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## REFRAMING THE EMBODIED CONSUMER AS CYBORG A POSTHUMANIST EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

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## Abstract

The two-fold purpose of this research is to introduce a posthumanist epistemology of technology consumption and to illustrate the usefulness of this epistemology in the study of consumption as a whole. Combining recent Anglo-American theories of consumer behavior and European systems theory, we first introduce the *tetralemma of the system*, an analytical framework for the systemic structuration of consumer behavior, which is then used to explore and develop three posthumanist systems on the rise and of interest to consumer researchers: (1) cyborgs, (2) brand systems and (3) protest systems. The cyborg is the prototypical posthumanist consumer, a cybernetic organism that signifies the symbiosis between animal and machine, but also reflects the transformative union between economic priority and insatiable desire, living being and observing system. A brand system embeds consumers' and marketers' brand related social communication to establish control over consumption. A protest system is concerned with the ongoing social process of ensuring outsider status from the market dominated social environment through consumption.. Finally, we conclude that our posthumanist epistemology of consumption and the notion of systems provide important new insights into the posthumanist understanding of the consumer as well as the cultural structuring of posthuman consumer culture.

## Extended Abstract

We are currently living in a moment of extraordinary complexity when systems and structures that have long organized our lives are changing at an unprecedented rate. The burgeoning growth in information, communication and multimedia technologies and their impact on the transnational connections in economic, political and cultural domains dramatically alter consumption, markets and culture. Giesler and Venkatesh (2004) have recently proposed to conceive of our consumer culture as *posthuman*, encouraging posthumanist methods of inquiry and inscription. While these authors call for a “posthumanist epistemology of consumption,” they remain silent on how such an epistemology could materialize.

The purpose of this study is to introduce a posthumanist epistemology of consumption by linking two research traditions previously held separate: Anglo-American theories of consumer behavior and European (Luhmannian) social systems theory. To illustrate the usefulness of the presented posthumanist epistemology of consumption, we develop the tetralemma of the system, a novel analytical framework for the systemic structuration of consumption, which is used to explore three important systems on the rise and of interest to consumer researchers: (1) cyborgs, (2) brand systems and (3) protest systems. The cyborg is the prototypical posthumanist consumer, a cybernetic organism that signifies the symbiosis between animal and machine, but also reflects the transformative union between economic priority and insatiable desire, living being and observing system. A brand system embeds consumers’ and marketers’ brand related social communication to establish control over consumption. A protest system is concerned with the ongoing social process of ensuring outsider status from the market dominated social environment through consumption.

First, we conclude, a *crisis of representationalism* limits consumer researchers’ ability to frame the meanings and experiences of contemporary technology consumption because Cartesian metaphysics are generally unable to go beyond the Mind-centered representations of technology as an external object or tool. Second, and therefore, a posthumanist epistemology of consumption empowers *researchers as cyborgs* to decode the hybrid constructedness of posthuman consumer culture, understood as a matrix that embeds a plethora of social, economic and technological systems of control established through consumption. Third, post-Cartesian (Luhmannian) systems theory provides the epistemological core elements for a *posthumanist cyborg anthropology* that significantly extends our understanding of technology consumption and consumer behavior as a whole. Further implications for consumer research are discussed in a concluding section.

## REFRAMING THE EMBODIED CONSUMER AS CYBORG A POSTHUMANIST EPISTEMOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

Among the most important business phenomena of our generation is the way in which entire categories of products and services are based or dependent on technology that has not been existent only a few years prior to their introduction. By the early part of the twenty-first century, those of us who live in the industrially developed part of the Northern Hemisphere live and move and have our being in the midst of our technologies. Following Ihde (1990), we might even say that our existence is *technologically textured*, not only with respect to the large dramatic and critical issues which arise in a high-technological civilization [—] such as the threat of a nuclear war or the worry over global pollution and different forms of terrorism [—] but also with respect to the rhythms and spaces of daily life and consumption. All around us, high-technological products and networks change not only the electronic infrastructure within the marketplace, but also the social fabrics of consumers' lives. Our consumer culture is driven, shaped and constrained by technocultural and technopolitical considerations.

Yet, as Glazer (1995) laments, “most of our understanding of consumer behavior is at best technology neutral, and at worst rooted in both theoretical and empirical work with product categories that have remained unchanged for many years with respect to their underlying technologies.” Following Mick and Fournier (1998) “studies of technology consumption are limited in number and focus.” While the consumer literatures have occasionally probed the nature of technology consumption (e.g. Giesler and Pohlmann 2003a, 2003b; Schroeder and Borgerson 2002; Sherry 2000; Venkatesh and Nicosia 1997, Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson 1994), they have remained silent about the deep impact of consumer technology on the transnational connections in economic, political, and cultural domains.

Recently, Giesler and Venkatesh (2004) have further developed Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger's (2002) foundational theorizing of posthumanism in marketing and argued that these

technocultural and technopolitical transformations must be conceived of in the context of *posthuman consumer culture*, employing a “posthumanist epistemology of consumption.” Posthuman consumer culture refers to the symbiotic relationship between (1) the structural 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 it means to be human in the Cartesian sense. Following these authors, the Cartesian dualism, which dominates contemporary marketing and consumer research, is responsible for our inability to understand the nature of technology consumption because it prioritizes the *Human Mind* and leaves the technological product to the material world of bodies and objects. Whether our consumers are theorized as information processors, cognitive subjects or cultural subject is derived from systems of humanistic epistemologies. In our march through history, we have been careful not to tamper with this epistemic monopoly. Because we have epistemized technology as an external object of tool, many impulses behind our obsession with information and communication technologies remain poorly understood. To improve the discipline’s instruments of analysis and to build a greater amount of complexity into the self-description of our networked consumer culture, Giesler and Venkatesh argue, consumer culture should be epistemized as posthuman, a “hybrid matrix” that no longer distinguishes between humans and technologies and instead embeds a plethora of nature-cultures and body-minds.

Although Giesler and Venkatesh (2004), echoing Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger (2002), call for a posthumanist consumer epistemology and encourage consumer researchers to move beyond existing disciplinary boundaries in search of its theoretical sources, they remain relatively abstract about how such an epistemology could materialize. The goal of this research then is to develop one possible posthuman epistemology of consumption by linking two research traditions previously held separate: Anglo-American anthropological theories of consumer behavior and European (Luhmannian) systems theory.

Epistemizing how consumer perception, acculturation and politics play themselves out in situations that are invaded by consumer technology, offers researchers important new insights into contemporary consumer culture by (1) exploring the processes by which consumers construct, elaborate and interpret their own social reality using consumer technology, (2) understanding the social context(s) in which these processes occur and (3) identifying the role of these processes in the overall construction, maintenance and description of posthuman consumer culture as a whole. Because of its focus on posthuman consumer culture, the focal research question of this study is “How can a posthumanist epistemology of consumption look like and how will it expand and inform our understanding of contemporary consumer behavior as a whole?”

We will proceed as follows. First we will discuss the current representationalist view that organizes contemporary humanistic inquiries into the culture of consumption and then contrast the Cartesian perspective of ‘system as unity’ with the post-Cartesian notion of ‘system as distinction.’ Then we will introduce the tetralemma of the system, an analytical framework for the systemic structuration of posthuman consumer culture, which we use to discuss three systems on the rise and of interest to consumer researchers: cyborgs, brand systems and protest systems. Implications for marketing and consumer research are discussed in a concluding section.

## REPRESENTATIONALISM AND BEYOND

A questionable pragmatic Cartesian metaphysics organizes current humanistic inquiry in marketing and consumer research (Giesler and Venkatesh 2004; Lincoln and Denzin 1994; Brown 1995). As the past three ACR/ JCR/ JMR decades clearly evidence, the vast majority of marketing scholars have embraced the Cartesian logic of *representation* where “‘making true’ and ‘representing’ are reciprocal relations” (Rorty 1991, p.4). Since René Descartes, the condition of being is fulfilled with the ability to think (‘Cogito ergo sum’); hence the famous distinction between the realm of the “Human Mind” and the external “material world” of bodies and objects. According to Descartes (and

implicit in the majority of marketing and consumer research), the Human Mind is “sacrosanct” or “essential” and exactly defines what it means to be human. The material world, in contrast, remains external and somewhat secondary since it can only be epistemized via “Mind-centered” representation techniques. Whether, for instance, consumers are information processors, cultural subjects, or cognitive subjects always depends on systems of humanistic epistemologies. In their march through history, consumer researchers have been careful not to tamper with this epistemic monopoly. Contemporary humanistic inquiry is conducted under realistic and relativistic ontological and epistemological assumptions (e.g. Brown 1995, p. 171-172). Like the modernist novel, positivist consumer research text presumes a stable external social reality that can be “recorded” by a stable, objective, scientific Mind (e.g. Hunt 1989; 1993; 1994). Like its postmodern counterpart, post-positivist consumer research text attempts to connect mobile, moving, shifting Minds (and their research representations) to a shifting, external world (e.g. Hirschman 1986; Holbrook 1992; Sherry 1991; Sherry and Schouten 2002). While this external world may yield to multiple interpretations, the interpretive, mobile consciousness of the consumer researcher-as-relativist is able to form certain and conclusive representations about it (Denzin 1991a, 1991b, 1997, forthcoming; McHale 1992).

Outside of the marketing world, the metaphysics of Cartesian representationalism have been widely criticized because they fail to let us account for the idea that, as Richard Rorty (1991) laments, “it is no truer that ‘atoms are what they are because we use “atom” as we do’ than that ‘we use “atom” as we do because atoms are as they are’” (p. 5). Neither does thought determine reality nor, in the sense intended by the realist, does reality determine thought. Following Rorty (1991), the history of philosophy rather showed, that there are no final answers to the traditional questions about “knowledge,” “truth” and “representation.” Consequently, they should be rejected. In a similar fashion, Rasch and Wolfe (2000) have demonstrated how the limitations of the Cartesian representationalist framework for dealing with the problems of knowledge are especially clear in the ongoing debates over the status of postmodernity. On the one hand, there are critics of diverse political stripe who

lament that with the breakdown of the realist worldview, we experience what Foucault (1969; 1972, p. 387) calls the “death of the subject” and that the loss of meaning that undermines the philosophical, ethical, and political promises of the project of modernity. On the other side, we find proponents of postmodernism who accept or even celebrate this very loss of representational veracity as a liberation of philosophical, social and cultural analysis from what Derrida (1967, see also Rosenau 1992) has termed “logocentrism.” Most researchers in marketing have today settled for an uneasy position somewhere in the middle of the continuum between realism and relativism: there is indeed a preexistent, finite social reality with its own objective nature, but one that is viewed differently by different “Marketing Minds” according to the cultural and social determinations that shape their particular view of things (e.g. Brown 1996, p. 179; Scott 1992; Sherry 1991; Thompson 1993). Yet, as Rasch and Wolfe (2000) passionately advocate, such a position is “purchased at the expense of incoherence, since it simultaneously endorses and disavows the very representationalism that it bridles against” (p. 16). This momentum, after all, may be not be the *crisis of representation* that is challenging marketing and consumer behavior research (e.g. Denzin 1997; Sherry and Kozinets 2000) but a *crisis of representationalism*: the urgent suspicion that marketing and consumer research have a Cartesian center from which they prefer to operate, leads to the even stronger suspicion that, if realism is lost, so is relativism.

What does this hold for consumer technology? The crisis of representationalism leaves consumer technology as an open question because Cartesian metaphysics are unable to frame the “technological texturedness” of our being-in-the-world (Davis 1998; Heidegger 1977). In a representationalist world, we can come to grips with technology only as an external means or human activity but not as a “being” that, as Sherry (2000) points out, “transcends its material existence as an object or tool by virtue of its ability to encode and transmit political meaning and mind, spirit and soul.” As it currently stands, marketing and consumer research are blind for the complex cultural and

political properties of consumer technology beyond the well-established Cartesian anthropologies of the tool.

To better understand technology consumption on the epistemological level of analysis beyond the problems of the Cartesian legacy, Giesler and Venkatesh (2004) therefore propose the replacement of the Mind by the cyborg, “a cybernetic organism, a fusion of the organic and the technical forged in particular, historical, cultural practices” (Haraway 1995, p. 51). Yet they do not explain how the cyborg epistemizes, socializes and sociologizes. Addressing this conceptual indeficiency, we propose a posthumanist epistemology of consumption. We link a posthumanist (post-Cartesian) theory of social systems to recent findings from the anthropological marketing literature. To pursue this goal, we will (1) distinguish between a ‘system as unity’ and a ‘system as distinction’ perspective; (2) develop the tripartite posthumanist notion of systems, control and communication; (3) introduce the cyborg as a cybernetic system; (4) present the tetralemma of the system, an analytical framework for the systemic structuration of posthuman consumer culture; and (5) explore two different social systems on the rise and of interest to recent consumer literatures: brand systems and protest systems. In a concluding section we will sum up the implications of this research for our understanding of posthuman consumer culture and the relations between consumption, culture and technology.

## SYSTEMS, CONTROL AND COMMUNICATION

‘System’ is a complex and many-sided notion in social thought. Its intellectual history is lengthy and abundant. Systems were a prominent concern of the great social theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Durkheim [1893] 1933; Hegel 1830; Marx [1867] 1946) and have continued to be so among contemporary contributors (e.g. Ashby 1956, 1961; Bateson 1972, 1979; Baudrillard 1968; Bourguine and Varela 1999; Glanville 1979, 1982; Günther 1962; Habermas 1984; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Löfgren 1977; Luhmann 1984; Maffesoli 1996; McCarthy 1991; Parsons and Shils 1951; von Foerster 1981; Wiener 1948). In what follows, we will explore two different systems

perspectives: the traditional Cartesian representationalist notion of ‘system as unity’ and the post-Cartesian/ posthumanist European (Luhmannian) notion of ‘system as distinction.’

### System as Unity

Inspired by structural functionalist thought of the Fifties and Sixties (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1952) and the famous work of Talcott Parsons (Parsons and Shils 1951), the notion of ‘system’ to epistemize the structural unity of marketing and consumption has been frequently probed in marketing and sociology (e.g. Baudrillard 1968, ‘system of objects; Douglas and Isherwood 1979, ‘goods as information system’; Moyer 1967, ‘changing marketing systems’; Arndt 1981, ‘the political economy of marketing systems’; Savitt 1984, ‘comparative marketing systems’). Here a system is defined in a representationalist fashion as, for instance, “a relation between structure and process” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) or “a marketing system that structurally governs itself within its own social mechanisms to maintain its boundary“ (Savitt 1984). Terms like mechanisms, structure, element, boundary or relation indicate a strongly representationalist perspective on social systems as “ontic units” (von Foerster 1981): the functionality of a certain pre-existent, finite marketplace reality is epistemized by representing it as a system. Researchers within the ‘system as unity’ tradition have worked ontologically with systems as stable, orderly, mechanic units that represent certain stable or shifting external social marketing realities. Yet, the ‘system as unity’ view has been widely criticized for being unable to deal with social conflict and social change (e.g. Giddens 1977; Edgar and Sedgwick 1999). In a Cartesian universe, in which social practice is “systematized” in such a way, there is also little scope for a theory of meaning and ideology (Lyotard 1979). While the representationalist framework offers to us palette of rich and well-established concepts for the representation of consumer behavior, markets and culture, the humanistic (Cartesian) social systems theories have proven their inability to deal with ideology, meaning, conflict and change within everyday social reality and consumption. In the crisis of representationalism, the perspective of

‘system as unity’ has failed to let us account for the social complexity of posthuman consumer culture. Is the systems approach then lost? Instead of rejecting the systems approach as a whole, we propose a different notion of social systems that takes into consideration, as McCracken (1998) did, that “we need a theory that shows how the system remains a system even as systemness is challenged.” In other words, we need a theory that explains: (1) what constitutes a system “as distinguished from” its social environment (Baecker 2002), and (2) who draws the distinction between system and environment (Fuchs 2001)?

### System as Distinction

The notions of ‘system as distinction’ and the ‘observer’ who draws the distinction beyond the realms of Cartesian representationalism are central to European (Luhmannian) systems theory (e.g. Luhmann 1984, 1997; Baecker 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2001, 2002; Fuchs 2001). Yet this post-Cartesian (constructivist) version of systems theory has not been explicitly theorized in marketing and consumer research. The purpose of this study is to develop a posthumanist epistemology of consumption using formerly neglected insights from European (Luhmannian) systems theory and linking them to recent anthropological marketing literatures. By exploring the notion of ‘system as distinction,’ this paper helps expand our understanding of the cultural structuring of posthuman consumer culture and society.

For the purpose of this study, we rely on the post-Cartesian notion of systems, control and communication, the tenets of which we will briefly review. The posthumanist concept of systems is historically situated in modern society’s attempt to monitor and control itself (e.g. Wiener 1948; Hayles 1999). Control means to establish causality ensured by communication (Baecker 2001), i.e. control presupposes communication. It implies a negotiation, a kind of contract to be concluded. This contract is not based on ideal speech, historically grounded reason or ontological unity (e.g. Habermas 1984; Bannet 1993; Ray 1993). It is rather grounded in a specific relation between causes and effects. This specific relation can be referred to as the system (and its environment), emergent from

communication and self-selected by an observer who distinguishes it from the universe of causes and effects all around him. But why the observer and not Mind? This issue is explicitly addressed by Varela (1979) who discusses the fundamental cognitive act of distinction:

“...[T]he establishment of system boundaries is inescapably associated with what I shall call a cognitive point of view, that is, a particular set of presuppositions and attitudes, a perspective, or a frame in the sense of [Gregory] Bateson ... or [Erving] Goffman...; in particular, it is associated with some notion of value, or interest. It is also linked up with the cognitive capacities ... of the distincter. Conversely, the distinctions made reveal the cognitive capabilities of the distincter” (p. 85).

In other words, the demarcation of a system is contextualized with respect to the observer effecting the demarcation. After all, the fundamental epistemological tenet of the posthumanist systemic perspective is that: 'Everything said is said by an observer' (Maturana and Varela 1980, p. xix). In contrast to the representationalist view, reality is therefore not external and preexistent independently from the Mind's attention (and later represented by the Mind), but actively constructed by the observer in the permanent process of drawing distinctions. For an observer, then, a system is a way “to communicate control if there is no other way to control but to communicate” (Baecker 2001). Communication can therefore be understood as the concatenation of selections, i.e. operations of drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions (e.g. Shannon and Weaver 1949). This posthumanist idea of systems reveals two insights about communication. As Baecker (2001) notes, “systems first of all explain that there are sets of possibilities before any specific possibility can be selected at all. And secondly, they explain that the set of possibilities is not a given one but is reproduced by the very selections being feasible which recursively constitute (by being remembered, forgotten and re-invented) that set of possibilities.” Communication therefore guarantees the production of redundancy (Bateson 1972). It marks both the message being selected and the set of possibilities from which it is selected. Communication consists in checking out that redundancy, and that is why it is stimulated both by non-knowledge *and* by knowledge, by what has been said *and* by what has not been said, by the determinate *and* by the

indeterminate, by the meaning included *and* by the meaning excluded and by the system *and* its environment (Luhmann 1997a, pp. 37-8; Baecker 2001).

### THE CYBORG AS EMBODIED CONSUMER

Acknowledging “distinction” as “the most fundamental cognitive act” (Maturana and Varela 1980), the posthumanist notion of systems resolves Descartes’s dualistic domination of the *res cogitans*, the realm of the mind, over the *res extensa*, the spatial world of bodies and objects, and instead epistemizes social reality as a “field of forces and relations” (Fuchs 2001) constructed by an observer. In doing so, Luhmannian systems theory provides the core logic not only for a posthumanist epistemology of consumption but also for a post-Cartesian “cyborg anthropology” of consumption in the sense of Giesler and Venkatesh (2004). The cyborg “observer,” a post-Cartesian, “re-embodied” cybernetic organism, includes both natural and cultural components. It treats cognition not as something that happens in the brain. Instead, it analyzes meaning and identity in terms of the relation between itself and its environment, integrating mind and biosphere. The relationship between the cognizer and its phenomenal world is determined by the bodily and cultural distinctions it draws. The cyborg epistemizes, socializes and sociologizes in the permanent process of drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions. The cyborg is the prototypical posthumanist consumer, a cybernetic system that signifies the symbiosis between animal and machine, but also reflects the transformative union between economic priority and insatiable desire, living being and observing system.

For the cyborg, technology consumption is, with Heidegger (1962), a fundamental “mode of revealing,” that determines its “being-in-the-world” rather than mere “tool consumption” or “human interaction” with the external world of bodies and objects. Technology is implicit in all being, so fundamentally determining our existence, that it becomes an epistemic device for the cyborg.

Posthuman consumer culture can therefore be defined as a hybrid “matrix that embeds” (von Foerster 1997) or a “pattern that connects” (Bateson 1972) a plethora of social, economic and technological systems of control established through consumption. In such a consumer culture of ours, both consumers and consumer researchers are cyborgs, “decoding” the matrix and observing its various social forms and their relations. How do cyborgs decode the matrix? In what follows, we will introduce an analytical framework that will help consumer researchers (and consumers) better understand the systemic structuration of posthuman consumer culture. We will then explore and develop two social systems of interest to the recent marketing literatures: brand systems and protest systems.

### The Tetralemma of the System

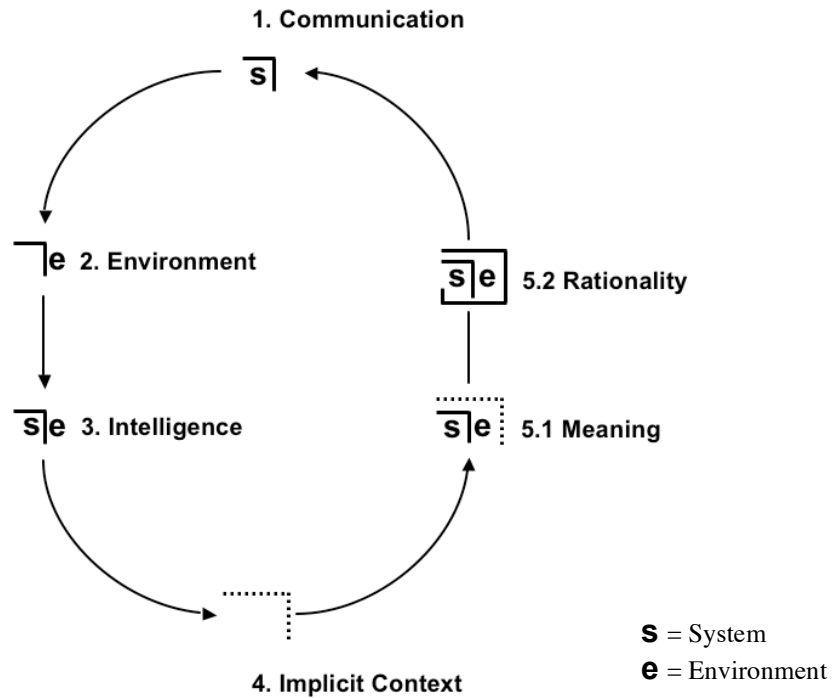
In the previous section, we have explored and developed a posthuman perspective on systems as being emergent from social communication, understood as the concatenation of operations of drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions. Systems present, for an observer, (1) the possibility of drawing a distinction, (2) the environment as distinguished from the system, and (3) the distinction itself as the relation between the system and its environment. Systems organize the relation between freedom, blindness and dependence: a system is free in the way of drawing its distinction, it is blind for the consequences; and for the success of its distinction dependent on everything it excludes (environment).

To further explore these insights, we introduce the *tetralemma of the system* (cf. Varga von Kibéd 2000; Baecker 2002), an analytical framework for the systemic structuration of posthuman consumer culture. The tetralemma of the system is a cycle diagram that shows how a system (e.g. a cyborg or a social system) is emergent from and brought forth by communication. The Spencer-Brownian (1969) mark  $\sqcap$  indicates “is distinguished from” (see Figure 1). The arrows demonstrate the recursive movement of the reflection and, finally, the re-entry of all single elements into the social

system.

Let us briefly go through each position of the tetralemma of the system: (1) A system is emergent from communication (as was discussed in the last section). As Davis (1998) points out, “all that remains is the possibility of communication.” (2) A system is a system within its environment. It is distinguished from its environment. (3) In the ways of negotiating inside and outside state, a system is intelligent if and as long it is able to reproduce itself. Intelligence is the system’s ability to “reflect on an environment” (Günther 1962, p. 318; see also Baecker 1994; Lacan 1949; Wiener 1948, p. 162), i.e. to substitute its own knowledge with the non-knowledge of its environment. (4) Both the system and its environment are set in the implicit context, a causally non-related social realm. (5.1) In the medium of meaning, the system does not communicate with but about its environment. (5.2) In the medium of rationality, the system reflects the distinction that it draws. The idea of rationality in position 5 formulates that the re-entry of a distinction into the realm of the distinction (Spencer-Brown 1972) does not claim Truth but rather another distinction - a position of reflection - that sets itself in relation to the “freedom, caprice and imagination” of position 1. The tetralemma of the system expresses the permanent oscillation of an observer between five analytical positions that help us explore and develop some of the key features of two important social systems on the rise and of interest in posthuman consumer culture.

FIGURE 1  
THE TETRALEMMA OF THE SYSTEM



So far, we have offered (1) an epistemological critique of Cartesian representationalist approaches in marketing and identified the crisis of representationalism, discussed (2) the posthumanist notion of systems, control and communication, and introduced (3) the tetralemma of the system, an novel analytical framework for the systemic structuration of posthuman consumer culture. We are now equipped to delve into the substance of two social systems that have been of interest to recent consumer literatures: brand systems and protest systems. To prove the usefulness of our posthuman epistemology of consumption we have selected two examples from outside of the technology consumption literatures. This is done in order to demonstrate the value of the tetralemma of the system and our posthumanist epistemology beyond the traditional confines of technology consumption. In the concluding section we will develop the implications of this research for our understanding of posthuman consumer culture and the relations between consumption, culture and technology.

## BRAND SYSTEMS

Brands are central to marketing. Yet despite almost universal experience with brands (e.g. Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Biel 1992; De Chernatony 1993; De Chernatony & Dall'Omo Riley 1998; Gordon 1991; Kapferer 1994; Keller 1993; Keller 1998; Marder 1997), they remain poorly understood. Conventional concepts of branding are ill-equipped to guide the creation of brand leadership when consumers socialize. Therefore scholars have recently begun to move thinking away from the traditional consumer-brand dyad to the consumer-brand-consumer triad (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Holt 2002). Yet much more theorizing remains to be done in order to thoroughly understand brands on the cultural level of analysis. While current research provides a useful insight into the complex cultural processes underlying the construction of brands, it remains silent about the dialectical interplay between agency and structure. Marketing theory is unequipped to answer questions about what Murray (2002) recently described as "the tension between sign experimentation and sign domination" (p. 42) involved in the cultural construction of brand meaning.

We propose to theorize brands as social systems. Contrasting Douglas and Isherwood (1979, p. 38), who 'systematize' the entire world of goods as an information system making visible and stable the categories of culture, we 'systemize' brand specific communication (position 1) as a brand system. A brand system is the "matrix that embeds" (von Foerster 1994) consumers' and producers' brand specific communication to establish control over consumption. A brand system organizes, for an observer, the relation between freedom, blindness and dependence: a brand system is free in the way of drawing its distinction (position 2), it is blind for the consequences (position 4); and for the success of its distinction dependent on everything it excludes (position 3). As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) report:

"...[M]any members of the Macintosh brand community derived an important aspect of their community experience from their opposition to PCs, PC users, and PC software giant Microsoft. This opposition to Microsoft is an important source of unity among Macintosh brand community members. Evidence for this assertion comes from both the face-to-face data, as well as the computer-mediated communication data. The existence of a common enemy against whom to unite makes this brand community particularly strong. The threat from this enemy is made all the more real by the fact that it had succeeded in displacing the Macintosh and

assimilating many former Macintosh users by appropriating aspects of the Macintosh operating system.” (p. 420)

As the above statement amply illustrates, a great deal of understanding of brand systems can be derived from looking at what they exclude. “The existence of a common enemy against whom to unite” makes not only this particular Macintosh brand community strong, but also hints at the intelligence of the larger Apple brand system in which it is set. Brand systems distinguish between brand system and brand environment states and formulate the ongoing oscillation between them. Brand systems are *different*. Understanding the brand system’s intelligence means to understand the relationship between what the brand system communicates to be and what it rejects (position 3). Consumer researchers have been slow to see this relationship and slower still to take stock of its significance. Understanding brands means, first of all, looking at what they are not.

Brand systems do not only explain the brand’s social constructedness (e.g. Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). They also serve as a cultural resource. In his dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding, Holt (2002), for instance, concludes that, “brands will become another form of expressive culture, no different in principle from films or television programs or rock bands. Brands that create worlds that strike consumers’ imaginations, that inspire and provoke and stimulate” (p. 87). In the idea of the brand system we find articulated Holt’s (2002) dialectical relationship between consumer culture and branding. Brand systems are a cultural resource, when they formulate a difference, which they do, to argue with Murray (2002), if and as long as they articulate the tension between sign experimentation and sign domination (position 5.2). Quite literally, brands are alive when they communicate.

Conventional marketing wisdom holds that image brands succeed when “they make an emotional connection with consumers” (e.g. Tybout and Carpenter 2000, p. 88). But how is this emotional connection achieved? Brand systems reflect the tension between how brands are communicated and how an observer sets himself or herself into relation to this communication. Brand systems are, for an observer, “pregnant with meaning” (Turner 1967, p. 44, position 5.1) because they

make a difference (Bateson 1972). Yet this difference is subject to a constant shift of attributions (e.g. Heider 1958). As the tetralemma of the system clearly illustrates, the recursive construction of a brand system through communication brings time into play. Brand meaning, therefore, is highly unstable and merely predictable in its effect and associability. Once the emotional connection with the consumer is subject to such dynamism, the concept of brand image turns out to be impoverished. The insight that ontology conceives the static duality of all being (something either *is* or *is not*), leads to the even stronger insight that, if representationalism is lost, so is the idea of brand image. A brand is a *mobile* army of meanings. Instead of residing in the Cartesian realms of brand image, consumer researchers can now strive for a posthumanist vision of, what we call, brand flow. How do brand systems evolve over time? How are brand systems created, maintained and eventually destroyed through communication? And consequently, how does the brand system's social environment evolve over time? In this way, understanding brand systems and their flow is a critical step in truly actualizing the idea of dynamic brand leadership.

## PROTEST SYSTEMS

Another remarkable phenomenon currently of interest to consumer researchers can be summarized like this: some consumers protest. They engage in consumer boycotts and resistance (Friedman 1985, 1995, 1999; Kozinets and Handelman 1998), different forms of market subversion (Penaloza and Price 1993; Dobscha 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Kates and Belk 2000), and ultimately emancipate themselves from the restrictive influences of the dominant market culture (e.g. Firat and Dholokia 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Giesler and Pohlmann 2003a, 2003b; Kozinets 2002, 1999; Murray and Ozanne 1991). Investigating the complex processes involved in the struggle for marketplace empowerment, consumer agency and consumer emancipation, consumer researchers have provided a useful, yet incomplete picture of communally enacted protest behavior.

To distance themselves from their (market dominated) social environment, we propose, consumers construct protest systems. A protest system is understood as an ongoing process of ensuring “outsider status” (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, p, 58; Hebdige 1979) through social communication (see Figure 1). Similar to Victor Turner’s (1978, p. 250) notion of *communitas*, a protest system is of antistructural character but not necessarily “full of unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances.”

For the success of its distinction, a protest system simply depends on everything it excludes. In his investigation of consumer emancipation at Burning Man, Kozinets (2000) observes that, “it is as if by keeping the market centered in the cultural crosshairs, its alleged evils will be exorcised” (p. 26). Giesler and Pohlmann (2003b; see also Luhmann 1999) theorize a similar observation at the music file-sharing community Napster as the “paradox of consumer emancipation.” Although (or especially because) the protest system offers an alternative protocol to the mainstream market environment (e.g. through consuming music at Napster as a gift and NOT (distinction) as a commodity), it *paradoxically* re-imports the social relation between itself and the rejected social entities into the system’s “cultural crosshairs” (position 5.2). Hence Kozinets (2002) suggests that, “the urge to differentiate from other consumers drives participation at Burning Man, and does not release them from grip of the market’s sign game and social logics” (p. 36). Yet, Kozinets goes on to theorize consumer emancipation in a *hypercommunity* context and suggests that consumer emancipation, if possible at all, must be perceived of as temporary and local. In contrast to this observation, the tetralemma of the system rather shows that a protest system can be successful not necessarily if its temporary and local but if and as long it is able to reproduce itself, i.e. to “reflect on an environment” that is different (position 3, Günther 1962, p.318; see also Baecker 1994; Lacan 1949; Wiener 1948). Although the Burning Man *festival* is temporary and locally bound, Burning Man’s protest system and its potential for consumer emancipation are not as long as communication takes place (e.g. on the Burning Man Website, the

Burning Man Newsletter or in this paper). In this way, understanding protest systems is a critical step in truly actualizing the idea of consumer emancipation.

## CONCLUSION

Studying ideological and consumption related social discourse and practice employing a posthumanist consumer epistemology holds several important insights into contemporary consumer behavior (Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger 2002). Four principal conclusions can be derived from this investigation. First, the *crisis of representationalism* limits consumer researchers' ability to frame the meanings and experiences of contemporary technology consumption because Cartesian metaphysics are generally unable to go beyond the Mind-centered representations of technology as an external object or tool. Second, and therefore, a posthumanist epistemology of consumption empowers *researchers as cyborgs* to observe and decode the hybrid constructedness of posthuman consumer culture as a matrix that embeds a plethora of social, economic and technological systems of control established through consumption. Third, post-Cartesian Luhmannian social systems theory provides an excellent "core logic" for a *posthumanist cyborg anthropology* that significantly extends our understanding of technology consumption and consumer behavior as a whole. Forth and finally, the *tetralemma of the system* is a powerful analytical framework that helps explore and develop especially various social systems on the rise and of interest to cyborg consumer researchers. It illustrates that social systems are fundamentally social entities, created as much by consumers as by marketers in an effort to reduce marketplace complexity through deciding self-referentially over outside reference.

Our posthumanist consumer epistemology further develops Venkatesh, Karababa, and Ger's (2002) foundational theorizing and addresses the socially constructed nature of marketing and consumption as something more than just the summation of images, meanings, norms and values. It generally demonstrates that consumer culture is not given and marketing knowledge not constituted [—] as in the traditional, representationalist worldview [—] but rather brought forth in the dynamic

interaction of observer and observed, system and environment, human and technology. It is important to note that the discussion of brand systems and protest systems in this paper illustrate the value of a posthumanist epistemology of consumption beyond the traditional confines of contemporary technology consumption - it presents a holistic, organic perspective on the interfaces of relationships between the social, economic, and technological domains in consumption, markets and culture.

During the past thirty years, most consumer research has operated within the Cartesian logic of representation. And of course, the import of emphasizing especially the humanistic, phenomenological, textual and rhetorical generation of marketing knowledge is indisputable. However, thematic imbalance can also reinforce disciplinary boundaries rather than encourage vigorous interdisciplinary dialogue about the nature of knowledge and the problem of interpretation (Sherry 2000). At this very moment, the social sciences and the studies in new consumer behavior (Belk 1995) share a common set of fundamental epistemological problems: the question concerning technology, paradoxical self-reference, resistance and protest, to name just a few (e.g. Davis 1998; Haraway 1991; Hayles 1999; Latour 1993; Serres 1981). Our posthumanist epistemology based on the post-Cartesian logic of social systems demonstrates the cross-fertilization of contemporary consumer and social-scientific theories; it is “the white box emerging from two interacting black boxes” (Glanville 1979, 1982) C.P. Snow (1959) once called “the two cultures” on general epistemological questions of interpretation.

Once thoroughly implemented in our research agenda, a posthumanist consumer epistemology enables us to relate to methodological concerns new epistemological questions of the social distinction between actor and observer, of the ecological distinction between social system and its environment, and of the temporal distinction between past, present, and future. Further attention must be devoted in this context to (1) recent advances in posthumanist social research on gender, race or class (e.g. Halberstam and Livingston 1995; Haraway 1989), (2) identity and self (e.g. Hayles 1999), (3) posthuman (techno)politics (e.g. Gray 1999 ‘cyborg citizen’) and (4) the methodological premise and promise of netnography (Sherry and Kozinets 2000) as to capture “the profound experiencing of digital

sociality.” If netnography wants to be more than an “on-the-screen-ethnography” (Turkle 1997) we need to carefully decode the consequences of our posthumanist epistemology in the context of methodology (e.g. cyborg ethnography). Doing so will improve our instruments of analysis and build a greater amount of complexity into the self-description of consumption. As a discipline we must learn to act like the two-faced Roman god Janus, the guardian of entrances and exits, the opener of all things who looks inward as well as outward. With one face we must observe the meanings of consumption. With the other face we must remember that, as Gregory Bateson (1988) reminds us, mind and nature are a necessary unit. As if by itself, more precision and rigor in one's own communication makes visible what it excludes.

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