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Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are

By [Emily Wilson](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [September 18, 2008](#).

Rob Walker, author of a new book on consumer culture, explains how consumers embrace brands as part of their identities -- often without knowing it.

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Conventional wisdom says that today's savvy consumers are immune to marketing and unaffected by advertising. Rob Walker, the "Consumed" columnist for the *New York Times Magazine*, disputes that and says there is an important shift going on, which he calls "murketing" -- a blurring of the lines between marketing and everyday life. Rather than disappearing, he says, marketing is just harder to detect, and many consumers, rather than rejecting brands, are giving their own meaning to them and embracing them as part of their identity. In his new book, *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*, Walker writes about the intersection of identity and consumer culture, how marketers want us to think we're beyond advertising, and just how Pabst Blue Ribbon got so popular. AlterNet's Emily Wilson spoke to him by phone at his home in Savannah, Ga.

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Emily Wilson: You say that a lot of people don't think of themselves as consumers and they reject corporate culture, so they think advertising doesn't affect them. You call that dangerous. Why?

Rob Walker: Well, I think it lulls you into a false security. Some people associate branding with just a logo. And they say "Well, I would never wear a logo on a T-shirt," and that's fine, but branding is more complicated than just a logo or a slogan; it's the process of attaching an idea to something. Often people who say they don't buy into corporate culture are hyper-aware of the brands they're buying -- it might be Tom's of Maine or whatever -- but they often have very specific opinions. Sometimes those choices are based on rational thinking, but sometimes they're based on assumptions or emotions, and it's hard to see that.

I talk in the book about my own experience with this with Nike and Converse. I was the kind of person much like the kind of person we're talking about. I thought, "Oh Nike, the swoosh, I would never do that." It wasn't until Nike bought Converse that I thought, "Oh, I've always worn Converse, what am I going to do?" There had never been a moment that I woke up and thought, "Oh, I am an outsider nonconformist." You don't think about those things consciously, but then suddenly something happens and you realize

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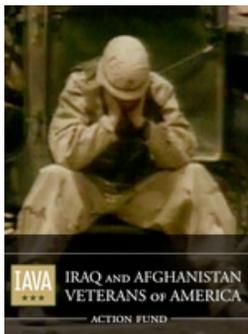
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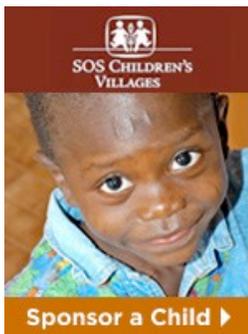
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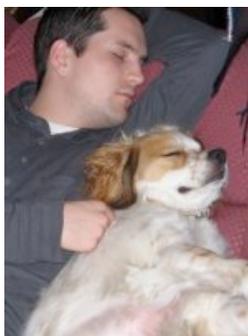


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it's there, and supposedly I don't care about brands yet I'm having this big existential dilemma about what kind of shoes I'm going to wear because the meaning of them has changed.

EW: But you write about ethics being a factor in our consumer decisions. Wouldn't some people say that's about ethics because they don't want to support Nike?

RW: In some cases it is. But often it's a little bit selective. And to stick to my own hypocrisy: I tend to wear Levi's jeans, and what really is the difference between the production process of Levi's and Nike, and can I really defend myself on that? Not really. I run into that a lot.

People will kind of get their ethical hit from doing one type of consumer behavior and one brand they're really loyal to, something like fair trade coffee for example. And then they don't apply that in other (cases), and they don't really stop and ask any questions at all.

So I think this sort of attitude of "I'm above it all, and all my decisions are right" is the mind-set marketers want you to be in. They want to push your buttons, whether it's about ethics or whatever.

EW: You say there is a tension we have between wanting to be an individual and wanting to belong to something. How does that play out in the marketplace?

RW: I use the iPod as an example of something that serves different roles for different people. For some people, that is a very individualistic device with their personal soundtrack on it. And most analysis nowadays really focuses on how, as a culture, we're all into personalization and individualization and customization, and we all want to be different, but that is sort of overlooking this equally powerful urge, I think, which is to be part of something bigger than ourselves. So with a product, it's getting the one everyone has because it's the one to get. ... You can't really make a straight-faced case any more for the iPod as individualistic. I said in a column recently that owning an iPod is about as individual as the gray flannel suit.

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Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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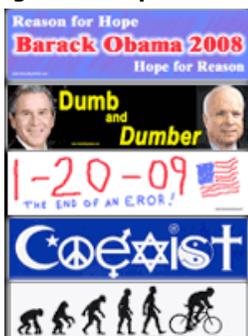


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Old age: a cure for obsessive consumerism.

Posted by: NoMcCainPalin on Sep 18, 2008 1:48 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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I'm now in my late sixties and while the end of life is approaching like a speeding bullet, it's nice not to require anything but basic creature comforts.

For the last 10 years or so, on my birthday and at Christmas, I told my wife and kids the same thing: "Honest, guys, I don't need a thing and there's nothing that I want."

The gifts that please me most are the inexpensive kind that show a lot of thought and love on the giver's part.

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- » **RE: Old age: a cure for obsessive consumerism.** Posted by: Benjaminsjw
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- » **RE: Old age: a cure for obsessive consumerism.** Posted by: schiffer

Negative effects of advertising.

Posted by: colinmeister on Sep 18, 2008 3:43 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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I wonder how many people are like me, and will actively avoid buying a product, even one they have used for years, because they feel their intelligence is being insulted by an advertisement?

I used to drink Budweiser almost every day, then one year I was flipping through the TV channels on Superbowl day when I happened to catch an advertisement featuring the "Bud bowl", with animated bottles of Budweiser and Bud Light playing some kind of sport. I thought this was so stupid, I haven't drank a Budweiser since. That must have been about 15 years ago.

I usually take the opportunity to find out what else is on TV when the ads come on.

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- » **RE: Negative effects of advertising.** Posted by: VZEQICVA
- » **RE: Ads like those show exactly what budweiser thinks of you** Posted by: cwilsondrum

Supporting the News

Posted by: Urstrly on Sep 18, 2008 4:09 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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I love my TiVO cause I can zip through the ads (but not delete them, unfortunately). What makes me angry is how much of actual programming time they eat up. It seems to shrink every year. I can watch two Daily Shows in the time it takes one to run with commercials. The ad time even on PBS is greater than I would like.

The question is, how do we pay for the media we like—reporting especially—without the ads? The whole economic model is built around advertizing.

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- » **RE: Supporting the News** Posted by: Tat106
- » **Alternative media business models** Posted by: IntnsRed

especially at the Presidential level.

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» **But it DOES apply to politics!** Posted by: IntnsRed

» **I am a constitution voter!** Posted by: logansafi

» **RE: I am a constitution voter!** Posted by: Spot

» **RE: But it DOES apply to politics!** Posted by: Spot

Conservatives love consumerism and yet they HATE consumer rights and protections.

Posted by: GrantBurkeVT on Sep 18, 2008 10:22 AM

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Current rating: **5** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

No surprise though since they always want to get those corporate profits propped up any way they can with no regards or respect to the safety of the consumers who give them the money to do so. And they want rampant consumerism to go on so that they can easily blame the consumers for everything regardless. Conservatives have been the biggest forces of socializing poverty and terrorism and enough is enough.

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Consumerism

Posted by: Spiritgirl on Sep 18, 2008 10:30 AM

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Current rating: **5** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

"as a culture, we're all into personalization and individualization and customization, and we all want to be different, but that is sort of overlooking this equally powerful urge, I think, which is to be part of something bigger than ourselves." The American people bought into Reagan's " rugged individualism like a fish to water! Yes, he wasn't the only politician to sing that song, Madison Ave. and their slick ad's didn't hurt, neither do the idiot tv shows- where everyone is rich, beautiful, and consumptive but no one ever seems to work! Listen to the corporate news and it's all about celebrity, reality tv -just as bad, yet the ratings for these shows are thru the roof which is why they continue unabated! As individuals we instinctively know this mad consumerism, brand name, what I own attitude is bad, yet in our separatist, me first, I'm not as bad off as you are, culture there can be no denial that we are consumed with consumerism!

Unfortunately, it has to take tough times for everyone, before anyone notices! Maybe now the American people will take the blinders of divisive politics, gender/race/class inequality, and culture wars, for the American people to find our collective way out of the dark, stagnant, individualistic road that we have gone down and take that higher road that we profess to love!

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pretentious advertising

Posted by: cyr3n on Sep 18, 2008 10:46 AM

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Current rating: **2** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

How about "your face belongs to noxema" and "sleepys.. trust sleepys for the rest of your life"

I'd NEVER buy these products because their slogans are so creepy. The first one evokes images of some kind of face-cloning factory.. where once you buy their \$hit, your face is now property of some corporate megloculture. And sleepy's.. jesus.. where to begin. First of all its a company where you're haggling constantly for a better bargain. If you trusted them in the first place, would you even be haggling? No. The price would confidently be the best value. So they fail on that mark. Secondly, "for the rest of your life" . A cheap mattress doesn't generally last longer than 5 years. So they jinxing you now to die a premature death from mattress-coil-tetnus? And then there's the obvious, give-us-your-money-forever undertone.

Yup. creepy. do not want.

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As oil production peaks out, the products we buy, most of which are oil manufactured, will be

Posted by: maxpayne on Sep 18, 2008 5:24 PM

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more expensive and scarcer in quantity. When the companies that rely on consumer sales big time are forced to sell less in quantity, it will first be exponentially higher prices followed by TOTAL BANKRUPTCIES !

GOD IS WILL ESCALATE THE SEVERE PUNISHMENT ON AMERICA TO ETERNAL DAMNATION FOR BEING A GREEDY PIGSHIT CONSUMERIST SOCIETY AND ALLOWING WARS FOR OIL TO FEED THEIR CONSUMERIST PIGSHIT WAYS !!! RRRRRRRRAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRR !!!!

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» **RE: As oil production peaks out, the products we buy, most of which are oil manufactured, will be** Posted by: Dboy

what you buy is what you are.

Posted by: cwilsondrum on Sep 18, 2008 7:20 PM

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Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

I had been a coke drinker my whole life, but no more and we make it stick. they are scum, corporate criminals. we use our dollars for those that try to do business not at the expense of everyone else. organic, not corporate goo that they would like to pass off as food.

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