

Manufacturing Choice: A Sociological Critique of Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Modern societies emphasise consumer choice as a symbol of freedom and a reflection of one's individuality, by relying on this cognitive bias to downplay the extent to which one's consumer preferences are moulded by external factors. Sociologists have long theorised about this phenomenon, carefully studying the influence of social class, cultural expectations, symbolic meanings, and institutional power on consumer decision-making. Drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Jean Baudrillard, and Susan Sontag, this paper argues that consumer choice is not entirely free or pre-determined. Rather, consumers exercise limited agency within systemic structures that shape ideas surrounding desirability and value, and advertising is a tool that creates this sense of value and desirability by leveraging cultural norms and existing power structures.

INTRODUCTION

A unique feature that defines the human experience is our ability to process complex information to predict outcomes, weigh risks, and integrate memories to select the most beneficial course of action. One popular estimate suggests that the average adult makes around 35,000 unique choices every day, which breaks down to around 2,000 decisions an hour, or roughly one choice every two seconds (Krockow, 2018). Yet, our true agency remains contested. One must wonder: are our choices really our own, or the result of deterministic, physical laws and an interlinked chain of causal events? These questions about free will and the illusion of choice have plagued philosophers and scientists across decades, sparking fierce debate. A powerful cognitive phenomenon, the illusion of choice makes individuals overestimate their influence on outcomes, believing they have full agency over their decisions, even when those options are pre-determined, carefully engineered, or functionally identical (Cuncic, 2022). Marketers exploit this cognitive blind spot daily, depending on the human tendency to overestimate our own autonomy in decision-making. The most mundane example one can consider to understand this phenomenon is that of card tricks performed by magicians. During a card trick, magicians create the illusion of free choice for the audience by asking them to pick any card, when the outcome is already engineered. Audience members are often willing to accept the claim of magic rather than doubt the extent to which their agency was compromised, and external variables manipulated the outcome.

Sep 2026
Vol 11. No 3.

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SECTION I: DEFINING IMPORTANT TERMINOLOGY

To define many of the terms featured prominently in the essay, I will rely primarily on research conducted in the field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). CCT is not a grand, unified theory, but a range of perspectives that theorise the dynamic relation between consumer actions, the market, and cultural symbolism. It explores how marketplace choices reflect, negotiate, and resist power dynamics, and how consumers construct their identities using brand symbolism (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868). Specifically, I will use CCT to provide a context-specific definition of agency. In the field of sociology, agency is typically defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently, make free choices, and exercise free will. CCT often defines agency as the consumer's capacity to make intentional, meaningful choices in the marketplace. It is the power individuals and groups possess to navigate and even resist dominant commercial ideologies, despite the pervasive structures of consumer capitalism (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). An individual's free will, naturally, is constrained by the material and cultural limits inherent in consumer agency, predicated on the use of products as symbolic resources to construct social identities, orient relationships, and express one's values, known as "consumer culture" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). I chose CCT as a theoretical lens to define terms relevant to my argument because it is the study of consumer psychology from a social or cultural point of view, as opposed to a purely economic or psychological one. Hence, I felt that CCT best aligned with the themes I wished to explore.

I will be using the work of influential thinkers Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Jean Baudrillard and Susan Sontag to explore further how social factors shape consumer preference and assign value to specific goods. I chose these four important 20TH-century thinkers specifically because of their unique and varied theoretical approaches to the study of consumer culture, which will make my analysis rich and multifaceted. For instance, Bourdieu, a French sociologist who primarily studied class and power, would have different frameworks of analysis as opposed to Susan Sontag, an American writer who focuses on how media and language shape human emotion and aesthetics. I also use examples of various brands and their advertising strategies to illustrate the theories being discussed. These brands (Loro Piana, Patek Philippe, and Hermès, etc.) were selected as case studies because their marketing strategies and consumer appeal explicitly dramatise, rather than obscure, the theoretical principals of cultural capital, social

performance, and the system of objects.

SECTION II: BOURDIEU AND THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

In his work *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu states, “Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices: museum visits, concert-going, reading etc., and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 1). This initially leads one to associate the predisposition of certain tastes as a marker of educational attainment alone. However, in reality, other relevant aspects of taste, such as the manner in which taste or culture has been acquired, and the manner in which this taste is displayed, are important aspects of behaviour used to classify an individual’s social standing. These behaviours are often linked to social class. For a particular taste or consumer preference to be considered legitimate, Bourdieu argues that it must be acquired through the socially accepted avenues or cultural institutions. He explains that it must appear to have been acquired through early, informal exposure in a cultured household—the most socially legitimate avenue. Formal education is a secondary route. He states that, “Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines, since even within the educational system it devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation as ‘scholastic’ or even ‘pedantic’ in favour of direct experience and simple delight”(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2).

What does Bourdieu refer to when he lauds the power of “direct experience or simple delight” over a more scholastic or pedantic understanding of a particular cultural commodity? This "direct experience" is not truly natural or innate, but rather appears effortless precisely because it has been so thoroughly ingrained through one’s upbringing that it feels like second nature. Individuals from a cultured household do not need to study the history behind a painting to appreciate it correctly; they innately know how to perform that appreciation in socially convincing ways. Conversely, those who acquire cultural competence through formal education are perpetually marked as outsiders, their learned appreciation for such commodities read as strained, academic, and inauthentic—"pedantic" in Bourdieu's phrasing. This distinction is crucial for understanding consumer freedom: what feels like a spontaneous, personal preference for sleek minimalist furniture, French-press coffee, or a niche indie film is actually the product of class conditioning, signalling one's social position as effectively as an accent or a surname. This also closely relates to Bourdieu's concept of *hexis* (the embodied, physical manifestation of class). Appreciating the feel of a cashmere sweater or the taste of French-press coffee is a form of bodily, ingrained taste, not just intellectual knowledge. Commodities, similarly to works of art, are embedded with cultural meaning and significance only accessible to those with the cultural competence, or the “code”, as Bourdieu phrases it, to unlock the meaning of the object. Bourdieu claims that, “A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme

or reason. Not having learnt to adopt the adequate disposition, he stops short at what Erwin Panofsky calls the ‘sensible properties’, perceiving a skin as downy or lace-work as delicate, or at the emotional resonances aroused by these properties, referring to ‘austere’ colours or a ‘joyful’ melody. He cannot move from the ‘primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp based on our ordinary experience’ to the ‘stratum of secondary meanings’, i.e., the ‘level of the meaning of what is signified’, unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties and which identify the specifically stylistic properties of the work” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 3). While those with an informal familial education are aware of the formal stylistic choices that make the object being beheld valuable, the acquisition of this knowledge is often forgotten; the knowledge is not intrinsic, like the rules of a native language. This leaves more room for genuine wonder, unlike formal learners who have studied the discipline and recall the process of knowledge acquisition.

“And nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even ‘common’ (because the ‘common’ people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration, completely reversing the popular disposition which annexes aesthetics to ethics” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 4). A concise way to understand these concepts is by considering the quiet luxury movement. Quiet luxury refers to luxury brands that are more subtle, often using muted designs, quality materials, and timeless styles, avoiding flashy designs and prominent logos, which have been increasingly considered to be ostentatious, specifically by their target consumer demographic (elite or high-income customers). Research conducted by Taylor et al. (2024) indicates that the motives of many consumers who were studied for choosing quiet luxury products were related to social factors. Specifically, social connectedness and association with elites were found to be associated with quiet luxury purchases, suggestive of buyers of these products wanting to feel connected to elites who are assumed to have similar values and hold similar cultural capital. This is counter to the classic theory of the leisure class and Veblen’s related conceptualisation of luxury consumption being driven by a desire to signal status to the masses (Veblen, 1899).

Consider the marketing and advertising strategies of the quiet luxury Italian brand, Loro Piana. The brand historically maintains near-zero advertising budgets compared to traditional fashion houses, operating on the philosophy that the exceptional quality of their garments speaks for itself. The lack of traditional advertising means that the brand relies on word-of-mouth promotion from its ultra-wealthy customers, who know the social significance and history of the brand. It is less recognisable by outsiders, who have not grown up in these elite social circles, due to its sleek and understated designs. Loro Piana campaigns (such as "Somewhere in Loro Piana" and "Unparalleled Excellence") are cinematic, calm, and focused on natural landscapes. Visuals prioritise rich textures and craftsmanship rather than overt branding, emphasising that their target audience already possesses the relevant knowledge to understand the value of the brand. This showcases the importance of cultural knowledge, or cultural capital, in consumer decision-making. Loro Piana’s products are not simply well-crafted pieces, but objects imbued with social meaning, which elites use to signal their cultural knowledge and in-group status to other elites.

Furthermore, the lack of traditional advertising in this case can falsely empower consumers, making them feel as if they have greater autonomy in the decision-making process, unaware that their preference is the product of deep social conditioning and that the brand's entire strategy is designed to attract and validate them as members of an exclusive club.

SECTION III: GOFFMAN, BAUDRILLARD AND THE PERFORMANCE OF CONSUMPTION

In addition to status signalling, individuals often use their consumption habits to fulfil social expectations and manage impressions, or control how they are perceived by others. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory is a sociological perspective that uses the metaphor of a theatrical performance to explain this aspect of human social behaviour. In his work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman identifies that performance is a crucial aspect of every social interaction for an individual to convey the desired social information regarding themselves to their peers. He states, "When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him" (Goffman, 1959, p.1). Goffman also states that for a significant impression to be formed in the minds of peers, both the way that the individual expresses himself (intentionally or unintentionally) and the way the others are impressed by him contribute to the lasting perception formed. He differentiates between verbal and non-verbal means of communication, which he terms "expression given", or verbal information we intentionally communicate, such as what we say and "expression given off": This includes unintentional, often non-verbal cues such as bodily posturing and movement, appearance and grooming, activities, etc., all of which contribute to what an individual wishes to communicate to others about themselves (Goffman, 1959, p. 4). The audience uses these to check the sincerity and credibility of our performance. Performers often aim to present an idealised version of themselves that aligns with the official values of society, often concealing actions or motives that contradict these ideals. Advertising plays into our need to present an idealised version of ourselves to others, and the use of objects to construct this social self, and signal belonging to the relevant in-group.

One can consider this phenomenon with the example of the luxury watch brand Patek Philippe's Generations campaign. Several advertisements feature parents with their children (most commonly fathers and sons), with the slogan, 'You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation'. This turns the expensive watch into a symbol of belonging for an elite family, the in-group in this scenario. As the father passes his watch to the son, it becomes a symbolic gesture of passing down the role of the patriarch to the family's heir. The watch comes with certain expectations which must be managed as one steps into this new role. The watch, beyond just indicating socio-economic status,

symbolises a certain kind of prestige and taste associated with long-term, intergenerational wealth. Hence, the watch is also a means of non-verbal social communication to outsiders about one's status, family affiliation, taste, etc. Consumption becomes a performative act.

French theorist Jean Baudrillard has similarly written many works offering several insights into the limits of consumer agency and offers through his critiques of capitalist, consumption-driven societies. In an earlier work, *The System of Objects* (1968), he proposed that consumption is an active form of relationship not only to objects, but also to society and to the larger world. It is a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system. Baudrillard believed that giant technocratic corporations foster irrepressible consumer desires, creating new consumption-based social hierarchies that have replaced the old class structures in many societies. Objects are no longer linked solely to a function or need. Baudrillard considers the example of a washing machine, stating, "The washing machine serves as an appliance and acts as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. It is strictly this latter field which is the field of consumption. All kinds of other objects may be substituted here for the washing machine as a signifying element. In the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a definite function or need. Precisely because they are responding here to something quite different, which is either the social logic or the logic of desire, for which they function as a shifting and unconscious field of signification. (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 2)" With the advent of luxury, branded versions of several items and objects, such as household appliances usually considered to be purely perfunctory, it is easy to see the effects of this shift in our society.

Baudrillard aptly describes the role of objects in postmodern society as central to everyday experiences. "Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather on a rising statistical curve - with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 25). Baudrillard also comments that in the age of affluence, the surplus of goods and commodities becomes increasingly noticeable. Giving the example of department stores, he states, "Big department stores, with their abundance of canned foods and clothing, of foodstuffs and ready-made garments, are like the primal landscape, the geometrical locus of abundance. But every street, with its cluttered, glittering shop-windows (the least scarce commodity here being light, without which the merchandise would be merely what it is), their displays of cooked meats, and indeed the entire alimentary and vestimentary feast, all stimulate magical salivation. There is something more in this piling high than the quantity of products: the manifest presence of surplus, the magical, definitive negation of scarcity, the maternal, luxurious sense of being already in the Land of Cockaigne"(Baudrillard, 1998, p. 26). In this age of surplus, consumers naturally seek out scarcer, more distinct or personalised versions of even everyday items to differentiate themselves from others. Advertising strategically manages perceptions of scarcity to excite customers and emphasise the exclusivity of their product, making it stand out in an overcrowded market. Consider luxury brands such as Hermès, which relies on falsely created scarcity, uncompromising craftsmanship, and heritage storytelling rather than strategic advertising. By manufacturing high-quality, handmade products and strictly controlling availability, the brand creates intense consumer desire and maintains its ultra-luxury status. Hermès also sells luxury versions of everyday items (notebooks, playing cards, washcloths, etc.) so that individuals with disposable income

can use such objects to distinguish themselves further from mass consumers and emphasise their superiority within the consumer hierarchy.

SECTION IV: SUSAN SONTAG'S NOTES ON CAMP AND AESTHETIC CATEGORISATION

Another important factor that influences our ability to freely choose as consumers is the classification of objects by aesthetic categories. How do these aesthetic categories constrain or enable consumer choice? We can use secondary texts such as Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* to understand how good or bad taste is socially defined.

In Sontag's essay entitled *Notes on Camp* (1964), she describes the essence of camp as "its love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration" (p.1). Camp is a sensibility, Sontag argues, that is not natural. It is undeniably modern, and has an air of sophistication. Camp is intentional in its ridiculousness. Sontag gives us many examples of things she considers to be camp, amongst them Tiffany lamps, Swan Lake, Bellini's operas, and the Cuban pop singer La Lupe (Sontag, 1964, p. 2). Camp often borrows from low culture, which creates a tension between it and high art. Camp can often take cheap, mass-produced objects and elevate them to the status of "art" by framing them ironically. It often takes an increasing amount of privilege and cultural capital to present something as camp, as opposed to tacky. For instance, when Lady Gaga wore a dress made of raw meat to the MTV Video Music Awards in 2010, it was perceived as a bold, ironic statement on celebrity culture, femininity, and consumption. If a non-famous person wore a meat dress to an event, it would not be seen as camp, and most likely would be labelled as tacky. Camp can often liberate choice for the privileged: If one has enough cultural capital, they can buy and display even cheap, garish objects and frame it as a clever statement. Similarly, Camp constrains choice for the less privileged. If someone lacks the capital to frame their choices ironically, they are judged by conventional standards of taste. The marketplace and advertising reinforce this. Luxury designers regularly borrow from "low" or "kitsch" aesthetics (such as Moschino's fast-food-inspired collections or Gucci's maximalist, "ugly-chic" designs) and sell these items at luxury prices to wealthy consumers who seem to understand ironic consumption. Meanwhile, the original mass-produced items remain cheap and stigmatised. Camp's reliance on irony and cultural capital means it ultimately reinforces, rather than disrupts, class hierarchies. While it appears to celebrate "low" culture and democratize taste, in practice it requires a level of education and social positioning that is largely inaccessible. Camp reveals the ultimate irony of the magic trick: even when consumers recognise the artifice, the ability to see through the illusion becomes itself a marker of privilege, reinforcing rather than escaping the system. The consumer who gets camp feels sophisticated, but this feeling is itself engineered by the same class structures that shape all taste.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, truly defining and understanding the limits of consumer agency is nuanced and complicated. In a society where even utilitarian items take on social symbolism, most consumer decisions are influenced by social conditioning and consumption-based hierarchies. Consumers hence exercise limited agency within systemic structures, and advertising often reinforces these power structures and conventions subtly, while still making consumers feel empowered and as if they are autonomous decision-makers. In this vein, advertising is comparable to a magician's magic trick in the fact that both play on the illusion of choice bias. These examples were selected because they illustrate the theoretical concepts discussed. Different brands or advertising campaigns may reveal additional complexities as these brands were not chosen through a systematic sampling process. Future research could examine a wider range of brands or include audience studies to test how consumers interpret these advertisements.

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