WIRELESS TRANSACTIONS: THE RHETORICAL APPEALS
OF CONSUMER ELECTRONICS MARKETING

by

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As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Ryan M. Moeller entitled Wireless Transactions: The Rhetorical Appeals of Consumer Electronics and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dedication

To my family: my beautiful wife and partner, Julie,

and our sons, Noah and Jacob.
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Abstract

This dissertation critiques the techniques used to market and distribute consumer electronics products in the United States. Using the wireless networking industry as a case study, I argue that the consumer electronics industry is at the cutting edge of the commercial, consumer nature of U.S. culture and that it operates according to the ideological moorings of what the Frankfurt School called "the culture industry." These moorings include the obscuring of contradiction and the politics of production behind a unified product image, the erasure of individual consumer choice in favor of efficient means of product distribution to an infinite consumer base, an exaggerated presentation of cultural values in product packaging that teach consumers what they should believe and how they should act, and a carefully constructed use of statistical data and quantified consumer behavior to maintain a mass, homogenized culture that opposes characterizations of diversity or heterogeneity that do not expand the consumer base or the target demographic. The rhetorical appeals of consumer electronics marketers depend upon recycled consumer values to create desire through a universal product image, through carefully designed product information, and through highly developed language. The dominant appeals in wireless networking products are to mobility, security, and entertainment. I explicate these appeals using a methodology derived from social-epistemic rhetoric, a rhetoric that examines sites of conflict and contradiction as the arbiters of culture. I explore the contradictions in what I call choicing, or the prediction and manipulation of consumer choice through the marketing, distribution, and use of
mass-produced goods. These contradictions include several consumer tactics that confront choosing strategies.
Chapter 1: The Role of Rhetoric in Consumer Electronics Marketing

Introduction

If religion is how we talk about the world beyond, then advertising is how we talk about the machine-made world of the right here and now. . . . Advertising is the primary language, the lingua franca, of commercial culture.

James B. Twitchell
*Lead Us Into Temptation*

If we accept Twitchell’s arguments about the commercial nature of United States culture at the turn of the millennium, then we should also add that the consumer electronics industry is at the defining edge of this cultural phenomenon. It is our Académie Française: 1 defining our signifying practices by circulating new usages and relationships, redefining or purging outdated and unwanted usages, and policing our current ways of thinking about the technologies that help us live our lives. Televisions and AM/FM radios have a market penetration of 98% in U.S. homes, making them more of a substrate for advertisers than commodities themselves (“American Consumers”). The Internet has flourished with thanks to personal computers in over 60% of U.S. homes. The Internet has encouraged new discussions about a *global village* and new definitions of surveillance, work, and play. Peer-to-peer networks such as Napster, Kazaa, eDonkey, and Morpheus allow users to view and share one another’s files, calling into question the software industry’s protocols for licensing and distributing single-user software. MP3 technology, including MP3 players that allow users to download music files from their computers and play it on demand and commercial free, has forced the music industry and their consumers to question the notions of intellectual property and file-sharing. Wireless
networking technologies (wi-fi) allow users access to computer networks and the Internet over radio waves, promising to provide us with fast, easy access to information, work, and family anywhere we go.

Of course, matters are more complicated than this. Unlike the French Academy, there is no single organization we can point to and credit or blame for our dependence upon consumer electronics in the workplace, in our homes, and for our entertainment. Yet, historian Alfred Chandler argues that the consumer electronics industry “dramatically defines the causes of the success and/or failure of national industries” (13). There is certainly evidence for this: the high-tech industry employs millions of people globally and its products underlie virtually every other industry.\(^2\) Furthermore, as Chandler points out, the commercialization of one technology is very often founded upon the same activities and assumptions that commercialized its predecessor: radio paved the way for television which, in turn, became the model for the production of various video recording technologies (13-4). For example, Research Alert published a survey in 1997 indicating that color televisions, home radios, video cassette recorders (VCRs), and telephones all enjoyed a market saturation of over 89%. Moreover, after 1997, it becomes more difficult to assess the market penetration of these products as the studies shift to numbers of U.S. homes subscribing to cable television, digital satellite providers, satellite radio, and broadband Internet services rendering the previous technologies nearly ubiquitous. The modes of production and ideologies that allow manufacturers to make thousands of identical products also forces the consumption of thousands of identical products, a cycle that results in mass markets instead of local and specialized merchants,
the creation of industries and corporations that must generate enormous revenues to stay in business, and the generation enormous amounts of waste including hazardous by-products, non-biodegradable packaging materials, and obsolete products.

Many scholars and critics have questioned the relationship between science and technology and the near cult status of "high-tech" products. Jacques Ellul traces a rather grim history of technique and technology, seeing in them a hyper-privileging of rationality, efficiency, and statistical modeling in every aspect of life. Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and other members of the Frankfurt School have argued that the Enlightenment produced newer, more rational myths like science, mathematics, and technology which appeal to individuality, choice, and agency where only thoughtless consumerism exists. More recently, Kathryn Henderson's ethnographic study of engineers explores the appeals of "high-tech" products and processes, suggesting that "high-tech" has replaced "high-art" as a determiner of product prestige and market potential.

The consumer electronics industry is a conglomeration of consumers, producers, designers, users, marketers, retailers and critics of electronic products supposedly working in harmony. It is made up of finely-tuned and intricately designed electronic systems and the applications of science and research. It is also made up of the day-to-day practices and working conditions of laborers, designers, and marketers whose methods are not so finely-tuned or accurate. But the packaging of consumer electronics suggests that these latter unscientific processes do not exist. Marketers disappear behind ads that present a cohesive and unquestioning view of various products' places in consumer's
lives. The practices of the designers and workers are forgotten in the image presented by a single product or product-line. Any problems, flaws, or disagreement fade behind the unified façade of a product’s sameness. A recent survey of U.S. market size for consumer products reveals that the category “consumer electronics” encompasses nearly a third of the entertainment market in 2002, surpassing “toys” and “sporting goods,” and totaling more than “stationery & greeting cards,” “photogoods” (including cameras), and “books and magazines” combined (“Entertainment Trends”).

It is the ability of the consumer electronics industry to provide a unified product image that works to drive an entire cultural awareness that interests me. As a dialectician—analyzing argument and contradiction as places where knowledge is created—I understand that agreement is very costly to achieve. It requires that people from different cultures, experiences, and social situations see a particular issue or course of action similarly under a range of constraints. This agreement takes time to establish, money to sustain, and work to uphold. At the same time, it takes an incredible number of resources to agree upon a product to develop, conceive of it as a cohesive entity, produce it, market it, and support it in a competitive marketplace. Despite such carefully constructed cohesion, however, moments of contradiction and difference always emerge in any given product’s lifecycle and in the marketplace as well. As a rhetorician—studying how language and other symbolic practices get deployed to achieve certain ends—I understand that language is never neutral, never unassuming, and never innocent. It is always interested, always valued, always valuing. If advertising is the language
spoken by those of us living in the era of the machine-made, then it is a language of power and it must be examined because it signifies access to the dominant culture.

These are the types of assumptions that guide this study of the consumer electronics industry. As I analyze the marketing strategies of consumer electronics producers, I am looking for moments where the promises of advertisers are not necessarily aligned with how consumers are accessing or using the technologies themselves, but where the language of the advertisers appears to speak louder than that of the products’ consumers. For example, Intel, arguably the most prominent computer chip manufacturer in the world, released its trademarked Centrino technology in March of 2003, and promised the convenience of a wireless world. Essentially combining a central processing unit (CPU) that has been modified to use less power, an internal wireless networking card and antenna, and specialized graphics capabilities, Centrino technology promises a pre-packaged notebook computer “solution” for the user on the go. The recent onslaught of advertisements supports this construction of the mobile user, showing people from various walks of life—from the twenty-something equipped with headphones to the corporate executive with a desk transplanted in a greenhouse—miraculously disconnected from the harsh realities represented by the low-tech, wired workplace, but still connected to the high-tech, highly mobile, unwired world. Trading desks for vistas with a view and tangled cords for seamlessly wireless connectivity, the actors in these ads promise a utopian mobility for those smart enough to choose Centrino’s wireless option. Even the competition’s technology, consisting of computers with wireless networking cards added via PC card slot or USB cable, are too labor
intensive, too bulky, and non-intuitive suggests the ad. The problem with this claim is revealed in this disclaimer:

Wireless connectivity and some features may require you to purchase additional software, services or external hardware. Availability of public wireless LAN access points limited. . . . *Availability of wireless connectivity will vary by participating locations. ("Increase Enterprise")

The fact of the matter is that there are very few places in the United States where an owner of a laptop computer equipped with Centrino technology can simply walk out of the office and legally connect to a wireless LAN access point without paying additional fees. While Intel and other computer manufacturers have been promoting access to wireless networks, these same companies have been working to establish security protocols that prevent unwanted users from connecting to such wi-fi “hotspots,” opting instead to secure companies’ ability to charge users for each connection. Hotel chains, coffee shops, and airports are beginning to host public wireless LAN access points, but these establishments are few and far between. The choice of freedom and mobility offered by wireless technologies such as Centrino is not much more than a choice of physical mobility encumbered by subscriptions, additional security measures, and limited venues. At the same time, though, nearly every mainstream notebook computer to come out since the development of Centrino technology has touted it in its advertising pitch. Those without Intel’s version of mobility advertise other brands of specialized components that similarly enhance wi-fi connectivity.
On top of this mixed promise of mobility—or perhaps I should say, behind it—is a good deal of market research and other evidence that consumers actually want increased freedom from their network hubs and workplaces. This gives producers and marketers the legitimate justification that they are simply giving consumers what they want or desire. And this is true. However, these wants or desires are situated such that they are sufficiently met but never completely met in order to train consumers about what could be. This partial satisfaction creates lifelong consumers by incrementally introducing them to products that are always evolving. For example, marketers set the "state of the art* as a moving target which consumers are taught to keep an eye on through advertising terms such as “more powerful,” “faster,” “more mobile,” and so on. Such phrases naturally illicit comparison between the product offered and what the consumer might already have or be looking for. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that such a system exists only to unify and strengthen a system of alienated dominance:

The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows every stronger. No mention is made of the fact that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself. (121)

When products are produced simply because a market exists without regard for long-term support and use—even if limited access is available as in the case of wi-fi—the
distinction between production, work, and use becomes irrevocably severed. It becomes impractical and nearly impossible to say that cultures of production and work have tangible connections to how products are used. This becomes even more apparent when consumer electronics companies outsource technical support for their products. It is not enough to say the market will take care of these problems (as in the case of failed consumer electronics such as Divx, Digital Compact Cassettes, Betamax, Laserdisc, the NeXT computer, the Wonder Swan gaming platform in the U.S. market, etc.) because the infrastructure is typically not able to recover and stabilize from the latest revolutionary technology and since each of these ventures ties up enormous numbers of resources for consumers as well as the industry. This problem is mainly due to the development of the culture industry.

The rest of this chapter provides a framework for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the culture industry, a concept I will describe using the sociological work of the Frankfurt School theorists who initially developed it. I will then turn to a rhetorical framework for critiquing the culture industry. This framework is based upon James Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric, which I will use to trace consumer subject formations when navigating the culture of the consumer electronics industry. Chapter 2 examines how marketers attempt to control the marketplace with "choicing," a neologism that signifies the process of predicting and manipulating consumer choice. Marketers use techniques such as statistical marketing research and analysis in order to predict and better understand consumer desires and anticipated responses to products in the marketplace. This does not necessarily mean that the products will be redesigned to meet
specific consumer desires; marketers may just change the advertisements to make the existing product seem to fit those desires. Thus, the average consumer is subjected to this unintentionally negotiated set of desires. Going beyond the ethics of anticipating consumer wants and desires, marketers and manufacturers imbue products with cultural values that come to define how the products are used and to what ends. Here, consumer choice does not represent complete freedom from a multitude of options but a carefully marketed script of recycled cultural values. Often it does not matter what a consumer wants or needs, but what products the marketer is selling. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau offer a methodology that identifies moments when consumer anticipation and resistance (which they call “tactics”) offer alternative histories to choosing (which they would consider “strategies”). In this chapter, I discuss rhetoric as dialectical and transactional within these alternative histories. The point is to emphasize the social and cultural characteristics of choice and to explicate the role of choice in the development and marketing of consumer electronics.

Chapter 3 examines available consumer tactics within the larger, systemic strategies of big-box, specialty retail store such as Best Buy and Circuit City. It also discusses the factors necessary for high-tech products to be consumed or commodified and the techniques used by mass retailers to appeal to consumers’ individuality while selling high volumes of products. Big-boxes use various strategies to reduce human resources and increase sales; I call these techniques “consumer management” or “enhanced self-service.” Mass retailers attempt to create synergy between e-tailing services and retail locations, placing more responsibility on the consumer to make
choices that are subsequently used by marketers and retailers to shape the shopping experience. Finally, several consumer tactics are discussed that undermine mass retail’s primary value of dramatic expansion. Chapter 4 looks specifically at the deployment of wi-fi technology in the United States. Publicized as both a grassroots effort for obtaining cheap broadband access to the Internet and as a corporate endeavor for obtaining additional market shares in the communications industry, the choice to go wireless is not as easy as it appears. Few public areas in the United States support wireless networking, and corporations are quickly installing and reconfiguring security measures to minimize wireless “hotspots” (locations where anyone with a wireless card and a computer can access corporate networks and the Internet at broadband speeds) and to ensure future control over who is able to access wi-fi networks in order to maximize profit. This chapter will investigate the dominant rhetorical appeals that have played a crucial role in the development and deployment of wireless networking technology in the United States. Convenience and mobility are dominant appeals, while complicated security measures (encryption, virtual personal networks, and firewalls), FCC regulations (bandwidth, frequency, and sensitivity considerations), and corporate policy have made the promises of mobility and convenience a very complicated promise indeed.

Chapter 5 returns to the question of agency, looking for opportunities to exercise choice and freedom from within the systemic confines of the consumer electronics culture industry. While the industry’s products and advertisements help us to believe that industry is consumer-centered in a way that constructs consumers with agency and choice, this centricity is precisely what is used to research, quantify, and drown out
consumer individuality. On the one hand, the capacity to choose between several options is an empowered position. However, even a choice between several options can be easily manipulated by information, statistics, and sheer number of options, rendering it almost arbitrary. Additionally, one parent company may own and produce a single product under several brand names, making a consumer's choice not really qualitative at all.

When the factors influencing any decision are predetermined—either by the skillful and well-prepared rhetorician or the high-tech market analyst—is it really a decision at all? This dissertation as a whole investigates this question.

The Culture Industry

The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the [social system].

Herbert Marcuse
One Dimensional Man

The concept of brand loyalty is as central to the consumer electronics industry as it is to the concept of the culture industry. That a consumer is devoted to the Sony line of products over and above any other criteria promotes a consumer mentality beyond an individual concern for what might be practical or useful. In fact, it promotes a consumer mentality that exists, for the most part, for its own sake. It binds the consumer to the Sony line beyond concerns for the necessity of a particular product for day-to-day life, and it blinds the consumer to the material conditions of the available products. It is as if the marketplace and Sony exist simply to provide consumers with the newest, fastest, and
best technologies rather than fulfilling human needs. This illusion demonstrates the success of the culture industry at voluntarily obligating consumers to the system.

The culture industry is a concept used primarily by Marxist scholars to signify the complex of efforts and activities focused upon maintaining the dominant consumer mentality within industrialized nations. It is not located in production, consumption, or advertising exclusively. Rather it is an accumulation of all of these activities and concepts. It is the effect of mass production and its consequence: mass consumption. It is the ultimate individuation at the cost of the individual, where the individual becomes a research statistic, defined by what he or she buys. Moreover, it is the process by which various media—film, television, radio, web sites, advertisements, etc.—present a unified image of culture through increasingly pervasive messages that distract from the drudgeries of the intellectual and physical workaday world.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the importance of the culture industry has to do with its being a system of repressions that exists despite the fact that everyone knows it exists. In fact, it seems to gain credibility from the fact that its operative schema is so apparent: “the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (167). While wi-fi users may not carefully think through the claims of every advertisement, they must certainly recognize the fact that they are being advertised to. Despite many cultural analysts claims to the contrary, this phenomenon of the culture industry is precisely what skirts the critique that their conceptualization is inherently elitist. In “Nostalgia and Mass Culture: McDonaldization and Cultural Elitism,” Martin Parker asserts that “any
formulation of ‘the masses’ reflects an assumption of prescriptive elitism. This is simply because the writer, and the assumed reader, [sic] are implicitly or explicitly, not of the mass. . . . the loss is that of the superior culture of a preindustrial past’ (3). As the argument goes, a truly enlightened cultural analysis will revel somewhat in the new, popular culture,7 and embrace new paradigms based upon diverse locales, as if these are somehow not susceptible to systemic forces.

Granted, diversity may be found in the everyday practices and uses of products. But the system still remains. And it tends to assimilate this diversity as if it has always been a part of the system. In fact, rather than lamenting a pre-industrial age gone by, critics of the culture industry trace its eminence—at least in part—to the cultural myths supposedly neutralized by the Enlightenment. In The Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment sought to demythologize and confirm human dominion over nature, but created new, more powerful myths like science, machine, and technology. In his introduction to Adorno’s work on the culture industry, J.M. Bernstein says of the project: “its central claim is that the very same rationality which provides for humankind’s emancipation from the bondage of mythic powers and allows for progressive dominion over nature, engenders, through its intrinsic character, a return to myth and new, even more absolute forms of domination” (4).

Moreover, these new forms of domination are characterized by a flexibility to incorporate critique and dissent into the status quo by virtue of their production value. Marcuse echoes this ability in One-Dimensional Man: “validated by the accomplishments of science and technology, justified by its growing productivity, the status quo defies all
transcendence" (17). Critique and irrationality are dismissed as elitist and paranoid in the case of cultural scholarship and, in the case of the labor market, are folded into the momentum of technical progress, seen as moments of well-planned and executed innovation.

In order to maintain continual investment in the system, the culture industry must emphasize the average, everyday qualities of those who succeed. From the would-be movie star biding her time working two menial jobs, to the revolutionary software programmer with lofty goals of directing the next international software giant, it is precisely the hope of being “discovered,” of getting the “big break” that perpetuates the status quo. While not everyone will win the lottery, work her way up the corporate ladder from janitor to CEO, or be “discovered” in the latest reality television program, those who do are portrayed as “winning a prize” or getting a lucky break (Horkheimer and Adorno 145-6). In this way, the various media define and represent the “average” individual by their success (luck), and industry appeals to individuals as customers and employees loses any sense of economic materiality (147). In fact, such portrayals of individuals’ success reinforce a belief that the system works as it should. All is good. “The result,” argues Marcuse, “is not adjustment but mimesis: an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole” (10). Images of productivity and efficiency confirm this and quench any doubts that progress is being made in all aspects of human endeavor by people who are no different than the average citizen.
This "progress" is represented by manufacturers' claims of "new," "improved," or "better," and consumers signify their approval by buying these supposedly superior products. In so doing, consumers are objectified and researched as representatives of their various demographic characteristics. In Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century, Richard Ohmann provides a detailed cultural analysis of the emergence of the national magazine of the late nineteenth century. As manufacturers began to see the magazine developing a national audience, they began to buy space in order to sell products to readers. Readers, assuming that they were buying a cultural commodity, were not aware that they were purchasing a commodity that commodified them. Magazines "presented their attention, their needs, their aspirations, their anxieties, as use values to unseen third parties" (8). Ad agencies sprung up as professional organizations of experts who mediated the treacherous waters of advertising. Through market analysis and rhetorical studies of specific audiences, ad agencies analyzed the needs of the culture at large and negotiated between manufacturers and publishers for advertising space. More importantly, though, these ad agencies began to shape mass culture as they presented products as necessities for an emerging middle class with higher aspirations. Using advertising revenues to sell magazines for less than the cost of production, magazines were widely available to anyone of moderate means. The middle class "got a cultural experience for almost nothing, meanwhile being counted, weighed up 'demographically,' and courted in ways both direct and oblique" (9). Important public decisions regarding the regulation of sales, advertising, commodification of the
consumer, and production were moved out of public view into corporate advertising headquarters.

Advertising instructs on how consumers should buy products and how to use them through personal narrative and anecdote, hiding the vast collection of resources marshaled behind such instruction. Advertising permeates nearly every aspect of life in an industrialized society: from television commercials to celebrity product endorsements, from Internet ads and unsolicited email to billboards and neon signs. The power of such distributive power lies in a unified product message. The message is always the same, "Buy x or y product." The product is universal: a D-Link DI-614+ wireless router is the same whether purchased on-line or in a retail location, in Minnesota or Arizona.

Horkheimer and Adorno compare this unified and omnipresent product image to propaganda: "Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. In both cases the same thing can be seen in innumerable places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan" (163). As the cost of advertising and distribution soar, only those with enough capital can afford to bring their products to market, thus closing the systems of production to outsiders.

Individuality is tolerated by advertising insofar as it fits the demographic pattern: "in the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned" (Horkheimer and Adorno 154). This brings the system of logic nearly full circle as individuals are catered to in a way that
renders their individuality as merely a function of the industry itself. When Marcuse argues that “independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized,” he has essentially characterized the beginning and the end of the system (1). It is a process that envelopes and encloses every aspect of life and presents these as commodities to be exchanged.

In the article, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno addresses the critiques levied against the concept of the culture industry as a totalizing force. He argues that “each product [of the culture industry] affects an individual air; individuality itself serves to reinforce ideology, in so far as the illusion is conjured up that the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life” (87). As I turn to rhetoric as a methodology for gaining a deeper understanding of this process, I am reminded of the advertisement for Intel’s Centrino technology: the twenty-something equipped with headphones and the corporate executive with a desk transplanted in a greenhouse. Both miraculously disconnected from the harsh realities represented by the low-tech, wired workplace, but still connected to the high-tech system of consumerism. This image can and does represent each one of us living in the U.S. or other industrialized country with even moderate aspirations of “success.”
Rhetorical Transactions

Social-epistemic rhetoric is the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political conditions.

James Berlin
*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*

In Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, I will argue that marketers instruct consumers on the proper uses of consumer electronics products, how they should behave in the marketplace, and how they should react to the concept of a mass market. They do this through product packaging, advertising campaigns, and even retail store design. The level of instruction that consumers receive in complying with the system of mass marketing has its roots in early advertising through mass media such as magazines and newspapers (cf. Ohmann, Lears, and Marzolf) and in the dominant, Western rhetorical tradition founded in 18th and 19th century Scotland. Through the widely disseminated concepts of “taste” and “polite” discourse, Scottish rhetoricians prepared the educated classes to receive direct cultural instruction that would easily operate on a mass scale.

One of the well-documented characteristics of the Scottish Enlightenment was its attempts to merge science and philosophy by quantifying human emotions and behaviors. While its rhetoricians expounded on the virtues of “taste” and propriety as innate human faculties, its natural philosophers neatly categorized the complexity of these faculties. Both of these endeavors paved the way for “polite” discourse, disengaged civic action, and ultimately for the culture industry itself. In *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces*, Tom Miller argues that as the first professorships in English composition, rhetoric, and literature were founded in
the British Cultural Provinces of America, Ireland, and Scotland in the eighteenth century, an enormous push was made to acculturate a newly-formed reading public with proper sensibilities of taste and correct usage. As the provincials began to study English, the subjects of polite taste and correct usage became studied as phenomena somehow set apart from common experience. In this way, the cultural "outsiders"—in their aspirations to achieve the dominant culture—actually brought about an acute awareness of the social and cultural differences which were bound up in the language. Rhetoric, once aligned with moral philosophy, came to lose its status as an art when ethics and aesthetics became matters of personal sentiment and "purposeful discourse" was subordinated by the belletristic tradition (7). Belletrism, argues Miller, offered rhetoricians and scientists a disinterested stance from which they could critique matters of taste.

The "culture of letters" welcomed its new members as consumers, training them to politely receive disinterested chit-chat. This cultural instruction did for English studies what magazines did for mass consumerism: teaching the educated public what to consume and how. Adam Smith, economist, moral philosopher, and influential lecturer in rhetoric, introduced the concept of "taste" to rhetorical studies. In Nineteenth Century Scottish Rhetoric, Winifred Bryan Horner argues that the concept of taste came directly from Scottish moral philosophy (30). Alan Bacon points out that Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres was particularly influential on Hugh Blair and on nearly everyone teaching rhetoric for many years (3, 16). Smith's concept of the "impartial spectator" encouraged individuals to "step back" from social conflict so as not to upset the politeness of civil society (Miller 197). Academics began to apply the methodology
and science of natural philosophy to describe human behavior and make generalizations as to a universal human nature. Moral philosophy, then, separated from the concerns of rhetoric and sought out a science and a logic of humanity.

Meanwhile, in language studies, Campbell, Reid, and other commonsense philosophers became obsessed with mapping out a grammatical, rule-based system of language: "A grammarian [according to Campbell] was to observe patterns of 'general usage' and select those usages that are reputable (not simply common), national (as opposed to 'provincial' or 'foreign'), and present (not 'obsolete' but not merely 'fashionable' either)" (Miller reading Campbell 221). Campbell’s emphasis on science and scientific methodology proceeds from his privileging of deductive logic. In The Philosophy of Rhetoric, Campbell locates two types of evidence: intuitive and deductive. Intuitive evidence includes mathematical proofs, consciousness (the fact of being a living, thinking being), and common sense (knowledge that all people hold). Deductive evidence can be scientific (abstract and unchangeable, absolute, related or parallel, and simple) or moral (real, but changeable; varying by degrees, always contrary, and complicated). Moral reasoning is subjective and experiential, being based upon experience, analogy, testimony, and calculations of chances (the bare possibility of an event). Scientific reason is judged to be superior to moral reasoning because it is based upon repetition (will the same results obtain), triangulation, and confirmation where moral reasoning is based upon infallible memory (Campbell 35-61 passim). So in both moral philosophy and linguistics, scientific methodology and logical reasoning was privileged because of its explanatory power over human behavior. These early
investigations into the inner workings of the human mind and human's capacity for action and reason paved the way for marketers to begin theorizing consumer behavior in the 20th century. The theory behind such investigations led to the creation of a docile, polite public, ready to submit to consumer research—especially when it meant reaping the benefits of applied scientific research: technology.

Blair, following in the tradition of Adam Smith, helped to reorient rhetoric toward reception rather than production. He helped popularize notions like sensibility, sociability, and other virtues of "polite" society. At the same time, he decentralized them by turning literature from a public to a private domain, thereby ostracizing individuals who lacked the proper response to such things. In Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, Blair defines taste as the power to receive pleasure from nature or art, and is a "natural" reaction to beauty, although it is assisted by reason. Some individuals are endowed by nature with greater powers of taste, but education and culture can supplant this natural power (21-5). Taste is reducible to delicacy and correctness:

The power of delicacy is chiefly seen in discerning the true merit of a work; the power of correctness, in rejecting false pretensions to merit. Delicacy leans more to feeling; correctness more to reason and judgment. The former is more the gift of nature; the latter, more the product of culture and art. (32)

There is, to Blair, a very clear good and bad, right and wrong sense of taste. While taste is a natural gift, there are forces that can warp it: religion, forms of government, and judicial
systems (42-3). For these reasons, Blair recommends that successful orators develop their skills though private study and application:

Nothing is so favourable as Virtue to the prosecution of honourable studies. It prompts a generous emulation to excel; it inures to industry; it leaves the mind vacant and free, master of itself, disencumbered of those bad passions, and disengaged from those mean pursuits, which have ever been found the greatest enemies to true proficiency. ("Means of Improving Eloquence" 461-2)

Thus, with individual and private study valued over public production or engagement, with the mass cultural instruction embodied in the concept of “taste,” and with a privileging of science over moral reasoning, the Scottish Enlightenment set the stage for the birth of the culture industry.

In “Revisionary History: The Dialectical Method,” James Berlin claims that rhetoric assumes a central role in the reproduction of economic, social, and political activities; in fact, it assumes a mediating position between the "realms of the material and social, on the one hand, and the political and cultural" (141). By briefly skimming the rhetorical assumptions of Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, Campbell, and Emerson, Berlin demonstrates that rhetoric "explicitly reinforces the subject's notion of what exists, what is good, and what is possible, and does so . . . through indicating who may engage in discourse, to whom discourse is to be addressed, and what may be the permissible contents of the message" (143). Therefore, the historical significance of individual rhetorics may be demonstrated only within the specific economic, social, and political
context in which they appear (144). This is the reason why rhetorical treatises on "taste," "virtue," and "polite discourse" can be extremely enlightening when read alongside histories of the advertising and media explosions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In "Rhetoric, Poetic, and Culture: Contested Boundaries in English Studies," Berlin argues that changes in the economic and social structures in the 18th and 19th centuries led to a conception of the poetic as purely aesthetic and isolated from other spheres of human activity, especially politics and science. Using the work of Raymond Williams, Berlin locates an important shift in the conceptualization of literature:

"[literature] lost its early sense of reading ability and reading experience, and became an apparently objective category of printed works of a certain quality" (25). This shift engendered three tendencies:

- a shift from "learning" to "taste" or "sensibility" which focused attention on the consumption of works rather than on their production, and delimited a bourgeois reading public with control of general social practices (25-6).

- an increased specialization in literature to "creative" or imaginary works, which relegated rhetoric to the mundane and the mechanical. "Art" became associated with the beautiful, mythic, and aesthetic ("high art") and ordinary experience became ugly, dull, and tainted with corruption (25-7).

- the development of a national literature which soon replaced itself as a tradition rather than a history. (27)
Berlin uses the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu to critique this trajectory toward the "literary" and "tasteful" in English studies. Bourdieu suggests that "art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence [or has the cultural capital], that is, the code into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu qtd. by Berlin 30). In this light, rhetoric and advertising work together to create an educated public that knows how to respond to the cultural messages encoded in mass media or advertisements. Those without the ability to understand such messages must work quickly to gain such a competence or risk complete disorientation in a consumer culture.

Berlin offers an alternative approach to English studies and cultural critique through social-epistemic rhetoric: an investigation of all discourse within specific historical contexts, "examining the ways language serves as a mediator in the negotiation of individuals within their economic, social, political, and cultural moment" (34). Under social-epistemic rhetoric, distinctions such as poetic/rhetoric and public/private disappear since all language enters into a relationship between writer, reader, text, and the material conditions that influence their interactions (35). Positioned as a type of cultural analysis that pays particular attention to signifying practices that construct subject positions within various systematic constraints such as ideology, economics, and politics, Berlin’s social epistemic rhetoric “enables senders and receivers to arrive at a rich formulation of the rhetorical context in any given discourse situation” (Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures 84).

This rich formulation is derived from a complex investigation and critique of rhetoric as a site of conflict between linguistic, cultural, economic, and political forces.
The investigation prioritizes the following: an understanding of the dialectical nature of relationships and institutions; an interpretation of semiotic codes imbedded in any message; an acute understanding of difference as opposed to inclusion and conformity; and special attention to the exigencies of production (Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures 84-6). To understand the dialectical nature of individuals’ relationships to each other and to institutions, it is imperative to ask how institutional practices such as design, marketing, advertising, production, and consumption position consumers and how consumers’ actions confirm or revise the positions offered them by industry. Because the nature of these relationships is dialectical and not purely mechanical or robotic, it is not enough to blame one party—however interested—and move on. There are many levels of complicity and interest within the system. In the case of the culture industry—a system that aims at masked conformity and uniformity—a focus on differences of all types will help to deconstruct the façade that the industry portrays and its consumers buy into when purchasing its products. One of the defining characteristics of the culture industry is its exclusion of production from the product, resulting in a discrepancy between the cultures of production—the ideologies and working conditions of those who make the actual products—and the cultures of those who use them. This characteristic has been enhanced, of course, by the notion of rhetoric as a receptive rather than productive art and the notion of the artist and critic as solitary, socially-removed beings. But Berlin’s attention to modes of production in any aspect—material, textual, etc.—focus attention on the active nature of interpretation of culture. Finally, the notion that holds these modes of analysis together is the linguistic notion of the sign. Berlin argues that the
subject is formed through signifying practices which are indivisible from the material and social conditions in which they occur historically (82). Further, he argues that:

language practices engender a set of ideological prescriptions regarding the nature of “reality”: economic “realities” and the distribution of wealth; social and political “realities” regarding class, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender and their relations to power; and cultural “realities” regarding the nature of representation and symbolic form in art, play, and other cultural experience. (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 86).

This dissertation project exposes and critiques these very ideological prescriptions that the consumer electronics industry—by its visibility, its vast resources, and its “high-tech” status—sets for consumers.

Conclusion

James Berlin offers a methodology of critique and rhetorical studies that focuses not on enfolding the individual into the hegemonic system of consumerism, but on deconstructing that system for what it is, how it works, and where individuals may assert agency at various levels. He argues, “political agency, not individual autonomy, is the guiding principle here” (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 82). I see this type of critique as a theory of transactions. Not monetary transactions per se—although economic realities are extremely influential in the cultural interactions of industrialized countries—but transactions of agency. There is a give and take: as a consumer, I might be willing to give up a little of my individuality and economic security to have a certain product. I assert some amount of influence on the industry that records my purchase and interests
(via surveys, product warranty and registration questionnaires, etc.) and uses that information to predict what choices to offer me next.

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that these types of individual choices, exercised on a mass scale, result in a "rule of complete quantification."

Marked differences such as those of A or B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. . . . What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice. (123)

So, I might feel like an individual, exercising certain agency over my choice of product, brand name, retailer, and price, but really I am just playing the consumer game and negotiating choices that have been predetermined by an entire host of players who are better, more powerful, and more experienced than me. To the culture industry, my "choice" merely signifies my complicity in the game.

But it can be a fun game, at least for those with enough disposable capital. The culture industry makes it fun in order to keep consumers playing. To accomplish this, the consumer electronics industry uses a plethora of rhetorical appeals aimed at providing consumers with agency, both real and faux. But throughout this deep critique of the culture industry and the consumer electronics industry, I will problematize the ideologies of mass culture as they are propagated through the consumer electronics industry. While I will describe tactics that consumers have employed in resisting these ideologies, the
culture industry will necessarily find ways to integrate and quantify these tactics as a part of replicating itself and mass consumerism. This tendency homogenizes individuals into convenient groups based upon predetermined characteristics in order to limit the number of possible choices that consumers and manufacturers both must contend with. While this dissertation does address at points the tactical side of this process, it is primarily an analysis of the propagation of mass culture through the marketing strategies of the consumer electronics industry. Part of what makes tactics effective is that they operate on the level of the individual, thereby rendering mass-level assumptions incongruous. It is primarily these mass-level assumptions that drive consumer electronics marketing, however, and dismiss individual tactics as relatively unimportant in the day to day operation of consumerism in general.
Notes

1 The mission of the Académie Française is to “discover the richness of our language, to enrich it and make it shine, and to defend its usage” (Defense).

2 One professional organization, the American Electronics Association (AeA), represents nearly 2 million employees and 3,000 companies in the United States alone.

3 Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to concepts like the “marketplace” or “market forces” to signify the environment in which processes of competition, manufacturing, production, and consumption play out in a predictable manner.

4 The concept of “state of the art” in consumer electronics is a misnomer. By the time products reach consumers via typical retail outlets, the technologies that they are based upon are in many respects outdated from an engineer’s point of view. This distinction is made clear by the number of other terms that suggest technologies are more state of the art than others: cutting-edge, bleeding-edge, and so on.

5 I will discuss the differences between tactics and strategies in Chapter 2.

6 Acting as sort of social barometer, this chapter also briefly surveys the development and deployment of wi-fi technology in other countries—any number in Western Europe, for example—that have far surpassed the U.S. in terms of infrastructure and public access.

7 Popular culture is often used in place of mass culture by theorists who wish to imbue the consumer with choice and agency and avoid having their arguments characterized
as “cultured snobbism” or “arrogant esoterica” as Adorno paraphrases them in “Culture Industry Reconsidered” (88). Ohmann, for example, consciously uses the terminology mass culture to forward notions of productivity and material conditions as opposed to some sort of democratic process of selection.

Both James Berlin and I rely heavily on Michel Foucault’s development of the concept of the “subject position” which he describes in the Archeology of Knowledge as “not the speaking consciousness, not the author of the formulation, but a position that may be filled in certain conditions by various individuals” (115). Thus the subject positions that I will be looking at are those that are constructed for consumers to fill. Many of these subject positions, I will argue, are constructed by consumer electronics marketers.

In rhetorical terms, this would be known as metonymy.

Even at the tactical level, success depends upon a common ideology, even one that resists those presented by consumerism.
Chapter 2: Choosing and the Role of Choice in Consumer Electronics Marketing

Introduction

When Ian was looking to replace a CD-ROM drive for his computer, he was faced with a deluge of choices. First he had to choose a type of optical drive, a make, and a model. He could choose from CD-ROM drives reading at varying speeds, from CD rewritable drives that would allow him to record music and data to blank CDs, from CD/DVD-ROM combination drives that would add the ability to watch movies and other media with DVD compression, or a DVD rewritable drive that would give him the ability to record movies and videos on to blank DVDs. As if this were not complicated enough, Ian had to decide on a brand name. After searching through computer magazines and various online retailers and comparison sites, he had seen literally hundreds of brands and models of drives to choose from. But he began to learn the jargon and decipher what he really needed: speed, functionality, external or internal configurations, etc. After learning the logic of the CD-ROM market, he went to one of several consumer electronics superstores in his region. Once there, the selection had been significantly delimited by the retailer, and Ian could quickly scan the store shelves for the product descriptions or look at the product packaging, since available merchandise was right there on the shelf. Since he was not completely overwhelmed but could not find a salesperson around, he had some options: he could choose a brand name that he had worked with before, one he had seen advertised, or he might look at the product packaging and retail descriptions in order to determine the product with the fastest speed at the cheapest price.
After making a purchase, Ian begins to evaluate all of the claims he has been subjected to in terms of how easy the drive is to install, how compatible it is with his computer system, how easy the drive’s software is to operate in performing its advertised functions like recording and playing back music. He sends in his warranty card with the 62-question marketing survey filled out, and he lives with his choice or he returns the drive and begins the process all over again.

Many marketers, economists, and cognitive psychologists will argue that this is how the system of buying and selling works.\(^1\) Such arguments make the claim that Ian’s decision-making process drives the market. This is true—Ian’s choice drives the market—but not in the transparent, rational method depicted above whereby Ian carefully weighs all of his choices and chooses the “best” option. Rather Ian has been covertly “handled” and his choices managed by the consumer electronics industry from the moment he needed a new drive, and much earlier. Consumer electronics are fairly disposable and due to extremely rapid advances in technology, they have a very short life-cycle before needing to be replaced. The industry plans on people like Ian needing new products. Ian’s choices seem pretty vast, but they just seem that way. It is likely that whatever drive he chooses, it will have been manufactured by one company, Matsushita, or will at least contain Matsushita components. Matsushita is the industry leader in optical drive technology, it manufactures drives for other computer companies, and itself owns 380 different brand names. Marketers use the information that they collect from Ian’s search and purchase along with information from the purchases of thousands of other consumers—the sites they visited on-line tracked their views and
search parameters, the retailers kept records of the products they bought and the locations where they made their purchases and made that data available to marketers and other retailers, and the manufacturer gained even more information about these consumers from the warranty cards they filled out—marketers use this information to predict Ian’s behavior the next time he must make a similar choice. So Ian made many choices, but the importance of these choices is drastically undercut by the system which quantifies them, manipulates them, and—to a certain degree—controls them.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse minimizes the importance of choice, seeing a range of choice not as an indicator of freedom within the capitalist marketplace or democratic state, but as a factor that is dependent upon the relative freedom of the choice itself:

> The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what* can be chosen and what *is* chosen by the individual. . . . Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these good and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation. (7-8)

His use of choice is a cautionary one: it is easy to think that the number of available options is the determining factor of freedom. After all, the guiding principal of the marketplace is the freedom to choose from a range of similar products or services as a result of innovation and competition. But it is precisely the level of control and ideology represented by the thing chosen that is the determining factor of how “free” the choice
was in the first place. In a way, Marcuse is saying that a society is constrained by the ideologies of the products or technologies it chooses and uses. This is because choice itself is a prepackaged and assumed factor of advanced, industrialized capitalism. It comes as a ready-made appeal within the narrative of the marketplace, and it is imbricated in the products that consumers choose.

It is widely accepted among scholars of culture that technologies physically represent the ideologies and values of its creators, which are subsequently imposed upon users (cf. Ellul, Postman, Feenberg, de Certeau). When the ideologies of creators and users are more or less aligned, there is not a problem (at least as far as the market is concerned). But when a choice to adopt a particular technology subjects a consumer to a new or hostile ideology—or even a marketing promise that was left unfulfilled in the product’s use—that choice alters the user’s world view. Ian discovered this when he began to use the optical drive he had selected and began to evaluate the manufacturer and marketing claims. As Ian evaluates these claims, Ian will likely discover that the product does not quite work in the way he thought it might. Like most consumers, he will not immediately blame the manufacturer for false advertising; instead, a disappointment mixed with expectation will likely lead Ian to buy the next iteration of the product in the hopes that it will fulfill his (constructed) desire.

My critique of the consumer electronics industry and in particular the marketing influences of this industry stems from its enormous material and cultural influence over consumers. Many marketers work very hard to sell complex products to an often disloyal and distrusting public. However, marketers often have considerable amounts of capital,
media air time, and visibility at their disposal. Moreover, it is the overt nature of marketing techniques and the fact that consumers understand and absorb the propaganda that makes marketing a successful enterprise of the culture industry. Although several marketers and marketing scholars protest that theirs is not an industry that predicts (at least with any certainty) or has any control over consumer behavior (cf. Reddy, Brownlee and Buttrick, Katsaros, or any rational choice theorist), the amount of research and influence they exert over markets suggest otherwise. When D-Link, a manufacturer of networking technology, presents a unified global product image—in English, no less—they are propagating a singular product or image for parallel, simultaneous consumption by millions of people worldwide. Thus, D-Link is implicated in mass culture. Certainly, marketers employ advertising campaigns that target specific audiences, but marketing trains individuals to the mass market. The notion of the mass market aggregates all markets and many activities into one, global system of buying and selling, presenting these transactions as a natural way of life. In his introduction to *The Emerging High-Tech Consumer*, Allan Reddy defines the high-tech consumer as “anyone who purchases and consumes innovative products and services,” making his work less than helpful in characterizing the high-tech market as anything short of a mass market (2). In *Selling High-Tech/High-Ticket*, John Katsaros urges marketers to develop strategies for mass market appeal:

In order to increase sales, we’ve got to deliver custom technology-based business solutions on a mass market scale. . . . Your high-technology sales role needs to expand from locating sales situations to creating the
framework for the promotion of enterprise wide and industry wide
opportunity development. . . . What has become crucial is your ability to
penetrate your customer’s entire enterprise and entire industry. (69, 96)

Reddy and Katsaros thus involve high-tech marketing in the appeal to a mass audience.
Beyond this appeal to mass culture is the training of consumers to purchase products that
will be quickly outdated: the “high-tech” industry operates with assumed product life-
cycles of mere months.

Choicing, Choice, and a Continuum of Choice
I will argue that marketers use “choice” as a foundational concept that facilitates
individual consumer complicity and engagement in the culture industry and the mass
market. Consumer choice represents the naturalized system of exchange that operates in
the consumer electronics industry. Systems characterized by freedom or free exchange
rely on rational choice—the notion that decisions are always deliberated by individuals
with the best possible personal outcome in mind—to explain that freedom. Democracies
are characterized by polls, voting, and representation that imply popular choice to varying
degrees. Markets are defined by competition of similar products and services, offering a
wide variety of consumer choice. This ultimately becomes the most general appeal
within mass marketing: “Brand X, the choice of anyone just like you.” The dominant
scenario implies that an informed consumer has weighed his or her options and chosen
the product that best satisfies his or her needs and desires. Marketers, in turn read this
scenario as a concrete representation of a consumers’ needs and desires, and shift their
strategies accordingly. I will argue, however, that this narrative is a myth that has been
created by the need to sell thousands of products. And in this way, marketers are able to appeal to individuals through the techniques indicative of an otherwise mass market. They do this through choicing, the art of predicting and appealing to consumer choice. Moreover, individuals rarely act in completely "rational" and calculating ways, but rather must be taught the "rationality" of the market.

Additionally, rational or deliberative choice, consumer choice, and choicing become integrated into technologies as features, options, or functions as marketers shape products based upon what they predict, know, or hope consumers will choose. In this way, issues of choice operate at multiple levels of cultural currency, from the naturalized "market" function discussed above to its reified form, embedded in the products themselves. By invoking material manifestations of choice and choicing here, I mean to discuss how choices are built into objects, things with specific cultural implications. Between the two extremes—one representing autonomous consumer agency and the other positioning things as the unchanging arbiters of culture and technique—are a host of relationships defined by choicing. From the consumer who happily completes a marketing survey to the market researcher who tallies up sales figures and determines what these consumer choices mean, choicing represents the site of conflict between individual agency and market demographics.

Choicing is a complex, rhetorical topic based upon the criteria discussed in Chapter 1: it is often conflicted and conflated ideologically and linguistically; it is always dialectical, and it intersects both conceptual and material realms. This chapter will tackle this complexity within the scope of the consumer electronics industry, moving from the
manufacturing and marketing of consumer choice to its more concrete, material dimensions. Indeed, it is difficult to embark on a study of the culture industry, the consumer culture, or corporate capitalism without discussing issues of choice at some level. Choicing is used to represent market trends, individual agency and decision-making, and ultimately complicity within a network of compromises. Choicing constitutes the greatest area of intersection of the various interested parties:

- product designers, advertisers, market researchers, consumers, and users: consumer choice represents the driving force behind product development and innovation at the level of the mass market;
- consumers' rational choices are carefully researched, predicted, anticipated, countered, appealed to, and confirmed or rejected by market analyses;
- choices are offered to consumers at the time of product purchase, both in terms of brand name options and features but also in terms of retailers and financing options;
- choicing is articulated in the functionality and usability of each product (what engineers refer to as design and users refer to as features and ease of operation) and is ultimately observable in the actual uses to which a particular product is put by users.

Plenty of experts, sales professionals, and connoisseurs are on hand at any given time to assist consumers in the game of negotiating these choices. In short, a study of choicing presents tangible moments of observable culture, ideology, and behavior and intersects the realms of materiality, theory, and practice.
Marketing Choice

Among the changes in the practice of marketing during the latter half of the twentieth century, perhaps the most radical was the increased dependence on statistical research: the ability to predict the preferences and trends of potential consumers with some accuracy. The goals of marketing have changed in the latter half of the twentieth century: to include not only matching consumers' needs with manufacturers' products, but also creating desire for products that already exist. The long term effects of this change have been felt by consumers in many ways including the emergence of big-box retailers and the erosion of “Main Street USA” which has resulted in the disappearance of local merchants, widespread concern over the environmental impact of huge parking lots and commutes associated with big-box stores, and an increase in the alienation of labor or the connections between products and the people that made them. Statistical marketing analysis has given marketers a language of choice, a way to describe consumer choice by quantifying consumer behaviors and using computer modeling to simulate and study hypothetical scenarios.

Marketers have long been interested in how computers could help them do choosing more accurately. The 1966 conference proceedings of the American Marketing Association predict their ability to successfully quantify consumer choices with startling accuracy by factoring statistical research methods into their forecasts for marketing technology products. In “Marketing and the Management of Technological Change,” Robert Bruce places marketers in the center of technology innovation in all aspects, from development to production to consumption:
The role of marketing in the social environment is obviously that of examining and detecting the values and attitudes of ultimate consumers or industrial users, their desire for product improvement, or such things as trends in consumer living patterns. It is primarily the function of research and development to examine the needs of the market in terms of the technological environment, but marketing has a moderate role to play in determining whether the market needs and can accept an advanced and sophisticated technology or whether it requires one that is less revolutionary. (41)

Bruce predicts that successful technological innovation will incorporate marketing and market research at every level of product conceptualization and production. Paul Green, in his essay “The Role of Experimental Research in Marketing: Its Potentials and Limitations,” implicates “data analyzers” into the work of marketers, and calls specifically for “computers with visual display devices that enable the researcher to test, quickly and inexpensively, a large variety of hypotheses on the assembled data bank” (493). Green predicts that computing technology will be able to calculate “the sequential behavior of subjects’ choices over some set of experimental trials” (493). Donald Hempel’s “An Experimental Study of the Effects of Information on Consumer Product Evaluations” suggests a merger between behavioral science and marketing in an effort “to explain and predict consumer behavior” even beyond the factors already under the control of the seller—beyond price, advertising, sales promotions, and marketing (589).

Marketers and market researchers claim that statistical research methodology (SRM) is the most powerful tool currently available for predicting and understanding consumer demand and market share (cf. Ben-Akiva, Lerman, and Riedesel). Essentially, these techniques quantify known consumer behaviors or those generated by simulated purchasing scenarios. This data is then used to make predictions about a certain
product's success in the marketplace, to select and differentiate product features based upon consumer preferences and, according to Market Trends, a Seattle based research firm, a close approximation of the “competitive environment.” At its most basic level, SRM presents representative consumers with various products, options, features, or brand names and measures their choices, preferences, and behaviors in order to predict how these will play out in the actual marketplace. Discrete Choice Analysis (DCA) was developed in 1985 by Moshe Ben-Akiva and Steven Lerman as a way of measuring consumers preferences between brands, categories, or other alternatives under fixed conditions. DCA was originally conceived of as a way to predict behavior in the travel and transportation industries; the web sites and white papers of major marketing firms will indicate that DCA is now common in the arsenal of marketing munitions. In his introduction to DCA, Paul Riedesel argues:

A key advantage of discrete choice techniques is that they are based on the observation of consumer choices (real or simulated). In the end, what we do as consumers is make choices, and those choices are ultimately what matters to the marketer. All else is secondary. The closer any research technique comes to modeling and/or predicting choices, the more actionable and credible it will be to marketers.

Taking this statistical representation of choice one step further, marketers can use DCA to present representative consumers with various products or different iterations of the same product that emphasize different features or options. Based upon the observations of consumer-subject behavior and the choices made in the research scenarios, marketers can
then recommend the development of certain products over others, reducing the need to bring every product to market. Thus, DCA represents consumer choice that comes prior to any individual consumer’s choice in an actual retail venue. Of course, the only revolutionary difference between DCA and previous iterations of market research is its predictive ability. Marketers have been studying consumer behavior in the marketplace since the early twentieth century when advertising began to finance the newspaper and magazine industries, bringing about exponential shifts in distribution and driving mass consumerism (cf. Ohmann, Marzolf, or Lears).

As surely as industrialization and the mass production of goods precedes the actual needs and desires of consumers, so too does choosing precede the actual needs and desires of consumers. For as many studies that bemoan the fickle nature of the “high-tech” consumer, there are just as many that provide systematic characterizations of “high-tech” consumers and present established marketing techniques for persuading them. In “When Bad Things Happen to Good Projects,” senior writer for Chief Information Officers (CIO), Tom Field, argues that the number one reason information technology projects fail is because “project managers don’t understand users’ needs”; the cost, says Fields is an estimated $145 billion each year to U.S. companies and government agencies (22-3). In fact, many consumer electronics manufacturers consider consumer interests as an afterthought. In “Marketing High Tech Products: Lessons in Customer Focus from the Marketplace,” Deborah E. Rosen, Jonathan E. Schroeder, and Elizabeth F. Purinton explain some failures of new technologies as a general ignorance of consumer needs. They cite Steve Jobs’ explanation of consumer research on the development of the iMac
computer: “it’s really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people
don’t know what they want until you show it to them” (Rosen, Schroder, and Purinton).
Implicit in this reasoning is an industry model that predetermines consumer choices. And
this model is hugely successful.

In 1999, the International Telecommunication Union published a comparison of
the adoption rates of various technologies. The following table represents the number of
years it took the respective technology to reach 50 million users worldwide:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Year Invented</th>
<th>Years to reach 50 million users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Wide Web</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Technology development for popular communication devices (“Pacemakers” 16). There are, of course, products that do not match such adoption rates. But the
peculiar thing about the consumer electronics industry’s ability to generate such
interest is that most of their products are not necessary components of everyday life,
but become so through advanced marketing techniques and mass adoption.

This exponential growth in the capacity of the consumer electronics industry to generate
a huge user base in a few years seems to put any concerns over marketing efficacy to rest.

Not only do marketers use SRM and DCA to anticipate consumer choice and
adjust their products and advertising accordingly, they also appeal to consumer choice in
the product image. In fact, in *The Laws of Choice: Predicting Customer Behavior*, Eric
Marder identifies eight tools for marketers. Seven of these are specifically geared toward directly influencing the “choice process” of the consumer (16-18). Marder characterizes this process as the environment and situational factors that influence a consumer to choose a particular product (10). Thus, choosing attempts to account for every influence upon consumers from television advertising campaigns to the location of a product on the shelf in a retail store. Marder differentiates between desirability and accessibility. Desirability includes all of the processes and influences that create a perceived need for a product or brand. Accessibility includes all the factors that influence consumer choice at the point where a specific choice is made: physical observation and use; comparison with other products on the shelf; discounts, coupons, and sales; staff recommendations; and so on.

But even for Marder, a researcher of marketing and market trends, choosing does not end at the point of purchase, selection, or adoption. The purview of choosing extends even to the point of using and interacting with a product. It is not until a consumer can use a product that he or she can begin to evaluate the claims that the product marketer made to establish the product’s initial desirability and accessibility. For example, someone who purchases an Apple iPod (a digital music player that stores hours of music on a tiny hard drive, eliminating the need for tapes or CDs) for its supposed ease of use and convenience cannot really evaluate these claims until he or she has a chance to download, sort, and play some of his or her favorite music. The experiences that a consumer has with a product after some use will shape not only his or her opinions of the
manufacturer and brand, but also the processes he or she engages when making his or her next purchase.

What remains important to Marder and to others who study marketing with the explicit purposes of bringing the interests of manufacturers and consumers closer together is the quantifiable nature of the entire process:

The customer's desires, the values she attaches to various attributes, are directly measurable. Her beliefs about the various attributes of the brands are measurable. The desirabilities of the brands are measurable, either directly, or indirectly by way of their components. Familiarity and internal accessibility (brand awareness) are measurable. External accessibility [post-sale use and product awareness] is measurable, either directly or by inference from relationships in the data. And brand choice is measurable. (14)

And the logical argument follows: the more that marketers know about what consumers want, the better products can be adapted to meet those desires. This type of adaptation takes place. But part of what choosing accomplishes is training consumers to adjust themselves to the promises and limitations of the products. For example, consumers commonly experience claims about speed, ease of use or installation, and compatibility which are highly relative to the consumers' unique contexts (especially in the case of system specifications) as disappointing approximations of what they thought these products might do. Consumers are trained through marketing when their disappointment is appeased by the introduction of newer, faster, better products that would seem to
resolve their disappointment. Ultimately, however, even these new products continue the cycle of disappointing approximations because the consumer electronics industry is every evolving; by the time that most consumers make the decision to act on their disappointment, the target has shifted enough to prevent satiation. Through choosing, consumers—their needs and desires—are adapted to the market that is flooded with products that need to be sold. It is this last type of adaptation—one that takes place under the guise of “choice”—that provides the richest investigation in terms of rhetoric and culture.

Steve Jobs might be correct in believing that consumers do not often know what products they might choose; the consumer electronics industry is far from intuitive and need-based. Rather, consumers are trained by marketers to desire the accumulation of products and to appreciate certain product features they may not entirely understand: bus speed, compression levels, the efficient transmission of information, data encryption, etc. Such training is not new. Both Richard Ohmann and Stuart Ewen argue that a highly-trained mass market audience had to be created in the early part of the twentieth century in order to consume the massive numbers of products made available. Stuart Ewen investigates the convergence of democracy and consumerism during this time, and argues that consumerism was “taught” via powerful metaphors of freedom:

Within the vision of consumption as a “school of freedom,” the entry onto the consumer market was described as a “civilizing” experience.

“Civilization” was the expanded cultural world which flowed from capitalism’s broad capacity to commodify material resources. (30)
This was not an easy sell, however. Social and economic realities threatened to defeat this grand new civilization, and “many industrial ideologues [realized] the continuous need to habituate people psychically to consumption beyond mere changes in the productive order which they inhabited” (30). This habituation was achieved (and still is) by presenting products as an escape and refuge from the very lifestyles that their production demanded. These advertisements provided “mass produced visions of individualism by which people could extricate themselves from the mass” (Ewen 45).

Implicit in these visions of individualized mass utopia was a limitation of choice “to the prescriptions formulated by business and politicized in its advertising” (91). Thus the dialectic of choice as both a constraint and liberty of the modern marketplace was established as a self-referential and inescapable cycle of desire.

Richard Ohmann levels a fascinating critique against the magazine industry at the turn of the century. Like Ewen, he identifies a palpable urge on the part of industry to educate a society to accept mass culture:

Not only would [capitalists] colonize the leisure of most citizens, as they had previously dominated work time; they would also integrate the nation into one huge market and market culture…. Before the people of the United States were a nation politically, businessmen had gathered their “island communities” into a nation organized around markets, money relations, and commodified culture. (59)

The enticing nature of this culture of commodification and consumption was the sense of identity and satisfaction offered by products and brand names. All the while, consumers
were similarly taught how to consume products that met each of their needs, even some needs that they might not have been able to identify previously. This was achieved by “positioning the reader as a consumer surrounded by cultural ‘wares,’ and becoming qualified to choose among them” (230). So almost immediately, an appeal to consumer choice empowered the consumer as a rational agent in a foreign matrix of commodification. Of course, this rationality was generously circulated by the advertisements that informed the skilled reader of the correct or “tasteful” products.

To summarize, the marketing industry developed in response to the exponential rise in production (or at least the potential of production) brought about by industrialization. It did so as a way of mediating the interests of industry and with the “needs” of consumers. At the outset, that mediation took the form of conditioning the public to mass culture and consumption in order to guarantee continued markets for the products of industry and to meet the growing needs of a consumer society. While meeting these needs, marketers gradually—and perhaps not always intentionally—habituated consumers to the ideology of mass culture and mass marketing. The universal appeals to consumers’ individual needs provided the promise of satiety and the reality of continual desire; appeals to consumers’ abilities to choose from variety of products provided the illusions of freedom and competition. Marketers used consumer choice—both predicted and actual—to quantify behaviors and to predict future choices; and most recently, statistical research methodologies allow marketers to make those predictions even before products are developed. Add to this summary the evidence that technologies
represent ideology-by-choice through their development and use, and a very powerful
erhetorical enterprise emerges.

Critics of the type of history presented here are quick to point out that industry is
at the mercy of a highly competitive market and that marketers are a diverse and varied
bunch. They will point to a lack of organization and leadership and claim that most
marketing campaigns fail. There is no way that such a disorganized industry could
educate an entire society, much less a global economy. In just such a moment of faith in
competition, Brownlee and Buttrick discuss the inability of industry to control price or
competition. In *Producer, Consumer, and Social Choice*, they discuss the impossibility
of market control due to a general lack of “oligopolistic [uses] of advertising, model
changes, and multiple brand names and outlets” (271). However, the twentieth century is
replete with such moments and entities. In fact, the consumer electronics industry is a
perfect example of an industry that relies upon a few manufacturers to produce a wide
variety of products under multiple brand names, retailers, and models. Moreover, as Joe
Cappo—advertising, marketing, and media columnist—argues, advertising has followed
this model: “of the top twenty agencies twenty years ago, seventeen have been swallowed
up by the four major agency holding companies” (14). These industry leaders exert
tremendous influence on the production and consumption of goods at multiple levels:
design (discrete choice analysis), production (market identification), marketing (appeal to
consumer choice), and consumption (consumer behavior research). These activities make
dominant forces in the consumer electronics industry. In the next section, I will discuss
the possibility of consumer tactics that activists claim are counter-hegemonic.
The Sociology of Choice

Consumers obviously enter into the system of mass culture with motivations as diverse and complex as those who market such a system. Certainly consumers purchase consumer electronics with intentions that do not perfectly coincide with marketing demographics or with replicating mass consumerism for its own sake. Perhaps a wireless broadband router will be used to distribute wi-fi access in a poor, urban community with few Internet connections. Maybe an iPod is purchased to archive Parisian recordings of Prokofiev's provocative *Symphony No.2*. Or a personal computer might be used in a rural community's computing center as a gateway into state and national politics. In the moment of choice, the moment of cultural exchange, there is a complex of competing interests and agencies.

Complicating this moment of choice is the whole notion of users: those who adapt technology to meet their needs rather than being idly subjected to the ideologies of manufacturers and marketers. In *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts*, Robert Johnson provides a user-centered view of technology as a radical departure from a consumer-centered view. To Johnson, the user is the expert, not the designer, manufacturer, or the marketer. Johnson points to a conception of art held by the ancient Greeks who "treated technology as an art whose end was in the use of the product, not in the design or making of the product itself (15). Johnson's view of technology is not reduced to the material nature of technology emphasized by human-technology interactions but occurs at the discursive level of technology use (a conscious down-play of the materiality of technology). In Johnson's
view, humans—users—always control technology. User knowledge is always situated and changing in relationship to technology and experience. However, users represent only one aspect of the many competing needs that a technology will represent: designers, distributors, technical support personnel, marketers, and consumers are also all stakeholders. Johnson's reliance on a classical view of rhetoric (speaker, audience, text) does not account for the complex interactions that technology takes on in contemporary, mass-marketed culture.

Arnold Pacey implicitly complicates Johnson’s presentation of the user to account for the complexity of “use” in a mass market. In Meaning in Technology Pacey argues that today's conceptualizations of technology must allow for complex and intricate interactions and influences, and they should be complicated and beautiful rather than perspicuous and expedient. Similarly, in her critique of Rational Choice Theory as an economic model for understanding human behavior, Mary Zey argues that a theory that concentrates power solely with marketers or with users is inherently flawed: “the idea that corporations are controlled by the discipline of the marketplace hardly presents a complete or accurate picture of reality. It represents an idealized image of market (or environmental) forces that is questionable at best” (50). She alternatively defines markets as “networks of organizations linked together through economic transactions, family relationships, friendships and social clubs, and management circles” (70). What’s needed is a flexible understanding of these networks of influence.

One way to investigate these networks is to trace the intersecting interests and opportunities made available (and closed off) for those who traverse them. In “Homo
economicus, Homo sociologicus,” Albert Weale encourages marketers to understand consumption and consumer preference within the context of individual, everyday life:

[C]onsumption of food, for example, is not simply a way of maintaining bodily functioning, but also provides a means of forming and maintaining social relationships, and these social aspects of the process may develop a much greater importance than the satisfaction of the physical needs which underlie these activities. (71)

In order to understand the complexity of consumer behavior, Weale characterizes human action under two categories: the economic and the social. Economic action is concerned with the instrumental, the rational fulfillment of needs. Here, preference selection is predictable and calculated (62). Social action, on the other hand, is characterized by the cultural roles and positions imposed upon and subsequently adopted by individuals as a result of their relationships to others within the social group. Here, choice is more sensitized to an individual’s perceptions of what other people in similar situations—in terms of race, class, educational background, gender, occupation, religion, etc.—might choose (62-3). People are constantly negotiating these complex relationships, making choice very difficult to understand.

I appreciate the fact that Weale complicates the notion of choice somewhat by placing its economic—that is, material—and social aspects in a sort of pseudo-dialectical struggle. However, both perspectives are still viewed from the marketer’s gaze, with very little in the way of understanding individual agency from outside the system of prefabricated and classifiable relationships. But, perhaps this is because the system
leaves little in the way of flexibility. Michel de Certeau conceptualizes individual agency within a particular system in terms of pockets or moments of small, localized resistance to the systemic logic. Toward this end, he differentiates between “strategies” and “tactics.” The former are hegemonic, totalizing cultural forces that become “circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the bases for generating relations with [a distinct exterior]” (xix). These are the collective actions of the powerful, dominant cultural force(s). Tactics, on the other hand, are used to describe actions that are performed within the place or space of “strategies,” but do not conform to these completely. A tactic cannot be explained without a strategic context.

De Certeau uses the notion of tactics to describe individual actions in the mass market that do not quite fit the prescribed behaviors offered by the strategies of marketing:

In the wake of the many remarkable works that have analyzed “cultural products,” the system of their production, the geography of their distribution and the situation of consumers in that geography, it seems possible to consider these products no longer merely as data on the basis of which statistical tabulations of their circulation can be drawn up or the economic functioning of their diffusion understood, but also as parts of the repertory with which users carry out operations of their own. (31)

So use and marketing, or tactics and strategies exist in a dialectical relationship. They complement, complicate, reinforce, and destabilize one another. However, the dialectic is limited, as both strategies and tactics are defined and contextualized within the
networks of power that describe them. Thus, in a mass market, individual consumers can play the game of choosing and even subvert or “win” it, but they will never hold the upper hand. Since the industry always deals the cards, as it were, consumer choices will typically find articulation within the system. The system may even adapt—through choices—to assimilate consumer responses.

To use Weale’s language, consumption (a strategy since it is explained in marketing terms and reinforces marketing ideologies) may be a way of negotiating and maintaining social relationships (tactics that are explainable in non-marketing terms and metaphors), but those relationships are often co-opted or by the language of consumerism. For example, the Internet has created several new avenues for communication and information transfer. Among these is an empowerment of consumers to give feedback to sellers and corporations on-line. Two of the most popular Internet retailers in the United States, Amazon.com and eBay, both allow customers and sellers to post product reviews and to rate each other on-line. These “ratings” become a powerful tool for evaluating and trusting the quality of service and reliability of both parties in a transaction: buyer and seller. However, these relationship indicators have no bearing on the system that underlies the transaction. The “empowerment” of consumers in this case is a system of rating that substantiates their roles as consumers and subsequently binds them to sellers, lest they receive a negative rating in return for their feedback. There is little room to question or “rate” the system in which this relationship is facilitated.

In another example, consumer choice as a tactic is rendered arbitrary by a steady assault of product information, from physical dimensions to performance ratings to
complex (and not so complex) comparisons to market figures and statistics. All this as if to say that product reliability or choice is motivated purely by what everyone else is buying—i.e. top-selling model, number one box office hit, or consumer’s choice. Under such numerical categories, *choice* becomes a function of quantity (how many purchased, etc.) rather than quality. Consumer choice is also appropriated here as a function of the market in that the choice not to buy the product, see the movie, or eat the food does not enter into the equation. Here, *choice* is not a consumer tactic but a strategy that serves the larger project of mass production and consumption.

Of course, all of this has to do with power. De Certeau characterizes strategies as positions of power: “strategies are actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power, elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed” (38). Marketing operates from such a strategic location of cultural prowess, not from physical force or even from economic resources per se, but from the mass message of individual-as-consumer. In “Power,” Albert Weale characterizes this type of overt propaganda as power: “we might note that power is most insidiously exercised when those who are controlled have their consciousness shaped in such a way that they come to assent voluntarily to their condition” (232). This echoes Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (167). The powerful in the case of the culture industry are the marketers and
advertisers whose work shapes consumer consciousness and complicity in the culture industry.

Pierre Bourdieu approaches this problem from the perspective of a sociologist and anthropologist, interested in the tension between objective structures and subjective, “rational” actions. He locates “practice” in the practical and the everyday: “in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle” (Logic 52). The “practices” of the consumer electronics industry can be seen at the level of the individual—below the objective, quantifiable nature of the mass market—and in a host of relationships that operate in opposition to the quick characterizations of market demographics.

Bourdieu develops the concept of the habitus to account for the distinction between material properties—the body, physical space, anything that can be counted or measured—and symbolic properties—associations that must be understood in relation with one another (Logic 135). Essentially, habitus is a “subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (Outline 86). It is the intersection of material reality, individual perception, and possible actions where the actor is not subjected to specific hard and fast rules. That is, the objective and the subjective forces of culture are observable in a moment in which an agent acts “freely.” This sense of freedom is problematic, and like Marcuse’s cautionary choice, it is misleading:
Only in imaginary experience (in the folk tale, for example), which neutralizes the sense of social realities, does the social world take the form of a universe of possibles equally possible for any possible subject. Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and inaccessible... the relation to what is possible is a relation to power... the *habitus* is the principle of a selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it. (Logic 64)

By understanding the habitus of individual consumption and use, scholars of consumer tactics can identify the ways that consumer behavior confirms and challenges the objective strategies of the mass market and the forces of marketing.

The transaction, the moment when money is exchanged for a product, where individuality is traded for the promise of more products to come, where individual agency is levied against the strategies of the culture industry, is the intersection between the perceptual phenomenon of the habitus and the disembodied practice of choicing. The transaction is the intersection of strategies and tactics, manifested in an observable scene that is subjected to hegemonic cultural structures and the individual rationalizations of those structures as well as possible alternatives. Choosing establishes the culture industry as a system of rules and strategies that are reinforced by any action that might be taken, but a system wherein individual negotiation and play is valued and encouraged (*Practical Reason* 79-81). At the moment of transaction or exchange where the choice is made, the system is validated and recognized as important. Beyond this is a system of structured
negotiations and tactical maneuvers that represent the objective and subjective relationships of players playing the game. Choosing is the first principle of marketing.

Rhetoric at the Moment of Transaction

There is a sense in which choosing, or at least the influencing of choice has always been a part of the rhetorical enterprise. Aristotle clearly binds speakers to their past choices as a part of their credibility and character. Blair and Campbell, following the lead of Adam Smith, oriented a newly literate public in reception and taste—knowing in any situation what is “proper” or “correct.” What’s more, choice is a naturalized part of any decision-making process, making it open to influence at many levels. When I want to influence my two year old to eat something that I know he wouldn’t choose on his own, I offer him a choice: the item that I want him to eat or something that I know he would like less: “Noah, do you want this banana or some broccoli.” I know that he will choose the banana, and will be happy with that choice, since he has avoided the much dreaded broccoli. Similarly, the consumer enters the system of mass consumerism presumably for similar reasons: he or she has chosen to buy a product and avoided the alternative. Once engaged in the system, he or she is faced with additional choices—from brand name, to product features, to retailers—which represent investment in the system and, to a lesser degree, moments of carefully scripted possibility.

There are two sciences devoted to the study of choice: marketing and decision theory. The former is described above and is dedicated to understanding how consumers make choices based upon certain conditions—like price, availability, features, brand, etc. It is also primarily sponsored (and subsequently motivated) by corporate interests in
maximizing profit. The latter comes out of cognitive psychology and organizational theory and seeks to understand how people make decisions under a variety of constraints, from psychological and emotional factors to how people perceive relationships and motivation. The problem with both of these approaches to studying choice is that each positions the consumer/decision-maker as a relatively free agent in a web of semi-transparent options for action. Rhetoric—at least my conceptualization of rhetoric as a study of transactional agency—is uniquely poised to study choice as an expression of individual agency within a cultural system of exchange. This system operates at a symbolic level, but also finds itself materialized in the technologies and things we use daily.

Aristotle provides a nice explanation of why choice assumes a rational agent, making an informed decision. He posits that deliberative choice is always directed at an end and manifests character (1.8.6). Rational Choice Theory (which I have used as a foil in my argument here) assumes that decisions or choices are the result of individuals acting toward some end. As such, observers, marketers, or audiences can attribute the choices an individual makes to a part of some larger project. In the case of rhetoric, this larger project is the establishment of character, the ethical appeal, or the right to speak. United States citizens have a tendency to judge politicians by the bills they have voted on or endorsed, defining political “character” by the choices one has made in one’s career. In the case of marketing, choices establish behaviors and motivations that market researchers can use to establish demographic patterns and predict future choices.
Aristotle also advocates assigning character to choice, making clear what the ends are. In discussing the function of narrative as an argument he hangs character upon choice:

The narrative ought to be indicative of character [ἐθικὲν]. This will be so if we know what makes character [ἐθος]. One way, certainly, is to make deliberative choice [proairesis] clear: what the character is on the basis of what sort of deliberative choice [has been made]. And choice is what it is because of the end it is aimed at. (3.16.8, brackets are Kennedy’s)

Thus, a speaker’s character is directly related to the choices he or she has made as a part of working toward some end. The effective speaker will use these choices—being a part of his or her presumably “honorable” or “virtuous” character—to influence an audience to think or act in a similar way. In fact, this is a foundational concept to advertising and marketing. Just think of any of the infomercial testimonials where we see Everyman or Everywoman proclaiming the virtues of some product, not able to fully function as a member of society before buying it: the unsuccessful dieter who lost wait with miracle pills, the insomniac who can finally sleep on the perfect mattress, or the inept housekeeper who can maintain a clean environment with a robotic vacuum. Or commercials that make the following appeal: “You’ve worked hard all your life making things better for your company, your neighborhood, and your family. Isn’t it time you do something for yourself?” Here, though, moral or deliberative choice has been obscured by marketers to emphasize superficial values that will likely sell well to a mass audience.
rather than the substantive moral issues that might be the basis for such deliberative
issues as labor practices, environmental concerns, and community involvement.

In *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action*, Alan Donagan explains
Aristotle’s notion of deliberative action \(\text{prohairesis}\) as always involving a conscious choice:

The elements by which Aristotle held that human action is to be explained
are therefore three: wishing for an end \(\text{boulesis}\); believing, as a result of
deliberation, that a certain kind of action in one’s power would effectively
serve to bring about that end \(\text{doxa}, \text{resulting from boulesis}\); and, as a
result of these choosing an action of that kind \(\text{prohairesis}\). (41)

In this way, a choice can always be said to have been a result of influence, deliberation,
and action. Moreover, Donagan characterizes choice as an embodiment of the belief in
the authority and ability to make that choice: “if human beings credit themselves with
power to choose or not to choose what they do . . . it is because the body of concepts and
beliefs in terms of which they think about their actions implies that they have it” (182).
Here choice is a concept of freedom and power simply because this “freedom” signifies
complicity within a larger system where choice is not free.

Marshall Alcorn makes a similar point in his analogy to democracy, desire, and
the freedom of speech in *Discourse and the Constructions of Desire*:

Culture and human subjectivity constitute a complex mechanism
involving circuits and processes for the production, transmission,
reduction, and amplification of desire. Cultural activities employ various
devices that manage desire through the use of generating agents, blocking agents, and intersubjective and technological relations. In a democratic society, people make choices as they consciously or subconsciously express their desires. (66)

Yet, Alcorn argues that many of these desires are shaped by the cultures and social structures embedded in everyday life: “wherever there is choice that is evaluated, there is an exercise in the training of desire” (61). In opposition to this situation, Alcorn argues for a discourse thoroughly enmeshed in the awareness of desires that are both hegemonic and subversive.

It is with an understanding of the dialectical nature of relationships among the tactics of users/consumers and the strategies of consumer electronics marketing that I begin to provide some concrete examples of these complicated forces surrounding the notion of choice in a free market. I will deal with rhetorical appeals other than choice in my investigation of marketing techniques in the consumer electronics industry; however, it is clear that these all revolve around maintaining the illusion of consumer choice while clearly limiting the same and propagating a continued consumer interest in maintaining the validity of the larger system, namely the culture industry. The tug and pull of individual choices on the system that creates them represent a complexity not simply explained by complicity in the larger strategy of consumption. It is precisely because each choice is not necessarily quantifiable and deliberative in either the Aristotelian sense or in the case for Rational Choice Theory that resistance can and does exist. This
phenomenon, which I call consumer tactics, opposes the retail strategies of negotiated shopping or enhanced self-service and is subject of the next chapter.
Notes

1 For examples of such arguments, please see the following. From marketing, see Robert Settle and Pamela Alreck's *Why They Buy*, John Katsaros' *Selling High-Tech, High-Ticket*, or Allan Reddy's *The Emerging High-Tech Consumer*; from economics, see James Morgan and Greg Duncan's *Making Your Choices Count: Economic Principles for Everyday Decisions*; and from cognitive psychology, see Robyn Dawes and Reid Hastie's *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World: The Psychology of Judgement & Decision Making* or H.W. Lewis' *Why Flip a Coin? The Art and Science of Good Decisions*.

2 I will refer to a continuum of choice throughout this chapter. To avoid confusion I will refer to choice in three ways:

- **Consumer choice** denotes the systemic concept of choice as it is naturalized within the market system: the idea that consumers do have a choice between products and marketers do their best to anticipate that choice and react to it.

- **Rational choice** follows from Aristotelian logic and cognitive psychology and forwards the notion that consumers study the market rationally, weigh their options, and make the best selection available to them.

- **Choicing** is the art of studying, predicting, and manufacturing the choices consumers will make in the future. Choicing refers directly to the spectrum of freedom consumers enjoy in negotiating particular products or decisions
and the relative contribution to the culture industry (mass consumerism) signified by such a negotiation.

When not further signified with the adjective or typeface, "choice" simply represents a motivated decision to adopt one product or idea over at least one other.

This is the basic concept behind rational choice theory in marketing, economics, and politics. The idea that decision-making behaviors can be explained through rational, deliberative means can be seen in the work of Ben-Akiva and Lerman, Dawes and Hastie, Lewis, Marder, and Morgan and Duncan. Several scholars problematize this concept of human action as being too simplistic. This can be seen in *The Theory of Choice: A Critical Guide*, edited by Shaun Hargreaves Heap, Martin Hollis, Bruce Lyons, Robert Sugden, and Albert Weale; in the rhetorico-philosophical work of Donagan; or in the work of political economist Mary Zey.

Each of these effects are documented and discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to products and brands. By *products*, I mean the specific technologies themselves. By specifying *brands*, on the other hand, I call into question the various marketing campaigns, product lines, customer surveys, and popularity of a particular manufacturer of consumer electronics. For example, *D-Link* is a brand whereas the wireless router (even the D-link DI-614+) is a product.
Chapter 3: The Rhetoric of Retail Consumer Electronics

Introduction

At its heart, the culture industry depends on one fundamental motive: to make shopping a consuming experience. This is the case even though the consumables very little from one to the next. The culture industry requires the individual consumer to fully engage with the systemic logics of the marketplace, of marketing, of advertising, of retail space, and of salespeople, many of whom are highly trained in the art of persuading consumers.

This chapter deals with the intricacies of this experience within the specific domain of the consumer electronics industry which specializes in making and selling mass produced high-tech products intended for ubiquitous use. This industry is particularly interesting in terms of the problems it poses for retailers and consumers: making very complex products seem simple enough to install, operate, and use.

There can be no better vantage point for studying consumer tactics and marketing strategies than from within the space where the daily transactions take place: retail locations (brick-and-mortar businesses) and e-retailers on the WWW (click-and-order businesses). These are the spaces where the effects of marketing and the efforts of the culture industry meet the individual intentions of consumers and users, both of which are made material through physical transactions. These spaces are designed around the notion of choice: offering a number of similar products from which consumers will presumably make their rational choice and undertake the specific transaction of purchasing a product. The tension between consumer choice and choosing—the art of predicting and manufacturing consumer choice—plays out in several ways: in the design
of the spaces, the continuing training of the consumer through interactions with retail personnel and other shopping cues, and the permanent record of the transaction itself. These spaces are carefully designed to create a sense of overwhelming choice, the strategies employed by the retailers are derived from techniques of mass consumerism and result in consumer complicity in the culture industry. For example, there is simply no way the retail experience can customize a 50,000 square foot building for each customer or efficiently offer an individualized experience with each transaction. While retail practices might not be fairly labeled as “nefarious” (at least not usually), they are often built on techniques designed to give consumers misleading impressions. Namely, they are built around giving consumers the impression that their personal and community values drive the industry, when in actuality the overwhelming need to sell a high volume of products to a mass audience is what drives the industry. Thus, while technically legal, these strategies push the boundaries of being ethical. Consequently, the efficiency offered by big-box retail locations serves the interests of moving a high volume of products to a very large consumer base and does so by appealing to various consumer values like “convenience,” “selection,” or “service.”

In *The Paradox of Choice*, psychologist Barry Schwartz argues that the multiplicity of choice in the shopping experience represents an enormous problem for people living out their daily lives. Instead of being faced with a few major decisions and several smaller decisions, the choices available to consumers actually present each decision as one that must be thoughtfully researched, carefully analyzed, and perfectly executed. These choices also drive various markets to offer more and more choices in
retailers, products, and features. These additional choices provide a level of ersatz customizability while reinforcing the values and systemic philosophies of shopping. Schwartz argues that greater consumer choice is actually a greater bondage to the system and ultimately a loss of freedom because each choice—from the mundane to the important—must be carefully researched and analyzed, placing the responsibility for such work on the individual, rational consumer. Such choices can be haunting as well as daunting: once a choice has been made, it is often too late to change one’s mind. In the consumer electronics industry, for example, the relatively short life cycles of computers, the low cost of new machines, and the relatively high cost of repairs and upgrades often mean that consumers are stuck with their choices until they decide to replace them altogether.

In his recent article in *Scientific American*, Schwartz refers to an abundance of choice as a “tyranny” and a leading cause of psychological unhappiness: fewer consumers are expressing satisfaction in the experience of shopping and in their choices (71). Much of this unhappiness is due to the nature of contemporary retail philosophy: in order to cut costs and keep prices low, retailers must make profits on a huge volume of sales with little markup. So processes are streamlined (i.e., people are replaced by computers and inventory tracking systems) and much of the information about products is made available to consumers over the Internet or in store displays in order to facilitate “easy” decision-making. But information is not always helpful, especially when it is highly technical in nature (as in the case of consumer electronics) or completely overwhelming and unfiltered (as in the case of the Internet). Moreover, enormous retail
spaces (50,000 to 200,000 square feet) facilitate low overhead, low cost retailing, an architectural detail that complicates the problematic of consumer choice because consumers are expected to navigate these spaces with little or no help from retail employees or salespeople. Consumers are trained through store design and market research to make choices based upon values associated with higher levels of consumption with little to no regard for issues of production.

Retailing High-Tech

The first step in the formation of the consumer electronics industry was turning high-tech products into mass produced goods that could be bought and sold easily. Factors for commoditizing high-tech products (creating mass produced goods that can be easily bought and sold) include low-cost production, high volume sales, a high rate of product turnover or a short product life cycle, convergence of producers, and the most recent iteration, discount volume sellers. Obviously, mass production has been employed in nearly every industry as a way of reducing costs and maximizing profit. The consumer electronics industry is no different. Computer and television components are mass produced (typically by the same few companies), and the final products are built on assembly lines in large plants. This industry constructs and entertains a strange dialog between high-tech products and commodities. When a technology is first introduced—like the plasma screen television or computer monitor—it is often expensive and complicated. The Digital Video Disk (DVD) player was introduced at a price of $600.00. Currently, DVD players can be purchased at Wal-Mart for $39.00. While the DVD player remains as technically complicated as ever, forces of marketing and consumption
have seemingly erased the technicality, presenting merely a "black box" which plays
movies in amazing clarity and with great sound. Thus, there is a trend in the industry to
turn technologies and innovation into easily consumed products. In "The Moral
Significance of the Material Culture," Albert Borgmann differentiates between
"commanding technologies" and "disposable technologies." Commanding technologies
are those that are complex, refined, and made up of a multitude of technologies and
knowledges (e.g., a musical instrument). Disposable technologies, on the other hand, are
items that are relatively simple to operate (e.g., a portable CD player) (87-8). But just by
looking at music as an example, it is easy to see how the disposable nature of the CD
player, whose operation in terms of algorithms, electronics, and mechanics lies far
beyond the layperson, has made music—a commanding technology that was once
arduous to master and costly to recreate—disposable, commodifiable, disembodied, and
susceptible to consumerism (89-90).

The next step in the commoditization of high-technology is the convergence of
producers from a relatively large number of small producers to a small number of large
producers; this elite and powerful group distributes most of the consumer electronics,
often under dozens of different brand names. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Alfred
Chandler traces this trend from the emergence of radio and television to the production of
the personal computer and entertainment peripherals like compact disk (CD) and DVD
players. After the sales boom of 1920s radio sets, several conglomerates quickly took
over the market:
Over six hundred new enterprises entered the market within a four-year span, but nearly all disappeared quickly. By 1940 ten companies accounted for close to 75 percent of sales of receiving sets. ... From the consumer electronics industry's beginning, long-lived entrepreneurial start-ups were very few. (240)

According to Hoover's, an on-line database of business and market information including snapshots of over 13 million companies, the Sony Corporation dominates sales in the consumer electronics industry. This includes the game console market, where it enjoys a 70% market share over its competitors. Sony's sales in 2003 topped 63 billion dollars, and its profits reached nearly a billion dollars ($978 million). Over 60% of Sony's revenues come from their sales of televisions, stereo equipment, personal computers, and digital cameras. Sony also owns music and video recording companies (Epic Records and Columbia Video), film studios, DVD recordings, and television studios and programming ("Sony"). Hoover's profile of Sony's major competitor, Matsushita, unveils Chandler's theory of convergence: Matsushita owns more than 380 companies that distribute its products, including Panasonic, Quasar, Technics, and JVC ("Matsushita"). Chandler argues that market leaders like Sony and Matsushita will continue to dominate the consumer electronics industry because of two primary factors: "highly specialized technical knowledge embedded in an integrated learning base" and the resources to support an "extended time of study before new products [reach] world markets" (244).
Additionally, consumer electronics industry journals discuss the commodity nature of high-tech products. Trade journals like *TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics, DSN Retailing Today*, and *Chain Store Age* regularly publish articles and interviews on the state of the consumer electronics and retail industries with key executives in leading companies. In “Dealers Learning to Live in a Wal-Mart World,” president and chief executive officer of computer and electronics chain store CompUSA, Larry Mondry articulates the tension between what he describes as high-tech products that are complex and challenging to sell and commodities that are cheap, simple, and almost walk themselves off of store shelves: “as the technology becomes more ubiquitous, and frankly, commoditizes, [discount retailers like Wal-Mart are] in a position to sell anything they want to. Once [a high-tech product] becomes the Walkman, in that you don’t need a lot of product knowledge and it’s understandable and everyone and their grandma has it, then they can certainly sell it. We can’t think they won’t” (26). In “High-Tech Goes Low Price: Mass Contributes to Commoditization,” Laura Heller cites Circuit City chairperson and chief executive officer Alan McCollough’s concern over technology commoditization and mass distribution: “the rapid commoditization of product has long been a trend in [the consumer electronics industry] and allowed discounters to become a considerable force in the industry” (41). Consumer electronics retailers are under considerable pressure to make high-tech products easy to understand, despite the complex nature of the products themselves.

Once the consumer electronics industry has sufficiently “commoditized” high-tech products, they still must reach the masses by some means. The retail sector of the
consumer electronics industry is no stranger to the type of convergence demonstrated by the industry’s producers. In fact, retail convergence is due to the commoditization of the industry’s products, since low price goods can be sold cheaply in high volume retail locations and over the Internet. In fact, according to *DSN Retailing Today*, the self-described “leading international newspaper serving the ever-growing mass market,” the commodified product drives the industry by allowing discount retailers to become a competitive force in the industry. Wal-Mart, the discount retailer par excellence, “moves the second-highest volume of products in the [consumer electronics] category after specialist Best Buy” (Heller 41). Wal-Mart has come to represent mass discount retailing to scholars of retail and shopping, and many argue that it has the market force to eradicate many of the local retailers that line the streets of main street America and replace them with a single mega-shopping experience. The next section analyzes the establishment of big-box retailers as a primary means of distributing consumer electronics. The forces of commoditization are further enacted upon these products and their consumers through advertising, store design, and market research.

**Big-Box Consumer Electronics**

Massive retail outlets like Wal-Mart are among the recent innovations in retail history. Known as *big-box stores*, *category killers*, and *superstores*, these huge retailers are quickly replacing other retail store models. Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning defines big-box stores as those over 50,000 square feet, with typical sizes in the range of 90,000 to 200,000 square feet, and deriving most of its profits from a high-volume of sales rather than high mark-ups (“Big Box
These stores are typically rectangular, windowless buildings with expansive parking lots, an architectural feature that demonstrates how superstores cater to a highly mobile regional population. These retail behemoths are now ubiquitous in the U.S. and their design and function rarely varies one from another. With few exceptions, buying a CD at a Best Buy in St. Paul, Minnesota is exactly the same as buying one from a Best Buy in Tucson, Arizona. In fact, one of the challenges for store designers is maintaining a uniform interior store design across very different locations, from suburban power centers (regional retail centers with two or three big-box “anchor” stores) to urban warehouse retrofits. Best Buy introduced its “Concept 4” store design when faced with the challenges of opening its giant stores in densely populated cities like San Francisco and New York that attract pedestrian traffic rather than suburban or regional commuters (see Heller or Wolf). The store designs maximize space by including open air demonstration rooms, split-level designs, and interactive kiosks in order to sell the same amount of merchandise in two-thirds the space and to maintain the uniform feel of its much larger regional cousins.

The evolution of the big-box store offers a demonstration of the levels to which consumers have been trained in the art of retail: big-boxes offer a stripped down and streamlined, one-stop shopping experience. In many ways, big-boxes are the answer to a mass culture that has been trained in the art of consumerism and wants the largest selection at the lowest prices. In Ohmann’s history of the retail industry from country stores and local merchants to mail order catalog companies to department and chain stores, each development in retail science represented a more cost-effective and efficient
vehicle for delivering a higher volume of products to consumers at lower prices. The immediate effect was that almost everyone in the extant consumer chain benefited: manufacturers and wholesalers found outlets for their products, retailers and marketers trained the public in the art of buying through advertisements, store displays, and sales, and consumers found an increased selection of products at lower prices. This trend—begun by the department store and mail-order catalog—is sustained by the big-box, where the process has found maximized size and variety with minimized overhead and cost.

Wal-Mart presents itself as an easy target for critique and for representing this trend in retail, with its high visibility in middle class, rural, United States culture. No definitive histories of big-box stores exist, but many retail scholars and critics point to Wal-Mart’s early incorporation of big-box elements and its overwhelming takeover of local and national markets as indicators of such industry leadership. In fact, the big-box layout is so new, that most studies prior to 2000 don’t even recognize it as a sustainable innovation in retail (cf. Bluestone, Hanna, Kuhn, and Moore’s *The Retail Revolution* (1981); Israel’s *Store Planning/Design: History, Theory, Process* (1994); Michman and Greco’s *Retailing Triumphs and Blunders* (1995); or Andersen’s *Small Store Survival* (1997)). These retail design resources deal almost exclusively with the department store as the dominant retail space. The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) defines department stores as “primarily engaged in retailing a wide range of the following new products with no one merchandise line predominating: apparel, furniture, appliances and home furnishings; and selected additional items, such as paint, hardware,
toiletries, cosmetics, photographic equipment, jewelry, toys, and sporting goods. Merchandise lines are normally arranged in separate departments" ("Department Stores"). Ohmann discusses department stores in terms of their vast selection and wide variety of commodities (70-1). But the recent growth in the retail industry has been dominated by big-box retailers. According to the University of Wisconsin-Extension's Center for Community Economic Development, big-boxes have a strong foothold on the industry:

Most of the traditional mall department stores are no longer full service as they have scaled back their merchandise to only apparel, cosmetics, shoes and some household items. The number of department stores selling appliances, furniture electronics, lawnmowers and other durable goods is limited. Further, mall department stores are representing a shrinking part of the retail industry having lost sales to mass merchandise and specialty retail stores. (1)

Essentially, big-boxes make giants out of what might have been a single department: office products, furniture, groceries, consumer electronics, hardware, etc. Department stores are classified by their content, big-box stores by their size and selection within a single category—making choice even more plentiful and ostentatious. According to TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics, multi-regional electronics stores and mass merchants held 53.2% of the industry sales in 2002, compared to regional stores that took 1.1% of sales in 2002 or department stores that held only 0.3% of sales (Wolf “Top 100” 20).6 Purdue University retail scholar Thelma Snuggs points to the success of mass
retailers as a leading economic indicator. Among her list of
top ten specialty stores are
consumer electronics big-box
competitors Best Buy, Circuit
City, and CompUSA (70).

Best Buy has a
particularly an interesting
history, evolving from a local
audio parts store in St. Paul,
Minnesota to a chain of
comprehensive consumer
electronics stores selling
music, entertainment

hardware, appliances, and computers. Dick Schulze began the enterprise as the Sound of
Music and changed the name of the stores to Best Buy in 1983 when he expanded his
merchandise line to include video products and home appliances. Best Buy currently
operates 650 stores nationwide ("Company History"), selling a full range of consumer
electronics products, appliances, and music. According to the trade journal *The Chain
Store Age*, Schulze’s success is due primarily to two influential business practices: the
big-box format and the shift to a non-commissioned sales staff ("Dick Schulz"). By
shifting from a local audio shop to a nationwide retailer, Schulz followed the model set
by warehouse stores and discount retailers, including a no frills store design with warehouse feel, placing merchandise on store shelves rather than in back rooms. To accommodate a “more relaxed shopping environment free of the high pressure sales tactics used in other stores,” Best Buy employs a salaried staff (“Dick Schulz”). One of Best Buy’s major competitors, Circuit City, has recently followed suit with a non-commission sales staff.

Mike Linton, Best Buy’s chief marketing officer, discusses the retail chain in terms of a brand and discusses data processing as a way of reaching consumers and discovering their needs. In an interview with *TWICE: This Week in Consumer Electronics*, Linton admits that the company is far from understanding what its diverse clientele needs and wants (“Best Buy Slicing”). This is indicative of a mass market approach to consumer electronics that is driven both by sales and by the creation of “desires” in consumers where none previously existed. The retailer’s name, Best Buy, is deeply embedded within the assumed market function of consumer choice, and announces itself as the best choice among the competition. Even the logo, a yellow price tag with the name, Best Buy, emblazoned upon it, draws upon consumers’ notions of choice: availability, selection, best price, etc. The location of this giant yellow price tag on the outside of the building, suggests that the entire store is for sale. It is, after all, a giant warehouse sale. The overall message is a consumer electronics discount retailer concerned with providing consumers with the best choices at the best prices. Adorno and Horkheimer comment on this very construction as “the circle of manipulation and retroactive need” as a fundamental characteristic of the culture industry (121).
But like the evolution that Ohmann traces, there is an ulterior motive in operation beyond consumer interests. The low costs and massive selection presented by big-boxes represent the deepest training consumers receive: buyer beware, you better shop around, shop before you buy, etc. They are simply a more efficient means of moving a higher volume of products to a greater number of consumers. In “Retail Structural Dynamics and the Forces Behind Big-Box Retailing,” structural geographer Scott Munroe argues that “firm cost structures, independent of location, can greatly affect the optimal size of facilities with little regard to the preferences of consumers. That is, even when consumers have no great preference for large facilities, such large facilities can dominate the landscape simply because they are a more efficient means of retailing to their operators” (371). In fact, much of the literature on big-box stores debates the drawbacks and benefits of these huge structures in terms of how they affect local business, the environment, and economic growth. Of primary concern to local communities is the environmental impact of such huge retail locations, the resulting traffic and pollution from consumers and delivery vehicles and connected parking lots. Many communities with precious natural resources such as rivers or wetlands, tourist sites such as natural landscapes or wildlife, residential areas, and space demands such as New Rochelle, New York; San Francisco, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Tucson, Arizona have all implemented environmental policy statements in an attempt to block further big-box developments within their communities or, as Chris Duerksen and Robert Blanchard argue, to make those developments less “indifferent to local identity and interest” (“Belling the Box”).
But the proponents of big-box economy will provide cost-benefit analyses that demonstrate the overall benefits of the behemoth stores. Among these are the lower prices and increased selection offered by the purchasing power of such multi-regional giants and the increase in jobs and retail competition resulting in a better economy. And this is true; the only draw to a big-box specialty store for the consumer is price. Big-boxes often represent a retailer’s attempt to streamline the selling process, placing emphasis on self-service models that do not require a large sales staff or customer service department. Consumers are naturalized to expect to navigate the stores on their own, for the most part, and store displays are designed to help them do just that by utilizing large signs, open displays and boxes of merchandise, and clearly delineated techniques of organization (like sorting CDs by genre, artist, and title). Like high pressure salespeople, these more subtle strategies direct consumers to attend to particular products and features that might otherwise escape their attention. Unlike salespeople, however, these strategies encourage consumers to accept greater responsibility for their choices than if they had felt pressured into a purchase by an agent of the company. And while studies like the one conducted by Clifford Guy and David Bennison argue that the introduction of big-boxes stimulate local economies and revitalize local retailers (see “Retail Planning Policy”), there are many others like Stephen J. Arnold and Monika Narang Luthra’s “Market Entry Effects of Large Format Retailers: A Stakeholder Analysis” that show how the introduction of big-box retailers in a community forces a necessary decline in local economies, employment, and competition, unless the competitor is another big-box chain store. Ultimately, Arnold and Narang Luthra—a professor and doctoral candidate at the
Queen's University School of Business in Canada—advocate for big-boxes to include hefty philanthropic programs within their operating budgets to demonstrate a concern for local interests beyond sales. Best Buy, for example, operates several national and local community programs like the Best Buy Children's Foundation that funds non-profit organizations that implement “innovative” technology programs in K-12 programs, its college scholarship program, or its roaming solid-waste recycling program. These programs are a small part of the operating budget of a retailer like Best Buy, but they provide opportunities to connect with local consumers and make for considerable free media exposure.

In *Going Shopping: Consumer Choices and Community Consequences*, retail historian Ann Satterthwaite documents Wal-Mart's incorporation of community programs and service initiatives as a nation-wide, corporate response to local concerns over stability in the economic and employment sectors. Wal-Mart has very publicly positioned itself as a small-town retailer with very regional, big-box implications on local communities:

> Such megastores [as Wal-Mart] have become major determinants not only of shopping patterns but of the quality of life in a wide circle of communities. When the giant has stamped out all the local competition and then dies itself, a community is in trouble. (180)

Whether or not big-boxes stimulate or stifle local economies through competition and employment, they are always implicated in the community at levels far beyond the immediate vicinity. And since most big-boxes are national chains, local stakeholders
have little opportunity to leverage any sort of voice beyond boycotting, which is problematical, especially if there is no local competition. Additionally, journalist and urban critic Roberta Brandes Grantz identifies such economic stimulants as temporary benefits to the community in question. Rather than increasing competition, stores known as "category killers" seek to eliminate the competition and dominate the market (172). When retailers like Wal-Mart or Best Buy carry a wide variety of products—from groceries to hardware or from CD players to DVDs respectively—just one category killer can put multiple retailers out of business. Grantz characterizes the process as such:

"Attack" teams are put together for the first few months of operation of a new store. If a new store is meant to operate with 100 employees, the "attack" team will contain 150 and will include friendly, helpful salespeople for the first several months. The first-time shopper at the store has a positive experience and saves money—at first. Customers are won early. Local stores close. Some try to reposition themselves to fit a new market. . . . They try, without access to Wall Street funding or helpful politicians. Some succeed. They change their product mix, emphasize service and specialty goods. Many fail. Some—maybe—remain in business, but barely. (173)

And all too often, according to the promotional materials generated by the Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning at Columbia University, the resultant lack of competition leads to a reduced workforce and higher prices: “it is important to note that [the] disposable employees are included in the initial job creation estimates, so the number of long-term jobs is often significantly less than the developers would have the public and its officials believe” (“Big Box”).

Such practices have consumers and consumer advocacy groups screaming for change behind community web sites such as “Bestbuysux.org” (www.bestbuysux.org) and “The Big Box Home Page” (www.big-box.com) that offer web boards and discussion
threads for frustrated consumers. However, as Monroe Friedman notes in *Consumer Boycotts*, these are among the few options left for individual consumers who wish to engage in resisting the big-box phenomenon. There are several factors that discourage local activism against national retailers. The biggest and most obvious is that many retailers are a part of large, multinational and national conglomerations, which all house various brand names. This makes boycotting Best Buy difficult, if one doesn’t know that the corporation also owns and operates Future Shop and Magnolia Hi-Fi stores, or that it recently sold all of its Musicland outlets. This also makes picketing a difficult task; it is nearly impossible to find the resources to cover a picket line of nearly 650 stores nationwide. Friedman advances a sort of handbook of consumer boycott tactics, and nearly all of them require national media coverage of some sort, from consumer advocacy groups and web sites to national news campaigns and counter-advertisements.

But the average consumer with limited financial resources and little leisure time cannot meet the demands required by such a media campaign, and the choice comes down to whether or not one will engage in the retail game at all. Occasionally, retailers and corporations have adopted the values transmitted by consumer boycotts; animal testing in the cosmetic industry or dolphin-safe tuna fishing are good examples. But in the case of big-boxes, the values I am discussing (the elimination of local competition, a corporate ideology of excessive growth, or the aim of efficiently selling high volumes of products to a mass market) are integral to the cause of mass consumerism. The appeal of big-box consumer electronics retailers is to numbers and volume, not individuals or even individual sales. In order to facilitate individual sales within the system of mass retail
and marketing, retailers implement strategies that I call the “consumer management experience.”

Consumer Management: Enhanced Self-Service

Consumer management is the term I use to refer to all of the efforts that go into managing how a consumer navigates the retail space, decides upon a product, and makes a purchase. These include store design, shopping assistants, salespeople, and in-store kiosks and networked, interactive stations that attempt to bridge the gap between the physical retail location and the corporation’s web site or e-tailer. Consumer management represents a shift toward customer self-service by providing consumers with more information and less personal contact with store representatives per transaction. Consumers must then be trained in navigating retail spaces and information sources. This training in navigation also represents a negotiation between the consumer’s own values and buying constraints; the retailer’s advertising; the retail space; and the products themselves. This network of meanings must all be negotiated by the consumer.

Within the big-box model of retail, store design and layout becomes increasingly important as retailers expect consumers to navigate the store and make purchases with little to no help from store employees. The paradigm shift toward mass retail places much more responsibility upon the consumer to navigate retail space. They must do this by reading cues from signs and displays. In short, consumers must interact with the stores themselves. In “Superstore Interactivity: A New Self-Service Paradigm of Retail Service?” Australian retail and marketing scholars Bill Merrilees and Dale Miller argue that this trend in levels of customer service is directly related to the shift in retail toward
the mass market: “The idea of self-service was often put into practice in a shift from full personal service, as a means of reducing labour costs, particularly in specialist stores and department stores. Finding and choosing products became very much the role of the customer” (386). The goals of mass retailing, including a drastic increase in the volume of sales, do not include such labor intensive elements such as a highly trained and motivated sales force except in special, high-ticket markets like car sales or emerging technologies markets. If the store has been designed to be efficient and consumer-friendly, then a small number of merchandise stockers and cashiers are all that are needed to operate even a larger store. Efficiency and friendliness to Merrilees and Miller include such techniques as well-lit and appropriate signage that directs customers quickly; product placement (placing related and dependent products in proximity to each other, for example, putting the proper toner cartridges next to printers, or mobile phone faceplates next to the mobile phone display case) so that customers do not have to look elsewhere in the store for these items; and product fact sheets, which allow customers to quickly scan product features and compare similar products in a related category (387).

In the consumer electronics industry, this emphasis on self-service and store design has resulted in a split between emerging technology specialty stores and discount merchandisers. Specialty stores emphasize a highly trained and knowledgeable sales staff that will help customers find products and install them. CompUSA has recently adopted a sales plan called Unmatched where customers can have a store employee come to their home or business and set up any product purchased at a CompUSA store. The advantage of this, according to president and chief executive officer Larry Mondry, is
increased customer satisfaction and an increase in related sales as CompUSA technicians suggest additional items such as cables, printers, or other upgrades ("Dealers Pursue" 18). Discount merchandisers like Best Buy or Wal-Mart rely on store design and a relatively small sales staff to sell a higher number of products. A key to this retail strategy is making the technology seem easy enough for the average consumer not to need additional technical support once they leave the store. This is accomplished through diagrams, in-store demonstrations, and a greater reliance on manufacturer documentation.

In *Web Rules: How the Internet is Changing the Way Consumers Make Choices*, Tom Murphy discusses the trend toward self-service as a result of the tension between corporate and consumer interests. An editor and columnist for CBS.MarketWatch.com and former correspondent for Bloomberg News, Murphy argues that corporate mergers and superstore, big-box retailers hurt consumer choice: "In most mergers, customers end up with fewer stores to shop in and, sometimes, higher prices due to reduced competition. Power shifts from the individual to the corporation" (12). To defer or offset this power differential, large-scale retailers will often offer "individualized service" in order to appeal to consumers' desire for some level of service. Most recently and unlike CompUSA's Unmatched program, this individualized service comes in the form of database driven, real-time price comparisons or computer program "wizards" which aid consumers in selecting the "best" product for their needs. Web sites like PriceGrabber.com (www.pricegrabber.com) or BizRate.com (www.bizrate.com) will generate tables that compare price and availability of a certain product or a range of
products amongst a number of electronic and traditional retailers. Electronic retailers like BestBuy.com, a subsidiary of Best Buy, offer similar services to consumers:

In September 1999, Best Buy created a wholly owned subsidiary, BestBuy.com, Inc., and launched the new BestBuy.com site in June 2000, offering customers a better shopping experience. Visitors can find cutting-edge product information, product reviews, guided shopping features and technology news. Also offered are a Compare feature, Shopping Assistant feature, Think About folder, and multiple angle product views, making BestBuy.com a state-of-the-art shopping experience. ("Company History")

In looking for a digital camera on BestBuy.com, for example, a consumer can select various products and see a comparison chart of features, options, configurations, and prices; he or she can add a product to a “wish list” for later purchase or for purchase by a third party; and he or she can access articles on a particular camera, brand name, or on digital cameras in general in the “Research Center.” Each of these features appeals to the consumer as a rational decision-maker who will weigh his or her options and choose accordingly.

Despite the fact that this wealth of information and shopping “assistance” can be overwhelming and make choosing a product extremely time consuming, and not forgetting Barry Schwartz’ concerns over the tyranny of choice, these shopping assistants are extremely valuable to retailers not because they assist consumers, but because they collect data on consumer choice processes. When shopping at Amazon.com, for
example, a glance at a few products will generate a "customized" web page of products that the consumer will likely purchase based upon the products he or she has viewed.

Additionally, stored purchase histories will allow Amazon.com to tell a consumer what other people who looked at particular product have shopped for and/or purchased. These strategies offer a level of perceived customer service and assistance while still emphasizing a self-service model of retail sales. This way, retailers can move a higher volume of merchandise, collect information on individual sales, and expend relatively few resources on facilitating each individual sale. Consumers unwittingly become part of the marketing machine themselves as their purchases are tallied and published for future consumers to evaluate.

Where this level of data collection and electronic interactivity is not traditionally available, in retail locations or physical stores, retailers are implementing various
measures through electronic, networked kiosks; self checkout stations, rebates, and post-sale electronic surveys that attempt to create synergy and consistency between retail experiences, both online and in-person. Jeff Hayes, the director of CAP Ventures, a corporate consulting and market research firm, sees interactive kiosks as one of the “Five Timely Trends in In-Store Technology.” He argues,

From ATMs to grocery store self-checkout to airport self-check in, consumers are now seeing and using kiosks in many aspects of their lives. Look for innovative retailers to weave kiosks and self service systems into the consumer experience. Future kiosk adoption will be driven by customer experiences with Web-based purchasing, desire for improved customer service, interest in appealing to key shopping demographics, and the ability to improve productivity. (60)

Best Buy has already implemented kiosks into its store design. From in-store demonstration terminals for video games, computer software, and hardware sales to diagrams for installing a home networking solution to networked computer stations for purchasing or comparing products on-line, Best Buy is taking strides to seamlessly connect the on-line and off-line shopping experience. This, like self-checkout stations employed at grocery stores and hardware superstores, places more emphasis and responsibility on the consumer to navigate the individual transactions, leaving the retailer to invest more resources into appealing to larger numbers of consumers. Rebates and on-line market researchers offer rewards and cash back on purchases in exchange for valuable market data on consumers. This data is collected by forms that are snail-mailed
back to the manufacturer (in the case of most rebates) or by an on-line survey that is announced on a consumer's receipt, directing them to the web site.

Retailers tell consumers repeatedly how important they are in advertisements and on sales receipts—and they are important. In great numbers, consumers provide retailers with the demographic data they need to stock their stores, advertise expeditiously, and make the transaction of shopping more efficient from their perspective. The consumer, on the other hand, has little option but to comply if he or she desires the best available products at the cheapest prices. While retail strategies like store design, data collection, e-tailing, and shopping assistants are loudly touted as ways of facilitating individual sales and fostering meaningful relationships with consumers, they are ultimately means of moving greater numbers of goods more efficiently and with fewer resources. The consumer is left to
navigate complex store layouts, vast electronic databases, and numbers of extremely similar products alone, all the while being measured up and tracked in order to predict future purchase history.

Empowering Consumption: On-line Rating and Customization

As retailers seek convergence between their physical retail spaces and their on-line e-tailers and inventory control systems, two more trends in consumer management are emerging and need to be critiqued. These are the on-line rating systems employed by auction sites and used goods retailers like eBay.com or Amazon.com and the notion of managed customization by computer retailers like Dell or Gateway. These appeals to individual consumer voice and authority operate in much the same way as the other self-service strategies discussed above, but they add a layer of autonomous feedback that operates—on the surface at least—to empower consumers.

EBay.com is an enormously successful Internet auction house that facilitates personal, private-party auctions on almost any item, new or used. It allows members to create,
modify, and end auctions and to set various controls such as the minimum auction price, auction length, and item descriptions. Additionally, it provides the capability for users to pay for items and receive payment through its electronic payment system, PayPal.

Membership is currently free, requiring some basic information, a username, and a password to get started. EBay makes money by taking a small percentage of every sale, so its motivation is to facilitate as many concurrent auctions as it can. EBay began as a home business of founder Pierre Omidyar in 1995, and in 2004, eBay announced that over 430,000 sellers held full or part time auctions. It also announced "an estimated $2 billion in global gross merchandise sales in 2003" ("eBay Announces"). In April of 1999, Amazon.com added auction and private used goods sales to its retail arsenal (Fig. 3.4). It later added an auction site that allows consumers to list used items for sale that are announced to viewers as they browse equivalent new products.

These auction sites are discussed widely among Internet journalists and critics as opening up new avenues of choice and competition and as creating alternatives to big-box retailers. In Web Rules, for example, Tom Murphy cites such shopping opportunities as those offered by Amazon.com or eBay as forces that increase consumer choice and competition and directly oppose the constricting forces of corporate mergers and superstore market control (12). And, in fact, one of the biggest problems facing Amazon.com and eBay was helping consumers negotiate an overwhelming sense of choice and competition, with little information to verify product authenticity, seller reputation or reliability, or transaction security. Moreover, both corporations attempt to minimize responsibility for anything beyond the security of the transaction. They simply
place sellers in contact with interested buyers. David Bunnell, chief executive officer and
ereditor of Upside Media and founder of PC Magazine and PC World, writes about eBay’s
solution to this problem in The eBay Phenomenon. In order to build trust between buyers
and sellers and in order to solidify each party’s relationship to the company, eBay
developed a feedback system whereby buyers and sellers could rate one another. It
“provides a positive-neutral-negative rating format that is both public and cumulative.
Thanks to this forum, participants can build public reputations, just as traditional
merchants and customers have always done in their communities” (56). As positive
feedback accumulates, individuals are assigned different stars that indicate the volume of
transactions processed through eBay. Amazon.com also allows buyers to leave feedback
about sellers; the program summarizes the feedback, rating (on a 1-100 scale), and
volume publicly. This practice has spread among many Internet retailers and product
comparison sites, so it is not difficult to find summative representations in the forms of
stars, happy face icons, or colors about a variety of retailers over the Internet.

There are a couple of differences here in terms of how these feedback forums
orient consumers to each other and to the retail industry that are worth noting. Rather
than traditional consumer-retailer relationships that might have been formed between
individuals and local merchants, these new on-line relationships are not formed with the
retailer that facilitates the sale. This adds a new layer of consumerism beyond buying
and selling to include the management of the transaction. And these retailers are not
exposed to public feedback or critique at the same level as those who conduct
transactions under their umbrellas. Additionally, while eBay and Amazon.com both
perform summation and editorial functions on the feedback, neither take any
responsibility for that feedback or for the transactions upon which the feedback is
dependent. Bunnell asserts that the various transaction utilities provided by eBay are the
reason for so many successful transactions, but the functionality of the retail site renders
sellers as agents of the site while obscuring that relationship behind the rating system (62-
4). It is a new service model, whereby business is conducted privately for corporate
profit, with little ethical or legal responsibility for individual transactions. Where there is
an issue with transactions over questionable material—child pornography, racist
materials, human body parts, etc.—eBay is quick to step in and stop the transaction. This
level of executable control, lurking in the background, is what defines the relationships
that are obscured by the auction interface. All this takes place under the rubric of
auctioneering, including bidding, competition, losers, and a winner. This rubric adds to
the obscuring of buyer-seller-retailer relationships, and it provides another opportunity
for data collection as each bid and view is recorded and made public.

Another retailing strategy that has emerged in the consumer electronics industry
takes place under the guise of product customization. Computer retailers like Dell and
Gateway allow customers to customize every computer system they offer. In fact, both
companies advertise this customizable product. Television commercials depict the
horrors of computer sales and buying-off-the-shelf, and customization and build-your-
own computer systems are presented as the answer to the problem. Gateway promises to
build computer systems around a consumer’s needs and lifestyle rather than requiring
each consumer to learn vast amounts of technical information and product jargon. Dell
allows users of its web site to change system configurations to items like hard drives, memory, and peripherals through drop down menus by category. Customized systems can be saved for later retrieval, purchased, or manipulated based upon price and other factors.

Like consumer management or enhanced self-service, strategies of customization appear to give consumers some measure of autonomy and choice in the retail experience. However, the choices are limited and determined in advance by the retailer. They must ultimately serve the retailer's goal of moving a high volume of merchandise, so the choices are limited to those that facilitate the retailer's distribution network. The available choices do not reflect individual consumer values as retailers would have those consumers believe. Most of the components that are offered as different options are made by the same manufacturers—processor chips will be made by Intel or AMD, CD-ROM and DVD-ROM drives will most likely manufactured by Matsushita, monitors will be manufactured by Samsung or will be manufactured for the retailer by a manufacturer that also sells to the retailer's competitor, and so on. The meaningful choices to be made by consumers do not consist of consumer values, per se, but those that have been determined by choosing to sell well. Additionally, like consumer management strategies, consumer choices are collected and used as market research that will determine future product offerings and configurations. Most of the current strategies in retail—represented by big-box stores, e-tailers, rating systems, and customization utilities—function like statistical marketing research and discrete choice analysis, granting
consumers a relatively small amount of choice that is quickly used to determine future markets, retail strategies, and product offerings.

Conclusion and Tactics

The corporate philosophies and missions of mass retailers and big-box specialty stores are dominated by expansive growth. Bunnell cites plans for exponential growth matched with scalability and mass customization as a business model that has determined eBay’s success (93). Best Buy includes “extraordinary growth” as one of three foundational corporate values. Former Amazon.com employee Mike Daisy discusses the companies aggressive position on growth, creating ad hoc patches to problems as they presented themselves and “scaling” solutions that would continue to work as their customer base doubled and tripled. In *21 Dog Years*, he describes a corporate philosophy built upon an “infinite customer base” (140). While these mass retailers utilize appeals to consumer self-service and informed, rational choice, these turn out to be very carefully managed and negotiated by the retailer well in advance of any transactions. The independent actions of consumers are recorded and collected as market research for future product development. There is little more than minimal attention paid to customer service or quality of experience as enhanced self-service floods the store and Internet with information that must be deciphered, valued, measured and compared by consumers. In effect, this flood of information accomplishes two things simultaneously: it obscures consumer choice through its overwhelming vastness while narrowing product offerings according to predicted buying patterns.
Despite such effective smoke and mirror marketing strategies however, consumers and consumer advocates are finding ways to enact change within the system of mass retail and consumerism. Theirs are the tactics that undermine the strategies of big-box retail. Some of these include building consumer-voiced websites like “Bestbuysux.org” (www.bestbuysux.org) and “The Big Box Home Page” (www.big-box.com), both of which present consumers with a multiplicity of perspectives and positions on big-box retail. Consumers are also finding ways to support local retailers and businesses by engaging in urban pedestrian shopping instead of frequenting automobile-friendly superstores and lobbying local city-planning and development advocacy groups. Consumers may also employ a host of critical and resistant approaches to engaging with big box retailers and e-tailers directly, including:

- talking to as many store employees as possible even in a well-designed big-box location;
- looking beyond product placement in superstore aisles and choosing products manufactured locally or generically;
- avoiding kiosks and talking with people;
- shopping randomly and avoiding predictable browsing patterns;
- taking retailer recommendations only as a last resort;
- finding out what products salespeople and current users prefer rather than taking the retailer’s promotional suggestions;
- building a computer from components rather than customizing a brand name;
• frequenting yard sales and community thrift stores instead of on-line auction services;

• refusing surveys or product questionnaires that allow retailers to predict your buying behavior and decision-making processes.

In short, refusing to be a predictable, efficient consumer offers the best chances for personal service and rejecting the growth patterns demonstrated by mass retailers. These are tactics, though, and still demonstrate a certain complicity in the strategies of the culture industry. Even erratic consumer behavior will likely be explained and incorporated into retail strategies. For example, little consumer behavior lies outside of the purview of Amazon.com as it tracks consumers navigating its inventory of thousands of products from computers and mobile phones to jewelry and cookware.

Such tracking offers retailers and manufacturers the ability to predict consumer behavior and to make necessary changes in their distribution of products. While these strategies are not inherently predatory or "nefarious," they do instruct consumers—in the various ways that I described throughout this chapter—in the techniques of mass consumerism using recycled consumer values to do so. The next chapter looks closely at the development of wireless networking technologies in the United States to evaluate how consumer choice, choosing, and retail strategies determine products and product features. Operating essentially as a continual feedback loop, strategies of marketing, advertising, and retail provide everyone involved in the distribution of commodities with valuable information about what consumers will buy and why.
Notes

1 I call this an ersatz customizability because the increased variety in products—color options for video game consoles and controllers, amounts of memory for new computers, or range of brand names that each sell cordless telephones in the 2.4 GHz frequency range—continue to be predetermined and manipulated based upon what market researchers have determined will sell (or not sell) in the specific retail location in question. Moreover, these choices in customization represent superficial differences in product appearance and do not represent substantial differences in product functionality or use. Adorno and Horkheimer discuss this manipulation, albeit in terms of popular entertainment, noting that “not only are the hit songs, stars, and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself is derived from them and only appears to change. The details are interchangeable” (125). Thus, while choice may be overwhelming, it is rarely substantive.

2 The situation presented by an abundance of unfiltered information holds a special place with choice within the ideologies of U.S. consumer freedom. It is precisely the foundational concepts of freedom—access to information and choice—that bind consumers to the very system that they are supposed to transform.

3 The industry term—commoditization—transforms the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism to suggest that products have value (exchange value) in addition to labor practices or technological content. The industry terminology constructs high-tech
products as "commodities" only after they cross an invisible threshold into cheap and ubiquitous use. This conflation of use and production will be discussed later in the chapter, suffice it to say here that marketing and retail strategies in the consumer electronics industry operate in such a way as to completely divorce products from their histories of production. This strategy which is often referred to as the alienation of labor obscures the processes of production in order to create products which are easier to market and sell to a mass audience.

4 Wired magazine’s editor-in-chief, Chris Anderson, locates four “collisions” that occur when a product moves from “innovative” to “ubiquitous.” These include: critical price, the moment when a product becomes affordable to mainstream consumers; critical mass, when most consumers know someone who has the product; displacement, the “collision” between a rising technology and one on the decline (currently this is evidenced by flat screen and CRT monitors or broadband Internet access and dial-up service providers); and zero cost, when the retail cost of the product becomes cheap enough for nearly universal access (when DVD players hit $39.00 at Wal-Mart). See Anderson’s “A Crash Course in Innovation: The Four Collisions that Make a Breakthrough Technology.”

5 In the following three sections (“Big-Box Consumer Electronics,” “Consumer Management,” and “Empowering Consumption”), I discuss two different types of images—advertising photographs and screenshots—that are meant to illustrate the signifying practices of big-box retailers and e-tailers. While each of these images is
visually complex from a rhetorical perspective (the lines and motion in the Best Buy store front ad suggest a “funneling” of consumers into and not out of the massive warehouse, for example) my intention in using these images is to provide evidence of the particular practices discussed in those sections rather than to provide a close reading of the images themselves.

6 The remaining 45.4% comes from a variety of “other” retailers that do not specialize in consumer electronics, for example, home improvement stores and drug stores.

7 An e-tailer is an electronic retailer making some or all of its merchandise available for purchase over the Internet.

8 This trend is certainly supported by similar developments in other retail venues: department stores, mail-order catalogs, and e-tailers. These developments culminate in the big-box store design and convergence of physical retail locations with digital inventory control systems that control vast numbers of products sold regionally and over the Internet.

9 Retail distribution networks exert enormous influence over the production and consumption of commodities. For example, if Hewlett-Packard (hp) does not manufacture enough units to meet its commitments to BestBuy, then BestBuy will put Sony Vaios in their place. Best Buy must always generate interest in whatever products it has been able to secure for distribution. This offers another level of obscured consumer choice.
Chapter 4: A Tactical Reading of Mobile Technologies

Introduction

Wi-fi, or wireless networking technology, facilitates computer networks and Internet access via radio waves rather than through cables. Wi-fi users are those who have setup wireless networks in their homes or workplaces, and—by inserting a small card into their mobile computers or by virtue of having a built-in wi-fi component—they can connect to wireless access points wherever they exist. Many airports, hotels, and coffee shops are beginning to include these access points in their list of services; it is sometimes free but many times is not. Wi-fi is related to the technology in mobile telephones, which also use radio waves to transmit data. This data used to be voice only, but now can also include images, text, software, and streaming video. Each generation of wireless technology has seen improvements in throughput and compression, meaning that more and more data may be transmitted at higher and higher speeds. Wireless technologies are currently entering into the third generation (3G), but proponents of 4G are already predicting standardized transfer protocols that will soon make wireless technology nearly ubiquitous across technology platforms (cf. Anderson 2003; Brans, Lightman and Rojas; Steinbock). Personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, computers, and computer peripherals will share access to wireless networks at the same high rates of data transfer while enjoying “always on” connectivity. Such promises have current telecommunications giants scrambling for alternatives to landline-based communication technologies. New paradigms of the “mobile worker,” the “mobile workplace,” and even the “mobile shopper” are being conceived and articulated under metaphors of increased
access and efficiency and decreased downtime (cf. Brans, Easton, or Hogan). In this way, wi-fi drives the wireless industry by casting current wireless technologies and possibilities under the metaphor of mobility. Mobility means untethering such technologies from wires, from land-lines, from government licensing, and from telecommunications giants; all of this while promising the eventual convergence of wireless technologies—cordless telephones, mobile (cellular) phones, laptop computers, PDAs, digital cameras, and so on—under one communications protocol. Wi-fi standards already operate at the same frequencies as cordless telephones and mobile phones.

This chapter will investigate the dominant rhetorical appeals that play a crucial role in the development and deployment of wireless networking technology, including "convenience" and "mobility." At the same time, complicated security measures (encryption, virtual personal networks, and firewalls), FCC regulations (bandwidth, frequency, and sensitivity considerations), and corporate policy work against such promises and privilege privacy and security over mobility or convenience. This contradiction characterizes well the deployment of wi-fi in the United States, and provides an excellent opportunity for studying how consumer electronics are developed, sold, and used in this country.

The Rhetoric of Wi-fi Technology

Key Terms and Definitions

Wi-fi represents a host of wireless networking technologies that allow users access to computer networks and the Internet using radio waves instead of cables. The typical setup consists of a wireless router the size of a paperback book, and a small antenna,
which broadcasts an Internet broadband connection or computer network connection according to one or more wi-fi standards: 802.11b, 802.11a, or 802.11g. The signal is received by tiny antennas that may be purchased for most computers, printers, and other peripherals, and which are now built into most laptop computers and wi-fi enabled personal digital assistants (PDAs). Once these pieces of hardware are properly installed, wi-fi users can connect to and use a wide range of computer appliances throughout their home or office.¹

The emergence of broadband Internet access predates and facilitates the mass marketing of wi-fi. These fast and relatively cheap connections to the Internet have made it easier for two or more computers to share an access point. Telecommunications companies and cable television service providers have been quick to accommodate Internet users who wanted faster-than-dialup connections. Gerald Faulhaber argues that high quality, digital cable television service, itself a response to digital satellite services, brought along cheap, broadband access to the Internet as a happy consequence (231-3).

Telephone companies, which facilitated the bulk of dial-up service connections over their lines, responded with their own digital service: digital subscriber lines (DSL). The rapid deployment of broadband service has allowed for relatively cheap, fast access to the Internet. In April 2004, John Horrigan of the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that as many as “55% of adult Internet users—or 34% of all adult Americans—have access to high-speed Internet connections either at home or on the job” (“Broadband Penetration” 1). The same report demonstrates a connection between those with
broadband connections and those who have networked their computers and those who have connected to the Internet via wireless devices:

Broadband users are far more likely than dial-up users to log on using a wireless device; 28% of broadband users have at one time done this versus 9% of dial-up users. One the average day, 11% of broadband users go online with a wireless device while 3% of dial-up users do. Broadband users also take advantage of high-speed to network their computers at home. One-third (34%) of broadband users have done this, with 21% hard wiring with cables and 13% doing it wirelessly. Just 6% of dial-up users have networked their computers at home. ("Broadband Penetration" 9)

In another Pew report, Horrigan observes that 28% of Americans are equipped with wireless devices which they can use to browse the Internet or check their e-mail ("28%" 1).

Wi-fi standards have been set by the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) and refer to the frequency and bandwidth at which data is transmitted. The first wireless networking protocol was 802.11b. It operates on the 2.4-GHz frequency (the same as many cordless telephones) by sending packets of information at a transmission rate (bandwidth) of about 11 Megabits per second (Mbps). A Megabit is about one million of the smallest binary units, eight of which make up a letter in the alphabet. The 802.11a standard was the second wi-fi protocol that operates at a higher, less congested frequency: 5-GHz to 6-GHz. It compresses data packets for a faster through-put—about 54 Mbps—almost 5 times faster than 802.11b. It is incompatible
with 802.11b and 802.11g protocols, making it far less popular than either its precursor (b) or the current industry standard (g). The newest iteration of wi-fi standards—802.11g—is backwards-compatible with the 802.11b protocol and offers speeds up to five times faster (55 Mbps) at the same frequency, 2.4-GHz. The reason for setting the frequency standards at either the 2.4-GHz or 5-GHz range is important, and it is what has spurred a great deal of hope for deregulation of communications technologies and the dismantling of the telecommunications giants.

Wi-fi Hype

The frequencies on which wi-fi operates are currently unregulated by the United States government and corporate enterprise. For this reason, wi-fi is often touted as a grassroots revolution in computer networking and communications technology. Chris Anderson, *Wired* magazine's editor in chief, for example, argues that wi-fi is opening up new, open spectrum technologies that operate at unrestricted radio frequencies. These frequencies do not require government regulation or telephone company-owned transmission rights:

> What's extraordinary about this boom is that it's an authentic grassroots phenomenon, happening in the home even faster than in the office. Companies are cautious about the security implications of a network that goes through walls and into the street, but most home users are too dazzled to care. Anyone with a broadband connection can plug a $100 access point into a cable modem or DSL box, slip a $60 card into a laptop, and suddenly have the most fabled of tech ambitions: Internet everywhere, or at least everywhere around the house. (9)
The revolution, according to Anderson and other wi-fi proponents, is that such connectivity is available without massive investments in communications infrastructures resulting in corporate ownership or government regulation.

In *Wireless: Strategically Liberalizing the Telecommunications Market*, telecommunications consultant Brian Regli argues that wireless communications and computing technologies offer a new paradigm of innovation and competition, one that challenges existing centralized economic and political institutions in favor of decentralization and deregulation. Sustainable development in the telecommunications industry will be enacted, Regli argues, through new types of competition:

What we are looking for, then, is not just any type of competition, but competition that meets the goals and objectives outlined [by the strategic liberalization of the telecommunications industry]: increased penetration of services, enhanced levels of political and economic participation from customers, and a strong partnership between public and private institutions that participate in the [industry]. (73)

Lest Regli’s use of the term “strategic liberalization” be misunderstood as denoting a democratic and free space for human-to-human communication, he carefully confines the phrase to mean increased competition in a deregulated marketplace. The political regulation of wireless access comes most frequently in the form of what Regli calls “frequency management” or the distribution of licenses by the government for utilizing technologies that operate within certain frequencies (80). Such management stifles technical innovation, argues Regli, by limiting the number of manufacturers and products
and by demanding universal access to the frequency range across manufacturing and product platforms. Regli's decentralized model of telecommunications policy draws upon the model of wireless access utilized by wi-fi technologies: a communications infrastructure is built node by node, connection by connection rather than relying upon an existing centralized model that is slow to react to change and innovation.

Even if the telecommunications giants have been slow to react to innovation in networking and wireless technologies, consumer electronics manufacturers have been quick to take notice of this new communications architecture. Intel has launched its Centrino technology (discussed in Chapter 1), and several wi-fi manufacturers offer cards for use in any computer. Many PDAs come equipped to connect to wi-fi networks or can be made so with an additional piece of hardware. Mobile phones that can capture, send, and receive images and streaming video as well as connect to the Internet are available from several manufacturers and distributors. Digital cameras, printers, and input devices like keyboards and mice are all available with wireless connectivity. Wireless television—digital quality television that is broadcast to any television in a home from an outlet—will be made available to mainstream consumers in early 2005. In Brave New Unwired World, Alex Lightman and William Rojas argue that the proliferation of wireless products will render the technology of the Internet ubiquitous, just as radio wave technology has disappeared behind televisions and radios: "The Internet will be brought to a new audience, becoming a ubiquitous phenomenon, and the mobile handset will assume a much greater role in our lives. . . . Over the next decade we expect that a new industry focused on mobility and the Internet will emerge" (75). However, such product
development does not represent new methods of production, marketing, or distribution. As the Australian magazine, *The Financial Review*, reports, the consumer electronics industry has moved quickly to begin establishing brand name stability in an emerging market: "They're not even a month old, but already the wireless-networking industry's efforts to establish an easy-to-understand, readily recognisable [sic] brand for wi-fi hotspots appear to have been swamped by an irresistible force: the massive, multimillion-dollar Intel campaign to make its new brand, Centrino, the new name in portable, wireless computers" (Davidson). The problem with such a development is that Intel appears to dominate the entire wi-fi industry by placing its own brand above the product. This is nothing new, of course, since many brands have become synonymous with the products they sell: Kleenex as opposed to facial tissue, Band-aids as opposed to bandages, TiVo as opposed to digital video recorders, etc. The problem is due to the early dominance of the relatively nascent industry. The wi-fi industry’s advocacy group, the Wi-Fi Alliance, has had a difficult time of publicly differentiating between wi-fi technology generally and Centrino technology specifically.

Even if wi-fi and wireless technologies are ushering in a new era of decentralized communications, these same technologies are being marketed, distributed, and consumed under the relatively old system of mass consumerism that is proving to be quite adaptable to innovations in communications technologies. The realities of mass marketing—marketing to millions of people through a unified, singular message—and choice—the art of predicting and manipulating consumer choice—threatens to transform the wi-fi revolution into just another marketing buzzword.
Wi-fi Reality

There are very few places in the United States where an owner of a laptop computer equipped with wi-fi technology can simply walk out of the office and legally connect to a wireless access point without paying additional fees. While the consumer electronics industry has been working to develop wireless networking technology, the very same industry has been working to establish security protocols that prevent unwanted users from connecting to wi-fi "hotspots," opting instead to secure companies' ability to charge users for each connection. Hotel chains, coffee shops, and airports are beginning to host public wireless access points, but these establishments are few and far between.

Additionally, these establishments often struggle with the decision whether or not to charge users for this service or to offer it freely as an enticement for high-tech consumers. In "No 'Wows' Over Starbucks Wireless" Elisa Batista describes reactions to the coffee mega-chain's decision to include a pay-per-use wi-fi service in 70% of its stores. The decision is a controversial one since "self-proclaimed wireless geeks wondered aloud why anyone would pay $50 a month -- the fee for one of the plans Starbucks customers could purchase from T-Mobile to use the service -- when wireless Internet access is readily available for free" (Batista). Customers could also choose a pay-per-use plan that would cost "$3 for the first 15 minutes of surfing the Web and 25 cents for each additional minute of use" (Batista). Most industry analysts, reports Batista, wondered if Starbucks' wi-fi service could turn a profit after the enormous expenses of equipping and maintaining an enormous wi-fi infrastructure.
The mobility offered by wireless technologies such as Starbucks’ T-Mobile service or Intel’s Centrino technology is certainly limited. Although hypothetically more mobile, such technologies result in little more than a physical mobility encumbered by subscriptions, additional security measures, and limited venues. At the same time, though, nearly every mainstream notebook computer, PDA, or mobile phone to come out since the development of wi-fi has touted it in its advertising pitch. Those without Intel’s version of mobility advertise other brands of specialized components that similarly enhance mobility. These technologies are marketed—through choosing techniques—as enhancing mobility, security, and entertainment possibilities for workers and for home users. The flurry of activity surrounding government policies for regulating such technologies have little to do with open spectrum technologies or with consumer rights. Rather, consumer rights are assumed to be protected by market competition, an assumption that I challenge in the next two sections.

Policing Wi-fi

Chris Fisher summarizes the industry’s position on government regulation in his trade journal report, “New Tech Key in Wireless Recovery:”

[A] key event took place in February when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved unlicensed spectrum for commercial ultra-wideband use. Ultra-wideband is a relatively new technology that simultaneously delivers high data rate, low power and low cost wireless with "wire-like" video quality. Opening up this free spectrum gives technology companies many more options in developing wireless connectivity solutions and, in turn, gives consumer electronics companies more options to create differentiating features for their products. Adding wireless functionality at a low cost to a variety of consumer electronics products will continue to be an enabling capability for expanding the home wireless connectivity market. This in turn will continue to help drive the technology industry toward a broader recovery. (16)
This is the "trickle-down" theory of consumerism. The logic is that greater options for consumer electronics companies will mean greater choice for consumers. Consumer choice will in turn drive the industry. But it is important to note that the consumer is not mentioned in Fisher's view of a deregulated ultra-wideband spectrum. Such a claim that ignores the consumer, the supposed instigator and regulator of the industry, is indicative of high-level discussions of products, product offerings, and regulation. The industry drives itself, consumers are assumed to openly accept and readily buy any technologies that are offered to them.

And in the policy hearings on broadband mergers and high-speed Internet access, consumer choice seems to be confused with "competition" in a very general, corporate sense. In the 2001 United States Senate Judiciary hearings on the AOL/Time Warner merger, Senator Orrin Hatch argued that:

> Competition is essential to both the future of the Internet and continued innovation in the high-technology world. It is competition that has created a robust Internet economy and its constituent enhanced services that we are enjoying today. . . . Today's hearing is really about the next chapter in the development of technologies that will liberate individual consumers to seek and obtain content. High-capacity Internet promises to allow anyone, regardless of wealth or market power or viewpoint, to deliver his or her perspective for the world to see and hear. (1)

In a responding statement, Senator Patrick Leahy characterizes the nature of the committee's concern over competition, and it appears to boil down to consumer choice:

> The thing we do worry about is whether the consequences of this merger will be that consumers will see their choices of Internet service providers dwindle and their viewing and listening choices over high-speed cable
lines limited or directed just toward AOL or Time Warner’s favorite content. (4)

But at one point in the hearing, representatives from America On-Line (AOL), a popular Internet service provider, are questioned about consumer’s complaints. Consumers complained that installing AOL’s operating software would erase any other Internet service providers that may have been previously installed on their computers. This erasure, complainants charged, is not announced by the software installation program. The representatives from AOL respond that,

We do tell people what we are doing. We are [erasing records of other service providers] because it is better for consumers, and indeed for 95 percent of our members they only use AOL. They don’t use other Internet service providers, so this isn’t even an issue. It is only an issue for the 5 percent or so that have multiple ISP’s and they have the choice about whether they want AOL to be the default ISP. (49-50)

Again, consumer choice appears to be a highly manipulated concept. In terms of AOL’s obscuring their own customers’ possible choices of other Internet service providers, this choice is controlled and masked by technical language (for example, “default ISP”) for a high percentage of the consumer population. Since a majority of Internet and AOL users might not know what an ISP is in the first place, their choice is obscured immediately. The spirit of competition so broadly conceived in the senators’ opening remarks is obscured in the end by a simple question of “default settings” upon installing software. The answer to Senator Leahy’s question is not a matter of AOL or Time Warner’s
favorite content, but the content that is dictated by market forces. In the end, market
forces seem eerily equivalent to the favorite content of service providers, since they often
determine the content and the conditions under which the content is accessed by average
consumers. Until recently, AOL maintained its own interface and information retrieval
system that left many users thinking that AOL owned much of the content it filtered
directly from the Internet. The Microsoft Network (MSN) has a similar browser, and it
sets up its own Internet web site, search engine, and news service on users’ browsers as a
default. These techniques work similarly to cable television providers who determine
which channels of programming will be available to customers, how it will be accessed
(included in “basic” service, part of a “premium” subscription, or a “pay-per-view”
event), and when. Of course, advanced users can change various default settings, but
these changes are obscured by “default” or “recommended” options upon installing the
software or initiating service. The result is that subscribers of Comcast high-speed
Internet access will use services selected for them by Comcast more than they might
other, competing services. Users of MSN Internet access will likely use news content,
advertisements, and offers made by Microsoft more often than they might had they
subscribed through a different service provider.

In Senator Hatch’s opening statements on the Senate Judiciary Committee’s 1999
hearings on broadband competition and consumer choice, he again appears to conflate
corporate competition with consumer choice:

As we move ahead with the deregulations of the 1996 Act, timely
enforcement of antitrust laws, as established through sound legal and
economic principles, will become even more important in ensuring a competitive marketplace. As I have said before, proper enforcement of antitrust laws today will and should avoid heavy-handed regulation of the Internet tomorrow. That is what we are here to examine today—the status of competition in the high-speed service and technology markets. (2)

As long as companies are competing to provide consumers with choice of products and services, then the U.S. Senate sees consumer choice as safe and the deregulation of telecommunications giants as acceptable. In his response to the question of deregulating control of the communications industry, chairman and chief executive officer of AT&T, C. Michael Armstrong argues: “there is no basis for government intervention in any of these areas: the market should make the choice, competition should spur development and customers will determine what they want” (11). Again, “market forces” are protected prior to consumer choice, which is assumed to naturally follow the market trends.

In a report to the U.S. Senate titled, *Technological and Regulatory Factors Affecting Consumer Choice of Internet Providers*, members of the General Accounting Office describe the regulatory power of the government over wireless communications in the following way: “[The] FCC governs wireless providers in two principal ways: control over the allocation of spectrum to service providers and control over what types of services may be transmitted over certain spectrum bands” (47). Deregulation is equivalent to letting market forces control what types of services are transmitted over
these spectrum bands. Ultimately, service providers control the content over certain wavelengths:

Opponents of open access—those who believe that market forces should determine how the cable industry structures cable modem services—are also split in their views on the applicable definition for cable modem service. Many cable operators view cable modem service as a “cable service” in which they exercise considerable control over choice of content, as with video programming. AT&T has stated that cable operators purchase rights to programming (or produce it themselves) and then sell that programming to subscribers, whether the programming “is CNN, HBO, or an interactive online cable service that includes Internet access.” (55 qtd. material is by AT&T and MediaOne Group in a lawsuit filed in September of 1999)

In short, those who believe that market forces should control communications infrastructures and wi-fi networks are not advocating open access to information at the consumer level. Rather they are advocating for corporate control over access and information, a control that is handed down to consumers through techniques of choosing. “Competition,” in regulatory terms, means nothing more than several companies providing the same service and the same content—wireless Internet access for example—through the same technologies. Since the frequencies are regulated by the federal government, they are by definition the same. Since the components of each system operate in identical ways over the same frequencies, they are essentially the same. Deregulated or market-controlled, the wi-fi consumer is left with little choice.

Because the government has deregulated and licensed only these frequencies (specifically 2-3GHz and 5-6GHz ranges), potentially competing manufacturers of wi-fi technologies are producing essentially the same technologies. A wi-fi access point or wireless router made by one manufacturer will work with another manufacturer’s
wireless laptop card or with Intel’s Centrino technology. While this might appear
liberating at first, offering a number of technologies that interoperate with one another,
this exact sameness actually limits consumer choice to market factors such as marketing,
choosing, brand name preference, and retail distribution rather than the ability to make a
selection based upon some qualitative difference in the technologies themselves. In this
way, even the liberation of open spectrum technologies, the IEEE’s established
communications protocols, and government deregulation of wireless radio frequencies
has made the mass marketing of wi-fi the single determiner of consumer choice.

Choosing Wi-Fi

Robin Mansell and W. Edward Steinmueller are critical of the ways mobile technologies
have been deployed so as to obscure consumer choice. In Mobilizing the Information
Society: Strategies for Growth and Opportunity, they present the argument that increased
market competition rarely means increased choice for the individual consumer. Current
service providers are working under what Mansell and Steinmueller call “broadcast”
models, in which “clear and simple choices are made for users.” This model “avoids
confronting [users] with the complexity of Internet access alternatives” (195). The
complexity of alternatives is never addressed in the competitive environment of the
marketplace, since “market forces”—namely corporate interests, patent holders, and
government regulations—predetermine the simple choices in the first place. Mansell and
Steinmueller argue that such complex choices are the products of deliberative processes
that take place outside the marketplace and with little regard for consumer preferences:
The determination of technical compatibility standards, the regulatory interpretation of interconnection obligations, the use of hardware identification for copyright protection, and the governance of electronic payment systems, are all instances in which the technological outcomes are a reflection of deliberations that have led to public or private choices between competing technologies or to the rules that will make particular technologies and services viable. (454)

In terms of wi-fi technologies, this represents a level of regulatory control that exists between the government that licenses and distributes spectrum technologies and the major corporations that operate on those frequencies in turn. These negotiations about compatibility, universal access or interoperability, hardware requirements, and subscriptions all take place well before a consumer is ever offered a choice. For example, cable operators made the cable box a required technology for subscribers who wished to view special programming. Those same companies charged a premium price for the rental of these boxes, until the government stepped in and stopped the practice.

In choosing wi-fi, the manufacturers and marketers of wi-fi products use a plethora of rhetorical appeals aimed at providing consumers with perceived agency. These can be collected under three general categories:

- Mobility, the notion that wi-fi products will enable network connectivity without physical connections. A brief glance at product packaging will indicate values of mobility portrayed by the manufacturer: speed, ease of set-up and use, freedom, compatibility with existing systems, freedom, sharing, etc.
• Security, the strategy of protecting a network connection from computer hackers, identity thieves, child predators, and even terrorists.

• Entertainment, the catch-all for technologies that are not specifically geared toward practical uses and the notion that having the Internet available to users on an anytime, anywhere basis will “organize” leisure time.

Each of these rhetorical appeals plays a part in defining and replicating the culture of consumerism by appealing to values that each consumer is assumed to hold.

Mobility: Building a New Consumer Base and Workforce

Mobility, and similar concepts that indicate a freedom to move about a certain space while using a technology, is the primary appeal used by wi-fi marketing. Advertisements that appeal to mobility will picture workers being productive outside of the dreary cubicle setting, people maintaining communications with one another in settings where such

III. 4.1: An IBM ThinkPad/Intel Centrino advertising billboard that promotes individual employee productivity as an appeal for industry-wide wi-fi deployment.
communication is not typically possible (e-mail in airports, business meetings in parks, etc.), and friends enjoying the benefits of the Internet from comfortable coffee-house couches. Individual mobility is an appeal that is emphasized; however, the primary appeal to mobility is to employers who are seeking greater productivity from their workers.

Marketers promise employers increased work time from their employees—especially those who travel—and greater compatibility between current communications infrastructures and wi-fi networks. In “Why Wi-fi?” technology reporter Mike Hogan outlines the future of wi-fi in the workplace: “Wi-Fi—or 802.11b—is just now starting to penetrate the workplace. But it promises to bring us our product databases and price lists, maps, video-conferences, training clips, CEO pep talks and a lot more—anywhere, any time” (Hogan). The reason for the recent surge in wi-fi technologies is not necessarily just about increased productivity; however. Hogan reports, “Wireless networks have been around for years but have never really caught on. Part of the problem was their sub-2Mbps transfer speeds. More than that [...] there has never been the kind of marketing push and distribution infrastructures—not to mention technical support—that are behind wi-fi today” (Hogan). Essentially, marketing and distribution have made sure that many employers are aware of the promising potential of wi-fi as a part of their business and network infrastructures.

Intel Corporation cites “studies” that prove wireless technologies aid employee productivity:

With Intel Centrino mobile technology, you can give employees the freedom to work wherever it's convenient, increasing collaboration and
job satisfaction. As the number of public hotspots in airports, hotels, conference centers, and coffee shops grows, the productivity benefits extend well beyond the office. Coupled with a wireless LAN solution, your company reaps the benefits of reduced infrastructure costs, along with greater adaptability and expandability as business needs change over time. . . . In a recent study, Intel IT found that workers who used wireless notebook PCs with Intel Centrino mobile technology gained more than two hours per week of extra productivity. Those gains more than paid for the cost of the notebook upgrades in the first year of deployment. ("Increase")

This marketing technique exploits an employer’s familiarity with cost/benefit analyses to warrant the initial expense of deploying wi-fi technology. Increased productivity is explained by convenience, collaboration, and satisfaction, as if workers were looking for an excuse to work from home, during travel, or at the kids’ soccer game. One of the key elements behind the deployment of wi-fi technologies in the workplace is fostering the illusion that work is not work, especially if it does not take place in traditional “workplace” settings. Rather, work encroaches on all other aspects of life. Adorno and Horkheimer critique this conflation of work and social life as “occupying men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day” (131). In the IBM Thinkpad advertisement pictured above, technology—not work or employers—constrains workers and limits productivity (see Fig. 4.1). The ad promises that greater productivity and success can be achieved easily by simply “unwiring” oneself from the workplace which in essence means that the workplace expands to fill every aspect of workers’ lives. These appeals to mobility in the workplace—whether targeted at employers or employees—promote a wide-scale adoption of wi-fi technologies at the cost of obscuring the boundaries between the
workplace and leisure spaces. Without such adoption and development across the business and industrial sectors, wi-fi mobility will not be able to flourish.

Patrick Brans discusses the promises of wi-fi in terms of its current realities. In *Mobilize your Enterprise*, he discusses strategies for employers who wish to utilize wi-fi to create a more efficient workforce that is “always-on.” He argues, “because there is a need to mobilize an enterprise, and because this is now possible, we can be sure that within five years most companies will equip a large part of their workforce with small, wirelessly enabled devices that will allow employees to read and update critical enterprise data” (18). Such a prediction is problematic, though, especially in the United States which has deployed several standards of wireless networking protocols. This means that a mobile phone on one network will not necessarily work on another and a subscription to one wi-fi service provider will not give employees universal access:

[Y]ou cannot expect widescale availability. First of all, market penetration is still low. Second, if you subscribe to a service using one network provider, you cannot access the services of another. For the time being, you will have to plot out the likely paths of your mobile employees and subscribe to access at strategic points along the way. (143).

Still though, he portrays wi-fi as the “magic” solution for recording every employee transaction, every conversation, and every idea, thereby closing the gaps in communications between employees and enterprise solutions. A wireless, mobile employee will be constantly connected to updated company resources and clients, and every contact will be recorded by the very servers that facilitate those connections (62-3).
Here, mobility means greater tracking and efficiency for employers quite likely at the cost of employees’ leisure time.

Outside of workplace connotations of mobility, advertising and market demographics present a similarly limited view of mobility. Nokia, a leader in wireless technologies particularly noteworthy for its distributed models of research and infrastructure, has an extremely restricted view of its users. In *Beyond Mobile*, Lindgren, Jedbratt, and Svensson present Nokia’s conceptualizations of wireless possibilities as oddly limited: “Nokia sees three primary customer groups in the corporate segment and others make the same assessment. These are: *sales-driven organizations*, *service-driven organizations*, and *logistics-driven organizations*” (118). Constant communication with company databases, resources, or personnel are emphasized in each type of organization. Furthermore, Nokia sees its consumer base as consisting of three groups: “*teens* (up to 18), *students* (19-25), [and] *young professionals*” who demonstrate only “slightly different needs” (118). Such market characterizations, coupled with the mass marketing strategies similar to the consumer management techniques that I discuss in Chapter 3, lead Lindgren, Jedbratt, and Svensson to predict mobile advertising that will be broadcast to the wi-fi user based upon his or her location. They call this “micro-geographical marketing” (125-7). At the grocery store, cereal advertisements might pop up on a user’s PDA. While shopping at the mall, a user might get an email with a coupon attached for a discount at the store he or she frequents often. In Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of the Philip K. Dick short story, *Minority Report*, this prediction takes the form of advertisements that change to accommodate the consumers who pass by.
Billboards ask the main character if he enjoyed his most recent purchase of some product, and they adapt their images to the character's likely interests based upon sex, age, race, and occupation.

These views of mobility are problematical at best, and offer more in terms of tracking employees' communications or consumer behaviors than they do consumer freedom or universal access to wi-fi networks. The hype surrounding the revolutionary potential of wi-fi technologies—open spectrum frequencies, decreased government regulation, and increased access to information—is quickly overshadowed by the realities under which wi-fi is currently being deployed—increased tracking by marketers and employers, greater systemic efficiencies at the cost of individual workers' leisure, and new metaphors of mobility and distribution that signify complicity in the system of mass consumerism and industry-wide adoption. The extent to which this new, mobile reality is entrenched in corporate interests and consumerism can be seen with respect to another prominent appeal: security and network protection.

Selling Security: Wi-fi and the Political Economy of Fear

The packaging of D-Link's DI-614+ wi-fi router claims that the primary purpose of such a technology is to "Protect and Share" a connection to the Internet (see Fig. 4.2). In fact, on the front of the box alone, there are four separate appeals to security: protection, firewall, parental control, and data encryption. The message from such an over-production of security is that there must be something to fear from broadcasting an Internet connection or from "sharing" one's Internet connection. In The Culture of Fear, Barry Glassner points out that the Internet is often touted by mainstream press as a "city
without cops,” or a safe haven for child pornographers and pedophiles (34-35). Citing two widely publicized cases of possible electronic abduction that were “considerably more ambiguous than they seem[ed] on first hearing,” Glassner concludes that “It is poor children—few of whom have America Online connections—who are disproportionately abused, and it is children’s own homes and those of close relatives that sexual abuse commonly occurs” (35). Overblown media coverage of sexual predators that operate through electronic means and product features such as “parental controls” prey on the fears of consumers and create the illusion that these features will protect children. Statistically speaking, though, children have more to fear at home than they do in a Pokemon chat room.

Glassner’s book refers to what Catherine Chaput has called a “political economy of fear.” Manifested in reality television shows, disproportionate media coverage of
violence and criminal behavior, planned and guard gated communities, and consumerism (scenes at shopping centers hours before a hurricane, for example), fear produces very tangible results for marketers and television networks. Justified by greater ratings for stories and images that depict violence, psychopathic behavior, or tragedy, television shows like Cops and America's Most Wanted and even nightly news coverage of events like the Rodney King beating present a much skewed image of U.S. culture, portraying poor people and minorities as violent drug addicts with nothing to lose. John Fiske argues that a constant barrage of these images has produced an "enclave society" in which people sequester themselves in their homes and communities in fear (242).

Another result of this sequestered and fear-induced state is an increased tolerance for surveillance at any level. Chauput and Fiske both point to increased surveillance techniques as a source and a product of the political economy of fear as more and more behavior is tracked and broadcast. This in turn justifies the use of more and greater surveillance techniques. In Weapons of Mass Deception, Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber link the perpetuation of fear in mainstream U.S. culture to increased consumerism. They point to the commercialization of military hardware like the Humvee army vehicle into a high-end, all-terrain vehicle or the marketing of SUVs as "urban assault luxury vehicles" that protect consumers from the dangers inherent to driving as indicative of marketers' predilection to take advantage of consumers' fears (135). In his documentary Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore interviews shock-rocker Marilyn Manson who argues for a connection between product advertising and the fear incited by even the nightly news. Ours is certainly a society that is forced to deal with fear on a
daily basis. But in the days following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, when the entire country seemed gripped with fear and grief, President Bush urged citizens to do their “patriotic duty” and to shop. Such a suggestion provides a concrete link between fear that is incited by mass media coverage of world events and consumerism. Worried about the potential downfall of the economy, President Bush gave citizens a strategy for combating their worst fears: buying things.

Similarly, wi-fi products are marketed through metaphors of security, protection, and seclusion. Well before the 2001 terrorist attacks, Charles Mason argued that “the future growth of wireless data will revolve in large part around penetrating the mass market. Part of this growth will be driven by security concerns. As the cellular industry has found, many customers have been attracted to wireless voice services due to security concerns” (72). By this, Mason means that customers would want wireless technologies that could “automatically notify authorities of an accident, and guide them to the car; track stolen vehicles; provide navigation assistance to lost drivers; call emergency roadside assistance; and perform remote diagnostics of engine functions” (72). Currently, OnStar wireless communications services provide such features. Sold as a subscription service in many American-made automobiles, OnStar operators are available via hands-free wireless connections. These operators can perform services as mundane as announcing movie times or making dining reservations and as important as tracking down stolen vehicles or directing emergency services to the scene of an accident. It is the “important” tasks that OnStar uses in its advertising campaigns, demonstrating the value of its services to a culture in fear of the dangers of driving.
Fear of identity theft and computer hacking currently drive the wi-fi industry's product security features. Corporate concerns over data and transaction security have led to the development of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and wi-fi encryption that block unwanted users from accessing company networks, even just for a free ride on the Internet. Fears prompted by computer users with "hotspot locators" or wi-fi sniffing devices have prompted the wi-fi industry to offer additional security measures to keep these "predators" off of any bandwidth that might extend beyond the walls of company headquarters. For the individual wi-fi users, reports of identity theft on the news, movies like *The Net* where a character's identity is deleted or stolen irrevocably with a single keystroke, and credit card warnings to protect one's electronic transactions each send a message that consumers must choose wi-fi products that will protect their identities and their information from predators. As seen in the numerous appeals to security on the D-Link product packaging, marketers' appeals encounter these fears and effectively offer to assuage them.

**Entertainment: Home Automation and Remote Control**

Wi-fi television, wi-fi control of home entertainment systems, wi-fi broadcasting of music files and streaming videos from computers, and home automation are among the entertainment options available to wi-fi consumers. These options promise a convergence of entertainment technologies under a single protocol. Using a single computer, a user would be able to listen to favorite music tracks or play a movie downloaded from the Internet on his or her television in any room of the house; he or she could watch a cable or digital television program in any room without the need for a
hardwire connection; and he or she could control the air temperature in any room while ordering groceries which the refrigerator has announced are needed. Additionally, any wi-fi enabled device like a computer or a PDA could serve multiple functions as calendar scheduler, contact list manager, or remote control. These various functions could be tracked and saved for later recovery as “favorites.”

Several innovations in wi-fi products have been developed primarily for entertainment value. That is, they serve interests that are not typically associated with work or productive behavior. Consumer electronics journalist Joseph Palenchar hopes that such developments will spur additional growth in wi-fi sales. In “Enhancements to Aid CE Sales” he writes that an optional 802.11e standard “will support streaming audio and video,” and will “lay the groundwork for consumer electronics companies to offer personal video recorders, residential gateways, mobile web pads, and digital audio and video jukeboxes” (24). For example, many HP computers can now be controlled by remote control, demonstrating a convergence between entertainment and productivity. Intel is working on an interface that treats the computer primarily as a wireless access point for controlling television and music programming (see Gohring). Pocket PCs have optional software that will let them act as a universal remote control for wi-fi or Bluetooth enabled products like CD players, televisions, or DVD players. Bluetooth
enabled mp3 music players can download music files queued from a computer database. The result of all of these innovations, argues market research analyst and consultant Elizabeth Parks, is the development of the computer as the central multimedia platform. She cites as evidence the fact that 40% of computer sales in the last five years have been "media PCs," or computers designed for handling multimedia content ("Entertainment-Centric").

As Lightman and Rojas have argued, such developments would render the interoperability of the required networks and subsequently the Internet ubiquitous and would make tracking consumer preferences and behaviors extremely easy and equally ubiquitous (75). Such ubiquity would aid marketers in choosing new products and services as consumer behavior tracking—advertised as a feature as in the case of saving "favorite" settings—completely invisible and totally efficient. Data could be transferred easily from a consumer's network to the product marketers on a regular basis. This strategy is already employed in many computers that will automatically generate and send reports to the hardware or software manufacturer when errors occur. As Mansell and Steinmueller warn about in terms of "broadcast models" of distribution, such simple choices as whether or not to send a report or whether or not to save one's preferences represent a wide body of negotiation between regulators, product developers, and marketers that are obscured at the level of consumption. As the consumer electronics products that will organize and distribute our "entertainment" and "leisure" through wi-fi are developed, consumers are left with relatively few options for influencing the industry except through the careful surveillance of their individual use.
The most troubling fact about this convergence of entertainment technologies under the wi-fi protocol is the fact that it is done under the name of entertainment. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman argues that entertainment, and primarily television entertainment, is the vehicle through which U.S. culture identifies itself. Because of the pervasiveness of this medium, U.S. citizens see most cultural events through the genre of entertainment, even when these events are serious and their implications may be disastrous. In her review essay, “The Electronic Bribe: Power and Knowledge in the Video Age,” Sue Curry Jansen summarizes Postman’s argument:

Contra conventional genres of mass-culture criticism, Postman does not believe that the intellectual junk food served up in such generous portions by television soaps, game shows, sit-coms, and cartoons is the major damage. Rather, Postman maintains that television is most dangerous when it attempts to be serious: when it presents news, public affairs, and political debates. The real menace is *Sixty Minutes*, not the *A-Team*, because, according to Postman, all attempts to present serious discourse on television must inevitably reduce that discourse to the canons of entertainment. (623)

So when consumer electronics marketers appeal to such blurred concepts as “serious play” or urge consumers to “play hard” and “unwire your life,” they are drawing upon cultural assumptions that are very deeply embedded in the mass audience. These assumptions place entertainment in opposition to work, and suggest that through consumer electronics products work can be entertaining and entertainment must involve work. Several scholars who study the relationship between games and play and culture argue that what consumers may typically consider entertaining actually involves a significant amount of seriousness, work, and learning (cf. Gee, Huizinga, and
McAllister). This learning ranges from basic literacy and skills to cultural behaviors and ideology. As mobile technologies used for work and for play can now facilitate both activities and are not differentiated in their marketing—PDAs, for example, can store and distribute music files as well as appointment calendars, client lists, and personal photos all over wi-fi connections—consumers learn about how their work and play should be organized or managed. The blurring of entertainment and productivity may result in higher employee monitoring and tracking or the expectation on the part of employers that employees will be always accountable to their jobs when equipped with such “always-on” technologies.

Consumer, Wi-Fi, and Mobile Tactics

From policy debates on wi-fi and broadband regulation to market conceptualizations of consumer choice, the deployment of wi-fi technology in the United States is proving to be more influenced by marketing and consumerism than it is a grassroots effort in open spectrum technologies. Certainly, those who stand to gain most from either circumstance are the companies poised to produce and market wi-fi technologies. The consumer stands to gain very little. In fact, the consumer is used by the industry and is instructed on how its products will liberate her from bondage at work, him from his fears of identity theft, or their need to control their leisure time. Such instruction makes the surveillance and controlling techniques of market choicing much more palatable and indeed, a part of the social fabric. Wi-fi simultaneously supports a liberatory and decentralized communications infrastructure while it is bought and sold under the somewhat constraining system of mass marketing and consumerism discussed in Chapter 3. This
perplexing contradiction is what makes technologies so interesting to use and to study from a rhetorical perspective. Both ideologies find incorporation into the products and product features, indicated by the contradictory pitch on the D-Link router box: “Protect and Share Your Internet Connection!”

The fact that wi-fi and wireless technologies are in fairly nascent stages make the strategies that I have described throughout this chapter much more evident and easily critiqued. In order to more fully comply with the liberatory, open spectrum aspects of wi-fi and to resist market demographics and systemic characterizations of consumer behavior, consumers and activists have employed various tactics that complicate choosing and consumer choice. In terms of wi-fi products and uses, these congeal into several categories: consumer tactics, wi-fi tactics, and mobile tactics. Such tactics represent the complexity inherent in the emergence and use of any technology.

Consumer tactics include building consumer-voiced websites that present consumers with a multiplicity of perspectives and positions on wi-fi products and uses beyond the secure home network; paying careful attention to buying wi-fi related products from local, small businesses as opposed to national chains and big-box superstores; and mixing brand names in creating wi-fi networks. Wi-fi tactics are primarily aimed at maintaining wi-fi independence from the telecommunication industry’s control of bandwidth and government regulation of frequencies. They include: sharing broadband connections with neighbors through wi-fi networks; setting up wi-fi hotspots in communities and community centers with little access to the Internet; and obtaining wi-fi broadband Internet access as a primary connection to the Internet, thereby
reducing the need for more traditional, landline-based technologies like cable, DSL, and dial-up services. Mobile tactics are meant to facilitate "smart" use of mobile technologies as opposed to use based upon choicing techniques. They include: resisting the urge to maintain Internet access via multiple technologies (having paid access, for example, at the office, at home, on a mobile phone, and on a Blackberry email terminal or PDA); utilizing free hotspots in airports, hotels, and parks, and restaurants while refusing to pay for hourly or daily service from such locations; and using wi-fi "sniffing" devices to locate free, unsecure wi-fi activity. These tactics resist systemic strategies of mass consumerism and mass marketing by eschewing the simple characterizations of the mass market that seek to articulate all consumer behavior in terms of choosing and prescriptive use, all of which fall under the competitive marketplace image used in discussions of liberating consumer choice.

As I turn now to a discussion of the conclusions and implications of this critique of the consumer electronics and wi-fi industries, it is important to point out the pervasiveness of what Frankfurt school theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse called "the culture industry" in infiltrating, measuring, and—to some degree—controlling what are otherwise very liberating opportunities. The extent to which open spectrum technologies and wi-fi networking products are limited by "competitive" market forces and not by "consumer choice" is a dramatic demonstration of this pervasiveness and of the willingness of a mass audience to accept cultural values offered to them by the products they buy.
Notes

1 Infrared technology and Bluetooth technology are also wireless connection utilities worth mentioning, especially since infrared has been used for a relatively long time in computing technologies and in remote controls for televisions and stereos. The drawback for both technologies in terms of wi-fi is that their broadcast range is very short and they are limited by their relatively high power consumption. Infrared and Bluetooth are more useful for connecting computer components in short bursts rather than long-range, always-on Internet connections.

2 The “complexity of Internet access alternatives” that Mansell and Steinmueller refer to here is precisely what is erased by proprietary software like AOL when it establishes itself on a user’s computer as the “default” Internet service provider. Any other options a user had for accessing the Internet will now be deferred through AOL’s gateway.

3 In “Wireless R&D: From Domestication to Globalization,” Dan Steinbock glorifies Nokia’s employment of globally distributed and shared networks for product research and development across nodes in Europe and Asia in comparison with very centralized models of research and development represented by the United States’ Bell laboratories, Ericsson, and Motorola, which rely heavily on domestic resources (43-5). The Nokia model, argues Steinbock, offers new possibilities for flexibility and innovation while maintaining a global market. The latter models provide stability and innovation in domestic markets alone.
A myth of wi-fi is that brand name products must be used together, when they all comply with the same bandwidth and frequency standards set jointly by the government, industry leaders, and the IEEE.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

Summary

In concluding this critique of the consumer electronics industry, I would like to return to my initial adoption of James Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric as a line of inquiry for studying such business and discourse. I opened Chapter 1 by claiming that the consumer electronics industry is at the cutting edge of the commercial, consumer nature of U.S. culture and that it operates under the ideological assumptions of the culture industry. These assumptions include the obscuring of contradiction and the politics of production behind a unified product image; the erasure of individual consumer choice in favor of efficient means of product distribution to an infinite consumer base; an exaggerated presentation of cultural values in product packaging that teach consumers what they should believe and how they should act; and a carefully constructed use of statistical data and quantified consumer behavior to maintain a mass, homogenized culture that opposes characterizations of diversity or heterogeneity. Each of these operating assumptions is illuminated by using social-epistemic rhetoric as a methodology for understanding cultural events as sites of conflict. In fact, the assumptions offered by the consumer electronics industry oppose any conflict in order to maintain a global system of buying and selling. Where Berlin’s rhetorical inquiry seeks to investigate conflict and contradiction through linguistic and material markers, the culture industry seeks to emulsify inequities and power differentials into simple discussions of choice, preference, and price. The message sent out by consumer electronics marketing is meant to be
singular not diverse, instructive not constructive, prescriptive not descriptive, and hegemonic rather than oppositional.

The culture industry operates in a self-perpetuating cycle and seeks to incorporate and adapt to change rather than to risk destruction by ignoring change. As such, it contains various structures that allow for change in ways that perpetuate large-scale complicity in the systems of consumerism and mass marketing. One of these structures is in the instruction of consumer behaviors and values. In Chapter 1, I show how 19th century rhetoric and the emergence of mass media in the form of newspapers and magazines opened the way for the homogenized presentation of taste and civility, concepts that enabled mass marketing and advertisements to instruct consumers what products to buy and how to use them. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how the techniques of retail design teach consumers how to shop and to navigate huge retail stores and allow e-tailers to track consumer behaviors in order to present the best products that meet consumers’ needs. Another of these structures is signified by consumer choice, the notion that consumers influence the market significantly by researching every product and feature and selecting the best possible product that meets their needs. This concept, known as rational choice theory, is presented as the driving force of consumerism. But in Chapter 2, I discuss how statistical research methodologies such as discrete choice analysis in the field of marketing actually anticipate consumer choice, determining in advance which products and which product features will come to market. This is the process I call choicing. In Chapter 4, I look at the security features of wi-fi products as an example of this choicing. Such features, which may or may not be important to the
consumers who purchase wi-fi products, send strong messages about what problems or fears consumers should be concerned with and how these products alleviate such fears. Each of these techniques is used to predict consumer values and to appeal to consumers in predicted ways. But the values are distributed through a unified product image—a singular product, advertisement, or feature that is distributed to a mass audience—making the consequences of marketers’ predictions concrete and universal.

In Chapter 2, I deal with the notion of choice and choosing as contested concepts in consumer electronics and consumerism in general. I argue that rational choice theory, which stems from Aristotelian notions of deliberative action, do not fully explain the complexity of consumer behaviors and that any investigation of complex interactions and transactions such as those that occur within the marketplace must be viewed as dialectical. Consumers and their behaviors are not quite so easily quantified and explained as statistical research methods might suggest they are. For this reason, my analysis is aimed at critiquing the system at large while providing glimpses of how consumers are actually influencing the system from the inside. For example, in Chapter 3, I discuss how consumers, working through local governments and advocacy groups, have enacted changes in the big-box retail phenomenon. They have created stricter environmental policies and have forced big-box retailers to give something back to the local community, however miniscule. In Chapter 4, I look at possibilities for taking advantage of wi-fi’s open spectrum technologies in order to resist political, industrial, and corporate control over wi-fi product features and community-building efforts.
Chapter 3 addresses the consequences of retailing high-tech products as commodities to a mass audience. While retailers are driven by a tremendous pressure to sell a high volume of products efficiently and to continue to expand exponentially in order to turn profits, their advertisements appear to appeal to community values. Consumers are asked to sacrifice service for low prices, and convenience for selection as they navigate 100,000 square foot retail stores more or less by themselves. In turn, consumer behaviors are tracked, analyzed, and utilized in ways that provide retailers with greatly improved efficiencies toward the mass distribution of products. What keeps these techniques from appearing predatory are the notion of choice and the recycling of consumer values: if customers did not want huge selection at low prices, then they would not choose to shop at a WalMart or a Best Buy. Such retailers also offer "convenience," "selection," or "service" as values that consumers hold in common everywhere.

Wi-fi technologies, discussed in Chapter 4, offer a unique glimpse at the emergence of a consumer electronics product that could potentially disrupt the mass-marketed logics of consumerism and the culture industry. Operating on frequencies just outside government regulation and just above the grasp of the telecommunications giants, wi-fi has the potential to offer new ways of thinking about communication networks and infrastructures. But wi-fi is also marketed and distributed under the system of mass consumerism. It is the latter that threatens the wi-fi revolution, turning it into merely another commodity to be traded on a global scale. I discuss problems with the notions of competition and consumer interests as reported in high-level conversations amongst government committees and corporate mergers: the consumer becomes a simple market
function, a ready-made purchaser that will use any products offered by the market. And I discuss the contradictions inherent in the marketing of wi-fi products. Mobility, security, and entertainment are offered up as the chosen values of a target demographic, and consumers are subjected to corporate values that have been predetermined to sell well.

It is not that consumers do not want to be more mobile, have greater security over their information, or that they do not want to be entertained. The difficulty is that the illusory promise of these values comes at a hidden cost: complicity in the culture industry. Whatever diverse uses consumers come up with for the products they buy—sharing broadband connections through a wi-fi router, distributing free Internet access in communities with few computers, or even using a hotspot locator to find free Internet access—the values inherent in those uses are co-opted by the culture industry and a unified product image which is selling mobility, security, and entertainment.

Desire, Consumer Values, and the Reification of Culture

What is so powerful about the culture industry is its ability to extract consumer needs and desires from marketing research—mobility, security, and entertainment as tropes for selling wi-fi, for example—and to project those back onto the consumer as cultural values to be consumed by purchasing the advertised products. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno critique the growing disparity between a very few centers of production and a steadily increasing number of lines of distribution or retailers as indicative of the culture industry’s success. They argue that this evolution—which I describe in Chapter 3—is claimed to be “based in the first place on consumer needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is a circle of
manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger” (120). When the marketers of D-Link’s wi-fi products choose to emphasize certain values that they believe their potential consumers will hold and then present those same tropes through multi-national distributors without so much as changing the language on the product image, those values are reified through the transaction. If security is advertised, then the market will simply assume that a consumer who buys that product values security over other possible product features. In this way, the consumer is not consulted about his or her values beyond the product features that are advertised, and his or her purchase and consumption of the D-Link wi-fi router signifies needs that may have never materialized prior to the transaction. But these needs are what become extremely important as marketers tally up consumers’ choices.

This transplantation of consumer values is what Marcuse calls “false consciousness” in One-Dimensional Man. He describes the prescribed and reified values inherent in mass produced products as a type of indoctrination and perpetuation of the culture industry:

The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. (12)
Marcuse describes this false consciousness, this market-defined system of distributing consumer values, as a way of life. He argues that it initiates a pattern of one-dimensionality whereby any actions that transcend or work against the system are discussed only in terms of that system. It is the goal of the consumer electronics industry to create desire and to establish consumer values and create products that correspond with those desires; this is how successful products are developed and sold. What is wrong with this is that the industry has become so good at selling products, that they are also selling the values imbedded in their products. This binds consumers to the system of consumerism and obliterates individuality in order to move products efficiently from manufacturer to consumer.

So corporations create desire. So consumer electronics marketers make us want things. Is this necessarily bad? Perhaps not. If I want to buy a wireless PDA, does that mean that I have been duped? That I am a pawn? A consumer? These are simplistic ways of describing a complex system of relationships. Certainly my desire to purchase consumer electronics products does not limit me to such rash characterizations. However, there are ways in which the desire that is created for these products positions consumers as willing participants in a massive conspiracy to perpetuate consumerism for its own sake. After all, the desire that is created is based upon techniques of mass culture which broadcast singular messages to a huge number of people. When consumers buy products, they are described by marketers in terms of values that have been defined by these messages. Consumer electronics products are sold as commodities—cheap and ubiquitous products offered to a mass audience. As such, they have a powerful effect on
human relationships. In order to produce and distribute consumer electronics products cheaply and efficiently, companies must utilize the techniques outlined in this dissertation which alienate consumers—training consumers in the values of consumerism; valuing growth and efficiency above local, community concerns; outsourcing and downsizing labor in the production and distribution of goods and in the production of information about those goods; choosing consumers in order to obscure the sales pitch; utilizing big-box stores and other techniques of global distribution (like e-tail websites) to distribute products rather than locating dedicated customers. In short, these companies must do whatever they can to make money, and there is little money to be made by investing in long-term relationships with individual consumers. The desire created by the consumer electronics industry is more than just a desire for a cheap commodity; it is a moment of instruction and complicity in a culture of consumerism.

On the Value of Critique

In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard describes the self-referential system of consumerism as a “value process” whereby the value of a commodity is equivalent to its circulation as a benchmark of cultural standards rather than the value appropriated by labor or production costs. This is the process that lands radios in every home, televisions in almost every home, and computers in most homes, but demands a high cost for the latest or most desirable technologies: high-definition televisions, computer gaming systems, or wi-fi Internet access. Here commodities can become cheap and ubiquitous as well as cultural markers of status or class. But in this system, exchange value becomes the arbiter of cultural values: “the value process is
equivalent to a phantasmic organization, in which desire is fulfilled and lack resolved; in which desire is achieved and performed; and in which the symbolic dimension and all difference is abolished” (206). Baudrillard describes this organization as one where price or cost determines happiness, where a more expensive product must be a better product or a product of higher quality. He refers to this as the “terrorism of value,” and suggests that its reversal lies in the complete liberation of the system of exchange: consumerism.

But among my critiques of the consumer electronics industry and of the wi-fi industry, I have also illuminated certain tactics used by consumers and consumer advocates to disrupt the terrorism of value described by Baudrillard. These tactics attempt to vivify community values in the wake of mass distributed ones. Where mobility, security, and entertainment are the major tropes in consumer electronics sales, consumer tactics involve the free distribution of Internet access or resistance to the new responsibilities demanded of the mobile worker. These struggles are far from being new or unique. The fact that these consumer tacticians are able to endure the homogenizing strategies of consumerism (i.e. choosing) is indicative of the limited ability of the culture industry to explain the complexities of culture through simple metaphors and relationships. By looking at the contradictions inherent in the consumer electronics industry, I have demonstrated this complexity and the system of marketing and distribution that operates as though complexity does not exist. Although extremely powerful in their message and their ability to quantify and explain consumer behaviors, marketing has not perfected the science of understanding consumer behavior and retailers have not achieved totally efficient systems for the mass distribution of goods. It is my
hope that work such as is represented by this dissertation will continue to explicate contradiction and dialectical processes in such a way that basic human differences and community values are not obliterated by mass consumerism and mass culture. Rather, my critique is based upon the assumption that we can find more humane ways to distribute consumer electronics where human relationships are not defined by the exchange of commodities or the choices manufactured for consumers but are valued as a part of that exchange.
Here I mean to suggest that product features that do not significantly change the operation or utility of the product—like colored faceplates for mobile phones; video game systems available in different color schemes like jet, indigo, or platinum; or even name brand differences in interoperable wi-fi systems—do not represent a diversity of choice. They represent, rather, an illusion of diversity on a superficial level where the actual qualitative, physical operation of the technology remains exactly the same. Adorno and Horkheimer refer to this exaggeration of uniqueness as a tried and true strategy of the culture industry:

Everything down to the last detail is shaped accordingly. Like its counterpart, avant-garde art, the entertainment industry determines its own language down to its very syntax and vocabulary by the use of anathema. The constant pressure to produce new effects (which must conform to the old patterns) serves merely as another rule to increase the power of the conventions when any single effect threatens to slip through the net. Every detail is so firmly stamped with sameness that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth, or does not meet with approval at first sight. 

Radically different or truly revolutionary consumer electronics products similarly will not likely be introduced to the mass market because consumers have been trained to eagerly await the next disappointing approximation. A revolutionary product would necessarily break the “circle of manipulation and retroactive need” and could not be tolerated. The revolutionary potential, for example, of wi-fi technologies will remain ever unfulfilled by a society propelled by the culture industry.
In Chapter 4, I outline several revolutionary aspects of wi-fi technology including how it enables unregulated use of radio waves and decentralized networks for Internet access with little investment in civil infrastructure.


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