

The gadgeteer: sex, self and consumerism in *Stuff* magazine

by Paul Slater

Introduction

This article will examine the relationship between the language used when advertising and reviewing consumer electronics equipment, and its effects on ecology and the environment. It will look in particular at the way that people who purchase electronic devices such as mobile phones, PCs and other equipment are encouraged to trap themselves in a continual cycle of spending and upgrading by the monthly publication, "Stuff" magazine. It will then examine the damage that this can do to people and the environment, with respect to manufacturing, electronic waste disposal, family life and personal debt.

Using sex to sell

Stuff Magazine, with a circulation of over 90,000 per month (Haymarket, 2007) is the UK's self-described "market leader" (Haymarket, 2007) for guides to new consumer oriented technology, and as such is in a very strong position to influence the buying habits of its readership. It is obviously designed to appeal primarily to the younger male population, as the covers mostly display pictures of women in bikinis holding or supposedly using one of the latest devices. These are invariably "demand" pictures (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), where the women are looking directly into the camera lens which serves to imply that they are demanding a relationship with the reader. The facial expression of the women leaves no doubt as to what kind of relationship is being demanded - a sexual one.

The language used on the covers frequently describes devices in words more usually used to refer to attractive women, such as "super slim" (Stuff, 08/2003), "stylish" (06/2002), "sexy" (06/2002), "slinky" (02/2003) and "hot" (02/2003).

There are also less subtle devices used such as superimposing "BIG IN 2003" in large red letters across the chest of a woman in a flimsy dress (02/2003), placing "NEW IPOD why you'll kill to get your hands on one" (07/2003) next to another woman in underwear, and "XBOX UNCOVERED. First ever look at Microsoft's super console" next to a woman in bed. This serves to reinforce an implied link whereby the devices can be considered every bit as desirable as the female models on the cover.

As well as the implications of sexual desirability, other persuasive tactics are used on the magazine covers, such as frequent descriptions of buying or owning these devices as a necessity rather than a luxury. There are many references to this need, using imperative and compelling phrases such as "essential" (07/2002), "you'll have to have" (02/2003) and "now's the time to buy..." (03/2003).

One headline asks, “How many of the 20 smallest, coolest gadgets do you own?” (09/2003). This implies that actual ownership of the devices is an aim in itself, rather than the use of them. Additionally, asking ‘how many’ are owned makes it seem like the items are to be collected like stamps rather than purchased to satisfy genuine needs in the consumer.

Other headlines offer “Handheld Showdown” (04/2001) and “SHARP SHOOTERS” (04/2001). These link in to masculine identity and image of the cowboy as a free spirit and tough-guy, and may encourage the reader to see themselves in those terms. Articles maintain this theme with discussions such as “Is it a ladyphone? They’re delightfully dinky but are they too dainty for a macho 21st-century lad?” (07/2003 p3). In reality, the common image of someone who enjoys technology for its own sake is more likely to be that of a ‘computer geek’ or ‘nerd’, so these headlines seem to be aimed at reassuring the reader that it is, in fact, masculine to be obsessed by technology. The covers show naked and semi-naked women ‘enjoying’ the devices: holding phones suggestively in their hands (07/2003, 06/2002, 03/2003), a notebook computer between the legs (8/2002), or a woman in an intimate posture with an Apple computer (08/2003). These reinforce the message that not only is it masculine to be obsessed by gadgets, women find technology, and by implication its owner, a sexual turn-on. Needless to say, for most women, this may be quite far from the truth.

The linguistic and photographic grammar of the covers reinforces the need to constantly upgrade whatever items you own in order to keep up with all the advances in technology that become available. It is not only upgrades that are encouraged, but also early adoption of new technologies, “It’s time to go broadband” (02/2002 p38). Additionally, some of the articles derogate the readership for owning (or not owning) particular devices.

If ‘devices’ are used as an alternative to time spent outdoors enjoying fresh air and exercise, this could lead to health problems or obesity. The solution that *Stuff* magazine gives, however, is not to spend less time with the gadgets, but to buy more: “GUT-BUSTERS! Gadgets to help you get in shape for the spring”, (03/2003), “BURN OFF THAT BELLY The home fitness kit to shift that unwanted flab”, (08/2002).

Pushing the latest models

The articles in *Stuff* magazine review several categories of consumer goods, including mobile phones, digital cameras, MP3 players, TVs, hi-fi equipment, computers and cars. Whether these devices are useful, or contribute to the quality of people’s lives, is beyond the scope of this article. What is more important for now, though, is the way the magazine encourages readers to be dissatisfied with the devices they already own, involving them in a continual cycle of expensive upgrades. To illustrate this point with a selection of devices, the three issues from July to September 2003 have articles or reviews for the following items:

Issue	Phones	Cameras and camcorders	MP3 players
07 03	16	20	18
08 03	16	11	17
09 03	17	12	7

Additionally, the August 2003 issue contains four separate editorial pieces about the Apple iPod, which was also the subject of a major review in a separate article the previous month. The numbers above do not even take into account the rear section of each magazine which lists the various editors' top ten devices, in thirty separate categories.

The language used to describe devices frequently contains superlatives: "one of the most exciting phones to come out this year" (08/2003, p12), "this is the best phone Motorola has ever made" (09/2003, p115), or defines the quality of devices in terms of the number of features, "loaded with features to make a masculine gadgeteer sweat with excitement" (07/2003, p74). This last phrase creates a new noun "gadgeteer", and by using it in the noun-phrase "masculine gadgeteer" serves further to encourage men to define their identity, and their masculinity, by the gadgets that they own.

The language all serves to increase pressure on individuals to upgrade their devices on a regular basis, regardless of the fact that, for instance, mobile phones are primarily used for making and receiving phone calls and sending and receiving text messages – features that have been available in virtually all mobile phones since the early 1990s. A recent study of students' usage patterns found that, "most respondents use mobile phones to communicate with their parents/relatives" (Adomi, 2006, p1). Additionally, "Many consumers do not use many of the functions available on 2G phones, suggesting that they do not think they need 'advanced' services." (Crabtree, J. et al, 2003, p4). Yet around 2.5 million new mobile phones, digital cameras, and 1.25 million MP3 players will be purchased in the UK alone, this year (Energy Saving Trust, 2006, p2). As Edgerton (2006) points out, despite huge advances in the technical specification of devices over the last 100 years, the actual functions they perform in people's lives remain relatively unchanged. A gramophone and MP3 player, for instance, both allow people to listen to music, so there is no great revolution involved in going from one to the other, and far less so in moving from one MP3 player to another.

Overall then, the magazine appears to be using sex and images of masculinity to persuade men to buy new gadgets, or buy replacement gadgets with new features, whether or not these gadgets are necessary or improve the quality of people's lives in any way. There is, of course, a downside to unnecessary purchasing, as the following sections discuss.

Manufacturing hazards

Electronic consumer goods are frequently manufactured using hazardous materials, and environmentally hazardous methods. Beryllium, for instance, is mixed with copper to form alloys used in electronic equipment. Exposure to beryllium dust can cause Acute

Beryllium Disease, and about 30% of sufferers will develop the incurable Chronic Beryllium Disease (Fields, 2001, p76).

Cadmium too, which is “highly toxic to plants, animals and humans” (Greenpeace, 2006, pp2-3), is often used in batteries for mobile phones and laptop computers. On industrial exposure to cadmium, the World Health Organisation points out:

The kidney is considered the critical target organ for the general population as well as for occupationally exposed populations. Chronic obstructive airway disease is associated with long-term high-level occupational exposure by inhalation. There is some evidence that such exposure to cadmium may contribute to the development of cancer of the lung. (WHO ,1992, p17 / section 1.7.1)

Hexavalent chromium, described as “highly toxic even at low concentrations, and in some cases carcinogenic” (Greenpeace, 2006 p4), is used as a corrosion inhibitor. Exposure can lead to cancer of the lungs or to the rare cancer of the sinonasal cavity. (IARC, 1990, p5)

These are just some examples of the compounds that are found in electronic devices. Whilst their manufacture and use in manufacturing are generally being subjected to more stringent controls, the continued risks of exposing workers to these types of compounds are clearly apparent. The effects on the family livelihoods of workers who develop conditions after prolonged exposure to these compounds, cannot be underestimated. This is especially true when one considers that the manufacture of a lot of these types of goods takes place in the poorer parts of the world.

Electronic waste disposal

A further problem with the endless cycle of upgrades that people subject themselves to, is the problem of how to dispose of their existing equipment. Some figures indicate the extent of the electronic waste (e-waste) problem:

674 million mobile phones were sold worldwide in 2004 - 30 percent more than in 2003.

The average lifespan of computers in developed countries has dropped from six years in 1997 to just two years in 2005. (Greenpeace, 2006)

Most modern industrial countries are aware of the problems that all this e-waste can cause to the environment, and there are initiatives in place to ensure that it is disposed of correctly, such as the European Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment directive (Europa, 2003). But what happens in practice is that container loads of old PCs and mobile phones are still being shipped to undeveloped nations where the goods are often dismantled or smelted in people’s back yards to extract the most valuable constituent parts. Lagos, Nigeria, for instance, is a major export destination for e-waste. Up to 50 million tonnes of computers each year are disposed of in dumping grounds around the

city (Carney, 2006, p1). Even low estimates (there are no precise data available) give a figure of the equivalent of 100,000 used PCs passing through Lagos alone each month (Schmidt, 2006, p234). Not only are people exposing themselves to huge risks by trying to extract the precious metals in non-commercial smelting operations, they are also having a marked effect on the environment around these dumps. It is further compounded by the fact that the dumps are located in swampy areas, allowing poisonous compounds to seep into the water supply.

Costs and debt

As well as the effects on the lives and livelihoods of the people involved in the manufacture of electronic devices, who are being exposed to toxic compounds, there is an effect on the family lives of the people who feel compelled to purchase the latest upgrades: debt.

In November 2006 for instance, UK consumer credit lending grew by £1 billion – this figure excludes mortgage costs. For all debts including mortgages, the amount being borrowed by UK citizens increases by £1 million pounds every four minutes (Credit Action, 2007, p1). These figures will include consumer lending to purchase various electronic goods such as plasma TVs and computers.

Dell Computers are currently offering a gaming PC with a starting price of almost £3,400. By adding all the optional components, it is possible for the PC to reach a price of a staggering £5,811.66 (Dell, 2007). The Dell website conveniently also offers to help finance this purchase in a very enticing way:

Yes, it's really true! It's shopping made easy! Simply choose from the great range of Dell equipment available to you - from Desktops and Laptops to LCD TVs and Projectors - and when you pay with Dell Financial Services you only £10 per month [sic] for the first 12 months! (Dell 2007)

That offer would leave over £158 to pay each month for an additional three years, if the interest rate were 0%, but it is offered at an APR of 18.9%; even that figure is “dependent on credit score and may differ from typical rate shown” (Dell 2007). The latest mobile phone from Apple Computers, the iPhone, was announced in January 2007 at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, and will be offered to US consumers at \$599, tied to an airtime contract. A sixty-inch plasma TV is currently being offered for sale at £10048.25 (Redstore, 2007).

There are environmental, as well as personal costs. Increased electricity consumption can also contribute to personal debt; the average plasma television will consume four times as much electricity as the average CRT television. Additionally, the plasma device will contribute 400kg of CO₂ emissions per year, compared to 100kg for older style receivers (Coughlan, 2007, pp1-2).

These direct costs, and the hidden costs of ownership, all contribute enormously to personal debt. A lot of electronic devices will be purchased as gifts in the run-up to Christmas, yet a recent report predicts that:

Almost 30,000 personal insolvencies are expected in the first three months of 2007, of which 10,000 will be as a result of excessive Christmas spending. (Grant Thornton, 2007, p1)

Conclusions

It is clear that Stuff magazine has a number of direct and indirect effects on ecology and the environment by constantly encouraging its readers to upgrade to the latest devices using imperative and persuasive language and images. Electronic devices are presented as desirable objects and discussed as essential items for the lifestyles of the magazine's readership. Even the few articles that suggest a healthier lifestyle through better fitness, are merely attempts to persuade the readers to part with more cash, for more gadgets. The in built obsolescence of the devices is rarely discussed, yet this is what the magazine has thrived upon since it was first published by Haymarket in 1999. Regarding devices as obsolete is frequently mentioned in the magazines whereas in reality most devices that are a few years out of date could at worst be described as a little old fashioned, or lacking in certain new, yet non-essential functions. A hi-fi CD player bought 20 years ago for instance, could still play CDs today, and the melody and lyrics would be exactly the same if played on a brand new CD player. The overriding principle of the magazine would seem to be that the constant cycle of upgrading to the latest devices is to be encouraged as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. This is presented as a desirable thing to do, regardless of the cost to the environment, the misery of personal debt, or the suffering of families influenced by disease from the manufacturing or waste disposal processes involved.

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