

CONSUMER CULTURE
THEORY

RESEARCH IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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RESEARCH IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
VOLUME 19

CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY

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PREFACE

We live within a global culture that is being rapidly transformed, especially due to developments in technology (e.g. social media) and emerging cultural geographies. In this context, we make reference to an earlier work ([Belk, 2008](#)) aptly titled, ‘Hyperreality and Globalization’. With a slight modification, the two themes for the Consumer Culture Theory conference (2017 CCT) are ‘hyperreality’ and ‘cultural hybridization’.

Given the general focus (i.e. hyperreality) of the conference, we selected the conference location as Disneyland, Southern California. As a cultural imaginary, here is a quote from [Jean Baudrillard \(1988\)](#) which seems appropriate:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.

A second theme for the conference is ‘cultural hybridization’, implying that, thanks to virtual media and other related developments, we are witnessing a transnational imaginary and global cultural connectivity that has not been seen before – leading to transformations in cultural patterns and practices. The CCT forum provided a unique opportunity to explore related themes.

The 2017 CCT conference attracted submissions from over 34 countries. In attendance were 230 consumer cultural theorists and several presentations were of the highest order. In this volume, we have included 11 research papers as chapters under three headings: Part I: (Hyper) Reality and Cultural Hybridization; Part II: Navigating the Marketplace and Part III: The Consumer Culture Theory Paradigm. Part I consists of three chapters, followed by seven chapters in Part II and one single chapter in Part III. Space limitations have restricted us from including more articles.

The following are highlights of the chapters in this volume.

**PART I:
(HYPER) REALITY AND CULTURAL
HYBRIDIZATION**

In their chapter titled ‘Amazing Information: Hyperreality’ and ‘The World of *Wicked*’ Kent Drummond, Susan Aronstein and Terri Rittenburg propose a promotional exhibit for the Broadway musical *Wicked*, entitled ‘The World of *Wicked*’, to better understand the ways in which arts marketers hail and compose new and existing consumers. Eco’s concept of hyperreality and its relationship to remediation and cultural sustainability are brought to bear upon arts phenomenon. As producers utilize new media platforms to reach the consumer, they make the experience of their shows more immediate and quite compelling. This paper received the Best Competitive Paper Award at the conference.

In the next chapter, Mariam Humayun and Russell Belk focus on the mythic nature of the pseudonymous Bitcoin creator, Satoshi Nakamoto. Drawing on ideas from Foucault and Barthes on authorship, they analyze the notion of the absence of the author, using interview data, participant observation, archival data and netnography. The authors examine the discourses that emerge in the wake of multiple Satoshi Nakamoto exposés ‘that serve as both stabilizing and destabilizing forces in the Bitcoin ecosystem’. They analyze the different interpretations of Satoshi Nakamoto and identify how consumers try to find meaning in Satoshi’s disappearance, while providing a richer understanding of the nature of anonymity in our hyper-celebrity culture.

In the third chapter in this section, Francesca Sobande explores parental management and use of media, as part of strategies to affirm children’s racial identities, as well as to assist such parenting efforts. The research analyzes how parents construct Black children’s engagement with media, as being a counter-cultural coping mechanism, to temper the potential racial and diasporic discordance of their children’s identities. In-depth interviews are conducted about the media marketplace experiences of Black women in Britain. The analytic approach is informed by studies of identity, visual consumption, as well as race in the marketplace, which emphasize how identity intersects with consumer culture.

PART II: NAVIGATING THE MARKETPLACE

In the first chapter, ‘Emerging Market Dynamics Within and Beyond Consumer Tribes’ the authors, Silvia Biraghi, Rossella Gambetti and Stefano Pace, explore how the interplay between a passionate consumer and his or her embeddedness in the network of a consumer tribe provides a fertile environment for the emergence of an entrepreneurial venture, combining macro-level and micro-level concerns linking the needs of the marketplace and the tribe. The research, set within the context of a consumer’s entrepreneurial project, employs an ethnographic methodological approach.

The next chapter by Jennifer Smith Maguire adopts a practice-oriented approach to address gaps in existing knowledge of the significance of cultural producers’ and intermediaries’ practices of taste for the construction and organization of markets. Using the example of the cultural field of ‘natural’ wine, the author proposes how taste operates as a logic of practice, generating market actions in relation to the aesthetic regime of provenance. The chapter sets out the conceptual relationship between aesthetic regimes and practices of taste. The discussion draws from interpretive research on natural wine producers and cultural intermediaries involving 40 interviews with natural wine makers, retailers, sommeliers and writers based in New York, Western Australia, the Champagne region and the Cape Winelands. Three dimensions of how taste is translated into action are examined. The chapter’s discussion of dispositions, affect, intuition and pattern identification provide interesting insights with implications for market development and value construction.

The third chapter in this section by Bhupesh Manoharan and Rohit Varman examines beef consumption practices in two villages in Tamil Nadu, India. It examines how the upper caste creates spatial boundaries to separate the inside from the outside in their consumption of beef. The authors conducted 70 in-depth interviews, and observed beef buying and consumption practices. The research shows how the upper caste members separate the inside from the outside and surreptitiously consume beef. Dalits or untouchables are unable to create such separations and as a result are stigmatized and ostracized. Moreover, the distinction between the outside and the inside is not fixed but is in a state of transition. This study offers insights into how stigma is defined by spatial boundaries and help us understand purity, pollution, and stigma in consumption practices as ongoing processes of social division and discrimination.

The fourth chapter by Kathryn Pounders and Marlys Mason examines the experiences and struggles of young women with breast cancer as they navigate the intersectionality of their illness and gender identity. Specifically,

the research explores the construction and expression of gender identity as a core part of who they were prior to diagnosis and who they desire to be in the future. Using a phenomenological approach, the authors investigate how women with breast cancer experience changes related to gender identity. The findings indicate that young women undergo gender identity disruptions and shifts as the result of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Informants in this study indicated that their resultant identities did not conform to cultural normative representations of gender, which profoundly impact their perceptions of the physical self, gender roles and intimate relationships.

The next study by Carly Drake and Scott Radford seeks to determine the marketplace practices that consumers engage in with regard to masculine and feminine codes employed in product design. Since extant consumer research argues that consumers prefer marketing stimuli that matches their sex or gender identity. This study also asks how consumers' practices inform this understanding of the possession-self link. The authors use semi-structured interviews with an auto-driving component to answer the research questions. Data from 20 interviews were analysed using feminist critical discourse analysis and a post-structuralist feminist-informed theoretical framework. Different consumer practices identified in the data show that interpretations and evaluations of product gender are sometimes, but not always, a reflection of the gendered self. In addition to gender, future research must include different socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals, in order to enhance or even challenge these findings.

The study by Ivan Small examines emerging consumption patterns in Vietnam's transportation market and considers them within broader practices and histories of mobility. The specific focus is on how Vietnamese consumers are apprehending the current transportation shift from motorcycles to automobiles and the corresponding societal transformations it foreshadows and remembers. Research was conducted between 2013 and 2016 and involved analyses of transportation industry global and regional documents and reports, observations and interviews with users and sellers of motorcycles and automobiles in Vietnam, participant observation and focus groups with drivers and driving schools in Danang and Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam, and discussions with transportation designers, engineers, manufacturers and marketing professionals. The main findings indicate that, in this transition period, as shifts in manufacturing and recent trade agreements mandating tariff reductions on transportation commodities reorient temporal and material relations to the market, anticipations of automobiles are paramount.

The final study in this section, by Annamma Joy, Russell Belk, Steve Charters, Jeff Wang and Camilo Peña, comprises multi-year ethnographic

research, encompassing participant wine tours, depth interviews and short interviews, on wine-tourism in selected regions in South Africa and India. The authors discuss the wine-tourism experience as pleasure-oriented consumer journeys undertaken by individuals and groups. On this journey, guides and consumers collectively co-create the memorable shared experience, which ultimately builds a sense of social obligation among participants towards tour guides and winery staff. The authors use performance theory to highlight the types of consumer engagement that tour guides induce, combining products and processes to leave participants with vivid, lasting memories.

PART III: THE CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY PARADIGM

The only chapter included in this last section, Shahzeb Jafri, fittingly addresses the issue of how CCT as a discipline has faced criticism from its inception to date. The author argues that while criticism based on methodology and research goals comes mainly from marketing's qualitative realm, various CCT proponents have pointed out the field's inadequacy in conducting a macro-level consumption analysis. The article presents the emergence of the CCT tradition as a new paradigm within consumer research, with criticisms raised against the discipline presented as 'anomalies' highlighted in a normal scientific procedure. The paper uses an overview and analysis of the immigrant acculturation literature produced by CCT researchers to depict how CCT projects focus on adding persistence to theoretical frameworks. By doing so, anomalies have been implicitly treated by the tradition's members. The article illustrates a previously marginalized research tradition advancing towards strengthening its paradigmatic boundaries. Moreover, the paper aims to unfold the possible implications this boundary strengthening could have for aspiring CCT researchers, where both negative and positive outcomes are discussed.

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PART I
(HYPER) REALITY AND
CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION

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AMAZING INFORMATION: HYPERREALITY AND “THE WORLD OF *WICKED*”

Kent Drummond, Susan Aronstein and
Terri Rittenburg

ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This paper examines a promotional exhibit for the Broadway musical Wicked, entitled “The World of Wicked,” to better understand the ways in which art marketers continue to hail new and existing consumers. Eco’s concept of hyperreality and its relationship to remediation and cultural sustainability are brought to bear upon this phenomenon. As producers utilize new media platforms to reach the consumer, they make the experience of their shows more immediate. Set in the context of a shopping mall, the hyperreality of the exhibit is unpacked and analyzed.*

Design: *This is an interpretive study using direct observation, participant observation, depth interviews, narrative analysis, and artifact analysis.*

Findings: *By facilitating embodiment, encouraging intense emotional arousal, and providing a sense of community, “The World of Wicked” is*

a metonym for Wicked itself. The hyperreal context of the shopping mall facilitates the consumption of fantasy as well as material goods.

Originality and value: *The findings of this paper extend theories of hyperreality, adaptation, and remediation into the context of arts. This contribution is foundational to building a larger theory of cultural sustainability.*

Keywords: Hyperreality; arts marketing; embodiment; adaptation; remediation; metonym

“What counts, however, is not the authenticity of a piece, but the amazing information it contains.”

—Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 1986

OVERVIEW

Fourteen years after its premier, the Broadway musical *Wicked* remains a cultural phenomenon. According to *Variety* (Cox, 2016), by May 2016, *Wicked* had grossed \$1 billion on Broadway alone, reaching that milestone faster than any other show in history. Yet that figure represented only one-quarter of its gross worldwide. *Wicked* has played to 50 million people in 14 countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil, and Japan. It has been translated into six languages. The *Wicked* soundtrack has been certified double-platinum. *Wicked* merchandise, ranging from golf balls to t-shirts, tote bags, key chains, and coffee mugs, generates at least \$300,000 per week – more than most Broadway plays (Barnes, 2005). A movie version of the show will be released in December 2019 (Khatchaturian, 2016). Only *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Lion King*, both much older musicals, exceeded these performance figures.

Wicked's astounding success suggests a series of research questions for those who work at the intersection of consumer research and the arts. First, how does *Wicked* continue to draw consumers to its doors, not only in the major cities of New York and London but also in more far-flung American cities such as Schenectady, East Lansing, Providence, and Appleton? And, given *Wicked's* history (it is based on Maguire's (1995) novel, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, which is itself based on a combination of MGM's 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, and L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), we also need to address a larger question: How has Oz remained culturally sustainable for well over a

century? In other words, how does this narrative keep reinventing itself, such that it becomes newly relevant to new groups of consumers, without losing its established consumer base?

To address these questions about *Wicked* in particular and Oz in general, we have developed a multi-theory, interdisciplinary approach to *cultural sustainability*. Drawing on literary theory, media studies, and interpretive consumer research, we ground our work in theories ranging from cultural studies, adaptation theory, remediation theory, and experiential marketing. Our book-length study of Oz, of which this essay is a part, examines the ways in which a narrative moves across different performances and media forms, extending and adapting itself over time to remain artistically and commercially viable. In order to construct this approach, we conducted archival research into the processes and reactions of historical producers, reviewers, and (through handwritten letters) consumers written over 100 years ago. We then conducted extensive narrative and cultural analyses, buttressed by depth interviews with present-day producers and consumers. The result is a theoretical framework of cultural sustainability, which can be used for analyzing a broad array of artistic, literary, and performative artifacts.

In this particular paper, we begin with an introduction to our theoretical framework, which includes a discussion of [Eco's \(1986\)](#) notion of hyperreality. We then describe the exhibit “The World of *Wicked*” (hereafter, WoW) in detail, and recount a special live performance of two songs from *Wicked* that helped bring this exhibit to life. We also offer impressionistic findings of these events, focusing on the critical roles hyperreality, remediation, and adaptation play in making the experience of the exhibit more immediate. We conclude by discussing the benefits that accrue to both producers and consumers because of that experience.

OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD: TOWARD A THEORY OF CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

At the heart of Oz lies *a story*: a magical land, compelling characters, and significant themes. However, today's Oz, at times adult and darkly political (e.g., NBC's *Emerald City*), and, at others, bright and nostalgic (e.g., Amazon's *Lost in Oz*), is very different from the Oz first penned in 1900 by L. Frank Baum. Over the decades, Oz has been *adapted*, or, in the words of [Linda Hutcheon \(2006\)](#), “made suitable for new audiences.” It has evolved to fit new times and different places. This ability to adapt to the needs and desires of consumers across time and space is the first step to long-term cultural sustainability.

However, adaptation alone is not enough. In order to reach new consumers, a narrative must seek them out in new places. Here, the work of marketing theorists such as [Pine and Gilmore \(2011\)](#) on experiential marketing, combined with discussions on hyperreality from [Eco \(1986\)](#) and [Baudrillard \(2015\)](#), as well as [Bolter and Grusin's \(1999\)](#) Theory of Remediation, apply as we seek to understand all of the factors that have contributed to Oz's longevity.

While [Pine and Gilmore \(1999\)](#) focused on businesses, not creative artifacts, to exemplify the ways in which consumption experiences can ensure a loyal clientele for years to come, they used an extended theatrical metaphor to illustrate their theory. Thus, their framework applies easily to the arts, and the fact that the producers of Oz, from original author Baum to Universal producer Marc Platt, have employed the techniques of experiential marketing, helps explain Oz's cultural sustainability to a considerable extent. In our discussion on Oz, we draw from a number of sources to identify the following six characteristics of experiential marketing that contribute to creating, sustaining, and extending a consumer base for creative products:

- First, generate “buzz.” Creating excitement, prompting consumers to feel a sense of immediacy — as well as exclusivity. “Right here, right now ... this is the place to be!” is the hoped-for impression.
- Second, immerse the consumer in a cocoon of physical sensation — sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell — that shuts out the distractions of external world and creates a safe space in which to arouse emotions. At Disneyland, the light and water show, *World of Color*, which plays at night, is an excellent example.
- Third, educate the consumer, interacting with her to teach her how to appreciate and consume the product, bringing the consumer on the “inside” as an expert or connoisseur.
- Fourth, foster a longer-term, imprinted emotional connection, inspiring a deep and memorable relationship with the experience.
- Fifth, encourage sharing, urging consumers to share their experiences with as many “friends” as possible, creating both a “ripple effect” and a community of consumers.
- Finally, facilitate a synergy of experiences such that consumers can encounter the experience in different ways and at different times.

In all of these aspects, experiential marketing seeks to provide consumers with what Eco described in his 1986 essay, “Travels in Hyperreality,” as a particularly American desire for “more of the real thing.” Eco's take on hyperreality is different from the theory that [Baudrillard \(2015\)](#) and others would fully develop in the 1980s. For [Eco \(1986\)](#), the hyperreal is different from [Baudrillard's \(2015\)](#) simulacrum, a world “without origin or reality.”

Rather, Eco’s (1986) hyperreality is the Absolute Fake, a “full-scale authentic copy ... more polished, shinier,” set in a context — such as the Johnson Presidential Museum, Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum, or Disneyland itself. The Absolute Fake undermines “the logical distinctions between real world and possible worlds,” placing heroines such as Jasmine from *Aladdin*, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, and Elsa from *Frozen* side by side in a theme park. The creation of the Absolute Fake, Eco asserts (1986), satisfies consumers’ desire for a world in which, if “good, art, fairy tale, and history are unable to become flesh, they can at least become plastic.”

However, it takes technology to make plastic. And here, we come to a critical aspect of cultural sustainability – and a point of articulation between Eco’s view of hyperreality (1986) and Bolter and Grusin’s Theory of Remediation (1999). To deliver the hyperreal thing to consumers, eager for more of a product, requires that producers create new media platforms that will enable them to reach both old and new consumers in new ways (e.g., television, films, video games, virtual reality, etc.); and as they move content from one media form to another (i.e., remediation), they must provide what Bolter and Grusin (1999) term a heightened sense of immediacy. If Eco’s (1986) hyperreality fabricates the absolute fake to satisfy the consumer’s demand for the real thing, then each new remediation promises to make consumers feel as if they were *really* there, providing an experience in which the medium itself disappears and consumers are left in the presence of the thing represented.

All of these factors play into cultural sustainability: adaptation to time and place; offering multiple experiences to attract, sustain, and extend a consumer base; and taking advantage of new technologies and media platforms to offer consumers an ever-more immediate and hyperreal experience. In order to achieve cultural sustainability, producers not only need to adapt their product to the needs and concerns of new audiences but also to use new, multiple media outlets to provide a heightened, immersive reality, beckoning consumers into an alternative world of sensation, and ultimately, persuasion. As we shall see, WoW employs all these techniques to market the musical (and, through it, Oz) to both new and repeat consumers.

COMING SOON TO A MALL NEAR YOU: “THE WORLD OF *WICKED*”

One particular type of remediation saturated with hyperreality is a promotional exhibit entitled, “The World of *Wicked*.” This temporary exhibit routinely tours around the country in advance of the touring version of *Wicked*

itself. Like John the Baptist, it heralds the arrival of something much greater, and it departs shortly after “the real thing” arrives. During our repeated encounter with “WoW”, the exhibit was set in the middle of a large atrium of the Cherry Creek Shopping Mall (Cherry Creek is an upscale suburb of Denver, Colorado). During the summer of 2015, WoW appeared in the mall for several weeks leading up to the opening night of *Wicked*, then closed several days after the show opened. We visited WoW three times between May and June 2015, taking extensive field notes, conducting interviews, and attending a special live performance of *Wicked* songs, delivered on a make-shift stage in front of the exhibit. We also took photographs of the exhibit from a distance that precluded identifying individual consumers.

Referencing one of *The Wizard of Oz*'s iconic images, WoW looks like a giant hot air balloon made mostly of panes of transparent hard plastic. An opaque cover on top of the globe features the now famous image of Glinda whispering to Elphaba, with the recognizable “Wicked” lettering printed in giant letters on either side. A winged monkey perches atop the globe, high enough to be on a level with shoppers on the second floor of the mall. Another winged monkey perches on the side of the globe, peering in at the consumers as they pass through the exhibit.

The entrance to the globe is literally framed by a version of the Time-Clock prominent in the show itself. It contains a large clock, gears, and the Time-Dragon looming atop the frame. As consumers pass through the arch, they enter WoW in a way similar to the way in which audience members enter the show of *Wicked* as the orchestra strikes its first chords. Here, however, in the middle of a shopping mall, consumers walk through the arch, literally placing their bodies in an alternative experience of *Wicked*.

Once inside the globe, visitors encounter three costumes from the show, with designers' sketches next to them. Two of the costumes – Glinda's blue “petal dress” featured in the opening scene of the show, and Elphaba's black dress, featured later – are mounted on full mannequins whose countenances resemble their respective performers. The third costume is Glinda's bright pink dress from the dance party at Shiz. This is mounted on a headless mannequin, but a jeweled letter “G” is perched where the head would be. The mannequins are elevated so that as consumers pass through the exhibit, the dresses are at eye level and arm's length. A video featuring interviews with *Wicked*'s key creators plays continuously, and a table displays brochures for a shopping contest linking WoW to the mall.

In addition to these production features, at least one guide oversees WoW at all times in order to interact with visitors and curate the experience for them. As we observed our guide – who later became a key informant for our

book – we noted that she had the ability to adapt her message to fit the needs and experiences of the visitors before her. If they had not heard of *Wicked*, she explained the essentials of the show to them; and if they were already familiar with it, she asked where and when they had seen a production. She then extended the conversation based on that information. In either case, she reminded visitors that *Wicked* was coming to Denver in just 2 weeks. She told them where they could purchase tickets – and advised them to purchase them soon while good seats were still available. She then led them out of the globe toward another staged area, this one containing a replica of Dorothy’s house just after it crash-landed in Oz. Two life-size cutouts of Glinda and Elphaba appeared to be having an argument in front of the house. To the side of this area were various props, such as a green feather boa, witch’s hat, and tiara. The guide encouraged visitors to don the props, pose with the characters, and have their photos taken by others in their party. Before sending them back into the mall, she encouraged them to post those photos on social media. A typical visit took approximately 10 minutes.

In some ways, WoW appears inconsequential – a short break from the “real world” of shopping. However, the exhibit’s deployment of the hyper-real, encompassing both experiential and remediation strategies, makes for a very effective marketing tool.

As evidenced by the guide’s interactions, WoW appeals to two groups of consumers: those who have already seen a live production of *Wicked*, and those who have not but may want to. For those who have already seen the show, the exhibit is a chance to jog the memory and revisit the features that made the show so pleasantly memorable in the first place: the costumes, the sets, the music, the characters, and the central relationship between Glinda and Elphaba – displayed dynamically and emphatically at the end of the exhibit. As their memories are jogged, previous consumers might ask: Is it time to see *Wicked* again, especially now that it’s coming to Denver, and we know where to purchase tickets, and good seats are going fast? The exhibit thus creates a sense of urgency in the minds of these consumers, prompting them to act now if they want to relive those memories, and maybe this time bring along a younger sibling (a friend) who was too young to see the show the last time it passed through Denver.

For consumers who have never seen *Wicked*, the exhibit marks their initiation into the multi-faceted *Wicked* experience, overseen by an interactive guide who encourages them to cultivate this newfound relationship. In the best case scenario, this could lead to multiple viewings of a live production of *Wicked*, resulting in hundreds of dollars in revenue. So particularly for consumers in this market segment, their first encounter with the show is

critical. If they are repulsed, bored, or intimidated, it could result in a lost opportunity – as well as lost revenue. But if they are drawn in, engaged, and made to feel valued as an ongoing consumer of the show, the result could be long term, and lucrative. This is what marketers mean when they refer to customer lifetime value (CLV; Pride & Ferrell, (2018)). How many dollars will the consumer spend over his/her lifetime as she/he interacts with our product? Cadillac makes such calculations, knowing that some customers may purchase five to 10 Cadillacs over the course of their lifetimes. Burger King also makes such calculations, knowing that consumers will spend more money on fast food during certain phases of their life cycles (college years, young families, etc.) than others (young, newlyweds, and senior citizens). The producers of any Broadway show have made similar calculations, and they realize that first-time samplers of a show could easily become repeat patrons. An exhibit, such as WoW, plays a critical role in this eventuality.

In either case, WoW accomplishes a great deal of interaction with consumers and facilitates an ongoing relationship with the show, providing an experiential consumption of *Wicked* apart from a performance of *Wicked* itself. It brings *Wicked* to the consumer rather than waiting for the consumer to come to *Wicked*.

This is an important and growing trend in consumption of arts in which the collection, the performance, and the players come to the consumer, not vice versa. In so doing, potential barriers to entry for many consumers – be they price, inconvenience, or the intimidation and inadequacy many feel at the prospect of entering into a high-culture experience – are removed, and replaced with a sense of immediacy and opportunity. Hence, a handful of pieces from a permanent art collection takes to the streets in an art-mobile; a small group of musicians from a larger symphony orchestra visits rural communities in a sparsely populated state; and a handful of dancers from a world-class dance troupe performs in an inner city classroom, a subway ride away from Lincoln Center. WoW mirrors this trend by bringing the *Wicked* experience to the consumer. And the subtext is, of course, “Do you like this? Then come to a full-length performance of *Wicked*, and you will like it even better.”

This exhibit also brings *Wicked* to consumers *in a place where they are already experiencing other types of performances, consumption, and hyperreality*. It has suggestive power over consumers who are already in a performative, acquisitive mood. It invites them into an alternative world at a moment in which they may well be engaged in fantasy anyway. “You’ve bought this, and you’ve tried on that. Now why not try *this*?” The exhibit catches consumers in an experiential, even impulsive mood and beckons them to try something new. Amplifying this impulsive state is the fact that the space itself is so

accessible. Open on all sides, visible from both levels of the mall, and accessible by a glass elevator placed at its edge, the court is bounded by walkways but contains no barriers to entry. There is nothing to dissuade shoppers from entering this porous space, other than the fear that other consumers may be watching. However, given the exhibitionistic nature of experiential marketing today, this would not be a deterrent for most consumers.

It is also important to note that WoW is placed in a space in which exhibits and performances traditionally take place: choir concerts, local celebrity interviews, extended exhibits (e.g., Black History Month), and, most importantly, Santa’s Village are all placed here. This establishes a sense of expectation in the minds of consumers; they would expect something “different” to happen here. The space also provides a respite from the First World problems of decision making and spending money that accompany the shopping experience. Owners of the mall welcome any opportunity for consumers to spend more time there, since it increases the likelihood that they will eventually spend more money. If an event such as WoW gives shoppers a chance to collect themselves and prepare to shop once again, so much the better. In fact, WoW promotes further consumption by providing visitors with a shopping contest. Participating stores give stamps of validation, and shoppers who have completed seven stamped visits may place their names in a raffle. Prizes include a *Wicked* soundtrack, t-shirt, and other merchandise. Thus, the cycle of consumption continues, providing a win-win-win for mall tenants, mall owners, and producers of *Wicked*.

Most importantly, WoW is an immersive consumption experience. As with the “Behind the Emerald Curtain” tour in New York City, visitors to WoW see and smell authentic Broadway costumes at arm’s length, hear the music, observe interviews, and gain a sense of the props and themes of the musical. Once they leave, they are confronted with life-size cardboard cut-outs of Glinda and Elphaba facing each other confrontationally. The figures are placed in front of a backdrop of an Oz set, complete with fallen house and corn stalks. Visitors are encouraged to don a witch’s hat, a princess tiara, or a green feather boa and pose in front of the two characters. They are also encouraged to have their photos taken, which they can then upload to *Wicked*’s Facebook site.

Taken as a whole, the exhibit provides consumers with an immersive consumption experience that offers a new take on hyperreality and remediation. Consumers are literally hailed into a hyperreal mis-en-scene of both Oz and the production of *Wicked*, the musical. They are beckoned to take their place, even if only momentarily, within the boundaries of the musical Oz itself, thus blurring the lines between fantasy and reality (something shopping malls

encourage in the first place). And they are asked to embody one of the characters – both of whom are beautiful, magical, and mysterious – and enter into a confrontation with the other character. So not only do consumers choose a character, they enter into a relationship. And as we witnessed on multiple visits, many young girls imitate this relationship by imitating the disposition of the characters’ bodies. To strike the pose is to inhabit the relationship. This produces, as [Pine and Gilmore \(2011\)](#) note, a defining characteristic of all memorable experiences: *authenticity*. And authenticity lies at the heart, not only of embodied consumption but also, ironically, of hyperreality.”How absolute is this absolute fake?” [Eco \(1986\)](#) might ask.

In this moment, visitors are taught that the relationship between Glinda and Elphaba is metonymic for the musical itself: to understand that relationship – to embody it – is to understand, and in some ways experience, the musical itself. This metonym is not something the show’s author, Holzman, would disagree with. In an interview regarding *Wicked’s* creation, she states:

You know, friendship is a big part of women’s lives, and you don’t often see it depicted very interestingly ... Elphaba and Glinda hate each other at first sight, but those feelings are a sign of how it’s their destiny to be forever altered by their friendship. They’re making each other better people and helping each other grow into the women they were meant to become. ([Holzman, 2005](#))

Thus, this portal into *Wicked* experience is entirely consistent with authorial intent. A consistently sustained message for a product is what marketers call integrated marketing communications (IMC). In this instance, the emotions shoppers are asked to feel at an exhibit in a mall are consistent with the emotions they will be asked to feel during the musical itself. IMC asks marketers to establish a through-line from the original vision of a product to all the portals through which stakeholders can access that product. In the case of *Wicked*, as represented by WoW, marketers have valiantly succeeded.

“THE WORLD OF *WICKED*” ENLIVENED

In early June of 2015, we returned to the Cherry Creek Mall’s Grand Gallery to attend “A Special Live Performance of *Wicked* Songs,” performed by two understudies for the lead roles of Glinda and Elphaba from the touring show. A full-length production of *Wicked* had already been playing in Denver for several days and would remain there for a month. This special performance had been advertised for several weeks on large posters throughout the mall. The performance took place in front of the WoW exhibit.

The stage for this performance was quite simple: A three-foot-high black rectangular platform had been placed directly in front of WoW. A small staircase, stage right, was the only way to access the stage. Two large black speakers were mounted on poles on either side of the stage. To the back of stage right was a table where a sound engineer monitored a portable console. There was a large open space in front of the stage for a crowd to gather.

Although the show started at 11:30, a crowd began to gather just after 10:00. There were only a few portable chairs, so most of the crowd sat on the floor. Early arrivals consisted almost entirely of young women between the ages of 5 and 18 years, many of whom wore green. Young mothers with strollers were also in attendance. As the crowd grew, people began standing at the rear of the gallery. Men and women aged 25 to 60 years comprised the majority of this group. The crowd totaled approximately 250 by the time the show started.

Shortly after 11:30, the show began. A twenty-something young lady took the stage as the strains of “The Wizard and I” began to play.

Dressed in a dark smock with black leggings and spike-heeled boots, dark red hair falling around her shoulders, this Elphaba understudy could easily have passed for a better-dressed version of many of the audience members seated in front of her. Powerful yet controlled, expressive but naturalistic, her performance captivated the audience all the more persuasively by her relatable persona. Without the benefit of lighting, makeup, costume, props, or narrative, the performance took on the feel of an audition for *American Idol*. And indeed, many audience members sang along in quiet acts of co-creation.

“The Wizard and I” was the perfect song choice for such a context. On one hand, it is song about youthful anticipation and the naivete that goes with it. Sung by the green-skinned Elphaba shortly after her arrival at Shiz University, the song looks forward to a time – undoubtedly in the near future – when she will meet the Wizard of Oz. Then her true genius will be revealed, she sings, and the days of misunderstanding and ridicule will come to an end.

On the other hand, the song is an exercise in dramatic irony. Elphaba does not realize how true her words will turn out to be when she sings about a celebration in Oz that will have to do with her. The celebration, of course, is over on her demise – a dissonant chorus-cry that opens and closes the entire show. Although Elphaba would have no way of knowing that yet, anyone in the audience familiar with the Oz story knows the tragic fate that awaits her. Blissfully ignorant of that outcome, Elphaba drives the song to a goose-bump-inducing climax that showcases the performer’s power and range. As is the case in the full-length show, this performance elicited emphatic “you-go-girl” shouts and whistles.

This euphoric mood was quickly dispelled on the small stage by the arrival of the second understudy, playing Glinda. Dressed in a soft pink cotton mini-dress and black espadrilles, her blonde hair pulled back in a bun, this character's gently revealing demeanor contrasted sharply with Elphaba's in-your-face attitude. She and Elphaba sang the famous closing duet from *Wicked*, entitled "For Good."

Whereas "The Wizard and I" is anticipatory, "For Good" is benedictory. Sung at the end of the show, it quietly but profoundly marks the last time the two main characters appear on stage together. In spite of misunderstandings, fights, and betrayals, real or imagined, Glinda and Elphaba realize that they will not be seeing each other ever again. Heartfelt apologies are offered and accepted, and, as the two women hold hands, each acknowledges the indelible effect the other has had on her.

"For Good" is a song about resolution, acceptance, and the recognition that some people change our lives forever, even though our face-to-face relationships with them may not last. In the context of a full-length, emotionally exhausting show, this song carries tremendous emotional impact: sniffles and Kleenex abound. In the context of a noonday shopping mall, however, the effect was more superficial. The audience applauded appreciatively, almost relieved that such private emotion, displayed in the cold light of a vast retail space, was over. What had transpired between these two characters to inspire this song? Unless they had seen the musical, viewers would have no way of knowing, yet even without the context, they could still appreciate the emotional intensity of the moment.

What did this performance of two songs from *Wicked* add to consumers' experience of the show itself? And what role did the hyperreal play in its effectiveness?

At the very least, the live performance of these songs enlivened the WoW exhibit. Rather than watching an endless-loop video of producers talking *about* the show, consumers watched and listened as two vocalists performed songs *from* the show. For a brief moment, the cardboard cutouts that normally conclude the exhibit suddenly served as backdrop for their own enactment. Glinda and Elphaba came to life, coming and going as quickly as characters do in both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Wicked*. Thus that sense of immediacy, the hallmark of Eco's (1986) take on the hyperreal, is fulfilled by the enactment of these characters.

Critically, however, the performers wore none of the costumes, or bore any of the props, that would mark them as Elphaba and Glinda to the unsuspecting viewer. No flowing gowns, no wands, or broomsticks were in evidence here. Yet, in the context of a shopping mall, the performance was all the

more immediate because of this. The two understudies appeared as if pulled from the audience by chance – a fact that made them much more relatable than if they had been in full costume and makeup. Their status as understudies was celebrated rather than concealed. Thus, the performance took on a “just-one-of-us” quality that motivated the audience to empathize with the performers and help them succeed. “This could be you” was the sub-text of this performative moment, and, of course, that is exactly what many young audience members would wish for.

Finally, one should not overlook the importance of this gathering of consumers to the owners of the mall and all the stores within it. This brief performance of *Wicked* songs infused the mall with a sense of excitement it would not have had otherwise that morning. Foot traffic literally stopped for this event because it had to: Shoppers on their way to somewhere else suddenly became audience members perform. People on the upper level of the mall peered down fondly at the performers and the crowd. WoW created a buzz-filled event in the mall that morning, and at its conclusion, 250 audience members became consumers once again. Happy and hungry, they dispersed into the mall like locusts. Enlivened by the performance, the mall became more immediate as well.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these impressions show how WoW and the performance of two songs serve to sustain *Wicked*'s cultural moment. And they do so in ways entirely consistent with Eco's (1986) notion of hyperreality, Bolter and Grusin's Remediation (1999), and Pine and Gilmore's (2011) concept of experiential marketing.

First, WoW remediates Wicked as a hyperreal and embodied experience. It moves the content of the musical from one delivery system to another – from the Broadway stage to a mall exhibit – and in so doing, makes the experience even more immediate. It beckons the consumers to place their bodies in a particular space at a particular time. And once consumers occupy that space, their senses are stimulated in ways that connect them to *Wicked* powerfully and memorably. Leading consumer researchers, such as Joy and Sherry (2003) and Schroeder (2002), have illustrated the powerful impact this technique can have over time. And Pine and Gilmore (2011) note that embodiment can produce a defining characteristic of all memorable experiences: *authenticity*. Strange as it may seem, authenticity is a key element in consumers' assessment of a hyperreal experience.

Second, WoW provides intense emotional arousal. This was especially true of the live performance of the two songs. And even though the songs were performed out of context (itself a hyperreal event), audience members got a taste of the tremendous emotional range and impact that *Wicked* affords. From the euphoric expectancy of “The Wizard and I” to the resigned closure of “For Good,” *Wicked* packs an emotional gut-punch in the finest tradition of Broadway musicals. Yet far from a liability, this emotional range is exactly what audiences expect from musical theatre. It became clear to consumers that morning – after only two songs – that *Wicked* will give it to them. In that respect, the choice of these two songs was inspired. It maximized emotional contrast, hinting at what the full production would offer.

Third, WoW showcases the musical’s central adaptation of the Oz story. *Wicked’s* phenomenal success stems, in large part, from a masterful adaptation of its source material by writer [Winnie Holzman \(2005\)](#). As the creator of the critically acclaimed series, *My So-Called Life*, Holzman was well versed in portraying issues relevant to adolescent females. Not surprisingly, she took a similar turn in adapting the novel *Wicked* for the stage, focusing on the relationship between Elphaba and Glinda while downplaying many other character and plot developments present in the novel.

Holzman’s decision was risky, and while many critics found her adaptation disappointing, mainstream audiences fully embraced it. Her perspective that a relationship between two strong women is not something we see on the stage everyday was vindicated at the box office if not in the reviews. Like James Cameron’s *Titanic*, *Wicked* tapped into a tremendous pent-up demand from female consumers eager to see issues and relationships relevant to their own lives portrayed on the stage. *Wicked* delivered on that promise, sparking a surge in ticket sales that swept over the negative reviews like a tidal wave. At the end of the day, [Holzman \(2005\)](#) succeeded in making the Oz narrative, in Linda Hutcheon’s (2006) words, suitable to a new audience. WoW remains truthful to Holzman’s worldview: to encounter the exhibit is to encounter the relationship.

Finally, these Wicked experiences provide a sense of sharing and community. Because they bring together consumers – particularly young consumers – interested in the arts, *Wicked*-related experiences provide a sense of community for people who feel ostracized already. As episodes of *Glee* repeatedly show, kids in the arts get “slushied” every day in school – literally and metaphorically. The WoW extends a moment in which these consumers feel validated, even celebrated, rather than ridiculed and rejected. The general exuberance we observed at these events reflects how valued they are by their participants.

Not coincidentally, these are also values *Wicked* promotes: expressing vulnerability, celebrating diversity, accepting the Other, recognizing one’s

Power, and harnessing it For Good. WoW, therefore, becomes an exercise in metonymy. One signified stands for another: the exhibit for the stage, two well-known songs for the entire musical, and two accessible understudies for distant stars. Hyperreal though they may be, such moments become meaningful social events during which consumers are encouraged to express, in appearance and interaction, their deep emotional connection to a cultural artifact. In contrast to the athletic arena, for example, in which bonding events such as tailgates and autograph sessions routinely encourage a sense of belonging, moments such as these are relatively rare in the arts. By providing an occasion for community apart from a full-length production of *Wicked*, WoW enacts the values that the show itself espouses.

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