

Consuming Cyborgs: Researching Posthuman Consumer Culture

Markus Giesler, York University

SESSION OVERVIEW

Technological products and networks all around us dramatically change not only the electronic infrastructure of the markets, but also the social fabrics of consumers' lives. Yet despite its widely acknowledged significance, particularly in the context of consumption, technology has rarely been mentioned in the consumer behavior literature. As Glazer (1995) has pointed out, most of our understanding of consumer behavior is at best "technology neutral." To improve upon this impoverished view, the idea of posthuman consumer culture was explored and developed in this session as the symbiotic relationship between (1) the cultural frameworks that orient how consumers interact with commodities, (2) the economic priorities of the market and (3) the "heteroglossia of voices" on how, through the excessive consumption of high-technological products and networks, to alter our notions of what means to be human in the Cartesian sense.

First, Alladi Venkatesh illustrated the difference between traditional and posthuman epistemologies in marketing and explained why consumer researchers should attend with particular vigilance to posthuman thought on the epistemological level of analysis. Markus Giesler then presented ethnographic findings from Napster.com and proposed the cyborg as posthuman consumer and the prism of European (Luhmannian) social systems theory as one possible posthuman epistemology of consumption. Analyzing the consumption of popular Japanese Anime action figures, cultural critic and technoculture writer Erik Davis finally developed and explored steps to an ecology of virtual commodities.

The discussion leader Robert Kozinets commented on the ability of each presentation to provide novel insight into the cultural interplay between consumption and technology, to emphasize the import of a posthuman epistemology of consumption beyond the Cartesian legacy of the subject, and to explode posthuman dualisms such as materiality and information or mutation and hyperreality. Among other aspects, the discussion pointed to the conceptual groundwork laid by cyberneticist Norbert Wiener and phenomenologist Martin Heidegger and raised the importance to better understand the deep "technopolitical" consequences of posthuman consumer culture and society with respect to the posthuman incredulity towards the Cartesian subject.

"Posthumanism and the Sciences of the Artificial: Some New Directions for the Epistemologies of Consumption"

Alladi Venkatesh, University of California

The term, posthumanism has come to mean several things from non-aging bodies to grafting of silicon chips into the brain to probing into the deeper recesses of the mind. Recent writings on posthumanism suggest that we may be entering a new era concerning how we conceptualize human bodies and mental structures (Gray 2001, Halberstam and Livingstone 1995, Haraway 1991, Hayles 1999, Rutsky 1999). Some consumer scholars are also attempting to explore posthumanism and its implications to consumption and marketing practices (Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger 2002). Although not strictly cast in terms of posthumanism, Zaltman's (2003) recent work on ZMET techniques contain some elements of posthumanism.

What is posthumanism? Katherine Hayles (1999) looks at it as the intersection of human mind and intelligence machines. Donna Haraway (1991) repeats a similar theme in her work on cyborgs.

Both Hayles and Haraway rather unwittingly capture the notion of the "artificial" as espoused in an earlier work by Herbert Simon (1982). Featherstone and Burrows (1995) view posthumanism as creating new cultures of technological embodiment. In this presentation, I will be concerned with the notion of the artificial and its connection to posthumanism. I will attempt to discuss the implications of these developments as we reconfigure our epistemologies of consumption.

I will begin the paper with Herbert Simon's seminal work, *The Sciences of the Artificial*. In his well-known book resulting from a lecture series, Simon has argued that many branches of human knowledge and practices—science, business, law, architecture etc, are concerned with the contingent, that is, not with how things are but how things might be—in short with "design."

For Simon all human ingenuity has been directed toward the creation of the artificial as opposed to what is already given, the nature. Nature is not a human creation, it already exists. But many entities we consider to be natural according to Simon are really man-made. Thus, the forest may be a phenomenon of nature; a farm is not, and the plowed field is no more part of nature than an asphalted street. However, what is remarkable about the world of the artificial is that all artificial entities are subject to the laws of nature and there can be no exception. An airplane is able to fly not because it defies the laws of gravity but because it obeys the laws to their last detail, otherwise the result can be quite disastrous.

It is in this context of the construction of the artificial that I place the whole discourse on posthumanism.

The human civilization is a march toward the creation of artifacts that are designed to adapt to natural systems. Associated with each artifact is a set of practices. When several artifacts are assembled together we create a system of practices. The basis of any system of practices is a system of knowledge. Systems of knowledge are known as epistemologies. As human beings, we try to adapt to the systems that we create. When the systems do not serve our purpose, we change the systems and the artifacts. It means that we also change our epistemologies. All these elements, artifacts, systems, and epistemologies are the artifacts of human ingenuity. However, in the Cartesian world, there has been one constant, the human mind, for it is sacrosanct and defines what it is to be human. In our march through history, we have been careful not to tamper with this human element. Only in science fiction we see attempts to change the human character with some serious consequences. Science fiction captures our imagination but sets limits to it. Thus the world of Frankenstein or Dracula excites our imagination but reminds us what can happen if we play with nature. In Simon's work, we do not deal with the artifacts of science fiction but objects of practical design that we create in the real world in order to experience them physically or phenomenologically. When this involves transgressing the world of the natural, we take risks. Another term for this risk taking is human progress.

To elaborate this point, Simon was careful to argue that none of the artifacts destroy the humanness of our lives. All systems are created so we preserve their human quality. The various artifacts we create are meant to enrich our lives. In the world of artifacts, Simon did envision the possibility of the merging of the human and the machine. He called this artificial intelligence. However, he was careful to note that what he is after is not to turn the human into machine, but make machines more human. Thus computers are

computational machines of extraordinary capacity. It is in the same vein, that biological models have been injected into artifacts. The airplane was invented to mimic the flying bird. Similarly, the automobile was invented so it could run faster than a horse. In all these examples, the humanness did not change, only the world of artifacts did.

Where does posthumanism fit into this? Posthumanism seems to change the "humanness" of our existential condition rather radically. Simply put, it is an attempt to alter our notions of what is to be human in the Cartesian sense. According to Haraway (1995), Featherstone and Burrows (1995), Hayles (1999) and others, this can occur through cybernetic advancements. It is an attempt to extend the Simoinian world where machines can not only do routine computational tasks but can actually think logically and act linguistically. Posthumanism thus envisions changing the make-up what it is to be human. Thus, for example, electronic chips can be grafted into the human body and brain and all the primordial notions of what it is to be human can be altered in the process.

The consequences of posthumanistic advances to the world of consumption are quite substantial. Traditionally, our notions of what a consumer is whether he/she is an information processor or a cognitive subject or a cultural subject is derived from systems of humanistic epistemologies. The question is what kind of epistemologies can we envision in a posthuman world? My paper will address these issues.

"Consuming Cyborgs: Posthuman Consumer Culture and its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing"

Markus Giesler, Kellogg School of Management

In this presentation, I will discuss important findings from two years of extensive ethnographic case research on Napster.com and offer a variety of new insights into the praxis of posthuman consumption. In the consumption of Napster we find articulated some of the key facets of posthuman consumer culture that are interwoven in some of the most popular contemporary entertainment consumption practices (e.g. Giesler and Pohlmann 2003a, 2003b). I will show how Napster has promoted an emancipative space of choice enabled through infomedia technology, cultivated by interconnected cyborg consumers and operationalized through the code of the electronic gift. In doing so, my examination of Napster consumption provides both an excellent example of posthuman reality in consumer culture and an example of posthuman epistemology utilized in qualitative consumer research.

To best reveal the idea of posthuman consumer culture, I examine the phenomena that it structures: Napster consumer's Internet music related consumption experiences. Interviews with Napster consumers and archival data were collected over the past three years to map micro consumption discourse and practices in order to build an understanding of the moderato and macro cultural processes constructing posthuman consumer culture. Two complementary methodological approaches that are oriented toward theory construction are used: the deductively-oriented approach of Burawoy's (1991) extended-case method and the inductively-oriented approach of Sherry and Kozinets' (2000) netnography.

This presentation (a) advances the theoretical notion of posthuman consumption; (b) searches for evidence of its existence in entertainment consumption situations; (c) discovers some of the manners, mechanisms, and particularities of posthuman consumption; and (d) situates these findings within the broader sociological and consumer literatures. My findings reveal that (1) Oscillation and paradox are hypothesized to have important effect as two basic cultural logics of posthuman consumption and (2) a systemic five-step schema is developed to illustrate the dynamics of posthuman consumption on the moderato level of analysis. (3) Information,

materiality, mutation and hyperreality are introduced as dimensions for (4) the semiotic square of posthuman consumption, a unifying framework that offers a macro perspective on posthuman consumption.

"Who Am We?" asks Sherry Turkle at the beginning of her seminal book *Life on the Screen—Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) alluding to her self as a multiple, distributed system and the paradigmatic move from modernist calculation toward postmodernist simulation. As we stand on the boundary between the real and the virtual, our experience recalls what Victor Turner (1985) termed a liminal moment, a moment of passage when new cultural symbols and meanings can emerge. Napster consumption uniquely inflects the complex ways in which these multiple viewpoints become enacted through positional "We(s)" that alter Napster participants' consumption meanings through the exchange of songs on the screen. In an age where materiality tends towards ascendancy over information, what metaphor could be more fitting than that of the organism as an information system linked to prosthetic machines—the *cybernetic organism* also known as the *cyborg*?

"The Emergence of Virtual Commodities"

Erik Davis TechGnosis

Let us define "posthuman consumption" as the circulation of desire and commodities in environments that are so highly mediated and technological that it begins to generate behavior and situations that are quite foreign to existing thinking about what markets are and what consumers want. Then we can expect to find posthuman consumerism particularly advanced in the most virtual of environments today—the massive multiplayer online games like Ultimate Online or Everquest. And we do. These environments are not simply breeding their own increasingly complex economies (largely based on the scarcity of various objects, including land, as well as the man-hours logged improving characters). They are also giving us a glimpse into the sort of retail environments that may increasingly shape consumer experience—especially among the young and wired consumers who constitute the leading edge of posthuman consumption.

In these environments, I argue, the logic of brands is almost entirely severed from actual material commodities, becoming a kind of virtual animated style element—like the different avatar bodies that are bought off the shelf in Neil Stephenson's (1992) *Snowcrash*. Here we see a space where the already rapidly oscillating movements of fashion can even more quickly sculpt the infinitely plastic material of virtual space. Nonetheless, the virtual environment also poses tremendous challenges to traditional models of consumption and intellectual property, and monetizing virtual reality will remain a pitched battle for some time.

Analyzing prominent science fiction literature such as William Gibson's (1984) *Neuromancer* and Neil Stephenson's (1992) *Snowcrash* in this presentation, I identify the ferocious cultural role of the "virtual," defined as a sort of free play of the imagination that is captured and circulated through technological rather than psychological means. I suggest that posthuman consumers will and already do live inside of cartoons. Insights gained will help consumer researchers better understand the growing import of the virtual in every domain of everyday material life. The consumption of goods in the real world will be increasingly shaped by the fluid fantasies of the virtual, a process we can begin to understand by looking at the transformation of the styles associated with animation, especially Japanese anime comic consumption.

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