural design of the early networks that would become the contemporary Internet. Standardized protocols were developed to allow compatible collaboration among university, government, and private interests across global distances (Network 61). Open network software development led to early MODEM protocols for file transfers and early Usenet systems to send and store messages, establishing an open source tradition that continues today with projects such as the Linux operating system and Open Office suite of office productivity software (Wessels 18).

The commercialization of the Internet in the 1990s created tension between the entrepreneurial drive of Internet business interests and the open, collaborative culture of early Internet development. America Online (AOL) was one of the largest internet service providers in the U.S. in the 1990s. In addition to its paid workforce, it also utilized the services of thousands of volunteers to monitor message boards, discussion forums, and chat rooms. According to van Dijck, in 1999 AOL began to introduce paid staff to do the same work in an effort to exert more power over remote staff (50). Seven volunteers filed a lawsuit against AOL for years of back wages, leading something of a backlash against the “glamorization of digital labor” and highlighting “its continuities with the modern sweatshop” (Terranova, “Producing” 33). In a similar fashion, Henry Jenkins writes that open source groups which view the Internet as an example of a “gift economy” feel threatened by the commercialization of user-generated web sites like YouTube and have organized alternative avenues for users to engage in participatory communities (“What Happened” 141.) Conceptions of the empowered user and free immaterial labor often clash with corporate motivations as the open exchange of cultural, social networking, and creative assets is channeled toward the commercialization of online services. As Terranova states, “Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (Network 78).

The level of activity in user-generated content contributes directly to the bottom line of Web 2.0 media companies. For Fuchs, the appropriation of immaterial labor “does not signify a
democratization of the media toward participatory systems, but the total commodification of human creativity” (149). Terranova, by contrast, does not consider all free labor to be exploitative. Much of the voluntary work done by AOL chat room monitors, she argues, was indeed freely given. Even after the class action lawsuit, thousands stayed on to look over chat rooms and message boards (Network 91). Open source projects continue, and are even embraced as is the case with recent releases of the open Google Android operating system for mobile devices. Volunteer programmers have eagerly responded to the opportunity to make improvements to the program, even though Google has placed some limits on their access and it is Google that will most likely benefit from their work (“Google Clarifies”).

Rather than completely commodify free labor, the commercialization of user-generated content blurs the subordination of labor to capital and of culture to the economic. It is an expression of work as productive toward culture, not just capital. Furthermore, free immaterial labor in user-generated content should not be seen as a process of assimilation of authentic culture by mass culture. Terranova argues it should be seen rather as a “channeling of collective labour (even as cultural labour) into monetary flows…” (Network 80). Terranova compares the commercialization of participatory and collaborative cultures to the voluntary commercialization, or “selling-out” of other subcultural moments in film, music, or video games. It is in this respect, perhaps, that brand management strategies most resemble the channeling of free immaterial labor toward commercial interests. Just as immaterial labor has been shown to be a source of value generating productivity for Internet companies, the voluntary work of consumers has been shown to create value for brands and advertising. Arvidsson explains marketers sometime seek to establish an identity for a brand by first introducing it into social groups that already have cultural capital (69). Marketers also conduct “cool-hunting” or “trend spotting” by hiring young people from specific subcultures to conduct market research on their peers regarding their awareness and perceptions of different brands (71). Through “viral” or “guerilla” marketing, advertisers attempt to inject brands into online social networks through infectious branded content as a way to harness the exponential reach of digital word of mouth (68).

While these are examples of marketers channeling consumers, user-generated advertising is a practice where consumers might be said to channel themselves. Arvidsson argues that brand management strategies such as cool-hunting or viral marketing are intended to take advantage of what is understood to be the productive role of consumers in creating a brand’s social identity. It
is about “ensuring that the means of consumption effectively become means of production; that the ethical surplus [immaterial labor] that consumers produce also becomes a source of surplus value” (82). When consumers appropriate commercial brand images in user-generated advertising they are contributing their own free immaterial labor to the reproduction of brands. As Arvidsson argues, consumers are part of brand construction, but consumers are also part of the process of brand reproduction and building brand equity. As users reproduce, recreate, and otherwise appropriate a brand in their own media creations they regenerate the position of the brand as part of everyday media culture.

As users take to the web to perform as the King in their own videos, they are engaging in this process of brand reproduction. Their activity not only produces culture in the sense that it makes a popular interpretation of the brand image, but also produces culture in the sense that it reproduces the cultural concept represented by the brand itself. Such interpretation is required to make a brand’s meaning, and to make it meaningful to consumers.

User-generated advertising is part the convergence culture of Web 2.0. It is a culture steeped in participatory traditions established in collaborative development on the Internet. Today, through the expansion of broadband Internet and interactive technologies, the production of user-generated content is part of an everyday practice online. Folk and vernacular creativity that would have been segregated as private in the past is now public and open for sharing and social networking. Brands also, as part of the everyday media and consumer culture navigated by users, become part of the raw material interpreted through user-generated advertising.

User-generated advertising is also integrated into the commercialization of Web 2.0. User participation is the creative capital that generates audiences to be sold by interactive web companies. Greater participation means more activity and potentially higher advertising revenues. This is seen as the channeling, and perhaps the exploitation of free immaterial labor – work that creates knowledge or cultural products. But much of user-generated content is produced with the understanding that it is a monetized commodity for an Internet media company. In the same way, consumers participate in co-creating brands with the understanding that brands are produced and reproduced through creative consumption in forms such as user-generated advertising. It is an understanding that has informed interactive strategies of advertising online.
Interactive Advertising on the Internet

Online advertising has grown by advancing beyond broadcast models of presenting ads to incorporating Web 2.0 models which integrate brands into the flow of content and user activity. Christina Spurgeon argues that as Web 2.0 has come to define the participatory culture (or participatory labor) of the Internet, advertisers online have also shifted their strategies to recognize users’ determination to shape the content they consume as well as their willingness to integrate themselves in the commercial structure within which the content is presented:

They understand the primary importance of developing web services to facilitate advertiser and consumer participation and interaction. They have turned away from the mass media model and the associated ‘push’ techniques of advertising. Instead, Web 2.0 firms understand that consumers will seek out advertising when they need or want it, and have found ways to integrate advertising unobtrusively across the Internet. (14)

User-generated advertising is part of an underlying strategy toward interactive advertising on the Internet. It is advertising that it is accessed by users, instead of audiences being accessed by advertisers.

At one time online advertising was considered experimental or tangential. But now, if ad revenues are any indication, advertising online is central to multimedia marketing strategies. Advertisers spent $125.3 billion in the US in 2009 (“Kantar Media Reports”). At $401.9 million, Burger King, the advertiser under analysis in the next chapter, was listed by Advertising Age as the 83rd largest marketer in the world in terms of advertising dollars spent in 2009 (“Global Marketers”). As the Internet has matured as a marketing tool, advertisers have made it an important part of their strategies to interact with consumers.

Advertising online began with click-through, display banners. According to Nigel Hollis, the first online ad was a banner link to AT&T placed on the website, HotWired, in 1994 (255). At the time the Internet was growing at an incredible pace, but many advertisers were still skeptical about the ability of online advertising to drive consumers. As Andrew McStay describes, early advertising online was more or less a translation of traditional text and outdoor advertising into hypertext (18). Still, it was a medium many advertisers decided they could not ignore considering the exponential growth of Internet traffic.

In a report on what it termed the “Emerging Digital Economy,” the US Department of Commerce reported that from 1993 to 1997 the number of Internet users in the US jumped from
around 5 million to approximately 62 million. In one year, from 1996 to 1997, the number of web domains grew from 488 thousand to over 1.3 million (Margherio 8). As Internet use became widespread, more advertisers were willing to take the risk. Advertisers continued to research and experiment with different forms of online advertising, including the ill-received “pop-up.” Ad spending followed the growth trajectory of web activity through the end of the millennium, and by the year 2000, online advertising revenue passed $8 billion annually (Hollis 256).

The bursting of the dot-com bubble brought back doubts that the Internet had the ability to build brands. Many advertisers subsequently abandoned Internet advertising between 2000 and 2003 (Hollis 256). As the new economy stabilized and advertisers became more sophisticated at using the web as a marketing tool, ad revenue rebounded. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau, Internet ad revenue surged from just over $6 billion in 2003 to $23.4 billion in 2008 (“IAB Internet Advertising” 5). The recent global economic recession pulled ad spending online back to $22.6 billion in the United States in 2009. But by that time, Internet advertising had already risen to compete evenly with traditional print and broadcast media. In 2009, television distribution was first in ad revenues at $26.2 billion. Newspapers were second on the list at $24.6 billion, followed by the Internet and then cable television with revenues of $20.4 billion (“IAB Internet Advertising” 14).

Inside the numbers, ad revenue online is distributed unevenly. It is hugely top heavy. The top 50 advertisers online command 89 percent of the market. The top 10 alone bring in 71 percent of the revenue (“IAB Internet Advertising” 7). Most of that is taken in by search services. Of the $22.6 billion earned in online advertising in 2009, 47 percent went to the search industry led by new media conglomerates like Google and Yahoo. Display ads made up 23 percent of online ad spending. Several other formats, including classifieds and digital video each comprised less than 10 percent (“IAB Internet Advertising” 9).

The period of growth in Internet advertising from 2003 to the present has been marked by innovations in online advertising beyond display ads to recognize a shift toward commercializing user-generated activity. Advertisers have altered their strategies to recognize that users have an increasing ability to influence the shape and form of their Internet experience and that there is an opportunity for advertisers to capitalize by positioning their brands as interactive assets.

Search companies were among the first to recognize this shift in perspective as an advertising opportunity. McStay traces the history of the search engine back to the beginnings of
the World Wide Web. Early searchers like WebCrawler and AltaVista grew in popularity as users tried to find their way to the information they wanted. Keyword searches became a path toward profit as search startups began looking for ways to monetize their services (49). Search became a way to “translate users’ information needs into consumption needs” (51). With services like Google AdWords, Yahoo! Search Marketing, and MSN adCenter, advertisers pay per-click for text ads conjured by keyword searches and placed alongside non-advertising results. Google and Yahoo also auction keywords to prioritize paid search results among presumably naturally occurring results. Other common services place contextual ads around content aggregated on user-generated sites like blogs.

Search advertising, according to Christina Spurgeon, answers lingering concerns among advertisers unsatisfied with traditional media. In the cases of commercial radio and television, search avoids the problem of being “a cause of irritation and interruption,” for “increasingly distracted, distrustful, and disinterested consumers” (27). Unlike a disruptive television spot, a sponsored search tag is seen as a way to enter the flow of content being controlled by consumers searching for information and products that are relevant at the first moment. Joseph Turow writes that, in addition to concerns over the resistant disrupted audience, the fragmentation of the traditional broadcast audience has also been a source of concern among advertisers. Smaller audiences are divided among more narrowly targeted channels of content, diminishing the efficiency of traditional advertising (107). Market researchers have determined that the Internet can solve some of those issues by taking advantage of interactive practices through surveillance marketing and behavioral targeting.

Surveillance and behavioral strategies commonly used by online retailers like eBay or Amazon.com where a user’s shopping choices and registered demographics inform recommendations for other possible purchases. On social media sites like MySpace or Facebook, profile information and other interactions provide “hyper-targeting” information used to direct advertisements toward users with specific interest profiles (McStay 65). As McStay describes, the measurements taken in surveillance marketing can be extensive enough to include search terms, purchases, preferences, advertisements users have clicked, and users’ apparent attention spans. Future incarnations, he says, will draw even more on social and even geospatial cues. Turow writes that this kind of data mining and subsequent consumer targeting is justified by marketers who argue it is a mutually beneficial relationship between advertiser and consumer.
They see it “not as privacy invasion but as two-way customer relationships, not as commercial intrusion but as pinpoint selling help for frenetic consumers in a troubling world” (Turow 120).

Defenders suggest the data can be used securely to provide user satisfaction and improve customer retention. Amazon shoppers have a more efficient experience. Facebook users are granted free access to social networking. Critics, however, consider such surveillance a breach of privacy and a distortion of relations between advertisers and consumers. Mark Andrejevic argues users are compelled to disclose personal information in the service of commercial interests, not their own. He calls it a “shift in control over personal information to private corporations” (“Work” 243). As with search, surveillance marketing and behavioral targeting are strategies designed to insert advertisers into the flow of content online. In contrast to spot advertising on television, page advertising in print, or billboard advertising which all create disruption, interactive advertising is meant to create seamless transitions between content and advertising.

Search and surveillance advertising monitor users in an effort to place advertising messages in the right place at the right time. Although they are targeted, they are not pushed the same way a television spot might be. For a television advertiser, a 30 second spot is presented to the total audience of a program based on its demographic profile. On a search site or social network, users are building their own profiles through their own activity. An audience for an ad is built one user at a time. By drawing from the specific actions of users as they search, shop, or share with each other on social networks, advertisers may redirect the flow of Internet users. As I watch a Coldplay music video on YouTube, I’m prompted to buy the song on iTunes or Amazon. I’m asked to connect with the band on Facebook (ColdplayTV). Marketing connections are blurred with connections to entertainment, information, and social networks.

A similar distinction can be drawn for other branded media on the web, which can include marketing web sites, Flash or Java applications, or video. Branded content is positioned almost as advertising on-demand. In 2001 and 2002, BMW launched its video campaign, “The Hire,” with 8 episodes, followed by a comic book continuing the story where the videos left off (McStay 55). They were not produced as commercials as much as they were pre-purposed product placement. As Spurgeon suggests, the BMW videos were like an interactive take on the historic radio soap opera (39). Advertising even makes its way into virtual worlds like Second Life where McStay says the carmaker, Pontiac, created an island called “Motorati” from which it set out to generate a car culture they hoped would transfer offline (74). Spurgeon notes that
branded entertainment is an attempt to “contextualize brand images in ways that are so appealing that consumers will seek them out for inclusion in their personalized media and entertainment flows” (40). Advertisers want their branded content to trace the same social connections other types of content may follow.

But participatory culture in Web 2.0 does not just mean accessing content, even advertising, on demand. It means providing the access and resources to affect the content itself. In user-generated advertising, amateur producers become creators of branded content and often the viral agents of their own branded media. User-generated videos can come from unassociated users or coalitions of brand devotees. The King videos are a demonstration of the seamless integration of brands and advertising into the flow of content and user activity online. The videos’ creators interpret the brand identity of The King in their own contributions to participatory culture. Albert Muñiz, Jr. and Hope Jensehn Schau use “vigilante marketing” to describe video ads made by users who might also be described as brand loyalists or brand evangelists. These ad producers often belong to brand communities which create cultural cohesion around the social meanings of their preferred products and brands. Muñiz and Schau show how specific brands and meanings become part of the community’s culture (37). Looking at a community of users devoted to the Apple Newton handheld PDA, Muñiz and Schau document a variety of ads parodying or reinterpreting ads from Apple’s own advertising. The “vigilante” ads, they say, subvert the intended meaning of Apple’s advertisements to reflect the experiences of the users – many of whom were resentful when Apple discontinued the Newton (40).

User-generated advertising has also been incorporated into corporate sponsored campaigns. To promote the 2007 Chevy Tahoe and a product placement deal with the television program, The Apprentice, Chevrolet invited web users to a micro-site where they could create their own advertisement for the full-size sport utility vehicle. Users could pick and choose video and audio, and write their own copy to build their own Tahoe ad. Instead of making ads heralding the triumphs of the Tahoe, many consumers generated attacks on the vehicle, labeling it as a gas guzzler and harmful to the environment (Taylor). User-generated advertising does not always match a company’s motives for brand development. Chevrolet opened the Tahoe brand identity to consumers, and a particularly vocal segment of consumers took the opportunity to attempt to subvert the environmentally neutral image the company may have preferred.
To mitigate potential damage to their brands, some companies have employed user-generated advertising as juried content. In 2007, user-generated ads made a splash in the highest showcase in advertising, the Super Bowl. That year Doritos, Chevrolet, and the National Football League each promoted and exhibited user-generated ads during Super Bowl XLI in an effort to promote their brands by opening them to interpretation from consumers. Frito-Lay received over 1,000 entries to their Doritos Super Bowl ad contest. Five finalists chosen by the company were put to a vote on a special website. The winner was shown during the game. It was an ad created by two aspiring filmmakers with a budget of only $12. By being selected for the Super Bowl, they won $10 thousand and a big break for their new production company (“Images of the Week”). The same year Chevrolet and the National Football League took pitches for ad concepts and produced the winning concept with a professional production crew with some involvement by the ad’s amateur creator. The NFL brought in veteran Super Bowl ad director, Joe Pytka, to produce Gino Bona’s ad concept (“NFL Holds Contest”). Chevrolet spent around $1.5 million to produce the ad concept of a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee freshman, Katie Crabb (“Katie Crabb Wins”).

User-generated advertising goes beyond vigilante brand communities and commercially sponsored campaigns. User-generated ads are not necessarily indicative of a subculture or marketing manipulation. On YouTube, uploaders archive ads they have kept from campaigns gone by in the same way they may upload old sitcoms or cartoons they used to watch. In 2010, Clara Peller is still asking “Where’s the Beef” (Videoholic1980s)? Just as movie characters or other media personalities are open for interpretation by users, so are brands and characters from advertisements and commercials. For instance, as far as Matt Johnson is concerned, the Dos Equis Man is not the most interesting man in the world. Matt Johnson is (BMJJR). These may not be the next award winning campaigns, or the next case studies in online community building, but they are demonstrations of the place of brands in every day media practice. It shows the normalized, everyday relationship between user and brand, and how it can be exceptionally productive.

Advertisers recognize that mass media images, including brands, are part of the everyday lives of consumers and their everyday expression of cultural agency through Web 2.0 media. Online advertising is structured to accommodate users’ drive to be engaged socially and to express themselves culturally through brands. Brands are made into interactive properties which
users can respond to, manipulate, share, and discuss. Under traditional models of the advertiser/audience relationship such activities might have been viewed as destructive to a brand’s meaning. But under new models that define the transaction between advertisers and users, such interaction is shown to be productive to a brand’s cultural identity. For advertisers, it is more important to structure the circumstances of engagement and manage a brand’s interpretation than to attempt to control how a brand is taken up by users.

**Conclusion**

As agents of cultural creativity, economic productivity, and brand management, users are productive. High speed digital technologies, interactive services, and participatory user cultures foster environments online where content creation is allowed, awarded, and even expected. As McStay suggests there is a compulsion toward productivity to achieve social status within user-generated communities and to regenerate associations every day among people, media, and culture online across vast digital and social networks (216). The productive power of individual users collaborating to create a collective cultural value provides the economic basis for Web 2.0 services’ and their value to advertisers. The immaterial labor of users continually regenerating networks of people and content is commercialized into dynamic cultural and economic assets. The same sort of work is done by consumers as they generate and regenerate brands as cultural assets in association with the management strategies of advertisers. To Arvidsson, “much of the value of brands derives from the free (in the sense of both unpaid and autonomous) productivity of consumers...” but the work of marketers is to affect some sort of filter to support the compatible expressions of consumers (130).

This is the case in user-generated advertising. As with other user-generated content there is a freedom, or empowerment associated with appropriating and manipulating the brand image of a commercial entity. There is empowerment in upsetting the traditional hierarchies of producer/consumer and author/text. However, the empowerment of the user cannot be explained outside of its economic function. Although it is not necessarily a practice that occurs through direct brand management, user-generated advertising cannot be said to be outside of the influence of market forces. It does not seem to be the case, though, that Web 2.0 companies or advertisers dominate and re-colonize user culture. While commercialization creates some sites of struggle over access and control, mainstream users seem to accept some transaction between
convergence culture and immaterial labor. Terranova argues that it is “more reasonable to think of cultural flows” of immaterial labor online “as originating within a field which is always and already capitalism” (80). User-generated content may not be created for a web company’s profit. User-generated advertising may not be generated according to an advertiser’s preferred expression. But they are each practices which are nonetheless embedded within the commercial structure of Web 2.0 where user activity is the force that drives value production. Just as user-generated content in Web 2.0 is argued to break down past divisions between author/text and producer/consumer, user-generated advertising conflates the production of popular culture and the reification of consumer culture. In the next chapter I will analyze user-generated advertising featuring The King to show how it blurs distinctions between brand identity and self identity.
CHAPTER 3: PERFORMING A CONCEALED COMMODITY

Mass media scholarship questions the role of the massive consumption of advertising texts on processes of identity formation and reformation. In the study of identity, the concept of masking is sometimes used to express the process of identity formation with a sense of concealment, dynamism, and fakery (Tseelson, “Introduction” 5). It informs the making of identity as being both transformative and transient. The same metaphor proves appropriate for the way commodities relate to their brands. In contemporary consumer culture, a product's symbolic identity contains as much or even more value than a product's actual use value. The brand is a mask representing a product’s cultural value, forming a representation of the product’s actual utility, and symbolically concealing the conditions of its production. It follows that those same brand images become the signifiers which individuals appropriate to establish social status. Among the many identities American consumers construct and the many masks they wear, that of the consumer is one of the most prominent (Baudrillard 277).

The two processes of self and product definition conflate uneasily in user-generated advertising, a practice facilitated by digital media in which the consumer becomes an active participant in the creation and distribution of an advertising message. More advertisers are turning to marketing strategies that harness consumer-based cultural production, and as they do it becomes difficult to discern where the barrier lies between consumer empowerment and exploitation. The barrier falls away, it seems, as it becomes clear both advertisers and consumers are using each other. This uneasy alliance across economy and culture requires an analysis of how it affects the dynamics that define and challenge the limits of the expression of self and commodity.

The following sections look at how concepts of masking and concealment have been and can be used to illustrate the performative aspects of culture and commodity, and how user-generated advertising becomes a practice of both cultural and commodity exchange. Using the examples of user-generated advertisements for Burger King, I will consider the implications of the user/producers' masked performances as expressions of brand and self, identity and commodity.
The Mask in Performing Identity

The Internet is described as a space where the construction of identity is freed from terrestrial offline associations through new digital ways of being (Poster 75). But as a performance of self, identity holds on to cultural associations whether it is portrayed in-person or online. And as individuals draw from commercial images in the performance of self, identity also reveals how social forces of consumerism shape the construction of identity.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues there is need for mediation between “essentialist” and “constructivist” positions on the constitution of identity (93). She writes that, from the essentialist point of view identity is fixed. Specifically, as they are the central questions of her work, gender and sexuality are fixed. Identity is not something, therefore, that can be divested and remade the way one changes a hairdo or an outfit. It is basic, fundamental, and even genetic. Such a view, Butler argues, has informed the definition of social barriers to the conditions of identity (94).

From the constructivist position, however, identity is a dynamic composition. As Butler writes, from this point of view identity is often considered a performance, even theatrical. Supporters of this concept of identity reject the essentialism of normative structures of gender and sexuality that have been historically dominant, and seek to replace it with a vision of identity as open and free. But, Butler suggests, it is idealistic and irresponsible to ignore forces that influence what she calls the performativity of identity (94).

While Butler disagrees with the essentialist idea that identity is fixed, she also disavows the constructivist idea that it is absolutely pliable. Butler argues that there are both elements of fixity and construction to identity as it is both interpreted by the individual and compelled by social norms:

The “performative” dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performance is neither free play nor theatrical self presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. (95)

Butler differentiates her position by describing a materialization of identity like a repetitious ritual, “a ritual reiterated under and through constraint” (95). Elsewhere, this constraint is described as citationality. Butler writes that identity cites the normative demands of society,
which is not to suggest one is preordained to comply with those demands. On the contrary, she writes, the rituals that generate identity show “the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity” (12). So to the extent that identity is a performance, it both conceals and reveals the cumulative influence of the laws of society that drive and constrain its theatricality.

In other words, there is room for play in the performance of identity, but there are always strings attached. If there is anything natural to identity, it is the urge to test its limits, or the range of motion allowed by social norms. It is through these challenges that the constraints to movement are revealed, and that the realization is made that the constraints exist and the force they exert is real.

The limitations suggested in Butler's vision of the performativity of identity are repeated in the mask, often used in theory and practice as a metaphor to explore the spaces of identities. Efrat Tseelson argues that the idea of “masking” is an extension of identity as performance (“Introduction” 2). Like performance “it evokes an idea of an authentic identity ('behind the mask' or 'behind the performance') only to dismantle the illusion of such identity” (“Introduction” 9). Masking leans toward the constructivist view of identity critiqued by Butler. As Tseelson puts it, it is a term that describes a tool for self-definition and deconstruction; self-definition of individual identity and deconstruction of social norms (12).

Tseelson describes, for instance, how masks were used historically in the European carnivals and masquerades (“Reflections” 18). In both cases masks were worn in the liberating spaces of the festivals as revelers lampooned authority of all sorts without fear of reprisal within the festival space. They were sanctioned subversions of official culture where vulgarity replaced propriety. These historical spaces of liberation have been adopted as symbols for the operation of oppositional identities in contemporary society by cultural scholars. In these cases the mask is reconceived as more than a prop or disguise to signify a multiplicity or alternative representation of identity.

But as Tseelson notes, echoing Butler's own warning, there are limits to the reorganization of identity made possible through masking. When the carnival or masquerade ended, the previously established norms of authority and behavior once again took hold. The implication is that, in masking there is a “contained release” that “may just be a form of social
control, a domesticated parody which apparently opposes but actually affirms cultural hegemony” (“Reflections” 28). Just as Butler argues performative identity cites society's structures of power, the mask, as it covers, cannot help but implicate that which it seeks to conceal.

**Mass Media in Performative Identity**

Mass media play an instrumental role in the formation of identity. Popular culture is a library of symbolic images and becomes an important cultural resource for media audiences. In his ethnography of television fans, *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins writes about the generative aspects of media consumption, arguing that viewers actively use the images, stories, personalities, and values they see on television in unique and innovative ways (*Poachers* 277). For many devoted fans who qualify for the category he labels “fandom,” these cultural elements of mass media become woven into their daily lives, into their own identities, and become intrinsic to the way they define themselves as individuals. Jenkins’ main example is the “Trekkies,” who became the collective punch line to many jokes for their deep embrace of all aspects of the *Star Trek* television series (*Poachers* 10).

Those who have invested in such a participatory culture often use the symbols of popular culture to construct their own masks, their own performative identities. For some, the appropriation of pop culture images manifests itself as a literal disguise, such as the uniform of an Enterprise crew member worn at a *Star Trek* fan convention. But, of course, most media images become intermixed elements of a materialized identity, as Butler calls it, competing for attention among other influential symbols.

Not everyone masks at such an extreme level as the Trekkies, but Jenkins argues that media consumers (and scholars as participant observers) should not be ashamed of or to try to abstain from allowing mass media and popular culture to become part of their daily lives. In fact, for Jenkins there is great empowerment in making popular culture a “participatory culture” and creating a free flow of symbols to be shared at all levels of audience organization. In such an environment, the popular images of mass media become open for citation in the performance of one's own identity (*Poachers* 49).

It should be noted that this is certainly not a phenomenon unique to television. The Internet has become a key location for symbolic exchange between professional and amateur
media producers and their consumers (Bruns, “Towards Produsage” 275). In the practice of user-generated advertising, for instance, users adopt corporate brand identities and create their own affirmative or subversive interpretations of what they mean. However, user-generated advertising carries the distinction of being an exchange of symbols of commodity. In the case of user-generated video advertisements created around the brand image of Burger King, a free flow of symbols seems to be achieved but users’ performances as the King are constrained by its distinctly commercial identity. The limits of users appropriation of the brand raises a tension reminiscent of the limits of masking in carnival and masquerade.

The conflict lies in asking to what extent the appropriation of brand images serves the consumer and to what extent the consumer serves the brand. This conflict becomes clearer as the role of the mask in performing identity, described above, is juxtaposed with the role of the mask in performing commodity.

**Concealing the Performance of Commodity**

In their performances as the King, the producers of user-generated advertising show how users associate with brands as any other image from mass media – as a cultural resource in self-expression. Their performances also show the role of brands in the management of individuals’ cultural relationships to consumer products.

Masking in the performance of commodity begins by grounding the audience in a specific position in commercial media that Dallas Smythe calls the “audience commodity” (256). Smythe calls the audience the main product of mass media, groups of consumers produced and packaged by the mass media to be bought and sold to advertisers for their ability to consume products. This illustrates the economic function of media and contradicts, Smythe says, the idea that the main product of the media is meaning (i.e. information, ideology, propaganda, entertainment).

Smythe’s description of the audience commodity is important to locate media users within a commercial media system where their attention is a valuable resource for advertisers and media texts can be seen to serve an economic function. But Smythe does not take full account of the productive cultural aspects of media consumption. As Jenkins argues, audiences appropriate images from mass media into their daily lives, and there is a cultural payoff in this participatory culture as those images become associated with the process of identity production.
For users, media texts serve a cultural function. Even the cultural products of marketing – brands, advertisements, etc. – serve a cultural function for an audience that actively interprets mass media.

This cultural function comes from a shift in commodity form that Nicholas Garnham argues is not fully accounted for by Smythe (Garnham 29). The gap left by Smythe is addressed by Susan Willis who argues that packaging has become the dominant factor of commodity form in late capitalism. The material use value of a product takes a backseat to the way a product is presented to consumers and the symbolic representation of use value that can be created through that presentation (338). Packaging, Willis argues, has been used to make the appearance of use value a commodity in itself, a promise of fulfillment that can be exchanged regardless of a commodity’s ability to satisfy that promise. Willis calls it a “hypercommodity” when the product's cultural value, encoded in its brand identity, becomes a commodity of its own. The exchange of actual use value is replaced by an exchange of images, meaning, identity, and culture (335). Here the mask resurfaces as an apt metaphor for the encoding of brand identity into the hypercommodity. The brand becomes a cultural mask standing in for a complete corporate organism and its means of production.

Jean Baudrillard takes the concept a final step by arguing that this has implications for a consumer's own body. The performance of identity and commodity conflate as consumers appropriate brand images. Just as the material use value of a commodity has been overlayed by a cultural representation of value, Baudrillard argues that the body has become dominated by its appearance to be able to perform the labor of consumption (277). The body bears a mask of cultural and economic production. Baudrillard describes the body as a cultural and economic artifact, arguing that in any society the body reveals the system of social relations. In feudal times, the body was the property of the king along with everything else within the domain of the kingdom. The body in capitalism takes on the title of private property improved and maintained through labor (278). There is social pressure for the body, as property, to be managed as a signifier of social status.

This relates directly to Susan Willis’ description of contemporary commodity form. In industrial capitalism, the body would have represented a physical use value among the working class. But today, the number of bodies in America that are required to perform actual physical tasks in terms of labor power in commodity production are fewer as physical work is out-sourced.
and our economy turns from manufacturing, to service, to information. As a result, the economic function of the body is less often the commodity production of physical labor as the commodity production of symbolic labor. Like the brand packages the hypercommodity, Baudrillard argues our bodies are packaged, or in a sense masked, to convey an ability to consume. This is why Baudrillard also describes the body in capitalism as the perfect consumer object, a site that demonstrates the ability to consume as a signifier of social status. If nothing else, a capitalist society demands that its citizens be productive in labor, and this is borne out symbolically on our own bodies. The body is a site of labor, but that labor is expected to serve the production of capital and hypercommodities like the King of Burger King (279).

Butler argues that the materialization of identity is indexed to the codes and norms of a heterosexual society. This point is reiterated in Baudrillard’s observation of the role of the body in consumer culture. He says “one manages one's body,” however, the body “is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject,” but “in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the norms of a society of production and managed consumption” (279). The performance of commodity is based upon the established codes of consumption in American society, which are in turn established largely through advertising.³

There are both limits and opportunities for innovation in performing commodity, particularly through the productive forms of user-generated advertising. Taking a closer look at these forms shows more about how codes of consumption are taken in by consumers and translated into a masked performance of commodity. The following sections will work to reveal more of how the process of masking works in the case of user-generated advertising for Burger King. The King represents the hypercommodity of the fast food company. It creates an identity that stands in for the corporation it represents. Baudrillard would suggest the appropriation of the King's image by web video producers amounts to the commodification the body, its transmogrification into the creepy King himself. But there is always a question as to what lies behind the mask. Jenkins would suggest that users experience social rewards by taking a brand image such as the King and sharing their own masked performance of the brand. The work of cultural appropriation through user-generated advertising creates value for both users and advertisers. Through their mascot, Burger King becomes part of a consumer language made up

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³ For examples see Ewen 214; Goldman 10.
of free flowing symbols that inform the participatory practice of user-generated advertising while also harnessing that participation to build the cultural value of the King.

**The “King” of All Media**

Brand images are woven into the performance of consumerism in user-generated advertising. As a brand, the King is positioned to accommodate consumers empowered status as cultural agents online. It is part of a relationship between users and advertisers based on managing consumers interpretations of brands as a cultural transaction.

In the study of the audience in commercial mass media, there is often a contradiction. Scholars such as Dallas Smythe have shown that, as collectives, audiences are bought and sold by mass media as commodities (256). Mass audiences take on predictable characteristics which make them valuable for advertisers, because they have been understood to react in terms of managed consumption. But within a mass audience are individuals acting independently and interpreting texts individually. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins have argued that, when considered on the individual level, audience members react and utilize mass media and popular culture in very different ways (*Poachers* 36). Rather than focusing on the mass media selling collective audiences for profitable purposes, Jenkins stresses the way in which audiences use mass media to construct unique and meaningful forms of popular culture.

The two approaches to the problem of finding the audience both make important points. To generalize, the mass media use audiences and audiences use mass media. These two ideas confront each other in user-generated advertising, as a site of both economic and cultural production. As P. David Marshall puts it, the products of mass media have become largely intertextual commodities, by which he means multimedia and interactive:

What is being played is an elaborate dance between the techniques of containing and servicing the desires of the ‘audience,’ and the audience itself venturing into unserviced and uncommercial areas of cultural activity. This dance of control and chaos is most clearly seen in the development of the cultural industries' and the audience's presence on the Internet's Word Wide Web, as well as the interlinked products they have created. (74) By control and chaos, Marshall refers to the ways in which corporations and audiences respectively approach cultural activity; the prior working to contain it economically and the latter working to free it for popular interpretation, or play. The non-commercial Internet Marshall
describes has been quite rapidly and intensely commercialized and populated with the kinds of intertextual commodities he observes and anticipates. User-generated advertising embodies this contentious relationship.

User-generated advertising turns to users themselves for the generation and often distribution of an advertisement. Overall, Internet users are producing a larger percentage of what they consume online. According to a report from *Advertising Age*, around 47 percent of Internet video was created by and uploaded by consumers in 2007 (“Digital Marketing & Media”). Recognizing the possibilities of user creativity for marketing, advertisers such as Burger King have loosened their grips on their brands to encourage consumers to use the images in amateur media projects. User-generated content that prominently features a brand is referred to, then, as user-generated advertising.

There are elements of control and chaos. The user demands more access, more interactivity, and more space to be creative and productive. The advertiser looks for ways to satisfy the user while also taking value from the user’s capacity as an agent of cultural production and networking. Joseph Turow calls this style of marketing an “emerging culture-production system,” where consumers, by their own knowledge or not, share personal information in exchange for greater access (103). The underlying concept is that as marketing becomes more interactive, companies can build more loyal relationships with customers by including them in the advertising process. Detlev Zwick et al. write that corporations in advertising and other industries are structuring their positions online to create value for the consumer as an open environment for interaction and participation because those structures give the companies an advantage in creating an economic relationship with those users (168).

Burger King’s mascot, the “King,” serves as a prime example of a brand that embodies “control and chaos” in commercial Internet space and the tension between the performance of commodity and identity in mass media through the practice of user-generated advertising.

When the Miami-based ad agency, Crispin Porter & Bogusky, reintroduced the King as Burger King’s mascot, the fast food-chain had been struggling with its brand image for many years. Crispin was the latest in a long string of agencies to try to make the company more attractive to consumers (Grow, Arndt, and Zellner). Burger King had also replaced CEO Brad Blum with “turnaround specialist” Greg Brenneman, the company’s 10th CEO in 15 years (“Burger King Appoints Turnaround CEO”). As part of the company’s turnaround strategy,
Burger King turned to Crispin Porter & Bogusky in 2004 for a realignment of advertising strategy. Crispin was known for its creative work, but was outside the Madison Avenue mainstream and not considered among the ad world’s heavy hitters (Bosman). It wasn’t long before Burger King and its agency were receiving publicity for their first viral marketing entry, the Subservient Chicken micro-site. The web page draws viewers to a flash site showing what is supposedly a live web cam that allows users to issue commands to a man in a chicken suit (“Campaign of the Year”). The site was an innovation in interactivity in advertising and viral marketing through social networks online. It also shifted the tone of the brand toward something more unusual and unexpected.

As critics and colleagues pondered what to make of the Subservient Chicken, Crispin continued to renovate Burger King’s image by reviving its old mascot, “the King,” in a new way. The character made his auspicious debut in a television advertisement called “Wake Up with the King.” In the ad, a man wakes up in the morning and, with sleep still in his eyes, rolls over to find the King in bed with him and presenting a breakfast sandwich for his enjoyment (Janoff). The confused, uneasy look on the man’s face is juxtaposed by the King’s constant grin.

The ad introduced the King as a sort of anti-Ronald McDonald, which may make sense for a fast food chain looking to compete against McDonald’s. Where McDonald’s Ronald is outward, warm, and welcoming, the King is intrusive and silent. He confuses people, and interrupts the calm of daily life in his gigantic plastic mask, bejeweled crown, beard, and broad ironic grin. The King’s hands are exposed, but the rest of his body is covered by royal garb, including burgundy tights and a gold cord around his neck with an oversized Burger King logo medallion. He is an unsettling, mischievous character that has been woven into a prevailing sense of ironic masculinity present in recent Burger King advertisements such as the “Manthem,” a song and dance manifesto of burger-based manhood (MacArthur, “BK Rebels”). Analysts and franchisees greeted the King with equal disappointment, even disdain (Garfield). But the King quickly gained pop culture capital. The new and improved mascot
inspired a series of video games for the Xbox system (Stanley and MacArthur). Burger King then moved to cash in on its social currency through a campaign that mixed viral and user-generated advertising strategies.

In the Fall of 2005, Crispin, Porter & Bogusky designed a limited run of King Halloween masks that went on sale through Burger King’s web site and some select retailers (Wheaton). VML, an interactive marketing subsidiary of WPP Group, arranged a supporting campaign with the video site, Heavy.com, an advertising dominated video site targeted at young men. The site’s content is predominantly off-color humor and softcore pornography. The aim of the Heavy.com campaign was to put masks in the hands of users to be included in their own amateur video creations. Those videos would then have the potential to spread virally across the World Wide Web.

Around a dozen videos were subsequently submitted to and hosted on the site (Morissey). The King videos that resulted from Burger King’s solicitation through Heavy.com generally follow the site’s lead in terms of content. One that received publicity shows a woman, apparently giving a strip tease, who turns out to be the King. It reportedly drew over 4 million views during the time of the campaign (Oser and MacArthur). It is important to note, though, that the King’s presence on the web reaches beyond Heavy.com. Traces of the 2005 campaign are still available in the Heavy.com archives, but dozens more videos, including some from the Heavy campaign, are on YouTube and other video hosting sites. The videos that were submitted as part of a calculated campaign have become intermixed with other independently conceived user-generated Burger King ads. Even though their use of the King mask may be coincidental, the videos show a strong connection in style and subject with the solicited King videos.

The next section focuses on the two main forms user-generated Burger King ads take. Many use the King to copy Burger King ads from television or other media texts. In those ads, the King becomes mixed in with familiar media images and narrative devices. In other user videos, the King is a masquerading deviant intruding on the “real” world with his brand of disruptive mischief. The King becomes a branded refuge for troublemakers.

**Becoming the King**

In user-generated Burger King videos, there is remarkable variety and creativity. I have collected over seventy user-generated Burger King ads from YouTube, Heavy.com, MySpace,
and Google Video. The earliest were posted on the Internet in October of 2005, the latest in June 2007. The technical quality of the videos ranges from something like an amateur professional production to a bad home video. Also, viewership for the streaming videos by other users on the sites ranges from a few dozen to a few hundred thousand, sometimes spread across multiple postings of a video on the same and other sites. Yet, there are enough similarities to draw some important thematic conclusions that describe how the King mask is worn in these user-generated ads.

This is not intended to be an empirical analysis of the videos nor an ethnographic account of their creators. Nor is it an exhaustive list of all the videos that exist. I attempt to offer a qualitative critical assessment of the videos in their context within the “chaos” of web users’ creativity and “control” of the King's brand viability. I watched the videos with an eye toward seeing how the user/producers relate to the King as a brand how they relate to the King as a representative of mass media forms and genres. From this perspective I noticed two trends in the way users use the King mask to interpret the King. The majority of videos can be coded into two different categories: parody and carnival. In these videos, the King mask is used in a similar way to deconstruct norms in popular culture (parody) and social relations (carnival). These terms recall Tseelson’s description of the way masks were used in masquerade and carnival to liberate the wearer from established social conditions. Masking provided a space within which the wearer was loosed from social norms, but within temporal constraints. Similarly, the King mask provides a space within with users are able to explore norms of society and media, but the mask provides its own constraints as an agent of commodification.

The videos that follow the theme of parody demonstrate an understanding of narrative and character styles in mass media, and use the King to replicate and sometimes mock those conventions. The King is often himself a target, but other parodies in this collection of consumer generated ads draw from film, television, and even other web videos.\(^4\)

A common subject for parody is the punchline from the King's first television ad, the idea of “waking up” with the King. The Burger King ad is often used as the basis for crude sex jokes as it was in “BK Blind Date” a video in which the King takes a blind woman out to dinner on a date. They end up in bed, smoking cigarettes. “Huzzah to the King!” she says. “BK

\(^4\) For examples see Theuber1337, “Wake Up with the King and Die”; Maximus32232004, “E! True Hollywood Story”; and TimSPC, “Madder than Maddest V Skillz.”
Commercials” translates the theme into a slapstick cat and mouse act with the King showing up unexpectedly and shouting, “Buy a Whopper” (TinfoilGrills). Videos such as these adopt the premise of the original TV ad identifying the King as a deviant character who violates the social order, taking the concept to its extremes in a form that confirms the characterization of the King but also deconstructs the idea of breaking social boundaries to sell fast food.

The user-generated ad, “Creepy King,” also deconstructs the character through parody, playing on the King's imposition on norms of privacy. In the video, a man goes to the hospital and learns he has “full blown AIDS.” He breaks down in front of the doctor, sobbing uncontrollably. Then, accompanied by circus music, the King appears with a hamburger and a smile to try to assuage the man's sorrows. The video goes on with a man and woman making love. When the man looks down at his lover, she has turned into the King, who tries to assuage his horrified reaction with a hamburger. The video continues with a third vignette showing the King dancing with a hamburger around a man who is having a heart attack. When the man collapses onto his back, the King places the hamburger on his mouth and just keeps dancing. Creepy indeed. This video approaches a critique of the King character, juxtaposing the happy royal with the specter of death.

Another group of videos parodies the horror film genre and uses the King as the heinous villain. In “BKM Killer,” which is described as a high school film project, the King goes on a killing spree with Colonel Sanders of KFC and the Taco Bell dog among his victims (Fedexd921). Another genuinely frightening video uses images of the King in a montage that resembles the style of the horror film, The Ring (“The King”). “Fish Slapper” takes this trope to the absurd as the King attacks a boy with a dead fish. Rather than appearing to be any kind of critique of the King as a character or corporate icon, these videos are more about the conventions of horror: the voyeurism, the chase, the fight scene.
The King seems to be chosen because his presence interrupts the continuity of those conventions, suitable for a character that has been positioned to interrupt the conventions of the fast-food mascot.

In these and the other parody King videos, consumers recast the King's mask to play intertextually with images and forms of popular culture, with the King as their primary foil. As Jenkins (36) and Marshall (74) suggest, such appropriation and reorganization is a primary mode of media consumption. The King is appropriated as a screwball, a clown, a murderer, a womanizer, and a sexual deviant, but not necessarily for the purposes of resistance or subversion. The character of the King, is revised to fit the wide variety of unique interpretations of consumers, but is more or less consistent with how the King has been previously defined on television. Even the ads that seem to deconstruct the position of the King as a deviant corporate mascot do so in a way that confirms the King’s place as a brand.

While these ads challenge the codes of media and pop culture through parody, another group of videos shows a change in focus, away from the codes of media to the codes of society. I am describing this second grouping of videos as “carnival.” These videos are marked by a public demonstration facilitated by the wearing of the King mask. To that end they range from mischief to disorderly conduct. Many of the carnival videos use the King mask as license to act out in a relatively benign way. “Burger King Guy at FSU” shows a class being interrupted by the King who gives professor a package of Chicken Tenders (Aznravechild6i9). A second video titled “The King” is put forward as “random crap with the mask” (Blindskater12000). The King rides a scooter inside a department store and hides around a residential neighborhood. “Beggar King” has a homeless Burger King wandering the streets and asking for money to buy a hamburger, the camera looking in from across the street to gauge people’s reactions. In each case, the King becomes a tool to deconstruct spaces of control: the space between student and lecturer, between shopper and merchandise, and between private citizens in public space.

Things become more sinister as users borrow the King to go after his competition. In “Safety Dance,” one of a series of King videos from an amateur web comedy troupe called RavenStake, the King goes to various fast food chains and gives them all the middle-finger.
After all, the King does not speak. He throws the bird with gusto while Men with Hats' song “Safety Dance” plays in the background. The King challenges his main competitor, McDonald's, even more bluntly in “The King Has It His Way,” in which the King urinates on the front door of a McDonald's restaurant (Slyonsdecde). Then the King goes after Ronald McDonald directly in “Burger King Guy.” A camera is planted inside a McDonald's restaurant where Ronald McDonald is greeting children. The King then enters the restaurant like a professional wrestler entering the ring, trying to get people's attention. Any confrontation he may have been planning is interrupted by the restaurant's management who put a halt the developing scene (Againstmatt1986). In these videos, the masked truly perform the role of the King, with an almost partisan urgency. McDonald's is identified as a force of normalcy to be challenged through their chaotic antics.

A group of related videos follows the setup of the King going through a drive-thru and ordering Burger King menu items at McDonald's and other fast-food outlets. This is perhaps the single most prolific theme. The eeriness of the shared performance only grows as one King after another plays his joke. A representative video, “Burger King Does McDonald's,” carries the Heavy.com logo although it is also found on YouTube, and shows the King and his friends trying to get a Whopper at McDonald's. His friends laugh hysterically, but the McDonald's employees seem disinterested (Storstygg).

The mask and often an accompanying costume conceal the wearer's defining characteristics. The individual cannot be identified. With the individual's specific identity concealed by the mask, the user finds new space

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5 For examples see “BK at McDonald's Video”; Panwagon, “The King Goes to BK”; “The Burger King Visits McDonald's”; “Return of the King”; Fccs, “Pulling Up to McDonald's with BK Mask On 2”; Geraldohernandez, “Mask”; Supersueng, “Jon Wheatley is a Creepy Asshole with No Life;” Channel69News, “Burger King Orders McDonald's Channel 69 News”; and Ur2dum2noe, “BK Mask Part II.”
from which to negotiate the discipline of everyday life. The masked become confrontational pranksters that they otherwise may be too exposed to become. That is to assume that most people would not urinate on a McDonald's, videotape it, and post the video on the Internet without some sort of protection from embarrassment or retribution. The creators of the carnival videos seem to be encouraged by the mask to create confusion in their own lives and the lives of others. As in the historic masquerades of Europe, the mask creates a space where the established standards of authority, propriety, and official culture are overturned and redefined, at least for the length of time portrayed through the videos. Watching the videos on the Internet provides a vicarious, even voyeuristic carnival experience.

There is also a less empowering reading, however. The King videos that follow the theme of carnival suggest a cultural identification with the King as an anti-authoritative folk hero of sorts. In doing so, the videos' creators perform a paradoxical rebellion against corporate authority. Authority is projected upon sites such as McDonald’s. Then the King impersonators perform their anti-establishment exercises against authority, but do so through the appropriated brand image of another multinational corporation. They defy propriety at every turn, under the guise of the mascot developed by a company traded on the New York Stock Exchange with over 11 thousand locations in 73 countries and revenues in 2009 over $2.5 billion (“Burger King Holdings”). So to the extent that the King mask conceals the alter ego of the person wearing it, liberating them from the bindings of social norms, it also immediately imposes the economic prerogative of Burger King on those activities, a mission taken on energetically by some of the King impersonators.

Looking back to the parody videos, a similar paradoxical reading becomes apparent. The King becomes part of a palette of media images that consumers draw from in their own creations, like the video “Touhou Video #3” which combines the “Wake Up with the King” commercial with Japanese style animation (Rozenmystica). Here the King is the most prominent of a collection of citations from popular culture. The result is a unique take on the advertisement, but an ad nonetheless. In this

Fig. 10. “Touhou” remixes the “Wake Up with the King” ad with Japanese anime.
sense, it is most certainly user-generated *advertising*. The King is appropriated more as an artifact of popular culture than as a brand image, but appropriating the King's image, even in the free flow of the Internet, does not diminish the King's marketing function.

Both the carnival and parody videos use the King to overturn the hegemony of preconceived scripts and norms, but there are limits to their revisions as those acts of cultural production are adopted as extensions of Burger King advertising. The videos' producers are enacting the tradition of participatory culture and productive consumption in relation to the King as an advertising icon. The user-generated King videos represent moments of empowerment for their amateur producers in which they were able to themselves control the process of media production, distribution, and consumption. A free flow of symbols seems to be achieved, but the symbols are distinctly commercial. The user/producers borrow and revise the King's image and use it to create spaces of cultural resistance, but not outside of the pervasive commercial media system in which they were made.

In user-generated advertising, consumers may find themselves more empowered to use brand images for their own ends, but not without the economic baggage those images carry. Within the context of the commercial media, the Burger King videos show that participatory culture can be appropriated in a reverse fashion to benefit the ends of advertising. The circumstances of the videos' production cannot be considered purely empowering when some of the videos were solicited directly by Burger King through *Heavy.com*, and all prominently feature the company's brand image, the fast-food hypercommodity that is the King. Furthermore, the videos are hosted on commercial, advertising-supported websites like *YouTube* and *Heavy.com* that benefit from greater user activity.

Much discussion of interactive media and consumer appropriation of media images turns to the tension that is generated by the original author of the content and the audience recycling it for its own ends. By introducing the masks into the market and conceding some control over the King as the company's trademark, Burger King mostly resolves the tension between author and audience in the use of the image by giving consumers space to interpret the King for themselves. But in its place arises a tension between the body of the consumer as a site of identity production and as a site of managed consumption, a tension reminiscent of the limits of the carnival and masquerade, the limits of performative identity, and the limits of the body as a consumer object.
Performing the Concealed Commodity

Media audiences have been recognized as active consumers of popular culture and proactive in borrowing from mass media images in their own forms of cultural production. Audiences have also been shown to be a product of the mass media, bought and sold in demographic blocks to advertisers (Smythe 256). Advertisers themselves have become more aware of how their own creations have become material for cultural appropriation by consumers. Advertisers encourage active consumers to take participatory culture to another level by actually becoming the producers, distributors, and again consumers of their own user-generated advertising. Burger King made its brand image, the King, available to consumers and asked them to make their own videos using the King mask. The result is a collection of user-generated videos circulating on the Internet where users produce themselves as the King. The “Kings” of web video often even adopt the commercial sensibility in which the King was generated, as a brand designed to compete against other brands for market share. The resulting collection shows how, in user-generated advertising, the performance of an empowered user is masked by the performance of commodity.

In participatory culture, users are empowered to engage with all kinds of mass media texts, including brands. Observing the ways users reinterpret mass media texts reveals how they relate to various media forms and narratives. But when users engage with brands in user-generated advertising, one may also observe how they draw upon norms of consumer culture to inform the way they relate to brand images. The King videos exhibit the performance of a user identity that draws from the empowerment of participatory culture, but is constrained by norms of consumer culture and the structure of commercial media.

Judith Butler argues that identity is a manifestation of internalized strategies (12). Butler suggests that identities are an expression of an ongoing internal process of reiterating and manipulating social forces, resulting in an unfixed but slow-moving performance of self. Jean Baudrillard places consumer culture in the position of being the prevailing discourse in the definition of identity. He further suggests that one’s body is the place where consumer identity is most prominently performed, calling the body the perfect consumer object (282). The body bears brands as a collage of signifiers that collectively convey information about one’s social status and one’s ability to consume. Online, this is translated through one’s digital relationship to

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6 For examples see Fiske, Reading 10; Marshall 74, Jenkins, Poachers 24, Bruns, “Towards Produsage” 275.
brands. Consumers adopt relationships to brands through social networks, report their consumer activity, and perform brand representations through user-generated advertising. In the King videos, it is the body of the user/producer that is constructed as the site where the discourse of consumerism is performed. When the King mask is placed over user/producers’ own faces, the materialization of the body as an object of consumer fetish is laid bare, and it is done through the users’ own means.

In these user-generated ads, the video subjects wear the brand of the King. For the limited duration of the video performance, users are able to adopt and remake the King image. But the performances of the King commodity in the videos should be cast neither as the simple manipulation of external signifiers, nor as merely the projection of outside forces upon a passive canvas. The videos' creators are active consumers of advertising images, forms, and functions. But just as the users’ bodies are masked by the King’s image, the cultural form of their work is masked by the commodity form of the brand. The specific hypercommodity form of the King transposes the commodity spectacle of the Burger King brand upon the consumers' bodies.

Futhermore, user-generated advertising is an appropriation of user-based cultural production as a commodity in itself. Henry Jenkins rejects the idea that fans can be considered a commodity of mass culture, as Dallas Smythe asserts, and argues that fans are empowered by “poaching” from the products of the mass media (Poachers 24). But the cultural function of the King videos for the video’s user/producers cannot be distinguished from their economic function for the advertiser. Videotaping oneself urinating on a McDonald’s can be seen as a symbolic expression against authority, but it equally supports interpretation as a competitive attack on the Golden Arches, an act of volunteer guerrilla advertising. What may at first appear to be a grassroots user-generated Burger King advertisement turns out to be part of a calculated marketing strategy on the part of the King’s handlers. It is, however, a marketing strategy that would be impossible without first recognizing the process of media consumption as cultural production. Burger King operated from a strategy that understands the way audiences make use of mass media in their own lives and how media texts become the raw material for their own cultural production.

The commodification of cultural production is not necessarily a new idea, but user-generated advertising shows how converging media technologies and practices refresh the concept. Dallas Smythe describes the audience commodity as the primary product of commercial
media and writes about culture being part of the base of commodity production (275). Through user-generated advertising we can see on a more precise level the way individuals produce themselves as an interactive audience commodity. Greater access to digital video equipment and broadband Internet access have increased the amount of user-generated content being uploaded, particularly to ad-supported web-based video hosting sites like Heavy.com and YouTube (Cover 140). Active users, such as the creators of the Burger King videos, demonstrate an interest and proficiency in manipulating the popular images of advertising. But, again, a user’s interpretation of a brand's cultural identity is constrained by the context of the brand's economic function. For Burger King, the cultural function of the King, being a character which users can appropriate for their own cultural production, serves a marketing strategy built upon such social currency (Crain). It is a process by which users reinterpret brand images while advertisers seek to manage their interpretations and capitalize on their cultural value.

As users explore their own interpretations of brand images, their performances in user-generated advertising navigate the space between cultural invention and commodification. A user’s performance may portray an alternative meaning for a brand image, but it is an alternative that is always mediated against a brand’s prescribed meaning. This mediation of meaning is a demonstration of the negotiation of power relations that occurs between dominant and alternative meanings of media texts in many areas.

In fan subcultures, individuals extend media narratives beyond their original texts in their own writings or other media creations. But Henry Jenkins concedes there are limits to fan interpretations of media based upon the ideological underpinnings of an original text (Poachers 34). Conversely, although audiences may sometimes actively attempt to subvert the specific meaning of an image, their parodies often end up confirming an image’s dominant meaning. Christine Harold, analyzing the work of advertising satirists, shows that cultural saboteurs fail to escape the rhetorical binaries they seek to condemn (191).

Even in an environment of participatory culture defined by cultural empowerment, Internet users must navigate these fields of influence. P. David Marshall describes control and chaos between media consumers attempting to distribute content outside traditional commercial models and media producers fighting to reign them in (74). Rob Cover describes tension created between authors and audiences as digital media allow users to recompose completed media texts (145). On the other hand, host sites may make access to interactive content or social networks...
contingent upon various forms of data mining and user surveillance used to target advertising (Turow 106).

Performances of the King commodity are thus constrained within the same economic realm. The King is enabled by a cultural function, but his appropriation by consumers is embedded firmly within his economic function as a hypercommodity brand. The King was rarely rendered as just a replica of his television personality. Parodies of the King as a murderer, sexual deviant, and public nuisance deconstruct the core values of the character established initially by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, and show that consumers do much more than mimic media images and values. But, as a cultural commodity, the King is a mass media property secured within a pre-existing set of power relations that exist between advertisers and consumers. Though the King videos often relocate the King in unlikely pop culture territory, citing the image of the King immediately conjures not only his context as a marketing artifact but also the strategies that encouraged his appropriation among web video creators.

As users are more empowered to appropriate media products for their own ends, they must also navigate the rhetorical boundaries embedded within the images and within their own consumer consciousness. As a site of cultural production, user-generated advertising upholds claims that audiences participate actively in making meaning of media and advertising images and make extended use of the those images in their own cultural creations. But user-generated advertising also demonstrates the limitations to users’ interpretations as the performance of commodity overlays the performance of participatory culture. Through appropriations of brand images in cultural and identity production, the influence of contemporary consumer culture is often challenged but nonetheless maintained to the extent that user-generated advertising can be properly recognized as the appropriation of user based cultural production practices where the audience commodity is implicated in its own production.

Conclusion

Burger King user-generated advertising illustrates the interrelation of the economic and cultural functions of the mass media as advertisers explore new ways to engage audiences and audiences explore new ways to engage media texts. In the Burger King videos the King mask becomes an icon around which consumers offer their own unique parodies of media conventions and challenge the norms of social conduct. The performances embody the multiple meanings of
the King. The King represents a contrarian sense of mischief, but he is also the iconic mascot and branding image of a multinational fast food corporation. Behind the masked performances of the King videos is the materialization of a consumer identity and the role of identity in cultural and commodity production. The creators of the King videos serve both the economic and cultural functions of the mass media by creating their own media products but embedding within them the corporate brand of Burger King. This suggests that users’ own appropriations of media texts can also accommodate advertisers’ own marketing strategies. Users play an instrumental role in producing themselves as an audience commodity.

More advertisers and media producers are building audiences by providing spaces for consumers to be part of the generative process of media and cultural production. As this happens, the conflict that has traditionally existed between media producers and media audiences over the meanings of a text gives way to a conflict over the user's own position as a consumer and producer of consumer culture. Through the King videos and other examples of user-generated advertising, consumers express their relationships with brands through their own media creations. They exhibit their ability to engage in a consumer culture which increasingly relies on participation to materialize symbiotic relationships with consumers, relationships which form the basis of the value and identities of brands and media properties. Like identity, the relationships among producers, audiences, texts, and meaning are never entirely fixed. Digital media provide new opportunities for consumers and commercial media to negotiate what brands mean and how users relate to them.
User-generated media place online audiences in a different position than traditional broadcast networks. The user experience is defined through the level of participation rather than the amount of time spent watching. The relationship between media producer and consumer has collapsed as users have become creators of their own content and consumers of other amateur produced media. Users appropriate mass media texts, including brand images, as the source material for their own media products and those texts become part of the regular vernacular of consumer culture expressed through user-generated media.

Participation is the basis of the user experience. It is the avenue through which users find empowerment as cultural agents. It is also through participation that commercial Internet media find value through user productivity. User productivity, as a form of immaterial labor, is a reorganization of audience work as described in broadcast media. Users work by creating content, organizing social networks, and engaging in the continual regeneration of user constructed web sites. User activity translates directly into advertising value, but it becomes an additional source of value as Internet companies monitor, collect, and distribute user data and marketers harness social processes in brand management. User-generated advertising embodies a dual performance as users express the empowerment of cultural production and the economic value of user productivity for advertisers. In the same way, the trend in web-based and mobile digital media is progressing farther toward situations where users are dual agents: empowered to affect their own immersive media experience, and enrolled to perform their own commodification.

The micro-blogging social network, Twitter, was initially an ad free service, but after amassing a network of over 160 million users, Twitter announced in October 2010 it would move toward integrating advertising. On both its web-based and mobile services, Twitter will bring in advertisers for promoted messages, sponsored search results, and ads based on users’ locations and interests as gleaned from their profiles and message activity (Miller and Vega). The prospect of more user information being divulged to advertisers has raised alarms among many consumers and privacy advocates. The demographic data in user profiles and status messages on Facebook are the basis of targeted advertising on its social network. When it was revealed that popular Facebook games like “Farmville” and “Mafia Wars” were sharing identifying information with
outside companies, *Facebook* pledged to tighten information security (Helft, “*Facebook*”). Mobile applications designed for smartphones like the Apple iPhone are also reporting a stream of data. For instance, the app for *Pandora*, the Internet radio service, tells about age, gender, location, and the phone ID of users. This information can be used by *Pandora* or sold to third-party agencies to craft consumer profiles and inform marketing strategies (“What They Know”). Several lawsuits are pending over the use of Flash cookies, which are able to bypass some browser security settings to track users and collect information on their activity (Vega). The next iteration of HTML, the code language that makes up the structural backbone of the Internet, is being closely reviewed to see how it will treat cookies. Some cyber-security analysts are warning that HTML5 would make it harder for users to control the kinds of data being collected on them.

As advertising networks are laid over social networks and user information is skimmed for third party vendors, the privacy threats are apparent. But what is also made clear is the development of information and participation as the currencies which afford access and status in Web 2.0 settings. The cultural advantage to users continues to be advanced through the economic prerogative of mass media. The organization of a merged cultural and economic function in user-generated advertising and other user-generated media presents areas of inquiry where further research would be valuable. In the remaining sections I will suggest a few topics that stand out as important for deepening understanding of user activity as a cultural and economic commodity in the convergence of digital media. First, socialization into participatory culture. Participation constitutes the working role of users within a networked commercial Internet structure which has been designed to commodify user activity. It will be important to follow trends toward normalizing commodified user relationships among online audiences, host sites, and advertisers. Second, tracing the politics of participation. As users and media companies continue to develop co-creative spaces online, it will be important to follow the continued reorganization of power relations. Although digital technologies have been identified as democratizing by some scholars and dominating by others, this should be seen as an incomplete question to which the conclusion is based in the struggle between open cultural expression and its economic appropriation in commercial media. Finally, constituting the performative consumer. As a performance of self and brand, user-generated advertising brings together the construction of each in a performative consumer identity. It is important to monitor the social presence of brands and how they are materialized through participation and performance.
Naturalizing Productive User Relationships

Participation has taken up a position as the natural function of Internet users. As much as consumption, there is social currency in being part of the conversation and part of the creative force driving the conversation. A crucial task for media scholars in analyzing the work and pleasure of users in participatory culture online is to consider the constructed nature of the user’s position in a commercial media system. To trace the development of power relations in user-generated media it is important to understand how users are socialized into a productive role and how online media properties are structured to constitute a productive, participatory user base.

Dallas Smythe described the socialization of the broadcast audience as a “free lunch,” where non-advertising content is presented to attract audiences with the intention to hold their attention for the subsequent ads (256). In this respect, the television audience has been organized around a complete culture of watching. The 30 second spot, Prime Time television, daytime soaps; the structure of commercial television is organized to maximize advertising effectiveness in relation to the socialized position of television in the daily lives of viewers.

Other theorists have rejected the characterization of audiences as compliant toward the patterns of media consumption set by the mass media industries. Henry Jenkins argues audiences are proactive in reordering the viewing experience. The VCR, for example, gave viewers the ability to bypass ads and change the context of their watching (Poachers 71). Furthermore, viewers’ readings of mass media texts do not necessarily relate directly to the official meanings encoded in those texts. Viewers make their own meanings and use media in their own ways. They actively pursue opportunities to resist subordination as a commodity of mass media or an object of advertisers.

Similar claims are made of participatory culture online. Jenkins describes the socialization of users online as convergence culture, a shift toward individual control, collaborative creativity, and community ownership. Digital technologies enable users to create their own cultural content, to bypass the media industries as gatekeepers of official culture to connect and organize around their own participatory culture. Through user-generated advertising, the official meanings encoded into the brand images come under review by users who freely interpret brands to their own ends. In user-generated advertising, participatory culture is extended into the realm of brand management. Brands become a co-creative project of corporate and popular forces that are not necessarily working in accord with one another but not
necessarily in conflict either. This certainly overturns what have been traditional ideas of corporate control over media representation.

But in Web 2.0 and user-generated media, the socialization of users also seems to be aimed at naturalizing, even privileging, a participatory culture where users are cultural agents but are also commodities through their cultural productivity. They constitute a culturally productive audience and take the greatest efficiency from the act of participation being socialized as part of the everyday lives of users. Shawn Shimpach argues that not only do audiences perform labor, but media consumers are expected to perform labor as a precondition of being recognized as an audience (353). A similar principle seems to hold true in the socialization of the working Web 2.0 audience. As a precondition of being a user, one is expected to actively engage with other users, actively create and critique content, and actively promote one’s own participation. Those who remain less active see diminished returns, go unseen, and find themselves outside of the social flow of Web 2.0. This complicates argument on both sides of the issue. Tiziana Terranova writes:

“The fruits of collective cultural labor have been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily channeled and controversially structured within capitalist business practices. The relation between culture, the cultural industry and labour in these movements is much more complex than the notion of incorporation suggests.” (Network 80.)

For participation to be equated with work runs counter to the idea that users constitute themselves as active agents. For users to be constituted as active cultural agents seems to run counter to the idea that they perform labor. The difference is that if the users are exploited for their creative labor, then they must also be implicated as active agents in their own exploitation.

Participatory culture online seems in many ways like a sort of new media “free lunch.” The role of the user is constructed differently in many ways from the viewer. The work of the viewer is to watch. The work of the user is to participate. As viewers are understood to manage their own interpretations of mass media, they are also understood to contribute to a culture of work through watching. Likewise, as users should be understood to manage their own engagement in user-generated media, they should also be understood to defer to an industry structured around commodifying their participation. Scholars can expect to have to take account this and navigate complicated fields of collaboration and cooptation in analyzing the socialization of users and the social construction of brands.
Pleasure, Work, and Power

The politics of participation recall scholarly debates over how audiences use or are used by mass media. Arguments have varied from empowerment to exploitation as media scholars have approached the question of shifting relationships among media producers and consumers. Generally, in the cultural studies tradition, the stress has been on the prerogative of individuals to evade official meanings through their own readings of media texts. Audiences find pleasure in taking mass media as the raw materials for their own participatory culture. Conversely, political economists have generally stressed the subordination of media audiences as commodities produced through the commercial structure of mass media. The producer/consumer relationship has been described as largely dominated by the economic prerogative of mass media to make routine certain modes of media consumption to maximize advertising efficacy. It seems however, that a full account of power relations in user-generated advertising and other user-generated media contexts must deconstruct traditional fields of empowerment and exploitation, or pleasure and work, as they are also sometimes phrased.

Locating pleasure and work in user-generated advertising uncovers the increasingly layered negotiations among the media industries and participatory consumer cultures. In the case of user-generated Burger King ads, The King is recast in amateur videos that can be seen as pleasure or work. On the side of pleasure, John Fiske might describe the user-generated ads as a demonstration of the user as a social agent, taking satisfaction from breaking open the social meanings that can be read in The King as a brand image (Understanding 181). Fiske considers forms of popular culture where consumers appropriate mass media texts as tactics in the struggle to evade incorporation by mass culture (20). He argues there is a difference between the consumer of a commodity and the user of a cultural resource. The pleasure in user-generated advertising is in taking a brand as a cultural resource and interpreting it outside sanctioned meanings.

On the side of work, the user-generated Burger King ads could be described, as Dallas Smythe might, as precisely the sort of activity which incorporates users into the commercial structure of mass media. Smythe argues that mass media serve to organize audiences as commodities to be valued for the work they perform as collective consumer groups (256). Web 2.0 companies make commodities out of the creative flow generated by users in participatory culture. User-generated advertising also organizes user productivity in the process of
constructing the social meanings of brands. The appropriation of user work is not, however, a matter of strict exploitation. It is a consequence of the management of consumption as a social process.

In user-generated advertising and other forms of participatory culture, it is difficult to implicate the pleasure or work in audience activity without implicating the other. Users have a clear stake in both the cultural and economic functions of their participation. Their media creations, whether home videos or Burger King parodies, to a large extent commandeer the power of the media industries to represent mass culture and place that responsibility within an uncommonly communal context. But users’ seizures of more significant roles in developing and defining the cultural products of Internet media also define them as commodities of Internet media. User-generated media are embedded within a specific commercial media system based on generating value from the flow of participatory culture. The brand images appropriated by users are not so much the raw materials in a free exchange of ideas as much as they are the refined symbols of a very specific exchange of commodity values. As Elaine Meehan argues:

In studying subcultures, we must be very cognizant of the “raw” materials provided by media corporations and of the economic system that constitutes the circumstances in which we act. As human beings we do make culture—but in the context and within the limits of capitalism. (90)

As users take a controlling stake in the composition of a web site, there is tension between the empowered participation of users and the reorganized commercial media structures designed to accommodate and appropriate user productivity. User practices that would be considered disruptive toward traditional distinctions between producer and consumer end up reaffirming the repositioned role of the working audience through the participatory culture of users online. Power relations among Internet media and users will continue to be negotiated in this terrain as users challenge the hegemony of access and authorship and as mass media proceed with efforts to both harness and conceal the conditions of audience work in participatory culture. In future scholarship it would be valuable to understand this as the current reorganization of commercial media on the Internet and the way users create cultural and economic value in it. From this perspective there are opportunities to recognize new ways in which online audiences may negotiate structures of power and to investigate locations where that structure may break down.
Performance, Participation, and Identity

The socialization of a participatory consumer reaches beyond material modes of possession and representation to immaterial modes of participation and performance. Consumers develop informational relationships toward brands understood through a performative consumer identity.

Internet users engage a performative self online. The Internet is a unique space where one’s self representation is composed by imposing oneself symbolically upon a digital network. Mark Poster describes it as a “performative self constitution” (75). Poster argues that in communications which take place through computer screens and Internet networks, identities are opened to “new degrees of flexible, unstable determination” (75). Through digital media, a new self is imposed on the network. Entirely virtual worlds, communities, and personalities are constructed online, forming a practically infinite fringe on the outskirts of mainstream mass culture. But while language has always held the capacity to reform cultures and identities, it has also always held the capacity to constrain, manage, and filter outlying interpretations. Through the Internet, users may challenge dominant forms of consumerism, but may also participate in the materialization of a new dominant consumer identity.

Performativity in this realm means constructing a representation through participation and engagement. Through participatory media, users piece together online versions of themselves within a constant flow of media texts and images. Users employ digital technologies to take control over media authorship and to take control over authoring their own online identities.

The performativity of a consumer identity is foregrounded in the construction of a brand’s symbolic exchange value. Digital advertising promotes what might be considered the performative identity of a brand. As Adam Arvidsson puts it, “What people pay for…is not so much the brand itself as what they can produce with it: what they can become with it” (68). Consumers are positioned as participants in the symbolic construction of brands in a social setting. Digital advertising and social branding advance brands as purely symbolic representations of products, representations which are constructed and reproduced through interactions with consumers.

Judith Butler argues that identities are materialized through an almost ritual repetition of social norms (94). It is through the constant reification of what it means to be a consumer, for
instance, that constraints are laid upon how being a consumer might be revised. While the Internet creates channels for users to deconstruct what a consumer identity might look like, it also structures new channels that support the momentum of a consumer identity based in participation and performance. As users comment on products they’ve used, advocate for brands they love, or impugn brands they dislike they are demonstrating that they are active and engaged consumers. As they create their own ads for Burger King, Chevrolet, Doritos, the National Football League, Dove soap, or any number of other products and companies they are satisfying the demand for productive creativity on user-generated websites, but also performing a consumer identity materialized through their own engaged participation.

Arvidsson and Zwick et al. argue that interpretations of brands are “governed” by the contexts in which personal and brand identities are produced. Both draw from Michel Foucault to argue that there is a government or a “disciplinary power,” in the way relationships among brands, participatory media, and users are structured (Zwick et al. 165). It is a power that works from the bottom up, by “establishing ambiances that program consumer freedom to evolve in ways that permit the harnessing of consumers’ newly liberated, productive capabilities” (165). Web 2.0 media are such ambiances. In participatory cultures cultivated through Web 2.0 properties, users are empowered to make their own meanings, but these spontaneous activities are set within customer and brand management strategies which aim to channel user participation. They mine demographic data from user activity. They take value from user content. They appropriate cultural value from performative expressions. Rather than regimenting certain meanings or forms of cultural activity, Web 2.0 sites are structured to encourage particular forms of participation. They are meant to appropriate economic value in everyday Internet activity by socializing particular types of participants who are compelled to perform their consumerism.

Conclusion

The goal of Internet media companies, like broadcasting networks, begins with attracting more users to be exposed to advertisements. More time spent on a site means more value for advertisers. But the work of users on the Internet user goes beyond just paying attention. It’s the difference between the work of time spent watching and the work of time spent creating culture, even serving as the curators of a culture of participation.
Audience work in user-generated advertising begins with what has been described as the work of traditional broadcast audiences: the work of watching and the work of time and attention. But by the same token, audience work in user-generated advertising departs into a territory that seems organic in that users appropriate a productive role, but also managed in that the value of the user’s creative work is in turn appropriated to serve the demands of capital. The cultural work of users creates a space where value is defined by a user’s degree of participation and engagement. It is a space distinguished by the constant creative input of users where there is a premium for being more productive as a user. It is an audience workspace where the extent of user activity is tied to the level of value generated for media companies. It is a space where users demand more access, more control, and more social connection, and their demands are strategically fulfilled by media companies in exchange for the economic value of their creative work and surveillance of their activity.

This is not just a question of how audiences incorporate user-generated media into their everyday lives. It’s also a question of the ways media companies seek economic advantage through normalizing particular forms of incorporation of media products into the every day lives of audiences as consumers. There have been massive shifts in the ways audiences consume media. Newspapers have lost circulation and television networks struggle to find viewers while web-based social networks experience nearly exponential growth. The Internet and digital consumer technologies have no doubt democratized media production and in many ways digital media have upended the traditional distinctions between author and audience. As we have seen with the Burger King videos in the previous chapter, users take images from mass media as the raw materials and inspiration for their own media creations. But as users reorganize their experiences with mass media texts, it is far less clear they are able to reorganize their economic relationship toward media companies. Web 2.0 companies have been able to accommodate the cultural activity of users and also harness it economically. The creative work of users continually refreshes a site’s content, reproduces a site’s audience, and regenerates its value as an advertising property. Advertisers themselves have also developed methods to harness the creativity of consumers as their own media producers.

Developing participatory culture in advertising has meant treating a brand socially. Brands become collaboratively constructed properties which are generated through the interactions of users and products but nonetheless filtered through market strategies. As in the
case of the Burger King ads, advertisers have located both economic value and cultural value in cultivating the social construction and reconstruction of brands and brand images. User-generated advertising demonstrates a sort of exchange between the cultural and economic. As users take advantage of the openness and access afforded by the Burger King brand, Burger King also takes advantage of the users’ willingness to contribute their authenticity in self expression to the negotiation of “The King” as a socially constructed brand. The King mask is a method for resisting identification, but the mask also becomes a pretense for taking on the role of materializing the social meaning of the Burger King image. A user could be seen as resisting one set of cultural authorities by challenging ideas of authorship and ownership of a media image, while tacitly reifying an entirely different set by dressing up the economic appropriation of participatory culture.

Ultimately the same digital tools which afford the manipulation of media images and the wholesale creation and management of new contents and communities prove ambivalent toward democratization. As Arvidsson suggests, those same digital tools also afford the further cooptation of the cultural production of users for economic ends.

It is the possibility of consumers to create something new, their ability to produce what I have called an ethical surplus that is the substance of brand values. The purpose of brand management is to program…the productive potential of the networked multitude so that it evolves in particular and desirable directions: on the preferred and desirable plane of the brand where all qualities are compatible and the real world is filtered out. (136).

Brand management and the socialization of a performative consumer filter in favor of the advancement of capital. As this thesis has considered the position of the audience in user-generated advertising and participatory media, it is clear that users play for themselves and work for others. That is not necessarily a contradiction of motives, but it is a trend toward a media environment where users cooperate in their own regulation under the commercial structure of mass media. This raises issues of privacy, agency, and exploitation. These issues are not new but they are recast in terms of collaboration, rather than antagonism. Further analysis of these issues should begin with an understanding of the compromised position of the participatory audience.
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