Consumption, a Modern Affliction: Branding Culture, Youth Identity and College Admission

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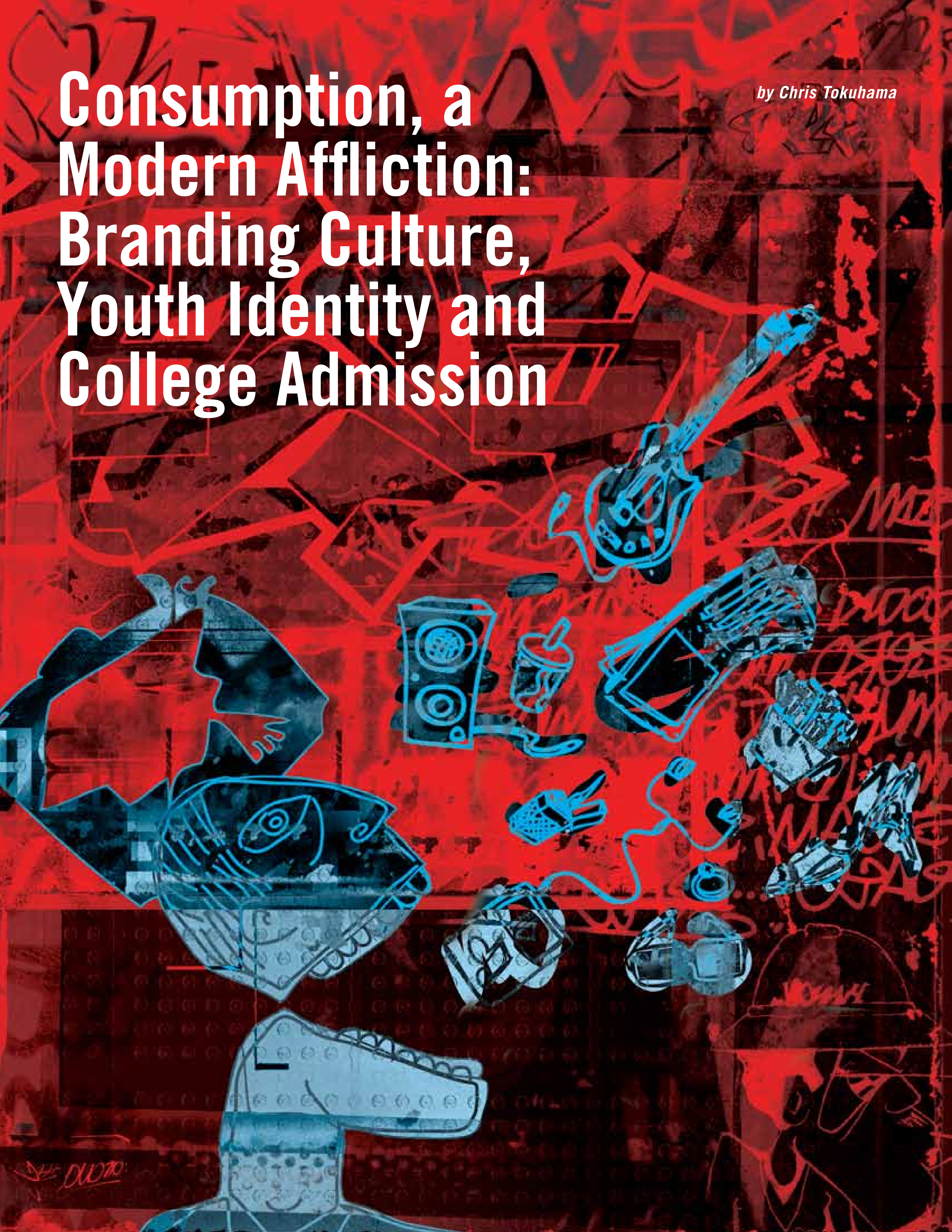

There was, for conspicuous consumption and commoditization, perhaps no time quite as memorable as the 1980s in the recent history of the United States. In particular, the ideology codified by Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* encapsulated past transgressions while simultaneously heralding the arrival of a new trend in domestic identities. Patrick Bateman, the book's protagonist, continually relates to his environment through image and demonstrates an adept understanding of social structures, using the language of branding to translate goods into value. For Bateman, manufactured products play an integral role in defining identity, with the nature of interpersonal relationships and emotional states often linked to the relative worth of possessions. The brand holds such incredible power for Bateman and his peers that Patrick is not surprised that a colleague mistakes him for another man, Marcus Halberstam, reasoning that the two men share a number of similar traits, noting that Marcus "also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses" (Ellis 1991, p. 89). This cements, for Bateman at least, the connection between definition of self-identity and consumer goods; in the view of individuals like Patrick Bateman, the clothes literally make the man.

While the example of *American Psycho* might appear passé, one need only update the novel's objects in order to glimpse a striking similarity between the pervasive consumer-oriented culture of the 1980s and that of modern youth. Apple's iPod has replaced the Walkman, caffeine has become the generally accepted drug of choice, and an obsession with social networking profiles has supplanted a preoccupation with business cards. To be sure, Ellis' depiction does not map precisely on modern teenage culture, but one can argue that the theme of core identification with branding creates a common link between the world of Ellis' 1980s Manhattan and the space inhabited by current college applicants.

In order to further understand the effects that consumer culture may have on modern youth, this article first traces a brief history of branding in the United States throughout the 20th Century to develop a context and precedent for the argument that the current generation of students applying to college has developed in a society saturated with branding, marketing and advertising. This environment has, in turn, allowed youth to conceptualize themselves as brands and to think of their projected images in terms of brand management. This article also demonstrates how the history of "teenager" has been closely linked with marketing since the term's creation, impacting American society's conceptualization of this demographic. By reviewing the modern history of branding, the article demonstrates that although consumer culture manifests uniquely in today's youth, the oft-lamented consequences are not merely products of our time.

This article will then address the commoditization of the college applicant by examining the confluence of branding, society and the admission process. Looking at how and why branding affects modern culture, the article suggests that admission officers can unconsciously encourage students' dependence on the paradigm of branding (and its associated vocabulary) as they themselves come to rely on the ability of the framework created by branding culture to activate networks of associations that, in turn, further aid in readily understanding and conceptualizing applicants. To this end, the cognitive organizational function of branding as a type of narrative structure is explored. Further supporting this position, the article argues that latent biases in the college application

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process may also help to reinforce the high/low culture dichotomy by privileging particular kinds of actions and experiences over others. A trickle-down effect then encourages youth applying to college to adopt the language of branding in order to present themselves as ideal candidates for particular institutions, thus consecrating the importance of branding in the bidirectional relationship between students and institutions.

Living in America at the End of the Millennium

The history of consumer culture in the United States provides an important foundational context for understanding the actions and attitudes and potential commoditization of contemporary applicants. In fact, as proposed in this section, to discuss the history of the American teenager is to recount, in part, past socio-cultural effects of marketing. Exploring the roots of consumerism in the 1960s,[1] the following account attempts to, with broad strokes, relay key points regarding the integration of branding and marketing into youth culture.

The 1960s marked a particular period of unrest in America as Baby Boomers began to clash with the GI Generation. Perhaps most significantly, the focus of discourse at this time shifted toward issues of youth culture with deep-seeded frustrations beginning to turn into anger as young adults struggled to define and express their individuality. The anti-establishment movement desperately wanted to break free from the control exuded by the State and corporations, eventually maturing a countercultural sentiment started by the Beat Generation into a milieu that gave birth to hippies and war protests. Baby Boomers, as a demographic group, occupied a rather unique place in American history, coming into young adulthood during a time of post-war prosperity and the solidification of the middle class. Suddenly, upward social movement became increasingly possible for a generation that enjoyed increased amounts of leisure time and disposable income. Simultaneously, this time period saw the birth of the Cultural Studies movement, which began to recognize that individuals were not merely passive consumers, but people who possessed a sense of agency (Arvidsson 2006), a progression that would prove to be a key milestone in the understanding of branding and youth, affording social scientists a systematic way to investigate the phenomenon brewing in the hearts and minds of the Baby Boomers.

Cultural observers quickly noticed the shifting economic trend and began to express their findings in prominent publications of the time. Dwight Macdonald labeled the American teenager a "merchandising frontier," a comment that would not go unnoticed by marketing companies looking to capitalize on this new trend (1958). In fact, although the term "teenager" had only recently emerged in literature, companies such as Hires Root Beer had already begun peer-to-peer campaigns among youth in order to promote a product, thus demonstrating recognition of the teenager as a potential consumer (Quart 2003a). The understanding of the teenager as a marketing demographic would prove to be a label that would continue to affect youth, influencing the ways in which modern American society (higher education included) conceptualizes the demographic. The development of the teenage market, along with the corresponding rise of teen-oriented culture and identity, continues to the present, with seeds sown by Beatlemania helping to permit fervor for teen idols like Justin Bieber. Perhaps more disconcerting is the relatively recent extension of this phenomenon, with marketers aiming at the "tween" audience (loosely conceptualized as 8–12 years of age) using children's media (e.g., animation and Radio Disney) as their chosen vehicles (Donahue and Cobo 2009, McDonald 2007). Yet, irrespective of their status as tween or teen, American youth can arguably be understood to exist in an aspirational culture that highlights the concurrent drawbacks and benefits of consumption.

The most readily salient effect of a consumerist culture mixed with the cult of celebrity—and, if documentaries like *Race to Nowhere* are to believed, an overemphasis on achievement—is that children start to focus on their inadequacies as they begin to concentrate on what they don't have (e.g., physical features, talent, clothes, etc.) rather than on their strengths. Brands, however, provide an easy way for youth to compensate for their feelings of anxiety by acting as a substitute for value; the right label can confer a superficial layer of prestige and esteem upon teens, which can act as a temporary shield against criticism and self-doubt. In essence, they say that if teens aren't good at anything, they can still be rich and be okay (Quart 2003b). For some, this reliance on branding might explain a relative lack of substance amongst the teenage population, but the ramifications of a culture dominated by consumerism extend much further.

Society may decry the enslavement of youth, but labels can serve a definite, and somewhat pro-social, function—brands can also be understood in the context of their ability to create and foster communities, prominently demonstrated, for example, by users' sworn allegiance to Apple.[2] The concept of a brand (or even a logo) can provide many of the benefits that come with membership to a group and, as such, also serve to define adopters' identities. The idea of brand as a community is a particularly powerful one when considering (but not limited to) teenagers, an age group comprised of individuals arguably searching for a sense of belonging. Indeed, the very act of consumption can be thought of as a practice whereby individuals work to construct their self-identities and a common social world through products and the shared sets of meaning that those goods embody (Kates 2002, Belk 1988). If we concede that manufactured items can begin to possess a value beyond their utilitarian function, a process that seems natural and inherent in group dynamics, it is no wonder that large portions of American culture have come to incorporate the ideology of branding into their everyday worldviews. Potentially a somewhat innocuous manifestation, it is only when we begin to privilege particular commodities—and communities by extension—that we being to understand the negative role branding can play.

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Further complicating the relationship, branding culture also exerts an influence on youth through lifestyle. Although the basis of this connection can be seen in the relationship between consumer culture and branding, brands can affect the process in more indirect ways. A number of factors, for example, from the emphasis on teen culture to increased pressure surrounding college admission, might be forcing adolescents to classify themselves earlier than ever. Emphasis placed on entrance to selective universities provides an excellent demonstration of the drastic changes that young people have had to undergo in the early part of their lives. For many students aspiring to elite schools, college acceptance (and attendance) confers a particular type of status and failure to achieve this goal by the age of 18 represents an extremely large disappointment. In order to secure this dream, young people might begin to package themselves—to applicants and their families, a "successful applicant" is no longer necessarily a student who did his best, but rather one who meets a specific set of criteria—turning their lives into products, which they hope to sell to colleges and universities.

Branding associated with colleges showcases how marketing has developed into the promotion of a particular lifestyle, as opposed to a means of distinguishing products (or perhaps more cynically, as an extension of this process), with a specific manifestation being the college admission process. Driven by a culture permeated with labels, the mystique of the brand has become the important factor for consideration in many areas—the actual quality of an item does not seem to be as important as its perceived value.

The Rise of the *Ad* (*Captandum*)

When considering the state of modern youth, however, the packaging process associated with college admission may not be as much of an anomaly when considering the larger cultural milieu in which applicants exist. In contrast to branding, which arguably confers some benefits to its subscribers, advertising represents a manufactured idea that exerts a powerful hegemonic influence on society, necessitating a brief segue into its background in order to fully appreciate the construct's effect on college applicants. As we shall see, advertising greatly influences value judgments, ideologies and culture dichotomies.

Children growing up in recent decades have arguably been exposed to large amounts of media and advertising, which has served to cultivate a latent affinity with embedded narrative forms. The term "Adcult," coined by University of Florida professor James Twitchell, depicts contemporary American society as an arena saturated with the lingering influences of commercialism (1996). Although the phrase results from a combination of "advertising" and "culture," one can easily imagine Twitchell describing a group whose ideology revolves around concepts of marketing through a play on the word "cult."

Advertising, largely a product of consumer culture, has rather obvious economic impacts. While one can certainly debate the mechanism(s), one need only compare similar products with and without marketing schemes to ascertain that advertising can have a potentially profound impact on manufactured goods. Moreover, consider that advertising can help individuals to organize knowledge and to make informed choices about the world, with advertising telling consumers how their money can be best utilized, given that currency is a limited resource.

The process of ordering and imbuing value ultimately demonstrates how advertising can not only create culture but also act to shape it, a process also evidenced by marketing techniques' ability to consume and/or reference previously shared cultural knowledge while simultaneously contributing to the cultural milieu.

Yet, while arguably functional, anyone who has experienced a good piece of advertising knows that the reach of marketing exceeds the limits of economics—exemplary ads have the power to make us feel something. Although informal research can support the idea that memorable advertisements often influence us on an emotional level (Roberts 2005), affective states resulting from advertising exposure can also be stored and retrieved for later recall (Stayman and Batra 1991), possibly resulting from the way that advertisements interact with our established belief systems and identity structures.

Continuing in the same vein, Twitchell contends that, "like religion, which has little to do with the actual delivery of salvation in the next world but everything to do with the ordering of life in this one, commercial speech has little to do with material objects per se but everything to do with how we perceive them" (1996, p. 110). Constructs like religion or advertising tell believers, in their own ways, what is (and is not) important in society, professing a particular point of view while attempting to integrate itself into everyday life, drawing on our desire to become part of something larger (e.g., an idea, a concept or a movement).

Perhaps, most importantly, ordering forces like advertising, religion, education, and art play on this desire in order to allow humans to give their lives meaning and worth, with a common thread being that followers can classify themselves in terms of the external: God, works of art, name brands, etc. Cynics might note that this phenomenon is not unlike the practice of carnival sideshows mentioned in Twitchell's Adcult: it does not matter what is behind the curtain as long as there is a line out front (1996). Although the attraction may assume different forms, it survives because it continues to speak to a deep desire for structure—advertising works for the same reason that we believe in high art, higher education and higher powers.

The process of ordering and imbuing value ultimately demonstrates how advertising can not only create culture but also act to shape it, a process also evidenced by marketing techniques' ability to consume and/or reference previously shared cultural knowledge while simultaneously contributing to the cultural milieu. The concurrent horizontal and vertical spread of advertising is reminiscent of memes, a concept created by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. According to Dawkins, memes represent discrete units of cultural knowledge that propagate in a particular society (analogous to genes) through a number of transmission methods (1976). While the concept of memetics certainly spans across areas other than advertising, Dawkins notably included, as examples of memes, catch phrases (slogans), melodies (jingles) and fads. Consequentially, although advertising inevitably forms a new type of culture in societies, ads also serve to broaden exposure to, or strengthen the connections of, existing aspects of culture as they stealthily burrow deep into our collective identity.

Despite the intricate and multifaceted nature of its impact, we can use the narrative characteristics of advertising as framework for understanding its influence. On a basic level, the format of advertising typically takes the form of a loose narrative, complete with implied back-story—television spots, in particular, provide a salient example of this. Yet, as previously mentioned, the messages present in advertising can also cause us to question our sense of self as we evaluate our belief systems and values. Consider how personal identities, like the aforementioned commoditized ones linked to college applications and branding, can result from narrative or actually be narrative; sentences containing "to be" verbs can be unpacked to reveal a larger narrative structure that can help us to "cope with new situations in terms of our past experience and gives us tools to plan for the future" (Sfard and Prusak 2005, p. 16). Twitchell supports this idea by mentioning that "the real force of Adcult is felt where we least expect it: in our nervous system, in our shared myths, in our concepts of self, and in our marking of time" (1996, p. 124). Advertising, it seems, not only allows us to construct a framework through which we understand our world, but also continually informs us about who we are (or who we should be) as a collection of narratives that serves to influence the greater perceptions of youth in a manner reminiscent of the role of television in Cultivation Theory (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

The Medium Is the Message[3]

Recasting branding and advertising as modern myths proves crucial to understanding how the messages, as narrative, help to convey complex ideas in a relatable format, making sense out of a potentially overwhelming wave of information—something resonant, it would seem, with college admission. Consider how the first iterations of narrative, myths and legends, informed the populace about the rules of a world (like why the sun rose or how humans had come to be) in a process that mirrors one of the previously discussed functions of advertising; although many have now come to accept scientific explanations in lieu of (or possibly in conjunction with) these tales, the fact remains that stories can serve to develop cognitive scaffolding as we evaluate foreign concepts. Narrative structure provides a guide for people to follow as they absorb additional information, easing the progression of learning (Perlich and Whitt 2010). This educational element, similar to the one existent in the concept of play, allows individuals to learn intricate lessons without any overt effort. However, when considering this process, it is important to realize that narrative, in choosing which facts to highlight, also chooses which facts to exclude from a story, which might be just as significant.

For some, the process of inclusion and exclusion might seem oddly similar to the recording (or creation) of history; certain facts become relevant and serve to shape the perception of an event while others fade into obscurity. Consider, however, that narratives often served as the first oral histories for a given population. Individuals entrusted with this position in these societies were the "keepers of information," whose ability to recount narrative shaped their community's collective memory, and, thus, a key part of the community's combined sense of identity (Eyerman 2004, Williams 2001). Performing a similar role as the oral historians of the past, modern society's sense of shared knowledge can be understood to be influenced by the commercial storytelling that is advertising (Twitchell 2004).

Again harkening back to the links between sense of self and the college application, the notion of narrative's impact on the sense of self is interesting to consider, particularly in youth-oriented marketing, as it affects individuals in the process of forming their identities (as opposed to adults whose self-concepts may be more static). In a process analogous to branding, adolescents try on different personalities like clothes, looking to see what fits. While not entirely insidious, teen marketing can exploit this natural process by providing shortcuts to identity through the power of branding. Altering perceptions, branding can activate particular sets of associations that have been engrained into us by marketing and therefore act as a value heuristic for youth. For teenagers navigating the social circles of their peer groups, labels can make an enormous difference.

Although we might be tempted to consign this fallacy to teenagers, young people are not the only ones prone to mental shortcuts; adults—including those who make evaluative judgments—have also been conditioned to rely on heuristics as guidelines, using experience to help them determine which rules to keep or eschew (Dhami 2003, McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003). Having grown up in a culture saturated with branding ourselves, we have learned to internalize the deeper messages of branding (perhaps on an unconscious level), a process that can result in us applying lessons gleaned from a lifetime of making choices between seemingly similar products to our applicant population. While heuristics generally provide users with an accurate conclusion, they are notoriously fallible and consistently exploitable.[4] The question then becomes: if adults are subject to heuristics in decision-making processes and these heuristics are sometimes faulty, what heuristic(s) may be active during the evaluation of candidates for admission?

The ramifications of branding's ability to affect American culture in this manner is profound: with its capacity to color perceptions, branding can influence the communal pool that forms the basis for social norms and cultural capital, which in turn can inform the ways in which college admission officers consider applications as they uphold the values of their institutions and individual selves. Even if we grant that the particular nuances of the application review will differ by individual institution, we can still examine the admission process in terms of branding culture if we understand that part of the evaluation process rests upon our ability to sort, organize and simplify massive amounts of information in order to gain perspective on our applicant pool. While reading the application, reviewers filter the information through their own unique lenses—the networked set of thoughts, associations and biases they bring to the table—attempting to develop a context for the student represented by the file. Buzzwords in the application, such as president, legacy, 2400, and minority, act like puzzle pieces, instantly activating particular collections of neural pathways as we begin to ascribe value in a process reminiscent of grocery shopping.[5]

Recalling the dichotomy of high culture and low culture, we can also think about how some key terms are not only privileged over others, but also how some buzzwords are themselves differentiated along the culture continuum. How, for example, does the president of a school club differ from the president of an online guild? Admission professionals might favor the established activity over the unknown. For these individuals, past experiences with students most likely factor into the development of a heuristic regarding student desirability, resulting in a series of mental leaps that, over time, grow into instinct. In a manner analogous to the one operant in branding, admission professionals are drawn to particular aspects/labels/phrases/attributes that we whole-heartedly believe to be indicators of value. While good readers learn to continually challenge themselves and check their biases, there may be a systematic devaluation of particular identities in the admission process. An opinion piece by Ross Douthat in *The New York Times* suggests that lower-class whites might just be such a demographic (2010)—

not out of active bigotry, but simply because the brand does not resonate with any pre-set associations regarding a successful student. Worse perhaps, admission professionals unwittingly privilege individuals with large amounts of social capital, favoring those who know to participate in the "right" activities.

The Next Big Thing?

Addressing this very issue, the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism hopes to provoke discussion by attempting to look at the trajectory between popular culture and civic engagement. In essence, the school hopes to discover how seemingly innocuous activities in the realm of pop might actually allow students to develop skills that allow them to participate meaningfully in their communities. Popular culture can act as a training ground for young people, allowing them to cultivate skills in the areas of rhetoric, agency and self-efficacy before applying their talents in the "real" world. The actions and experiences undergone in the world of pop culture can be ambiguous and difficult to understand and these traits are no less valuable to youth because they are not easily comprehendible. Some of the most amazing things happen in fandoms related to the iconic world of Harry Potter; cultures of remix, parody, and mash-ups; YouTube communities of Living Room Rock Gods; and political statements in World of Warcraft (Civic Paths Research Group 2010). Ultimately, the school hopes to challenge public perceptions regarding participation in fan communities, demonstrating that popular culture fills a uniquely productive role in the lives of its participants.

In the attempt to do good, admission professionals preach admission tips at college fairs and workshops telling students how they can develop their applications and stand out from their peers without coming across as packaged. We advise applicants to cultivate a point of view, or an image or a passion—ultimately, how is this different from asking a student to define and market a brand? Does admission subtly encourage youth to turn themselves into products while overtly chastising man-made fabrications? Does the structure of college applications cause students to begin to consider themselves in terms of taglines and talking points as they scramble to mold themselves into the image of the ideal student? This is not the intent, but I fear that it is our future. If professionals in higher education do not understand the possible implications of branding culture upon themselves, students and the profession, they cannot hope to begin to address the commoditization of college applicants.

Endnotes

[1] A more complete history would begin with the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, but mention of this is omitted in the interest of space as it is not directly relevant to the youth population. There are, however, interesting examples in this decade of branding's movement away from mere signification to a means of differentiating the self in a culture dominated by norms of conformity. More information on the phenomenon of conformity and avoidance of ostentatious display can be found in William Whyte's *The Organization Man (*1956).

[2] Apple seemed to grasp this concept fairly early on and developed a successful series of ad campaigns around the idea of community, most notably the "Think Different" slogan and the recent rash of "Mac vs. PC" television spots. The "Think Different" campaign, in particular, positioned users of Macs as a group in league with great thinkers of the modern era and also invoked the principle of psychological reactance in order to further strengthen the inter-community bonds.

[3] "The medium is the message" is a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan, in his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.

[4] There are many volumes written on this subject from the perspectives of both social psychology and advertising. For example, a fairly common heuristic positions cost as directly proportional to value. The foundation for this equation lies in the belief that more expensive items tend to be better quality, more exclusive or somehow desired. For a more comprehensive review of heuristics in the realm of persuasion, see *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (Cialdini 1984).

[5] "First generation" is the new "no trans fat"?

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