H₂O to Go: Marketing and Materiality in the Normalization of Bottled Water

by

Kimberley De Wolff

A thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology

In conformity with the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

(September, 2007)

Copyright ©Kimberley De Wolff, 2007
Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the rise in the consumption of bottled water and the dominant narratives of normalization that seek to explain it. Commonly understood as the cumulative result of the power of marketing and misinformation, or the gullibility of ‘irrational’ consumers, the pervasive phenomenon of drinking bottled water is explained as another instance of the commodification of everything. However, these narratives contain a rather surprising omission: while it may seem obvious to state that bottled water is about bottles and water, the role of the bottles themselves in enabling the consumption of water ‘on the go’ to become such a ‘normal’ aspect of daily life is noticeably absent. I argue, by drawing upon work in consumer culture studies, sociologies of the brand, and material culture, that we need to reconsider the role of bottled water as both a brand and material object. Following the trajectories of two major brands of bottled water – Perrier and Dasani – through a content analysis of marketing and associated materials, I illustrate some of the diverse ways in which bottles, water, marketing and consumption are interrelated in the divergent and convergent trajectories of ongoing processes of normalization. In conclusion, I consider how such theoretical and empirical observations pose difficult questions and new challenges for those seeking to alter practices of consumption.
Acknowledgements

I arrived at Queen’s unsure of my interests, abilities, and even discipline; therefore, I would like to thank everyone that helped make the Sociology department my home in so many ways. Above all I extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor Martin Hand. I could not imagine focusing my endless chatter and seemingly untamable ideas into a thesis without him. Working together has forever changed the way I think about bottled water and most everything around me, but it is his unconditional support, patience and friendship that has been truly inspirational. However difficult it may be to leave, I do so with confidence. Thank you so much for everything!

I would also like to thank Vinny Mosco and Laureen Snider for their guidance and kind encouragement throughout my degree. There would have been considerably less smiling on my part without all kinds of support from Lynn O’Malley, Wendy Schuler and Michelle Ellis. I am also grateful for the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

I could not have done this without my extended ‘research team’ - all those who have sent me bottled water related materials and patiently listened to updates on the latest thesis news. A special thank you goes to my family, especially Laura De Wolff, for her friendship and excellent suggestions, and to Gregory Kirczenow, for believing in me no matter what. And finally, I would like to thank my Nalgene bottle for so faithfully encouraging me to stay hydrated throughout the writing of this thesis.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................i
Acknowledgements ..............................................................................................ii

1 (Re)Introducing Bottled Water .................................................................1
   Introduction ........................................................................................................1
   Thesis Map .........................................................................................................4
   From Niche to ‘Normal’ ......................................................................................6
   Contested Consumption ...................................................................................11
   Irrational Consumers, Marketing and (Mis)Information ................................13

2 Consumption, Marketing and Materiality ..................................................20
   Introduction .......................................................................................................20
   Consumers, Choice and Consumption ..........................................................23
   Information, Marketing and the Mediation of Things ....................................29
   Material Objects in Everyday Life .................................................................34
   Discussion: Rethinking Normalization ..........................................................39

3 A Tale of Two Bottles: Perrier and Dasani ..............................................44
   Introduction .......................................................................................................44
   Method and Materials ......................................................................................46
   I. Perrier: C’est Fou! ..........................................................................................51
       The champagne of table waters ..................................................................54
       Earth’s first soft drink .................................................................................57
       Plastic Tactics ..............................................................................................63
   II. Dasani: Can’t live without it .......................................................................70
       Origins by Design .........................................................................................71
       Introducing ‘Washed Water’ .......................................................................73
       H2NO ...........................................................................................................81
   Discussion: Marketing Practices ....................................................................85

4 Objects, Information and Normalization(s) of Bottled Water .............91
   Questioning the Objects of Marketing ..........................................................92
   The Ongoing Processes of Normalization ......................................................95
   Redefining Hydration: The Challenge of Changing Consumption ..........97
   Final Thoughts: Practice-Oriented Provision .............................................100

References ........................................................................................................103
1

(Re)Introducing Bottled Water

Bottled water has become a global social phenomenon, one of the most successful products of recent times (Mittelstaedt, 2006)

Introduction

As the ‘ubiquitous commodity’ (Lazarus, 2007), it would appear that bottled water needs little introduction. A staple in kitchens, classrooms and boardrooms, at festivals and sports events, bottles are carried in cars, purses, lunch bags, backpack pockets. Dasani, Perrier, Evian and Ethos; Nestle, Fiji and Aquafina: with promises of health, beauty and a ‘pure life,’ bottles and logos figure in advertisements on billboards and televisions, in magazines and subway tunnels, and alongside advice on ‘staying hydrated.’ Bottled water is everywhere. A mass of information detailing the negative aspects of the phenomenon,
however, is becoming equally pervasive. Appearing simultaneously as ‘the icon of the age’ and ‘the bane of our time’ (Toronto Star, 2007), from questionable safety test results to the environmental and ethical impact of an ever-greater multitude of plastic bottles shipped and discarded globally, there is a growing consensus that bottled water is ‘the next environmental sin’ or at the very least, not ‘worth the price’ (Kingston, 2007). That people continue to drink it anyway, and in such large amounts poses a perplexing problem for activists, academics and concerned consumers as they try to envisage ways of changing people’s behaviour. Through a critical analysis of marketing, consumption and associated narratives, the aim of this thesis is to pursue a set of theoretical questions underpinning existing accounts of the ‘normalization’ of bottled water, and in so doing, challenge our current conceptions of what changing consumer behaviour involves in relation to practice and provision.

From governments to a wide variety of activist organizations, the effort to change patterns of consumption is increasingly on the agenda, and there is a tendency, especially among such groups, to blame corporate marketing and ensuing misinformation for the recent rise in the popularity of bottled water. That the most popular manifestation of this ‘icon’ appears in single-serving branded plastic bottles is in itself indicative of a multitude of concerns surrounding contemporary ‘consumer culture’: the power of brand marketing, the privatisation of provision, individualization and growing health and environmental concerns. Indeed, bottled water is at the centre of debates over such pressing issues where the only consensus is on the question of the ubiquity of the phenomenon. And since the late 1970s in particular, the consumption of bottled water has increased exponentially: in Canada consumption has exploded from less than a litre per capita in 1980 to over 60 today (Westell, 1980; IBWA, 2007).
Despite the product’s success and how well it encapsulates contemporary concerns with commodification, risk and the environment, bottled water has received very little attention from the academic world. While there is a considerable body of research devoted to the study of water more generally, the focus tends towards broad questions of provision and public responsibility. Anecdotally, bottled water appears to be a way of managing contradictions between the multifarious meanings associated with water and distrust in water provision (Strang, 2004). Furthermore, bottled water appears to embody some of the risks and uncertainty associated with contemporary social organization, issues regarding the production of ‘bads’, which are of unquestionable importance and deserving considerable attention in their own right (Beck, 1992; Lupton, 1999). Elsewhere, as the ‘pure commodity’ it exemplifies the ‘absurdity’ of capitalism and the failure of governments to fulfill obligations (Wilk, 2006; Gleick et al. 2004), the power of corporations over consumers, and the continued encroachment of the private into even the most mundane aspects of daily life (Barlow and Clarke, 2004; Clarke 2005; Bouguerra, 2006).

Considering such a variety of both popular and academic narratives surrounding the phenomenon however, suggests a rather surprising omission: while it may seem obvious to state that bottled water is about bottles and water, bottles themselves are noticeably absent as accounts overwhelmingly focus on water alone. While bottled water does appear deserving of description in terms of marketing coups or the manufactured ‘needs’ endemic to contemporary consumer society, it is important to note that our icon is also a material object, a bottle of water, rather than a person or information alone. And for many, it is such material things that are integral to the very possibility of carrying out, sustaining and transforming the ‘normal’ practices of everyday life (Latour, 1992; Warde,
2005; Shove et al. 2007). As such, considering the visible ubiquity of a product as synonymous with its normalization is to underestimate the ongoing work involved in becoming and remaining ‘normal,’ and most significantly, exactly what changing current consumption patterns might entail.

But, as indicated, our understandings of bottled water are also highly mediated; in common with a profusion of contemporary objects, in many ways – as statistics, advice, advertisements and the brand among others - bottled water circulates as information (Cohen and Rutsky, 2005). Moreover, Lash and Lury (2007) argue that with the brand, consumer goods themselves are increasingly becoming media as culture assumes a new materiality. Mundane and abundant, aggressively marketed and ethically charged, bottled water stands at the intersection of material objects and information. If bottled water is an “exceptionally clear example of the power of branding to make commodities a meaningful part of everyday life” (Wilk, 2006: 305), how might the marketing of bottled water be more specifically related to its normalization? And how might bottles themselves be implicated in reproducing or transforming the phenomenon? By following two brands of bottled water and associated campaigns, this thesis explores such questions in an attempt to consider bottled water as both branded and informational, mundane and material: as an object of marketing entangled within ordinary practices.

**Thesis Map**

The remainder of this opening chapter situates current consumption trends within a brief history of bottled water as a commodity. Concentrating on the period of intense activity from the late 1970s to the present, this is followed by a critical discussion of popular narratives that points toward key issues and assumptions concerning what consumption
entails, how objects relate to it, and how the role of marketing is understood. In chapter two, I situate these three themes more specifically within debates from relevant literature, including resources from consumer culture studies, accounts of consumption influenced by science and technology studies, and sociological accounts of brand marketing and mediation. Drawing attention to both objects and practices, the ensuing discussion considers various conceptualizations of ‘things’ as media, including recent work on information, design and developments in brand marketing. I argue that navigating the dynamic interactions between multiple facets of the phenomenon necessitates an approach that grants particular attention to the relationships between consumer products, flows of information and everyday practices in ongoing processes of normalization.

Following these ideas through empirically, in chapter three I focus more specifically on marketing as one component of these processes. Here I present two cases of normalization – those of Perrier and Dasani – through a content analysis of advertising campaigns, industry publications, news coverage and relevant magazine content. While the Perrier and Dasani stories parallel many of the changes in marketing identified by others (Lury, 1996; 2004; Arvidsson, 2006), in demonstrating the diversity of the phenomenon they also suggest how the bottled water phenomenon itself has, and continues to change. In particular, Perrier’s transition from glass to plastic and the ‘design’ of Dasani affirm the view that while brand marketing does involve multi rather than unidirectional exchange, such flows of information have material effects, and bottles themselves help fill the gaps where conventional explanations fail or the phenomenon takes unexpected turns.

Finally, chapter four revisits the original theoretical questions concerning the objects of marketing, consumption and normalization. Returning to the accounts
presented in the next section of this opening chapter, I contend that what appears as the normalization of bottled water is better understood as ongoing processes of reintroduction, where marketing, products and practices interact with and redefine one another in quite different contexts. Furthermore, in providing another point of access to the product, recent manifestations of the brand permit increasingly rapid, arguably continuous, change as marketing influences consumer practices and is itself remade in return. As marketing appears to be assuming a form that more closely approximates such an ongoing process of normalization, information becomes embedded in bottles and entangled in the practices in ways that are not so easily reversed. This produces a set of quite different challenges in terms of encouraging sustainable consumption, while effectively transforming questions of provision.

From Niche to ‘Normal’

Twenty years ago, most Americans bought bottles of water only when they feared contamination in the water supply. Today bottled water is hugely popular and aggressively advertised, in large part because of the entry in the last decade of Pepsico, with its Aquafina brand, and the Coca-Cola Company, with Dasani. (Ives, 2004)

The idea of bottling water is certainly not new, and neither are recent trends the first incidence of its widespread commodification. In the 20th century alone bottled water has figured as health tonic, status symbol, tap water replacement and even a beauty product. While water has been part of leisure, health and medical traditions for millennia, in the late 18th century ‘taking the waters’ at elaborate resorts in Europe, and later North America, was a well established practice; drinking or bathing in medicinal waters was part of the fashionable vacation for the elite. (Hembry, 1997). Bottles allowed guests to
take water home with them, but were more widely distributed and sold to those lacking
the resources for resort visits (Munsey, 1970; Chapelle, 2005). Following such traditions,
the legal permit for bottling Perrier commercially was issued in 1863 and Evian followed.
Available in distinct labelled bottles by 1844, over 7 million bottles of New York’s
Saratoga spring water were produced in 1850 alone (Munsey, 1970). The fame of such
waters was widespread. By 1785 water was being imported from Europe (Ebner, 2004)
while Poland springs water from Maine was later exported to Cairo and Melbourne
providing precedent for long distance, if not global trade.

With the delivery of ‘tea water,’ for many, spring water was also a necessary part
of more mundane practices as the growth of cities precipitated declining water quality
(Blake, 1956). In common with many North American urban centres, Toronto’s first
supply of running water was provided by private companies. The city accepted
responsibility for water supply in 1871 after years of debate and complaints, but the early
public system remained plagued with problems, with residents referring to the water as
‘drinkable sewage’ (City of Toronto, 2007). However, with infrastructure upgrades and
the chlorination of public supplies in urban centres after 1910, tap water assumed a new
status of safety and convenience (Goubert, 1989). In many accounts, along with the
waning popularity of spa resorts, bottled water was largely rendered obsolete, or at least
inconvenient (Munsey, 1970; Chapelle, 2005). As with ‘water cooler’ jugs today, delivery
continued for those with inadequate supplies, and bottles remained important resources in
emergencies, but were otherwise not a usual source of everyday drinking water in North
America. Carbonated waters such as Perrier were promoted as drink mixers, while Evian
was only available in pharmacies until the 1960s.
Over the past thirty years, however, both bottled water consumption and the industry have undergone considerable transformation. Still qualifying as a ‘niche’ product, in 1980 sales of bottled water were limited, with 90% based in Quebec, and the remainder attributed to young ‘trend-setters’ and older health conscious residents of major urban centres (Canadian Press, 1979). A local bottler was comfortable claiming that there were “only two geographical markets for spring water in Canada” as the good quality of water outside of Toronto and Montreal precluded development elsewhere (Stephens, 1978). Canadian per capita consumption has since climbed dramatically from less than a litre in 1980, to 26 litres in 2000, and 60 in 2005, with almost 20% of Canadians now drinking bottled water exclusively (Westell, 1980; ICBWA, 2007; Kingston, 2007; Clarke, 2005). Bottled water’s corresponding position as the fastest growing beverage category in the country is predominantly due to the popularity of low-cost rather than luxury brands. Recent reports indicating that current sales outpace coffee, tea, apple juice and milk, further suggest that bottled water is increasingly being relied upon in everyday contexts (Rodwan, 2005, Clarke, 2005). Whether mineral, spring or purified, bottled water is no longer limited to niche markets or luxury status, but is perceived to be a normal and necessary part of everyday life.

Of course, while there is a global trend towards increasing consumption, this is not a uniform or even process. The developing world, especially where public infrastructure is lacking, presents very different, if not unrelated trajectories and issues (see Bouguerra, 2006). Bottled water consumption has remained more constant in continental Europe, and interestingly, Quebec, whereas, the United States and Canada, the primary focus of this project, are experiencing particularly dramatic transformation. Although the factors outlined above clearly represent substantial change in themselves,
Canadian consumption trails the United States with 90 litres per capita in 2003, and long-established markets such as Italy, where consumption reached 181 litres per person in 2005 (ICBWA, 2007; BBWP, 2007). In conjunction with recent health trends, the water industry views this ‘gap’ as an opportunity for expansion and investment:

Bottled water is in many respects the ideal category for beverage manufacturers across the globe. It is characterized by high gross margins, the ability to segment the market, the possibility of trading up, and high growth (Rodwan, 2005).

Indeed, bottled water is estimated to sell for between 240 and 10 000 times more than tap water, and predictions for continued double digit growth in Canada are focused on the reprocessed water segment (Rodwan, 2005; AAFC, 2007).

This increase in the volume of purchases coincides with the reorganization of the global bottled water industry. While Canada has transitioned from a net importer to a major exporter of bottled water, trade remains reciprocal, meaning that water is shipped both to and from the United States but also countries such as the United Kingdom. Consistent with worldwide trends, the Canadian market is increasingly dominated by the food and beverage industry ‘giants’ such Nestle, Danone, and more recently, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. Such large corporations, with equally formidable marketing budgets, continue to acquire smaller bottlers transforming what was once a predominantly diverse industry of local bottlers supplying limited regional markets. Coca-Cola’s interests are not limited to management, but, similar to selling syrup for soft drink production, making big business of providing mineral packets to its existing bottling plants. Like Pepsi’s Aquafina, the resulting Dasani water is not from a spring, or even a single source. What

---

1 Danone alone currently controls 70% of the water industry in Quebec, the province leading Canadian production.
2 For example, Nestle now owns Poland Springs, Perrier, and Montclair among others, while Coca-Cola has recently acquired distribution rights for Evian in North America (Rodwan 2005).
Coke describes as ‘washed water’ is bottled municipal tap water from places including Calgary and Brampton (Clarke, 2005). Currently representing the source of 25% of bottled water sold in Canada, the use of city water as a basis for production is an increasingly standard practice (BWAC). It is not surprising that in their 2000 annual report, Coca-Cola claimed to be “redefining how consumers get hydrated” (Barlow and Clarke, 2002).³

As these changes to industry and consumption patterns might suggest, bottled water is increasingly perceived to be both normal and necessary:

The boom in consumption of bottled water has moved the product beyond the niche market and into the mainstream as bottled water has become a basic staple to many Canadians (AAFC, 2007)

A ‘basic staple,’ the ‘ubiquitous accessory,’ the iconic half-litre bottles are everywhere: “Executives sip them in business meetings, parents pack them in their kid’s school lunches, college students slurp them in class and shoppers tote them around stores” (Kingston, 2007). There are water contests, Aqua bars, and a ‘Fine Waters’ website recommending food pairings. Even away from the dinner table serving tap water to guests is if not a faux pas, commonly accompanied by an apology. Bottled water is a mainstay of health advice, where carrying bottles is promoted as a means of encouraging adequate ‘hydration.’ And people are drinking so much of it that concerns have surfaced about children no longer receiving adequate fluoride from municipal supplies.

Added to the popularity of less-exotic brands, is the very possibility of labelling an entire category of single-serving bottles as ‘tap water replacement’ in reference to non-

³ Beverage exclusivity contracts are further limiting not only brand selection, but the availability of alternative water sources. Coke’s contract with Queen’s University, for example, is rumoured to include the right to remove public drinking fountains from select areas.
emergency situations. While bottled water continues as a mainstay for emergencies, and jugs continue to be regularly delivered to offices and homes, it is where single serving bottles replace not only soft drinks or alcohol but tap water itself that the contemporary consumption of bottled water most radically departs from past trends. It is arguably with this development that bottled water becomes such a contentious issue, and it is the proliferation of such single-serving bottles that are the focus of this thesis. Over the past decade our notion of drinking water has ‘changed radically’; it has become a question of who is not drinking bottled water.

**Contested Consumption**

Bottled water’s iconic status is not only one of health and vitality. Along with the general consensus that it is a normal component of daily life, the phenomenon has elicited a multitude of responses from groups contesting its consumption in terms of (un)sustainability, safety and encroaching privatization. Given that a quarter of the 167.8 billion litres of water consumed annually is bottled, shipped and traded globally for prices rivalling gasoline (Kingston, 2007), this is not surprising. More specifically, sustainability issues, while including water table depletion, are predominantly related to the production, shipping and disposal of bottles rather than water. Concerns about energy use and waste production - an estimated 88% of bottles are not recycled - are compounded by reciprocal trade and the increasing popularity of single-serving ‘multi-packs’ (Rodwan 2005; Kingston, 2007). On the safety front, the regulation of bottled water as a food is the source of concern about health standards, given that regulatory standards for bottled water are less stringent that those for municipal supplies (City of Toronto, 2007). Other regulatory questions draw the focus to water rights, with bottlers selling water for high
prices paying little or nothing for city and groundwater extraction permits. Concern over private profit from what many consider a public good lands bottled water solidly in the middle of enduring debates between water as a ‘human right’ and water as a ‘resource’ to be traded as any other. Moreover, in providing evidence that people are willing to pay, activist groups argue that bottled water paves the way for the privatization of public supplies and increased inequality based on access to water.

These concerns do not exist in isolation: issues of safety and risk are exacerbated by questions of sustainability as bottles figure as both potential protection from, and a source of, pollution; problems of privatization include cost, taxation and questions of universal access, but also the potential quality and environmental consequences incurred when profit rather than equitable provision is the priority. Accordingly, many negative responses are based on multiple counts of social and environmental injustice. Canadian organizations such as the David Suzuki Foundation, the Sierra Club, and the United Church are promoting tap water as both an ethically sound and environmentally friendly way to meet health needs. Others, including the Canadian Environmental Law Association and the Sierra Legal Defence Fund, are calling for increased regulation in terms of both water standards and water rights, while CorpWatch Canada and the Polaris Institute are using questions of safety, inequality and sustainability as ammunition in their anti-corporate campaigns.

Municipal governments have also taken a definite anti-bottled water stance, arguing for the superiority of tap water on grounds of cost, safety and reliability. Along with an advertising campaign promoting tap water as ‘pure’ and ‘convenient’, the City of Toronto has distributed labelled refillable bottles, while the city of Vancouver has filed multiple lawsuits against a Brita filter commercial that equates tap water with toilet water.
Although falling short of voicing specific concerns over the threat of utility privatization, general impact on public trust is an important issue. As these examples from both activist and government bodies suggest, in forming a basis for questioning the public responsibility for drinking water provision, the exploitation of resources, and the environmental consequences of consumption, bottled water engenders moral and ethical debate in ways that garden hoses or bottles of orange juice do not. Understanding why bottled water in particular has garnered such attention requires consideration of both water and bottles.

**Irrational Consumers, Marketing and (Mis)Information**

Having outlined some of the main shifts commonly associated with the rising consumption of bottled water, the following section aims to identify and begin to critically assess some of the theoretical assumptions that figure in the dominant narrative positioning of the product. An abundance of tests, theories and arguments have been and continue to be deployed in various attempts to explain the product’s popularity. As already alluded to, such explanations provided by consumers, marketers and other commentators revolve around central themes of health, safety, purity, and convenience. While pointing towards key components of the bottled water phenomenon, I want to argue that the tendency to focus exclusively on issues of public perception, especially as distorted by corporate marketing is problematic and provides an important basis for further investigation.

The popularity of bottled water in North America is most commonly attributed to perceptions that it is superior in safety and taste (Clarke, 2005), characteristics that factor as the basis for various investigations of water quality. Whether examining mineral,
spring or purified versions, attempts to identify particular health benefits or risks through scientific analysis rarely reveal substantial differences between bottled and tap water, and taste tests are equally ambiguous (Wilk, 2006; Clarke, 2005). If anything, bottled water is found to exceed health guidelines in terms of trace elements, bacteria and other contaminants (see Pip 2000; Dabeka et al, 2002). The mainstream media framing of such results by the question of ‘whether or not’ bottled water is a justifiable expense, often leads to the conclusion that bottled water is a ‘waste of money’ (Doole, 2001). The situation is all the more difficult to explain given the seeming abundance of fresh water in Canada. Noting that Vancouver’s municipal water is direct from a mountain reservoir, a city councillor has explicitly argued that ‘no one has a reason to drink bottled water’ (Fong, 2006), a sentiment shared by a wide variety of concerned organizations. In terms of safety and taste, alternatives remain obvious, and bottled water is an unnecessary expense, or more seriously, an environmental and social liability. As critics are quick to point out, Evian is ‘naive’ spelled backwards.

That people are buying it anyway, and in unprecedented amounts, challenges governments, activists, and academics alike to account for ‘irrational’ consumer behaviour. From newspaper anecdotes to academic books, this seemingly paradoxical popularity is most often attributed to the power of marketing campaigns to convince people to behave in such an irrational manner. Rising levels of consumption represent ‘an amazing marketing coup,’ the result of advertising campaigns based on health, or ‘aggressive publicity hype’ (Barlow and Clarke, 2002:146; Bouguerra, 2006: 136). A source of misinformation about the value of the product or working to undermine trust in public supplies, marketing is seen to create a false sense of need:
First they have capitalized on fear, by taking every advantage to raise doubts about the safety and reliability of tap water. Then they have offered a reassuring solution: their product, a ‘pure,’ ‘safe,’ ‘healthy,’ and necessary alternative. This strategy so vigorously pursued by the industry points to an underlying manipulation of the consumer (Clarke 2005: 66, my italics).

Imbuing the product with desirable characteristics while demonstrating that other options are inadequate, the 2003 tag line for a leading brand exemplifies this process in action: “the label says Fiji because it’s not bottled in Cleveland.” The conclusion seems obvious: if consumers are spending considerable amounts of money on a product that is not demonstrably ‘better’ than alternatives, persuasive marketing must be to blame.

Explanations focused on safety and marketing are supported by particular constructions of the consumer, corresponding assumptions concerning the nature of the problem and, ultimately, conceptualizations of normalization and consumption. Presented with images of health and vitality, promises of safety and reminders of risk, consumers are ‘tricked’ into purchasing what is essentially tap water. The very possibility of stating that “a whole industry has been built on scaring people into believing that what comes out of their taps is dangerous” (Clarke, 2005), is dependent on a degree of consumer compliance, whether consciously chosen or not. Persuaded, seduced, ‘duped,’ scared, or even ‘snookered,’ the consumer emerges as the naive ‘victim’ or ‘fool.’ As the victim, the consumer is relegated to a passive role, subject to manipulation according to corporate will. As the fool, the consumer is representative of autonomous individuals making ill-informed or irrational decisions, often with no collective sensibility, and no trust or enduring relation to public institutions. The problem is corporate power or misinformation in place of other social and cultural norms and values.

Such understandings of consumers and the ‘problem’ are particularly evident as the basis of anti-bottled water campaigns and related strategies for change. Consider a
recent City of Toronto advertisement which, aiming to convert bottle users back to the
tap, provides information on water quality and the following caution: “Don’t be fooled.
Be Smart.” The message being that those relying on bottles water are ‘fools,’ and given
the ‘correct’ information, the consumer no longer has an excuse for making anything
other than the ‘smart’ decision. Other initiatives commonly rely on similar combinations
of education and moral coercion. Provided with the ‘accurate’ information about water
quality, reminded of the dire consequences of purchases, and motivated beyond
individual benefit by collective moral and ethical considerations, the naive consumer is
armed against unsound decisions or corporate manipulation. Previously passive ‘victims’
and irrational ‘fools’ alike can be transformed into responsible citizens: “ultimately,
citizens will have to decide for themselves whether they are being manipulated, lied to or
snookered” (Clarke, 2005). These reactions imply that as corporate power, marketing and
misinformation have created a need for bottled water, this can be similarly reverse
engineered with information provided on ethically or at least ‘rationally’ sound grounds.

Contradictions become especially apparent when attempting to reconcile
consumer ‘victims’ or ‘fools’ with an industry position that wavers between claiming to
simply ‘meet consumer need’ and celebrating the successful creation of just that. Industry
reports, representatives and newspaper business sections answer the question of rising
consumption in terms of simply meeting pre-existing needs. Whether enabling people to
avoid chemicals or calories, this is practically taken to the point of a public service:
providing ‘what consumers want’ in terms of choice, content and convenience. In this
scenario, the consumer is neither victim nor fool but rationally pursues self-defined
interests. There is, however, a parallel culture of self-congratulation for a success that
“may rank as one of the great triumphs of marketing over substance” (Ebner, 2004). In
contrast to popular magazine advertisements featuring pristine glaciers, promises of beauty and people happily engaged in healthy activities, those in industry publications, such as *Beverage World* boast of pure profits:

Along with Coca-Cola’s recent claim to be ‘redefining hydration’, Nestle’s own history of bottled water credits success to plastic bottles and “an advertising campaign emphasizing vitality.” Nestle’s senior vice president of global marketing has reportedly stated that “after all, we sell water...so we have to be clever” (Clarke 2005), affirming
both the crucial role of marketing in shaping need and the attribution of success to intentional individual actions.

The conflicting industry perspectives demonstrate quite succinctly that attempts to explain the rising consumption of bottled water quickly lead to questions of ‘need’ and its relationship to normalization in consumer culture. One observer points out that “It’s difficult to know whether to applaud the brilliance of corporate salesmen, or lament the gullibility of consumers” (Toronto Star, 2007). As this confusion indicates, pitting ‘clever’ marketers against consumer ‘fools’ does little to explain how bottled water has become so normal. In essence, the framing of the phenomenon in such terms reveals a problematic reduction of the diversity and often habitual nature of consumption practices in their social and cultural contexts to the self-interested actions of autonomous individuals. Recreating familiar divisions between passive / active consumers or producer / consumer led explanations (Slater 1997; Lury, 1996), the tendency to turn to either corporate marketing or consumer choices provides little insight into how such factors might be interrelated.

Falling short of accounting for such relationships explicitly, dominant narratives work on the assumption that normalization is the unified, direct and inevitable result of marketing, media and the dissemination of information. What ensues is an equally linear increase in the purchase of bottled water. Based on similar assumptions, (re)shaping consumption practices becomes a question of providing consumers with convincing reasons for acting in one way or another: “bottled-water companies are winning the marketing war and municipalities haven't even bothered to dress for battle” (CBC, 2007). In this ‘contest’ of information, responses are formed as attempts to discredit common grounds for considering bottled water a necessity. However, the perception that
consumers are simply receiving the ‘wrong message’ is problematic. Briefly, the idea of what media are and what mediation entails are reduced to the means of facilitating such linear transfers, preferably delivering information ‘intact,’ providing little space for either content or relationships to be negotiated or contested (Lury, 2004). Imagining the relations between producers and consumers as unidirectional flows of information creates an overly simplistic model that does not account for the dynamic nature of both marketing and bottled water consumption.

Furthermore, the focus on separating ‘myth from reality’ or ‘pure drink from pure hype,’ privileges a particular version of what constitutes (or should constitute) the product’s value - namely water quality in testable terms - at the expense of other kinds of considerations. Glossing over arguably defining attributes such as ‘convenience’ in relation to complex and interrelated practices in daily life, and treating the product as exactly that – the end result or simply a symptom – results in the failure to consider bottles as more than mere receptacles for water. Neglecting the contingent and dynamic aspects of what bottled water is and does precludes the possibility of considering how the product itself might be entangled with social relations in ways beyond the control of those aiming to inform the process. As such, the bottled water phenomenon may indeed require further introduction: one that demands a re-examination of both the marketing and materiality of bottles in ongoing processes of normalization and change.

4 While out of the scope of this thesis, another important issue is that of ‘expertise’ and ‘trust’ in relation to scientific information. In terms of what has become known as the ‘public understanding of science’ there are interrelated problems here concerning what could be meant by ‘accurate information’, how specific models of ‘the public’ are constructed in scientific discourse, and on what kinds of basis scientific credibility can be established. See Barry, 2001; Yearley, 2005.
Rather than simply meeting needs, artefacts are actively implicated in creating new practices and, with them, new patterns of demand (Shove et. al 2007: 10)

The global information culture for its part witnesses a new autonomy for objects, which in their global flows tend to escape from the intentions, from the sovereignty of the subject (Lash, 2002: viii)

Introduction

The assumptions and contradictions identified in the opening chapter not only deserve further attention, they exemplify long-standing problems and debates surrounding the characteristics of ‘consumer culture’. Accordingly, this chapter is organized around the unpacking and reconsideration of a selection of related concerns about consumers, marketing and objects arising from the popular narratives of bottled water consumption and their theoretical counterparts. Such a discussion, however, is necessarily caught up in more enduring questions concerning the very nature of consumption and what exactly the normalization of a product might entail. In situating the bottled water phenomenon in this context while aiming to work towards potential solutions, I draw on resources from three
areas of theoretical and empirical research: consumer culture studies, object-centered accounts of consumption influenced by science and technology studies, and more recent sociological work on brand marketing and mediation. What hopefully emerges is a productive account of the interrelationships between consumption, bottles, water and marketing that provides a rather different approach to examining normalization processes from those based on notions of irrational behaviour, misinformation or corporate marketing in isolation.

Following chapter one, three assumptions underlying dominant narratives emerge as especially problematic on theoretical and empirical grounds. The first, caught up in questions of autonomy, is that consumers are ‘fools’ tricked by advertising. As Arvidsson contends, even marketing industry literature concedes that consumers are not easily persuaded by advertising alone (cited in Lury, 2004; see also Thrift, 2005). Passive accounts of the consumer are further challenged by the appropriation of products in ways other than intended (as simple as refilling a bottle with tap water), the considerable anti-bottled water responses, and more significantly, by ‘use’ and ‘practice’ focused approaches that do not confine consumption to acquisition or to an outcome of individual behaviour (Warde, 2005). The second area of contention concerns marketing and information. Whether blamed or lauded for distorting consumer understanding and needs, marketing is primarily conceived in terms of linear flows of (mis)information, for the most part reducible to advertising as ideology. Such a reaffirmation of consumers as information receivers and the positioning of consumption as the endpoint of production is seriously challenged by studies of brand marketing as a dynamic process of consumer-oriented exchange, a transition ‘from representation to flows’ (Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006; Lash and Lury 2007: 112). Finally, the limited conception of exactly what is
consumed is problematic by omission. Understandings of what objects such as consumer products do are largely confined to the carrying of symbolic meaning and the communication of that meaning to others or the provision of consumer choice. Elsewhere, bottles are an environmental problem or a source of contamination, but otherwise simply containers for water whose value becomes a matter of testable quality versus price. Overlooking the range of potential understandings and uses surrounding bottled water, this stands in opposition to a substantial body of work emphasizing that things – with respective histories, lives and even agencies – are implicated in communication, forming relationships, constructing identity and shaping the practices of everyday life (Appadurai, 1986; Dant, 2004; Latour, 1992; Lury, 1996; Miller, 1998; Shove et al. 2007).

Even from such a brief sketch, taken together such issues point towards the potentially dynamic connections between things, information, and consumption practices. Suggesting interrelationships between normalization and marketing as ongoing processes, I take the position that things and what they do are important for understanding consumption. While there are many ways of approaching issues of consumption, this chapter develops two more specific lines of inquiry: one that approaches the normalization of mundane things in relation to the practices of everyday life, (Warde, 2005; Hand and Shove, 2007; Shove et al. 2007) and the other, on ‘new’ types of objects, focuses on brands, mediation and the circulation of consumer goods as information (Lash, 2002; Lury 2004; Lash and Lury, 2007). Mundane and branded, material and highly informational, in many ways bottled water in the present moment stands at the intersections of these positions where shared concerns with design, movements, and the interrelationships between objects and mediation emerge.
Consumers, Choice and Consumption

As stated in chapter one, with many confused over the popularity of bottled water despite the lack of concrete evidence demonstrating it is ‘worth’ the price, consumers are often blamed for making ‘irrational’ decisions. Beginning with a brief outline of key issues from a consumer culture studies perspective, this section connects the consumer ‘fool’ to discussions of need, autonomy and choice in the context of individualization and increasingly differentiated production and market segmentation. However such a focus promotes a particular conceptualization of consumption as acquisition that is challenged by theories of consumption based on use and practice (Warde, 2005). If not mutually exclusive positions, these tensions have important implications for understanding the normalization of bottled water, suggesting that it cannot be adequately understood as simply the increased purchase of commodified water by consumers ‘duped’ systemically or otherwise.

It is commonly understood that capitalism is reproduced through expansion, enabled by the successful development of new markets and products contingent upon corresponding manufactured growth in demand. This is the familiar selling of always increasing amounts of goods and services in the name of growth-equals-progress. True to this pattern, bottled water is held as exemplary of the logic of a contemporary consumer society characterized by relentless commodification (Wilk, 2006), where all aspects of life are increasingly organized and understood through consumption. While these attributes are not in themselves new – they are arguably entangled with the very origins of modernity itself – consumption is thought to be permeating everyday life in unprecedented ways: identity and values emerge as materialistic functions of consumption, freedom is synonymous with individual choice and private life, and even
resistance is something to be commodified (Bauman 2000; Featherstone, 2006; Slater, 1997). Corporate marketing and advertising are essential in sustaining this intensified consumption by constructing the requisite demand whose failure to be satisfied is not only systemic but necessary: “it is the system of production that requires our needs both to be insatiable and yet always to look to commodities for their satisfaction” (Slater, 1997: 100, my italics). In falsely representing promises of value as seemingly intrinsic properties of objects, marketing and advertising work to obscure these social relations of production, thus creating the ‘false’ needs endemic to consumer society.

From such a perspective, the commodification of water in bottled form represents another, perhaps even inevitable, instance of corporate expansion transforming the most mundane aspects of the everyday into privately provided and individually branded packages. Convinced that bottled water is ‘pure’, possesses mythical properties that are inherently ‘better for you,’ or is a necessary accessory to the ‘healthy life,’ consumers are persuaded to pay vastly inflated prices for something available for much less if not free elsewhere. As in Barlow’s description, irrational choices are those of manipulated consumers unaware of the interconnected origins of both the product and the (mis)construction of their corresponding need for it. Taken to the extreme, bottled water is a sign of capitalism ‘gone too far,’ the enclosure of a ‘water commons,’ and the culmination of privatization representing “the commodification of life itself” (Barlow and Clarke 2002: 86). Following a less alarmist variation, it is yet another example of corporations winning contests between private and public provision, where the popularity of bottled water provides further confirmation that whether looking for a healthy beverage or a safe or better tasting alternative, solutions are sought out and provided in packaged commodity form (Wilk, 2006).
Indeed, Bauman posits that life is increasingly understood as a series of problems to which solutions can and must be found in purchasable format (in Lury 1996: 50). But neither the problems nor their respective remedies exist independently; instead, “needs are defined by society as needs for its products” (Slater, 1997: 128). Doubly targets of social pressure, needs are influenced specifically, as through the advertising of particular goods, and more generally, in being predominantly satisfiable by commodities. The highly differentiated niche and lifestyle marketing that accompanies shifts to flexible production “not only identifies and targets existing lifestyles, but rather produces them by organizing consumers according to meaningful patterns, constructed and distributed through design, advertising and media” (Slater, 1997: 191; Featherstone, 2006; Thrift, 2005). Both needs and consumers are created and shaped, as marketing is not just a means of imbuing products with ‘value’ and a sense of necessity, but actively involved in the production of consumers themselves.

While declaring ‘manipulation’ alone or insinuating that consumer ‘fools’ incontestably take marketing at face value would obviously be overly simplistic, assuming reflexive self-critical consumers does not imply autonomy. For Bauman contemporary consumers fail to connect critique to larger mechanisms beyond personal concerns. The result is an invasion of the public sphere by individualized complaints aimed at individual satisfactions. Such an individualized life organized through consumption does not qualify as autonomous due to its apparent lack of alternatives and norms through which desires and needs can be (de)legitimatized (2000: 67). As “there

5 There is of course the enduring problem of critique: on what basis can ‘needs’ be judged as such? This is further complicated by Bauman’s assertion that there has been a transition from needs to wants, to the ‘wish’ which is ephemeral and completely disconnected from the reality of biological or social survival (2001). Privileging the relations of production and a particular conceptualization of ‘use value,’ an
are no autonomous individuals without an autonomous society” (2000: 40) and the sum of such private concerns does not constitute autonomous society, available choices do not constitute ‘genuine’ self-determination.

Choice, however, is routinely portrayed as an entirely positive, if not definitive virtue of consumer society. Francis Chapelle concludes his detailed natural history of bottled spring water by asserting that the ‘real’ reason people are willing to buy bottled water is choice. With an endless variety of origins and properties to suit individual tastes, “Americans have more choice in their drinking water than any other people at any time in history” (2005: 252). Choice is clearly something to be celebrated and, under assault from market consolidation, defended. For many social theorists this notion of choice is problematic, especially when needs become preferences and selection is confused with autonomy. In Bauman’s terms, “everything in a consumer society is a matter of choice, except the compulsion to choose” (2000: 73); while not everyone has equal resources or ranges of choices life has become a perpetual shopping spree in which choice is equated with individual freedom. Similarly, Slater observes that “while consumer culture appears universal because it is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone can be a consumer, it is also felt to be universal because everyone must be a consumer: this particular freedom is compulsory” (1997: 27). It is in the popular accounts of this illusory ‘land of freedom,’ where “power appears in the guise of the exercise of free will” (Bauman 2000: 34), that consumers appear as ‘fools’ for buying bottled water that is deemed unworthy of the expense. However, in place of a multitude of individual failures of rational judgment, is a fundamental contradiction between the expectation that

approach based on commodity fetishism presents similar problems of judgment while ignoring what people actually do with consumer products.
consumers act and take responsibility as autonomous individuals and the required conformity to consumption. Here the consumer fool is not the individual making irrational choices, but instead emerges systemically, in many ways unable to choose at all.

This question of autonomy to define needs and the means of their satisfaction is a central issue for studies of ‘consumer culture’ (Slater, 1997). However, as outlined above, this perspective predominantly positions consumption as the endpoint of production: increasingly differentiated production requires equally differentiated niche and lifestyle marketing to ensure demand for goods, and even consumers are understood as an outcome of this process. Moreover, the preoccupation with choice and the illusory but desirable freedom to choose, strongly suggests that consumption is largely a question of acquisition. And it is this understanding of consumption as acquisition that informs debates over private and public provision. While clearly important, a discussion of autonomy or a lack thereof does not provide much detail about what it means for an object, such as bottled water, to become and remain a staple of everyday life.

As a corrective to this approach, others argue that consumption is better understood through appropriation and ongoing use (Warde, 2005). That ever-increasing consumption is necessary for capital accumulation is not exclusive from the idea that people do things with objects. There is a very well established tradition of connecting the meaning of things and their ‘sign-value’ with distinction or class, and consumption to the cultural reproduction of social order (Bourdieu, 1990; Featherstone, 2006; Lury, 1996;

---

6 Slater goes on to argue that the enlightenment liberal view that idealizes the ‘rational individual’ is dependent on the exclusion of ‘others’ whose actions are defined as irrational in the process. As such, consumer ‘fools’ can be understood as implicated in the co-construction of their foil, the rational actor, where freedom and determination do not figure as opposites but are equally constitutive of liberal order. Following this Foucauldian line of thought, the question of consumer autonomy becomes one of how the concept of choice is deployed as a strategy of power (Slater, 1997: 55-59).
Slater, 1997). While it may be compulsory, it is through consumption that individuals define themselves (or are defined) in relation to social groups and the world. But there is a tendency for research to focus on fashion items or ‘cultural’ goods, especially in relation to the construction of identity where objects emerge as symbolic carriers of meaning and tools for the construction of the self (Warde, 2005; see Lury, 1996 and McCracken, 2005). By contrast, Warde (2005) suggests that the impact of production on consumption is mediated by the multitude of conventional but dynamic practices of everyday life, shifting the focus from individual autonomy to the reproduction of social competence and collective culture. From this angle, “practices rather than individual desires...create wants” (ibid: 137). The demand for consumer goods is reproduced at least in part by their necessary role in competently carrying out the practices of everyday life. This suggests the possibility that consumers of bottled water are not individual ‘fools,’ but involved in collectively defined practices such as drinking water ‘on the go.’

A bottle of Perrier may be commodified water with a rather exceptional mark-up, a device of distinction as the affordable status symbol expressing sophisticated ‘taste’, or a means of demonstrating participation in a ‘healthy life,’ but it is also part of a way of drinking water where bottles are carried, refilled, recycled and discarded. When defined as such – in relation to use – bottles become part of dynamic bottle-water objects implicated in the practices of everyday life in ways that are largely overlooked by an exclusive focus on provision and acquisition. In this context, the normalization of bottled water is not reducible to how many bottles at what social or environmental ‘costs.’

7 If not providing a completely successful alternative (Warde, 2005), Bourdieu refuses to explain patterns of consumption as either the result of individual expression or structural demands alone. Instead, consumption practices both emerge from and become cultural resources for establishing positions in social order (1990). As such, ‘needs’ and ‘preferences’ are defined by the ‘logic of practice.’
Taking consumption seriously as ongoing practices (which might include design, production, delivery, acquisition, storage, use, collection, discarding, repair, maintenance, and so on) requires an investigation of what people are doing and how that cannot rely on statistics about acquisition alone.

Information, Marketing and the Mediation of Things

Approaching consumption as use in relation to interrelated practices provides a strong connection between what people actually do and the reproduction of necessity. Consumption emerges as a potentially diverse and dynamic set of practices that implies change, but the question of exactly how new ‘needs’ and practices originate remains less defined. In the dominant narratives, the bottled water phenomenon is almost universally constructed with information as both the cause and solution of current consumption patterns. While there are many ways in which bottled water circulates as information – as consumer reports, water test statistics, health fashion, and beauty advice – persuasive and well-funded corporate marketing is singled out as a source of misinformation instigating the rising consumption of bottled water and its subsequent ubiquity. Especially in light of the preceding discussion of collective practices, however, it seems overly simplistic to assume consumers just do as they are told; if corporate marketing is to ‘blame,’ it is necessary to consider what marketing does more specifically.

While multiple facets of marketing have changed dramatically over the past century, it is the rise of the brand that features prominently in the most recent discussions (Arvidsson 2006; Lury 2004; Holt, 2006; Moor, 2003). As suggested, the relatively recent shifts to a regime of flexible production that characterizes accumulation in accounts of post-Fordism, are associated with the equally differentiated marketing:
Post-Fordist marketing...disaggregates markets and consumption into ‘lifestyles’, ‘niche markets,’ and ‘target consumer groups’, market segments...lifestyle marketing not only identifies and targets existing lifestyles, but rather produces them by organizing consumers according to meaningful patterns, constructed and distributed through design, advertising and media (Slater, 1997: 191).

It is the development of marketing as a performative discipline that is central to the emergence of the brand (Lury, 2004).

In contrast to the previous promotion of mass products in which advertisements announced the existence of something for sale, contemporary marketing plays an increasingly important and active role in designing products, leading practices and shaping the market itself (Klein 2000: 5; Lury 2005: 184). Emerging from processes of qualification and requalification, such as product testing and trials, with the brand multiple dimensions of products are defined in relation to alternatives and, most crucially, consumers. If consumers are ‘produced,’ it is the integration of information about consumers themselves that is a defining component of this process:

Until the 1960s...Public Relations was about propagating a certain corporate ideology against public adversity to big business; marketing sought to make consumers behave and desire in a certain way; and design was about imposing more beautiful or rational objects on the recalcitrant masses. Today, in almost every case, it is the other way around (Arvidsson, 2006: 41).

Products are increasingly understood, classified, promoted and designed in terms of consumer perceptions, needs and practices (Lury, 2004: 24). In opposition to conceptions of marketing in linear terms of ‘telling’ or ‘(mis)representation,’ contemporary brand mediation can be understood as multidirectional exchange.

As such, the brand, while providing an additional point of access to products, is more than another dimension open to aestheticization; it is not only representative but constitutive of sets of relations which Lury (2004) conceptualizes in terms of a ‘new media object.’ The brand is a ‘dynamic platform for practice,’ encompassing ‘a mode of
production, a technical support and a set of conventions’ (ibid: 6). Building form Latour’s concept of media as ‘translation’ – a processes of forming relationships in which information transfer is necessarily transformation (Latour, 1999) – the brand acts as an interface or ‘meeting point’ mediating communication between producers and consumers. The brand is not just a basis for semiotic meaning, but doing: organizing relationships in particular ways shaped by established practices and the materiality of the brand itself (Lury, 2004: 6). In contrast to the commodity which is produced, purchased, and taken home, the branded offering is a collection of concepts, qualities and experiences: a set of relations between products in time (Klein 2000; Lury 2004; Lash and Lury, 2007). Providing multiple points of access, the brand is an open system linking products, promotions, advertisements and participation connecting a Nike shoe to a Nike space; a Starbucks coffee to a jazz CD; a Perrier bottle to a logo in a magazine.

Both media and mediated, its brand-ness is inextricable from the relationships, knowledges and knowledge practices with which it is entangled (Lury, 2004: 15). Emerging from such ongoing relationships, the brand is an ‘open object,’ characterized by possibility: “the brand is an object designed so that it may be otherwise” (ibid: 151). Irreducible to purposive actions of marketers alone, the brand – selectively – incorporates consumer feedback while instigating ‘feedforward’ effects. Such multidirectional flows of information are distinct for their intensity and flexibility:

Brands are now developed as a response to – and a means of managing – a relation that is constituted by marketing practices as not merely two-way, but also long-term, inherently dynamic and interactive (Lury, 2004: 44)

---

8 For example, while the brand emerges in part through the rise of performative marketing, it is also legally constituted through copyright laws and associated configurations of objects and property that exclude the innovative capacities of consumers (Lury, 2004). Arvidsson (2005) furthers this position, arguing that this constitutes a means of managing and exploiting the ongoing creative work – the immaterial labour – of consumers.
Implicated in not only product placement and advertising, but development and design, such flows of information have very material consequences in terms of production itself. Most evident with the computer program updates and upgraded technologies, mundane consumer products too are subject to *ongoing* redesign (Lury, 2004: 130). As marketing shapes an increasing number of dimensions including packaging, promotion and the brand, the ‘making’ of the product is not confined to a particular moment, emerging instead through multiple processes over time. Lury argues that this dispersion, exemplified by the *ongoing* circulation and incorporation of consumer information at various stages, constitutes at the very least a ‘blurring’ of distinctions between production and consumption and the transition of marketing from representation to *flows*.

While ‘flows’ and ‘circulation’ evoke images of things in motion – rivers, library books, newspapers, money – Lee and LiPuma argue that these concepts should be understood not as movement or transmission alone but performative cultural processes (2002). These ‘cultures of circulation,’ are particular configurations of modes of abstraction and circulated forms, conditions and limits, expectations of interpretation and reciprocal actions. Lash and Lury position the brand as part of such a contemporary configuration of circulation organized through the qualitative properties of products where “value is established not in relation to price (as a mark of exclusivity) or origins (as a mark of authenticity), but in relation to information” (Lash and Lury, 2007: 141). The brand is:

Part of the rise of the virtual economy, an economy in which feedback systems of information, communication and control fundamentally reconfigure the temporality of production and the processes of object-ification (Lury, 2004: 47)
As such the brand must be understood in the context of an economy where flexibility is a necessity, where circulation, speed, flows, mobility, and information appear to gain their own currency (Thrift, 2005). While these shifts are perhaps most obvious in relation to financial capital (Lee and LiPuma 2002), or digital cultural goods (Poster 2006), others argue that “cultural objects are everywhere as information, as communications, as branded products, as financial services, cultural entities are no longer the exception: they are the rule” (Lash and Lury, 2007: 4).

The centrality of information does not imply a simple increase in knowledge production, but rather an organizational logic based on flows of information, the displacement of social order by an information order (Lash, 2002: 75). Arguing that there is no ‘outside’ to such global flows, for Lash, information is the social. Noting the centrality of design and the brand, Lash suggests that like images, communications and finance, consumer products increasingly circulate as information:

The global information culture for its part witnesses a new autonomy for objects, which in their global flows tend to escape from the intentions, from the sovereignty of the subject....Highly branded and fast-moving consumer goods also share informational qualities in their ephemerality, their quick turnover, immediate impact and quick movement. They too spin out of control of subjects in their movement through global networks (2002: viii).

While design and the brand take on new significance, it is important to note that Lash’s informational qualities are defined as question of flows, speed, intensity, and (im)permanence rather than immateriality alone. In place of separating information from objects – as representation – the brand emerges as simultaneously abstract and concrete, both medium and material. Consistent with Lury’s insistence on understanding the brand as an object, as goods become informational and the economy becomes cultural, culture too takes on a materiality (Lash and Lury, 2007). For Lash and Lury (2007), this marks
the appearance of the ‘global culture industry’ constituted through the interrelated processes of the thingification of media and the mediation of things where “consumer goods themselves become interfaces, technologies encountered by users as communications and messages” (Lash 2002: 71). In terms of material objects “design-intensivity and ubiquitous research and design is the culturification of industry: the mediation of things” (2007: 9). Irreducible to purposive actions alone, Lash’s consumer goods, like Lury’s brand ‘escape intentions.’ With agencies of their own, such objects transform and are transformed.

Material Objects and Everyday Life

The conception of ‘the mediation of things’ begins to provide a sense of the potential agency of objects themselves as media, constitutive of dynamic relationships characterized by movements between information and the material. In the majority of both popular and academic accounts of the bottled water phenomenon however, while information – especially that about water – is the focus, the materiality of the bottle itself is noticeably absent. Building from the idea that bottled water is a dynamic object – as both an object-in-use and a branded consumer good – while returning to questions of consumption and practice, this section considers conceptual resources from material culture and science and technology studies that question the ‘thing’ itself. As Appadurai (1986) posits, not only are objects an integral part of social life, but they have social lives of their own. Arguing for the examination of the ‘biographies’ of things, such an approach does not privilege production, but instead focuses on movements and circulation (Kopytoff, 1986).
Presenting the convergence of culture as representation and material goods to argue for the ubiquity of culture, Lash and Lury’s (2007) recent work provides a definite sense that as culture is taking on a different logic, a new type of object is emerging. For consumer goods, this transition is distinguished by movement from the commodity to the brand where:

The commodity is produced. The brand is a source of production. The commodity is a single, discrete, fixed product. The brand instantiates itself in a range of products, is generated across a range of products. The commodity has no history, the brand does. The commodity has no relationships; the brand is constituted in and as relations (Lash and Lury, 2007: 6).

This sense of disjuncture stems, at least in part, from the conceptualization of the brand in terms of a new media object (Lury, 2004). Following Manovich (2001) and Thrift (2005), such objects have their own agency, are capable of making people act (and interact) in particular ways, where “commodities are becoming increasingly animated” (Thrift, 2005: 7).

Although Lash and Lury aim to capture emergent rather than universal trends, this stark division between the brand and the commodity remains questionable. The claim that commodities do not have histories is particularly problematic as it stands in opposition to the very idea of a ‘social life of things’ that informs their empirical research. Moreover, there is a tension between ‘new’ kinds of brand-objects, and the materiality of other consumer goods. Despite claiming that “the information society is not primarily a society in which the production of information displaces the production of goods” (Lash, 2002: 75) and making a case for the brand as an object (Lury, 2004), it seems that the materiality of consumer goods themselves is subsumed by that of the brand. While arguing for the ‘culturification of industry,’ Lash and Lury (2007) arguably focus on spectacular objects: movies, football matches and products defined as ‘surfaces for
logos.’ Here the brand overrides the object to a certain extent, where consumer products appear as actualizations of the brand. While this amounts to an important and insightful account, Lash and Lury provide biographies of the brand-as-object, of the ‘swoosh’ not the shoe. Brand-objects may be implicated in the production of the economy and everyday life (Lury, 2004), however, thus far the focus remains tightly connected to information in relation to spectacular goods. Alone, such an approach may be appropriate for exploring movie promotions or digital games, but while branded, a bottle of water is arguably a very ordinary and material thing.

There is an alternative tradition, stemming from anthropology in terms of material culture, in which object relations and the conceptualization of things as media are far less defined by information or the novelty of the present. The movements of Appadurai’s (1986) things throughout their social lives, for example, are not unique to an ‘information culture,’ while for others, symbolic meanings of objects help constitute the social relations of everyday life. For Miller (2001), society constitutes an always “cultural project in which we come to be ourselves in our humanity through the medium of things” (245). Here objects are understood as an expression of class, power and identity, the embodiment of social order. Bruno Latour however, argues that the agency of objects comes not from their ability to ‘express’ identity or ‘convey’ symbolic meaning, but rather that:

The great import of technology studies to the social sciences is to have shown, for instance, how many features of the former society, durability, expansion, scale, mobility, were actually due to the capacity of artefacts to construct literally, not metaphorically, social order...They are not ‘reflecting’ it, as if the ‘reflected’ society existed somewhere else and was made of some other stuff. They are in large part the stuff out of which socialness is made (Latour, 2000: 113)
In other words, the bottle of water does not ‘reflect’ some social values to be found elsewhere, and therefore cannot be accounted for by referring to a ‘social’ explanation (Latour, 2005). Objects not only shape everyday life, they are the very ‘stuff,’ the ‘missing masses’ (Latour, 1992), of which it is made. The agency of such ‘objects’ is in their ability to actively form relationships, provisional ‘assemblages’ of humans and nonhumans. Latour’s things ‘script’ users, shaping behaviour, at times in ways ‘delegated’ - entrusted by design - to objects by their human counterparts.9

Within what is more broadly known as science and technology studies (STS), some have become particularly concerned with the processes through which specific configurations of people and things stabilize, or reach a point of ‘closure’ (e.g. Bijker et al. 1992). In this case, the question would be one of how the ubiquitous consumption of bottled water has come to be as it is, in terms of how alternative trajectories get closed down, with the results appearing to be ‘normal’ retrospectively. The view that technologies (or objects) become stabilized in their meaning and use as a result of contested sociotechnical design processes begs the question as to whether intervening in those design processes might embed sustainable values within objects. In other words, can sustainable consumption be ‘hardwired’ into technologies and other objects? As Elizabeth Shove argues:

Answers are complicated not least because some technological scripts are more ‘open’ or ‘resistable’ than others, because scripts are, in any event, de-scribed in context, and because stories of failure – in which technologies are used in ways other than intended – abound (Shove, 2003: 15)

---

9 The most commonly cited example is Latour’s hotel ‘key fob’ where its awkward size and materiality does the human work of reminding the guest to return the key to the reception desk. See Latour, 1992.
Furthermore, far less attention has been given to the ongoing work required to maintain such stability, for socio-technical relations (whatever they may be) to remain normal (Hand and Shove, 2007). Returning to Warde (2005), it is at least in part through practices that the need for particular objects is reproduced and sometimes transformed:

The practice, so to speak, requires that competent practitioners will avail themselves of the requisite services, possess and command the capacity to manipulate the appropriate tools, and devote a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice.

Shove et al. (2007) extend such a position to argue people do not just use things, but things, with agencies of their own, also ‘use’ people. Arguing that as much attention must be given to the ways in which objects organize what is seen as ‘normal’ social behaviour as to how objects come to symbolize specific cultural values, the effort is to consider the relation between ideas, objects and practices so as not to privilege any particular element. As such, competencies are distributed between humans and things: bottles enable consumers to carry out particular practices of drinking water, and constrain other ways.

Not only do things-in-use enter into and make practices possible, but ordinary objects themselves transform our everyday lives: products are not just designed; they are implicated in the design of everyday life (Shove et. al. 2007). Understanding agency as “an outcome of the relation between artifacts and the humans with which they interact,” (2007: 7) it is through their implication in practices that objects mediate everyday life and have the capacity to make people act. Not only are consumer goods ‘necessary’ for performing practices, “rather than simply meeting needs, artefacts are actively implicated in creating new practices and, with them, new patterns of demand” (Shove et. al 2007: 10). Here design is not limited to the intentional actions of professional or even consumers, but refers to the “ways in which practices and their constituent elements are
contingently and provisionally knotted together” (Shove et. al 2007: 19). Accordingly, with a dynamic understanding of the diversity of things-in-use, Hand and Shove (2007) contend that in place of a static view of ‘closure,’ normalization is better approached through the ongoing processes required to organize and maintain apparent stability.

**Discussion: Rethinking Normalization**

While this chapter has outlined and discussed, somewhat abstractly, some of the interrelations between consumption, marketing and objects, there remains a need to consider more clearly the implications in terms of understanding the normalization of bottled water. Traditional accounts of consumer culture have tended towards limited understandings of objects in terms of acquisition, as a logical consequence of changes in economic production and organization, and – especially in the case of bottled water - as symptomatic and representative of wider social problems. Considering consumption and objects though practices provides an alternative: connecting bottles to a way of drinking water.

From this discussion, consumption emerges as the diverse and dynamic phenomenon of things in use, where even the most ordinary objects are part of sustaining and changing practices in everyday life (Warde, 2005; Hand and Shove, 2007; Shove et al, 2007). Taking consumption seriously as an ongoing practice requires an investigation of what people are *doing* and how. As such, an investigation of normalization cannot rely solely on statistics about acquisition. Instead, there is a need to approach bottled water as part of ordinary practices (of carrying bottles, of drinking while moving, of remaining hydrated, etc.), rather than information about what’s ‘inside the bottle.’ To consider the unsustainability of the automobile, for example, by concentrating only on what’s ‘inside,’
such as the environmental impact of engine emissions in relation to political economy of
the global oil industry, is to miss how vehicles now make possible the ways we organize
and carry out daily life: ethical, material and symbolic practices that are not easily
changed by information alone however noble the intentions.

But objects too instigate change. Throughout this chapter questions of consumer
autonomy have shifted towards nuanced understandings of the agencies of things, where
demand and ‘need’ are not simply imposed by marketing, but mediated through objects in
various ways. For Lash and Lury (2007) with the brand, consumer goods themselves
become media, surface for logos and interfaces for exchange. Accordingly, objects
themselves ask people to participate in particular ways that increasingly escape the
intentions of those seeking to direct consumer behaviour. As Latour’s influential work
demonstrates, however, the ‘autonomy of objects’ is by no means limited to accounts of
an ‘information society’ or ‘new media’. If Lash’s (2002) social order is an ‘information
order,’ for Latour (2005), the ‘social’ does not ‘exist’ as such. Instead, everyday life
emerges through rather more provisional and contingent assemblages of humans and
nonhumans which may be more or less stable, and could never be understood as distinctly
‘social’, ‘technical’, or ‘cultural’.

When consumption is approached in terms of use, and objects are understood
relationally, they become part of potentially multiple and dynamic practices. Popular
accounts rely on a homogeneous and static view of what bottled water is – a single
consumer product there is simply more of over time – and to say bottled water is just
another, if exemplary, case of commodification is to gloss over how the bottle of water
might be located in different practices. With the understanding that neither objects nor
practices are static or permanently ‘closed’ comes the suggestion that normalization is
“not an endpoint but an ongoing process” (Hand and Shove, 2007). Not only different over time (Shove and Southerton, 2000), but concurrently constituted by a variety of practices and negotiations. In other words, “the challenge is to analyse and understand normalization as a process that is both diachronic and synchronic” (Hand and Shove, 2007). Manifested through the brand, however, marketing too is increasingly flexible, aiming to both inform and incorporate consumer practices and perceptions in various ways.

Current conceptualizations of the brand provide a serious challenge to the assertion that consumers are simply receiving the ‘wrong’ information. Not only can such brand-mediation be understood as nonlinear exchange, contemporary marketing incorporates information based on, but also influencing consumer perceptions and practices:

These changes in the form of the commodity also point to the increasingly active role the consumer is often expected to take. Consumers are expected to make more and more extravagant investments in the act of consumption itself, through collecting, subscribing, experiencing and, in general, participating in all manner of collective acts of sensemaking’ (Thrift, 2005: 7)

Similarly, Barry argues that with information comes expectation: “its existence is thought to imply a transformation in the conduct of those who are, or who should be, informed” (2001:154). Interactivity, such as that which defines brand mediation, does not imply equality; it allows, framing actions in terms of ‘you may,’ not ‘you should’ (Barry, cited in Lury 2004: 131). While such exchanges are multidirectional flows, “[they] are not direct, symmetrical or reversible” (Lury, 2004:50). As such, information, like the object, is not reducible to a reflection of the world, but “a reality which is placed into circulation,” with transformational and organizational effects as well as moral and political implications (Barry, 2001:154). Furthermore, the involvement of marketing in
multiple aspects of production including design, suggests movement between the material and information dimensions of brand-objects. Design can be understood as a process that builds information into objects, where “information enters into the constitution of the entity” (Barry, 2005).

Providing a sense of the interrelationships between various dimensions of contemporary consumer culture, the movements outlined in this chapter – between design and practice, objects and information; from commodities to brands, representation to flows – are also the source of tension: How do informational and material dimensions intersect in terms of an ordinary phenomenon such as the ubiquity of bottled water? In what ways might the ‘autonomy for objects’ relate to the bottled water phenomenon? What role does brand-marketing play in changing drinking practices? But while objects embody information, they are also material objects of ‘ordinary consumption’ (Gronow & Warde, 2001). Warde argues that:

“Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalized and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, qua consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies” (2005: 141)

While this chapter considers consumption in terms of its informational and material aspects, it is quite apparent that such divisions are (necessarily) artificial: consumers are integrated into marketing; objects are defined in relation to the practices of consumption; brands appear as objects and consumer goods as information. If marketing shapes practices, it is at least in part through the incorporation of information about changing practices and perceptions of consumers themselves. Accordingly, the investigation of the dynamism of consumption and marketing requires investigation of multiple dimensions of the phenomenon. What follows, is an exploration of the marketing of bottled water as one part of such a conceptualization of normalization. In considering
how the bottle water phenomenon is manifested in and through marketing, it is necessary to remain mindful of ordinary consumer practices, the movements between information and the material, and how bottles themselves ‘transform and are transformed.’
A Tale of Two Bottles: Perrier and Dasani

Introduction

This chapter explores some of the questions raised in chapter two concerning the relation between the marketing of and the normalization of bottled water. This is done through the empirical examination of documentary materials related to two major international brands: Perrier and Dasani. Selected for their high visibility and widespread availability, the brands share a reputation for dramatically shaping the history of bottled water: Perrier is frequently credited with instigating the 1970’s re-introduction of bottled water to North
America, whereas Dasani, as a Coca-Cola product, marks the entry of the ‘beverage giants’ into the arena, possessing the characteristics that ostensibly represent the future of bottled water. The naturally carbonated water in familiar green bottles, Perrier evokes a certain ‘snob factor’ commensurate with a history of royal decrees and luxury status. If Perrier, at least by water standards, leans towards conspicuous consumption and Lash and Lury’s (2007) ‘spectacular’ branded cultural goods, Dasani is arguably a very mundane product at least in terms of its ubiquity and contents. An exemplary commodity in ‘everyday life,’ available in vending machines and at convenience stores, Dasani is purified tap water promoted by popular advertising campaigns and family magazines. While the brands were selected for such contrasts, the aim of this chapter is not to delineate the similarities and differences between the two, but instead illustrate and illuminate some of the diverse ways in which bottles, water, marketing and consumption are interrelated, have had divergent and convergent trajectories, as part of multiple and ongoing processes of normalization.

Perrier, a well established brand, provides access to a century of shifting and intertwined histories of a highly recognizable bottle and a variety of marketing strategies. Guided by an analysis of advertisements and products, marketing and industry literature and popular news coverage, an in-depth discussion follows the social life of the ‘same’ object through three distinct North American campaigns. Tracing Dasani’s recent introduction illustrates the ongoing and design-intensive properties of a more mundane product and its positioning in ‘everyday life.’ In addition to outlining some of Coca-Cola’s more deliberate attempts to ‘redefine hydration,’ this section documents the introduction of a ‘new’ water through a systematic analysis of Canadian Living magazine, situating bottled water in the context of related objects and emerging concerns with
health, and, I will argue, most significantly, *convenience*. Together Perrier and Dasani provide a diverse basis for discussing the relationships between marketing and consumption, origins and brands, objects and information. Although this chapter is about the role of marketing in the normalization of bottled water, it is more importantly about what marketing alone cannot reveal: the moments when marketing fails, where consumers do the unexpected, and objects themselves change and are changed.

**Methods and Materials**

Informed by the considerations presented in chapter two, the method for this chapter was inspired by several sources that approach consumption by taking objects and what they do seriously. As outlined in Appadurai’s (1986) social ‘biography of things’, following an object does not privilege a particular phase of its life – whether production, distribution, marketing, reception, use, or reuse – but focuses on how objects change throughout their lives (Lash and Lury, 2007: 19). While Lash and Lury (2007) begin with the ontology of ‘things’, and Shove et al (2007) enter the debate through practices, in both cases the idea of a ‘social life of things’ is extended to include reflexive objects: objects in motion in terms of ‘doing,’ of agency, effect and transformation. The resulting biographies consist of ‘multiple histories,’ of convergent and divergent phenomena, the description of which necessitates equally diverse materials encompassing both producer and consumer accounts in addition to the product itself. In following their objects, such authors show particular concern for key moments and their management, (un)successful product introduction, and the apparently tangential issues and object instigated effects that redirect, divert and recast the phenomenon. Through the examination of how these two bottles have appeared in advertisements, industry reports and commentary, journalism,
websites, and other materials over the last century, this chapter aims to follow the brand-objects through key moments of change rather than provide an exhaustive history of marketing, bottled water or either brand.

There is a large body of research relating to advertising (see Wernick, 1991; Nava et al. 1997; Cronin, 2004), but despite claims that contemporary branding “is a core activity of capitalism,” it is only most recently that there has been a call to study brand marketing from a social science perspective (Holt, 2006). Furthermore, as Cronin argues, there is a classical tendency to approach advertising in terms of representation as “the primary social and commercial mediator between commodities and the consumers, products and society” (2004). This is inconsistent with the two lines of inquiry discussed in chapter two. Firstly, that brand marketing involves multidirectional flows of information rather than representation, and secondly, the various ways in which objects themselves can be understood as ‘media’. Consequently, here advertising is understood as one component of marketing, along with research, branding, packaging, positioning, design and the product itself (Arvidsson, 2006). Given the discussion of performative marketing and ‘open’ brand-objects, this definition must necessarily accommodate the possibility for the increasing influence of marketing in design and production, the feedback of consumer practices and participation, and the movements of ‘unruly’ objects.

In line with such an inclusive conceptualization of marketing, materials for this chapter were obtained from a wide variety of sources. Specifically, the primary advertisements were collected from brand websites, the Toronto Reference Library ‘Perrier’ and ‘water’ picture files, and magazines. These sources were reinforced with additional advertisements from the Museum of Beverage Containers and Advertising website, Google Image and Flickr searches. The Perrier, Nestle and Dasani websites,
local and international, were particularly helpful with history and production statistics and corporate perspective on product purpose and brand image. In addition to the general “bottled water” search in Globe and Mail, Toronto Star and CBC archives that partially informs chapter one, both the New York Times and the Globe and Mail were searched electronically for ‘Perrier’ and “Dasani’ from 1870 to the present. Selected for ease of historical access, reputation as sources of record, and substantial business focus, these publications returned a wide range of results from fashion, news, and business sections among others. Exploratory searches of other newspapers (Toronto Star, Vancouver Sun etc.) produced similar content. Business journals, trade and industry publications, such as Beverage World, Marketing Week and Packaging Digest, provide additional perspective on marketing and products. In terms of media, although historical sources are limited to print, current discussion include a variety of internet resources, however, TV commercials remain limited to descriptions for practical purposes.

For Perrier, these searches returned, along with numerous news and industry articles, over 75 print advertisements spanning from 1906 to 2006. The advertisements are not evenly distributed geographically or temporally. This is partly due to variations in company advertising strategy and expenditures,\(^{10}\) and is also likely due to the difficulty of finding advertisements that shift across publications, media and countries from year to year. As many advertisements came from the Perrier international website, a majority were targeted at a French audience, however overall at least 30 were specifically intended for the United States and Canada. The Perrier section focuses on three emergent

---

\(^{10}\) As a recent example, Perrier spent 7.9 million on advertising in 2002, but only $160 thousand in 2004 (Elliott, 2006).
concentrations of advertisements that coincide with major marketing campaigns and key shifts in North America:

1. The first substantial introduction of Perrier to North America (1906-1915)
2. The reintroduction of Perrier credited with sparking recent bottled water phenomenon (1978-1985)
3. The introduction of plastic bottles and the current ‘IER’ campaign described as radical departure from brand image (2001-2007)

While these periodic configurations do provide a sense of temporal change, it should be stressed that they do not flow seamlessly from one to the next and are not meant to represent an exhaustive analysis of the brand or Perrier’s advertising and marketing strategies, but instead correspond to selected critical points in the trajectory of bottled water in Canada and the United States.

Parallel searches for Dasani returned similar although considerably less material as the water has only been available since 1999 in the United States and 2000 in Canada. Taking advantage of this recent introduction, a substantial systematic search of Canadian Living magazine was undertaken to better situate the emergence of a ‘new’ water. The two main aims were to 1) trace the bottled water phenomenon and its marketing in a major magazine, and 2) to situate bottled water in the broader context of water images, practices and related products, as well as changing conceptions of convenience, health, purity and risk. As this project is concerned with widespread normalization, Canadian Living, with the tag line “Smart Solutions for Everyday Life” was selected for its focus on the mundane, an extensive circulation of 4.4 million readers per issue, and more practically, availability at the Toronto Reference Library. Four issues, January, April, July and October, were examined for bottled water advertisements and articles for every year
between 1996\textsuperscript{11} and 2006. The same four issues were more thoroughly examined for related water, beauty, health, safety, and product trends every three years beginning in 1988. In addition, every available issue for each year searched was skimmed to ensure consistent results.

While efforts have been made to include a diversity of formats and perspectives, this work is primarily based on documentary materials, newspapers and secondary sources. Advertisements feature prominently, and caveats aside, help provide access to multiple aspects such as product design. This is especially evident for the early Perrier section where other materials are scarce. Limitations, however, are especially evident in terms of consumer perceptions and practices. In order to help compensate for a lack of direct interviews or contact with either industry or consumers, business and industry sources were searched. Along with interesting tensions between sources (ie. Perrier website vs. Perrier business section), this produced a considerable number of articles including direct citations from those such as marketing executives. Mainstream news websites, most notably a recent Guardian web forum titled ‘Time to cap bottled water?’ provided consumer feedback, at least anecdotally.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} 1996 is the year the water related product advertisement - for Brita filters - appear in the magazine.
\textsuperscript{12} As such understandings emerge as an important component of marketing and consumption more generally, interviews with both consumers and those involved in the marketing of bottled water would provide an excellent basis for future research.
I. Perrier: C’est Fou!

Perrier noun trademark: an effervescent mineral water sold as a drink. Origin: from the name of a spring at Vergeze France, from which this water comes.

Testament to its enduring popularity, Perrier appears along with Kleenex and Xerox (but not Pepsi or Coke) in the Oxford American dictionary. Perrier water is not only well established, it is legendary. Or at least that is what parent corporation Nestle Waters would like us to think. The corporate story, beginning ‘a long long time ago,’ demonstrates the water’s apparently timeless appeal through tales of roman visits and Hannibal resting his troops and elephants at the spring. Naturally effervescent, the mineral water itself is the result of a unique combination of geological processes spanning
After serious doubts about the future of the spring post World War II, Perrier changed ownership. With renewed investment in national brand promotion and updated processing facilities, production rapidly increased to 150 million bottles each year by 1952, however the large majority remained in France. Substantial advertising efforts resumed in North America in the late 1970s, and by 1979, Perrier was (again) synonymous with sparkling water: “it would seem scarcely necessary to explain what Perrier is in America today” (Claiborne, 1979). In 1990 benzene contamination precipitated a worldwide recall, also drawing attention to the ‘new’ production process: in contrast to the ‘natural’ label, Perrier bubbles were being reinforced with extra gas from the spring. With sales in decline, Nestle acquired Perrier in 1992 in a series of bottled water mergers. Nestle, the world’s largest food processing and packaging company, currently owns 77 brands of bottled water that are sold in 140 countries, leading the US bottled water market, with 1/3 share of sales in 2003 (Clarke, 2005). Perrier, currently producing 750 million bottles a year of which 46% are exported to 114 countries, is the

13 For a detailed description of the hydrological conditions that lead to Perrier water see Chapelle 2005.
leading sparkling water worldwide. Products include various sizes of glass, cans and most recently, plastic, as well as flavoured waters introduced in the mid 1980s and in 2003, and even a ‘Fluo’ phosphorescent beverage (Nestle Waters, 2007).

This is but a sketch of a corporate production history. Person, place, brand, icon, water, beverage, bottle: What exactly is Perrier? According to the dictionary the answer remains very much tied to water with distinct geographic origins. Although flavoured Perrier is currently produced at Poland springs in Maine, most bottling does remain at the source in France. Alternately, present marketing executives describe Perrier as a ‘badge brand,’ a product sold through its image rather than attributes (Elliott, 2006). However, with its own glassworks and sand quarry, distinctive packaging, ‘art bottles’, and the recent addition of plastic, Perrier is also in many ways about the bottles themselves. So what is Perrier, and how did it become and remain so successful? The next section attempts to elaborate on such elusive definition by following various manifestations of the ‘little green bottle’ through three intensive periods of marketing.
Contrary to expectations, Perrier's first substantial sales strategy was not directed at France, but the British army in India. This was followed by the other colonies, Great Britain and Buckingham Palace gaining Perrier the royal stamp of approval as ‘Purveyor by appointment to his majesty.’ Early Canadian advertisements, bearing the royal crest, boast of the product’s ‘great success in Great Britain.’ Perrier was advertised in major North American newspapers beginning in 1906, and popular American magazines in 1910 (Perrier, 2007; Nestle Waters, 2007). With the large headlines, white space and declarative statements characteristic of advertising of the time (Klein, 2000:6), these early examples announce the availability of the product, directly describing its particular

![Advertisement for Perrier Water](image)
characteristics and suggested use. The original bottle, inspired by a cofounder's exercise clubs, remains immediately recognizable. While drawings of bottles figure in all advertisements, the bottles are alone in white space, most serving a decorative purpose at the bottom. The point was to sell water, and it is water and its taste that are carefully described. Perrier is ‘the universal favorite on account of its absolute purity, its delivery of taste and its sparkling lightness.’
A ‘crisp invigorating water,’ and a ‘luxury from Europe, the product’s value is presented in terms of geographical and geological origins: ‘from Europe’ or ‘From France’ figure prominently in all advertisements, with one dominated by a large French flag. The source is carefully located and described – 9 miles from the ancient Roman town of Nîmes – with an emphasis (bold type underline) on the ‘natural’ origins of the water. Here ‘nature’ is deployed as a mark of authenticity distinguishing water from artificially carbonated alternatives, while reinforcing the connection of value with a specific source. It is also through this association that Perrier retains vestiges of medicinal themes of a not so distant ‘spa era’: ‘the importance of the difference in effect on the digestive organs between manufactured carbonic acid gas and the natural product...is now becoming generally realized in America.’ Other advertisements refer to use in sickrooms, explaining that ‘Perrier stimulates digestion and is of real value in gout and uric acid troubles.’

Aside from somewhat tangential medical uses, Perrier is primarily promoted as a beverage: as a ‘table water,’ as ‘suitable for ladies’ or for mixed drinks it is intended for at home, restaurants or clubs. Although ‘sold everywhere,’ ‘attainable at all high-class hotels, restaurants and grocers,’ the imagined consumer is not necessarily the average person in everyday life. Evidence of early branding, the Perrier name figures prominently, more so than bottles, as a sign of origin and quality, distinguishing the water from alternatives. In addition to the appointment of King Edward the VII and ‘classy’ establishments, the water is associated with French cuisine and a ‘refined palate.’ The marketing strategy of this period is perhaps best summed up by its most prominent and enduring slogan: ‘the champagne of table waters.’ This product positioning through parallels with a well known elite French product from a specific region attempts to
establish Perrier as luxury good, where luxury is equated with rarity of material (Skov, 2005), in this case solidly grounded in the idea of ‘the source.’

‘Earth’s First Soft Drink’ (1978-1985)
Although post World War II uncertainty was accompanied by a 13 year break, exports to North America resumed in 1953 (Owen, 1953). However, it was not until the late 1970s that Perrier water experienced an explosion in popularity. This is most often – and quite enthusiastically by Nestle14 – connected to late 1970s and early 1980s TV and print advertising campaigns which established bottled water as a beverage rather than a health product (Nestle, 2007). Such a deliberate reframing is further supported by regional marketing strategies which at this time involved very distinct campaigns: a sport focus for France, and various plays on the word *eau* in the United Kingdom, while the first North American television commercial for bottled water literally sang the praises of a spring in the south of France named Perrier (Moskin, 2006). A complementary print campaign focuses on the natural origins of ‘earth’s first soft drink.’

Featuring prehistoric creatures, Perrier is ‘not manufactured but created by the earth when it was new,’ ‘a holiday tradition since the ice age,’ where ‘one million BC’ was ‘a very good year.’ Perrier water is *before* human history, in opposition to civilization and the ‘bads’ that come with it; natural is equated with purity as a lack of chemicals. ‘Minus all those additives that civilization invented,’ it does not require the ‘disinfection’ necessary for other waters. Despite the obvious references to the risks of civilization, rather than being alarmist, the campaign maintains a light, party appropriate, tone through bright colours, cartoons, and humorous cave-people analogies.

While linking the water to ancient natural processes, Perrier is simultaneously positioned along with wine and soft drinks, rather than directly in relation to tap water.

---

14 Despite the fact that Nestle had nothing to do with this at the time, as it did not acquire Perrier until 1992.
EARTH’S FIRST SOFT DRINK.

When the earth was young, mountains rose and valleys were carved and there was created, in what is now called France, a spring that is now called Perrier.

All the Perrier in the world is born in that spring.

Still clear, pure and sparkling, and minus all those additives that civilization has invented. There’s no sugar. No artificial sweetener. No caffeine. No colouring.

In modern times, when most beverages are made with water that’s been disinfected, softened, oxidated or chlorinated, it’s nice also to know that Perrier is naturally filtered as it rises to the surface from its deep underground source.

And so our only concession to civilization is the green Perrier bottle. Because without it, you would never get to enjoy Perrier.

Perrier, Earth’s first soft drink.” Created by the earth. And enjoyed by man for ages and ages.
The suggested serving with lemon implies time to sit down and enjoy the product as a delicious mixer, a calorie conscious and non-alcoholic drink for parties and special
events. Although, there is the possibility of ‘toasting your everyday triumphs,’ as indicated by product positioning and the placement of advertisements in publications such as Gourmet magazine and Canadian Opera Company programs, Perrier was primarily intended as a luxury product. This appears consistent with consumer perspectives, which suggest that the average person did not consider or buy Perrier as a replacement for tap water: “you don’t boil spaghetti in Perrier” (Wiggins, 1978; Ramirez, 1990). Although Nestle’s claims are congruent with the advertisements, and consumer reports, the results were at least in some cases, unexpected. Prior to the launch of major campaigns in Canada, Montreal literally ran out of Perrier for over a month. Moreover, speculations as to the cause of this development make no mention of corporate advertising in the conventional sense, instead connecting the situation to a highly publicized affair between Margaret Trudeau and a Perrier executive (Green, 1978). Many speculated that Perrier, and the surging popularity of bottled water more generally, were little more than the gossip of a passing fad (Wiggins, 1978, Green, 1978).

Materials from this period suggest that the ‘pretty green bottle’ was primarily a means of shipping water from the (natural) source to consumers: “our only concession to civilization is the green Perrier bottle. Because without it you would never get to enjoy Perrier.” Certainly a mark of distinction, in images the recognizable bottles consistently feature more prominently than either water, logo or brand name. However there is little to suggest that other attributes of bottles were emphasized, such as their convenience in relation to tap water or other brands’ water-cooler sized jugs more commonly available. And despite the existence of plastic bottles, the water remained in glass. If Perrier was not in technical terms a ‘new’ product in the 1970s, advertising does not assume familiarity with Perrier or what it is for, and many accounts treat this period as the ‘introduction’ of
both Perrier and bottled water to North America. This implies a relational understanding of the product and innovation in terms of promotion, packaging, information and practice.

Just as Perrier water was promoted in diverse ways through increasingly differentiated advertising, it appears that despite appearances of continuity, bottles were also becoming many things. Perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of bottles as more than containers is a series of advertisements and art bottles which began in the 1970s (Perrier, 2007). In this example dating from 1995, each of three advertisements features a distinct scene of urban jazz, social evenings or water sipped at bistros. The scenes are contained within the bottle’s familiar silhouette and accompanied by six words evoking – but not describing – each experience:

![Perrier Art Bottles](image)

Enveloped in identical images, the bottles themselves become advertisements, collectible art, and a drinkable embodiment of a distinct Perrier experience. Labeled ‘the art of refreshment,’ in addition to the increased aestheticization of a relatively ordinary product,
these ‘art bottles’ suggest a blurring of the object and its image, brand and experience, marketing and the product: the mediation of things.

**Plastic Tactics (2001-2007)**

After almost one hundred years of faithfully delivering Perrier water to customers, the green bottles escaped the intentions of their makers and began doing something else: no longer content with simply bringing water to consumers, they remained at their side, travelling around with them. Despite having quite stubbornly insisted on maintaining glass packaging, Perrier rather reluctantly introduced plastic bottles to Europe in 2001 and North America in 2004 (Huly, 2004). As one industry commentator notes “Perrier has finally come round to viewing its glass-bottle only policy as its weakness rather than
the brand’s strength” (McCawley, 2001). With the new bottles in development for five years, the switch to plastic was a drawn-out process fraught with considerable brand-image angst. Aside from concerns over keeping bubbles in bottles, there were worries that plastic would diminish the brand’s premium status amidst questions of whether the brand image would transfer or transform between materials: “are you keeping the brand attributes...will glass affect you the same way as plastic?” (ibid; Francis, 2002). The introduction of plastic bottles was not a matter of lifestyle marketing aimed at producing or capturing increasingly differentiated consumers, but the incorporation of bottle-instigated feedback that conflicted with plans for Perrier.

This is a clear indication of the importance of the materiality and the very materials of bottles in defining what Perrier is, but more significantly, it demonstrates the integration of consumer practice in the product’s trajectory. This is far from the first instance of incorporating information about consumers: Perrier was conducting consumer surveys as early as the 1930s in order to more effectively design advertising campaigns for target audiences. However, in this case information has very material consequences. Feedback, or in this case ‘feedforward,’ about what bottles and consumers are doing – not perception but practice – has effects beyond the reframing of product representation. The entanglement of bottled water with convenience-as-mobility15 changes the product itself in very tangible ways as consumer practices are ‘embottled.’ It is not the brand image, but the bottles themselves that ‘transform and are transformed’ (Lash and Lury, 2007).

Of course, with the following explanation, Perrier frames the transition as nothing more than the natural evolution of the brand in line with demand:

---

15 The emergence of ‘convenience-as-mobility’ is further discussed in the Dasani section.
Why is Perrier coming out with a PET bottle? Your lifestyle evolves, and Perrier follows suit. With this light, unbreakable, recappable PET bottle, Perrier offers you a ready-to-go format (Perrier International, 2007).

This is consistent with the corporate history of the brand in images, which also presents the reframing of Perrier through advertising which ‘captures the spirit of the times’ (Perrier, 2007). Marketing manager with Nestle Waters Canada explains that “the glass bottle wasn’t portable enough. We decided to relaunch Perrier to make it more usable to attract a somewhat younger market” (cited in Francis, 2002). Now embracing plastic as part of a more general reframing of the brand, initial reservations have given way to most recent attempt to position Perrier as portable fashion accessory. If Perrier was less than enthusiastically pushed towards plastic, such changes are quickly, if not successfully, appropriated.

The first and most obvious ‘plastic tactic,’ changing the material of the bottles themselves, spills over into the current interactive ‘-IER’ campaign, where it is the brand itself that is ‘mobilized.’ Through what is expected to be a $10 million effort, this campaign transforms the Perrier name into ‘-IER’ words such as Sexier, Crazier, Riskier,
Healthier, Prettier, and Scarier (Elliott, 2006). The altered labels appear in cartoon advertisements on crinkled paper:

but also on freely distributed bottles and associated merchandise including coasters, staff t-shirts, bar glasses, trays, postcards, stickers, and swizzle sticks. There are even plans for ‘Sexier’ and ‘Flirtier’ umbrellas and beach towels in Miami, and a series of ‘Riskier’ street acts including sword swallowers and contortionists in New York (Elliott, 2006, Beverage Industry, 2007). Although the print campaign is currently focused on such major urban centres, it also includes two new websites completely distinct from existing Perrier or Nestle pages, one of which is specific to Canada.

While the play on words is not itself new – a 1980’s series of advertising variations on ‘eau’ for the UK included images of a Picasseau ‘cubist’ bottle and glass garnished with square lemon wedge – here, in a move described as ‘risk-i-er,’ high culture references are left behind and it is the brand name itself that is subject to manipulation.
The (intended) result “literally changes the way people look at Perrier,” in a reframing of the product aimed at attracting a younger but also more mainstream audience (Elliott, 2006). This is in line with the current website claim that “the Perrier product line was developed to quench all thirsts,” however, ‘-IER’ is also about actively bringing consumers into the brand. As the campaign creative director explains, “we had to try something different to force a reappraisal, we have to speak to consumers in a way that they will feel we get them” (Elliott, 2006). Before the campaign began, the brand was connected to the popular and playful ‘-IER’ words by consumers (ibid.), however such participation is also encouraged on an ongoing basis. According to Nestle Waters North America vice president of marketing, “The brand is still instantly recognizable through the bottle shape and the way the label looks, but we want our younger target who doesn’t have much of a history with the brand to discover it on their own terms” (ibid, my italics).

Accordingly, the aptly addressed www.crazier.ca invites you to ‘make your own -IER.’ Consumers are encouraged to submit and vote on drawings of Perrier water ‘in action’ with the cartoon-sketch style of the advertising campaign and its altered labels. Weekly winners receive personalized t-shirts with their creations: individualized, wearable advertisements. An example of marketing as exchange, with ‘-IER’ consumers actively participate in the ongoing (re)production of the brand through “organized but open-ended relations between products, advertising and events” (Lash and Lury, 2007: 146). The series of online contest-events are designed for open ‘play,’ but ultimately aimed at creating effective advertisements while engaging consumers in interactive relationships that cultivate an enduring commitment to the brand through ongoing 

---

16 Entering riskier or healthier.ca will also direct you to the same page. There are two similar French versions as well.
participation. However, buried in fine print, the official contest rules caution that “Once submitted, all designs, including any intellectual property relating to the designs, will become the sole property of the Sponsor. The Sponsor will be free to use any or all such entries in any form without compensation or remuneration.” In addition to the dynamic shaping of the brand, it appears quite likely that such an exchange is generating the next wave of ‘-IER’ billboard and magazine advertisements and Perrier products co-produced and pre-approved by consumers themselves.

Again, such participation in the brand, marketing, and arguably production, does not imply increasingly democratic or equal relations between producers and consumers. As the reframing of plastic bottles and the contest rules both illustrate, there is a fine line between exchange and appropriation, creativity and control. It would be interesting to find out if the artist received the promised t-shirt corresponding to the winning toilet sketch labeled ‘run-ier,’ or equally amusing but probably not brand worthy ‘flashier.’
Moreover, a Perrier brand and corporate identity consultant cautions that from the corporate perspective such direct participation in the brand is only beneficial short term—in a carefully calculated period of ‘openness’—as otherwise there is the danger that “people could forget who Perrier is” (Elliott, 2006). In contrast to crazier.ca, the second website, ‘Show me Perrier,’ is more directly organized through consumer-approved but predetermined themes of Sexier, Crazier, Riskier and Healthier. While consumers as co-producers are invited to submit and vote on links to websites that they associate with each theme, additions are carefully screened and categorized. This is perhaps indicative of a closing of relations in which consumers, now accustomed to participating in the brand, are invited to do so in limited ways that increasingly conform to a desirable brand image.

But as the transition to plastic bottles demonstrates, this is not so easily controlled as bottles and information are more than mere representations constructed by corporations. While Lury’s (2004) brands organize a set of relationships between products, here the bottle too acts along with the label, as surface and interface, as a ‘medium of translation,’ in the context of shifting name, image and intended consumption practices. Over the past century Perrier has been many things: a ‘natural’ medicine, an imported luxury beverage, a portable refreshment, the subject of art, the surface for the brand. In each of the three periods discussed, Perrier emerges as a ‘provisional configuration’ between bottles, water, brand marketing and consumers. The ‘newness’ of the 1970s and the ‘breaking of tradition’ (McCawly 2004; Elliott, 2006) with plastic tactics, only make sense when Perrier is understood as inextricable relations between materials, information and practice. As such, the ‘openness’ of the brand extends—sometimes out of control—beyond the reframing of image or perception, as altering the
materials of the bottles and changing consumption practices are implicated in constituting and transforming what Perrier is and does.

II. Dasani: 'Can’t live without it.’

What does the name Dasani mean? Good question. For that matter, how deep is the ocean? How wide is the stream? What’s the price of tea in china – and what would that tea taste like if you made it with Dasani? You see, these are the type of questions that don’t exactly have answers, but while we can’t say exactly what Dasani is, we’re pretty sure it sounds crisp, and fresh tasting. At least that’s our story and we’re sticking with it (Dasani website, 2007).
Origins by Design

Word or water, ‘Dasani’ does not refer to a person, place or spring, or as indicated above, anything very specific at all. Deliberately defying definition, it is an original creation chosen because “consumer testing showed that the name is relaxing and suggests pureness and refreshment” (Gallagher, 2002). Launched by Coca-Cola in North America in 1999, by 2001, Dasani dominated the still water market along with Pepsico’s Aquafina and it continues to do so (Beverage Industry, 2001; Knelman 2007). Like Aquafina, it does not come from a spring or even a single source, but is ‘reprocessed’ water from a variety of city systems. In a Toronto supermarket, a one litre bottle of Dasani sells for 3000 times the price of a litre of municipal water in nearby Brampton where the bottle was filled (Knelman, 2007).

Although Coke has been selling local brands of water and a Bon Aqua label in other regions with varying levels of success, the corporation was admittedly late to enter the North American market. Appearances of seamless transition are further betrayed by the failure of Belmont Springs water in the 1980s and Mendota Springs in the 1990s (Clarke, 2005). While contemporary Coke officials reason that “if consumers are going to drink bottled water, they might as well drink a Coke product” (Deogun, 1998), even this most recent shift to bottled water production was not without international debate. As Coke’s profits come from providing syrup to bottlers, selling water from a spring or single source was not considered immediately profitable. In what is described as “the first genuine innovation in the bottled water market for 20 years” (Brierley, 2004), it was decided that existing bottling facilities and distribution networks would be provided with a special mineral mix in place of syrup. The result is not just a ‘beverage giant’ selling bottled water, but a deterritorialization and reconfiguration of the bottled water industry.
in terms of brands, flows and ubiquity rather than purity, source or exclusivity, where the production of the water itself is designed and ‘outsourced.’

With Dasani, marketing is by no means limited to managing product or even brand image as representation; both the history and ‘origins’ of Dasani are stories about information and marketing where the design of the product – of the very water itself – is the result of marketing. Although Coke is not the first major corporation to bottle municipal water from multiple sources – Aquafina was introduced in 1994 – the concept of developing and providing a ‘mineral mix’ is unique. Departing from previous spring water endeavors, Dasani water itself is designed along with its name, blue bottle and logo.17 The confidence in the brand’s qualities, despite intentional ambiguity, is backed by hundreds of consumer tests of various mineral combinations aimed at ensuring the water is perceived to be as fresh, crisp and relaxing as its name was similarly designed to imply. Implicated in the processes of design, production, promotion, and consumption, the performativity of marketing is evident in this consumer interactive co-production of object and information, product and the brand: “image has become matter and matter has become image” (Lash and Lury, 2007:9). Furthermore, the production of Dasani implies the redesign of the very idea of ‘origins’ in line with a marketing strategy based on the ubiquity of the product. With a flexibility in part made possible by the separation of water from the source, Dasani is designed as an object of possibility; the logic of the flows of brand marketing is embedded in, even delegated to the product itself.

17 The idea of manufacturing mineral water and selling it is not in itself new – in the mid-18th century, there were many attempts to imitate famous medicinal waters in order to make them more widely available (Hamlin, 2000). Through such efforts carbonated water came to be produced artificially, rather ironically making the popularity of soft-drinks, most notably Coca-cola, possible.
As such, Dasani provides an example of the ongoing and design-intensive production of even a very mundane consumer good. Water itself is an object of not simply purification and promotion, but design and redesign through the incorporation of consumer information. Preparation for the product’s launch in France involved designing and testing a different mineral mix (MarketWatch, 2004), while current products include flavoured ‘enhanced waters’ with vitamins and sugar-free sweeteners added. Such ‘water-based beverages’ make it increasingly difficult to distinguish bottled water from soft-drinks (and also lead one to question what, exactly, Coke is based on). What industry describes as an ‘aquaceutical,’ the most recent addition, Dasani Plus, is available in ‘refresh and revive,’ ‘defend and protect’ and ‘cleanse and restore.’ Such ongoing updates of both brand and water are made possible by separation from the source and the open design of Dasani. Here Dasani emerges as a set of relationships between products, “an object characterized by a changing unfolding character,” as a set of possibilities (Lury 2004).

**Introducing ‘Washed Water’**

Unlike Perrier, there have not been any attempts to associate Dasani with art, opera or ‘high culture.’ Popular marketing campaigns are arguably designed to demonstrate Dasani is exactly the opposite; it is not for the elite, or for the fashionable, but an everyday source of drinking water positioned as a low price product – both accessible and necessary – rather than an expensive luxury (Howard, 1999a). This is evident in the launch of Dasani water in 1999, and continues through subsequent campaigns, most obviously in the 2003 tag line: ‘Can’t live without it.’ The first ‘life simplified’ campaign, with what is in retrospect a fairly modest 3 million dollar budget, targeted working
women and ‘on the go’ parents (Howard, 1999b). A related website offered relaxation tips, while five million bottles were given away at games, beaches, malls, spas and bookstores. Corresponding advertisement appeared in popular magazines including Reader’s digest, Newsweek, Ladies Home Journal and Working Mother. Launched slightly later in Canada, some of the first advertisements appeared in Canadian Living magazine, a publication promising ‘Smart solutions for everyday life.’ The following section documents and contextualizes this introduction in an exploration of related concerns of health, water, convenience and implications for the construction of need.

The magazine advertisement introducing Dasani water in 1999 does not take for granted that consumers recognized the product as a necessity. Entitled ‘Introducing Washed Water’ it describes the merits of the filtration process, emphasizing that “you may not realize it, but not all water is created equal.” A side bar on the facing page offers a more detailed overview of the purification and remineralization process, including reverse osmosis and ozonation. The message is rather clear: alternatives (tap water) are full of impurities, and require ‘washing.’ The solution is conveniently described in Dasani’s ‘clean, fresh tasting water,’ and the reader is encouraged to relax and ‘do something good for yourself.’ The introduction of other bottled waters in the magazine follow suit. In an almost identical presentation of bottle on blue background, the 2005 Aquafina advertisement explains that ‘not all waters are the same,’ boasting of low levels of dissolved solids and a ‘taste of purity.’ Informing consumers of both benefits (safety, pure taste, relaxation) and the dangers of alternatives (chlorine, sodium, bacteria) these examples present solutions to problems with which consumers should be concerned. Despite the statistical ubiquity of bottled water at this time, both advertisements represent attempts to manufacture ‘need’ for ‘new’ products:
INTRODUCING WASHED WATER

You may not realize it, but not all water is created equal. New DASANI uses a state of the art Reverse Osmosis process for purity which removes organic compounds, chlorine and bacteria. Then, just the right amount of minerals are added for a clean, pure taste. So you'll love what's in it and what's not.

Clean, Pure Taste

DASANI

REMINERALIZED WATER

A product of The Coca-Cola Company

Life Simplified

Dasani", "Washed Water" and "Life Simplified" are trademarks of The Coca-Cola Company.
Such efforts are supported by the association of bottled water with a healthy lifestyle. For Dasani this involves a partnership with the healing garden products that also feature prominently in the magazines at this time. With Aquafina, bottled water appears as part of a 2006 ‘Smart Life’ campaign promoting healthy products along with advice: “In order to keep going your body needs to remain hydrated, so drink – especially water.”
Keep a bottle of Aquafina handy throughout the day.” At this time there is also a notable shift in the prominence of and approach to health in the magazine. Between 1998 and 2005, health issues are separated from the food and nutrition section, moving towards the front of the magazine as under a ‘health and wellness’ heading. There is a general interest in the ‘inside’ of things – from ‘looking good on the inside’ to food labeling and potential dangers of genetically modified products. Most consistently with Brita since 1996, such concerns coincide with a proliferation of advertisements for water filters on taps, jugs and even built into coffee pots, promising protection from lists of contaminants or unnamable ‘bad things.’

Such a careful ‘fit’ between the presentation of Dasani and more general magazine content could perhaps be interpreted as exploiting existing trends to sell products. For example, ‘antioxidants’ which get first mention as health advice later make an appearance in face cream. At this time, water, and bottled water more specifically, are also prominently associated with health and beauty. In what seems to be a general diffusion of this trend, splashes of water adorn advertisement for soaps and shampoos, but also ‘hydrating’ hair dyes and lip gloss. In other cases, however, the movement between the content of advertisements and their counterparts in the body of the magazine itself is more complex. While bottled water is also the centre of detailed discussions on health and safety – on staying ‘hydrated’ in summer safety guides, on the dangers and as an indispensable item on ‘don’t leave home without it’ travel lists – bottled water appears first in advertisements and later in such articles. Aquafina’s advice sits somewhere between these scenarios, with suggestions for a ‘healthy life’ incorporated into advertisements themselves. This suggests complex interaction between product
promotion including that of seemingly unrelated goods, magazine content and at least proposed consumer practices.

While certainly not due to the positioning of bottled water in this magazine alone, these examples illustrate some of the ways in which bottled water becomes entangled with the discourses and practices of health, beauty and safety. This exemplifies the well known manifestation of advertising as representation as water, its content and
consumption garner increasing attention in these terms. If the phenomenon was only about water, such issues would be the primary focus of this discussion, however, bottles are also objects involved in not only representing, but doing.

Returning to the magazine content analysis in terms of such practices, the most notable change is that of the relationship between convenience and mobility. While cell phones might immediately spring to mind, starting at the end of the 1990s there is a marked proliferation, even explosion, of more mundane things ‘to go’:

This includes the reframing of existing products but also those with packaging newly designed to be portable. There is oatmeal-to-go, Fruit Snacks become ‘Fruit To Go: real fruit, only flat,’ while mosquito repellent gains a belt clip, instant detergent is offered in Tide to go sticks, and Crystal Light drink mix appears in single serving pocket-sized packages. Even the 2004 National Home Show is promoted as ‘ideas to go.’ This conflation of convenience with mobility, the assumed attractiveness of things ‘to go,’ is
supported by the more general suggestion that contemporary understandings of convenience imply the ability to coordinate people and objects in time and space (Shove, 2003: 171). Here the product’s benefits and the justification for its consumption emerge from the flexibility of the object’s capacity to move with people. If water is associated with health, it is at least in part convenience that makes bottles so important.

These observations from Canadian Living are consistent with overall trends in newspaper coverage of bottled water and industry observations. While 1980s coverage of bottled water focuses on safety, taste and health benefits, from the late 1990s onward, convenience is increasingly cited among reasons people drink bottled water. Recent marketing research suggests that bottled water is an impulse buy, and “more consumers are drinking it on the move” (McCawley, 2004). However, despite these developments, marketing is not necessarily responsible. Dasani is not deliberately positioned as such, and it is only more recently in 2005 that Dasani launched purse-sized ‘shortie’ bottles. Moreover, in 2004 Coca-Cola’s chief executive admitted that “the emerging consumer trends in health and wellness were missed” in an “unstoppable shift to healthier, non-carbonated refreshments” (McKenna, 2004). Even with the $23 million a year promotional budget of a major corporate brand, there is space to question the effectiveness of advertising and marketing as information alone without incorporating consumer practices and perceptions.
While advertising remains an important component, the marketing of Dasani extended to very active attempts to insert products into practices. In the year 2000, around the same time that Pepsico’s Vice Chair declared tap water ‘the biggest enemy,’ the Coca-Cola Company annual report made an ambitious claim: “We’re redefining how consumers get hydrated” (Barlow and Clarke, 2002; Gleick, 2001). The former Coca-Cola Company CEO for 1981-1997 predicted that soft-drinks would replace tap water as number one way in which people all over the world would consume beverages. To this end, a prototype for a ‘home Coke on tap system’ was developed with the aim of having the ‘C’ on the cold water tap stand for Coke (Barlow and Clarke, 2002). While the focus may now be bottled water rather than Coke at home, and it is Dasani that has received
increased marketing investment the goal remains the same. Furthermore, Coca-Cola’s attempts to redefine how people get hydrated, are not limited to advertising or even marketing-intensive design and production, but include marketing strategies designed to alter practice more directly.

At the same time that Coca-Cola was promoting bottled tap water, the company was actively discouraging the consumption of the unprocessed variety. In what is described as part of a ‘battle plan against tap water,’ a joint effort with the Olive Garden restaurants developed a program entitled ‘H2NO.’ With the slogan ‘just say no to H2O,’ the project trained staff in suggestive selling techniques aimed at weaning restaurant patrons from tap water (Gallagher, 2001). This initiative included conducting research to determine why consumers where drinking tap water and developed strategies to intervene accordingly. The associated research found that many chose tap water ‘because it was there,’ and simply needed to be made aware of alternatives. However, even with such personal persuasion, there is recognition that practices are difficult to change, especially with information alone: those who drink tap water out of habit, about 20%, were found to be least likely to convert. As for the project’s success, all participating restaurants reported increases in beverage sales and decreases in tap water ‘incidence’ (ibid.).

In another research effort, Coke used the ideas.com website and a $5000 prize to solicit consumer input for the following question:

Many doctors have suggested that people should drink at least eight glasses of water a day. What ideas can you think of that would make it easier for people to drink more water? Your ideas can include Coke’s current water brand Dasani, or a new brand. It can include current products, or newly created ones you’ve invented yourself.

Aside from a questionable reference to doctors’ advice in an attempt to frame this endeavor in consumers’ best interest, this provides another example of consumer
participation in product development and promotion. This case shows how corporate marketing strategy is not restricted to attempts at changing what people drink, but includes how much. At least 2090 ideas were submitted (Gallagher, 2001).

While Coke’s plans involve actively redefining tap water or at least its packaging, more recent campaigns position Dasani through the attempted redefinition of spring water. A series of television advertisement from 2005 and 2006 features humans dressed as animals: a dog who dislikes the stale water in his bowl, an exercise obsessed hamster that ‘knows a little something about bottle water,’ and a bear with post-hibernation dry-mouth. In one segment, the bear comments that “the whole natural spring thing is fine [but] you don’t want any of that because its full of salmon and they’re spawning” (Janoff, 2005). In another, the salmon comment that ‘natural’ water, and bottled spring water by implication, tastes ‘fishy.’ Marketing industry reviews are not overly enthusiastic, noting that while the brand and bottle are featured prominently, the advertisements leave consumers wondering where Dasani comes from if it is ‘better than natural’ (Parpis and Alexander, 2005). That this campaign was expanded with new animals for 2006, suggests Dasani’s marketers are working from the assumption that repeatedly associating the brand with products that ‘make your mouth water’ is much more important than the source or being ‘natural.’

While this section provides multiple illustrations of very deliberate corporate attempts at changing consumption, as discussed above, these strategies are not necessarily successful. But despite criticism, and even admitted marketing failure, Dasani became and remains a best selling product in a market that continues to expand. Throughout the less promising moments confidence is maintained in well-established distribution network, as “their waters can go where their soft-drinks go and that’s just about
everywhere” (Beverage Industry, 2000). This reliance on ‘presence marketing,’ the impact of the simple existence of the logo-laden bottles, (Hays, 2000) demonstrates marketers’ confidence in product ubiquity, but also in the ability of the bottles themselves to influence consumers. This delegation of responsibility to the object, suggests that crucial information is not about, but circulated with and within the bottles themselves. In other words, nonhumans are entrusted with the human task of marketing, implicated in the construction of conditions for their own reproduction. Indeed, as the product’s origins suggest, Dasani is ubiquitous by design – as a branded product, in a multi-source production process, in a well-established distribution system – it is the portable plastic bottles you ‘can’t live without.’
Discussion: Marketing Practices

To a certain extent Perrier and Dasani illustrate a familiar story of marketing history marking the shifts from representation to flows. Advertisements move from classifieds, to magazines, to television, websites, t-shirt and towels as marketers explore new ways to gain and maintain the attention of consumers. Dasani has even commissioned a series of advertisements that appear animated from speeding trains in previously darkened subway tunnels (Zipern, 2001). Products and their promotion are increasingly differentiated: water appears in all kinds of packages, sizes and even flavours; Perrier’s advertising becomes regionally distinct; and Dasani’s wellness campaign targeting ‘working women ages 25-49’ is an obvious example of lifestyle marketing. This does not simply mean market segmentation: more advertising of specialized products for different groups of people. Moving away from simple description of water and suggested use, advertising alone becomes increasingly inadequate as a means of explaining the relationship between products and consumers.

Although unintentional, each Perrier campaign invites discussion of ever-more dimensions of the product under the rubric of marketing, including those not initially intended as such. Even Perrier’s handling of the potentially brand-ruining Benzene contamination in 1990 is now held as exemplary action in face of crisis that ultimately helped the brand (Pitcher, 2004). Marketing incorporates such feedback, but also increasingly reframes both product and the market through the integration of information about consumers. Consumer interaction with the brand precipitates different types of relationships in an ongoing – and in the case of ‘IER,’ even continuous – process of multidirectional flows between producers and consumers. And as is evident in Perrier’s recent campaign and the very ‘origins’ of Dasani, such information has material
consequences as marketing shapes production, design and redesign. Here research is marketing.

As outlined in this chapter, marketing also reveals key shifts in the trajectory of bottled water, partially tracing factors implicated in its normalization. Perrier alone has changed considerably over the past century in terms of the idea of bottled water, what it is for and how it is packaged and promoted. The green bottle of 1906 may be as recognizable as that of today, but it is not the same consumer product. Once ‘a luxury from Europe,’ intended as a table water, it is now intended for and co-produced by a much broader audience with ‘new formats to quench all thirsts in all circumstances’ (Perrier website). Even Perrier – from a unique source and arguably the most ‘elite’ of widely available waters – is now positioned as an everyday product for everyone. Furthermore, especially with the -IER campaign, there is much to indicate a transition from brand as mark of origins to brand as possibility, where the ‘source’ is less important than flexible and ongoing relationships with consumers who are invited to discover the brand ‘in their own terms.’

Separated from both luxury and source and established through ongoing consumer-intensive design, Dasani explodes these characteristics, arguably only making sense in terms of these shifts. With popular marketing campaigns from the start, Dasani is positioned as an everyday necessity: ‘Can’t live without it,’ is not the tag line for an optional indulgence. An exemplary branded commodity, product, advertisements and vending machines are all dominated by the Dasani name. Bottles are arguably more about putting logos in circulation than about water. Established as a set of qualities, experiences and products, Dasani’s design facilitates the increased speed of change, the ongoing ‘upgrades’ of the brand, bottle and water through feedback. If the concerns surrounding
risk, health and safety are indicative of growing uncertainty (e.g. Beck, 1992; Lupton, 1996), the brand is able to capture such change with increasing speed. However, such flexibility is not only the intended variety and should not be conflated with the idea that this openness extends to objects and consumer practices – the carrying of bottles, drinking water ‘to go’ – in ways that are not immediately controllable. The idea of the flexibility of the ‘source’ does however provide a strong illustration of the sheer possibilities of dynamic combinations of product, promotion, practices. Only two of thousands of examples, Perrier is at times bottled like water and marketed as a soft drink, where Dasani is bottled like a soft drink and marketed as water. And even for Perrier alone these three campaigns are but part-histories.

Lash and Lury suggest that a new regime is emerging where value is established in relation to information rather than authenticity or exclusivity (2007: 141). While this chapter and especially the changing ideas of ‘origins’ appears to support this claim, authenticity remains an important issue. Perrier and Dasani are by no means representative of all bottled waters. Fiji water for one, has recently become a major contender outselling Evian with marketing campaign based on far away luxury of a specific geographical source, of water from nature ‘untouched by man.’ And when the investigation of unacceptable levels of bromate in London’s Dasani water lead to the ‘discovery’ that the product was no more than purified tap water, consumers and media alike voiced considerable disapproval. Most recently, Aquafina has ceded to Corporate Accountability International demands, changing bottle labels to read ‘public water source’ (CBC News, 2007), a reminder that bottled water is still about water. Conversely, in some ways bottled water, whether in terms of product safety, purity or medicinal properties, has always been a matter of information.
While certain trends parallel the more general trajectory of marketing over the past few decades, the wide variety of themes both within and between brands is testament to the complexity of the bottled water phenomenon. However, that the recent campaigns presented here are not dominated by warnings of the ‘risks’ of tap water does not absolve the marketing or industry from charges of fear mongering. Such understandings are certainly implicit with Dasani’s ‘washed water,’ and the Brita filter campaigns that appear in Canadian Living from 1996-2006 are particularly noteworthy. The first advertisements explain that water is no longer as pure as it used to be, more recent ones equate tap water with that of the mop bucket and garden hose variety, while a controversial television commercial implies tap water is toilet water. Furthermore, that Perrier, a brand long established with ties to the arts, and as drink mixer relies on such themes for an extended period in the 1980s suggests such issues were considered prominent at least at the time. However, even the selected examples in this chapter do not reveal a single line of persuasion that characterizes the advertising of bottled water. Marketing is obviously interconnected to a multitude of shifting conventions and concerns, and health, taste and purity do remain central themes. But given the differences between medicine and diet, pure and purified and the perception that water should not have any taste at all, these too are slippery concepts that are themselves contested and dynamic.

Certainly changes in health, highly publicized safety reports and water-related disasters represent some of the many potential factors related to changes in bottled water consumption, but it is the mobility of the bottles that best illustrates how the current bottled water demands consideration in terms of object and practices. Marketing may work to define and position products in relation to others and as objects of consumption – Dasani from Perrier, bottled from tap, purified from natural – however, the bottles
themselves are implicated in such redefinition. In some ways, the very existence of bottled water changes tap water: it becomes an object of suspicion, bad-tasting, potentially dangerous. If nothing else, what was in the early twentieth century a modern convenience becomes decidedly inconvenient. Even for Perrier, so commonly defined in relation to a geographical source and a national culture, mobile bottles become a matter of necessity, while similarly positioned Evian has recently become available in clip-topped bottles, the ‘Nomad.’ As one commentator asks, why can’t young people today survive a ten minute bus journey without those ubiquitous water-bottles? (Guardian, 2007). Bottles are still packaging, but in many ways the bottle is the product itself, people and bottles and water ‘to go,’ and this need for movable bottles arguably stems from practices rather than as an invention of the brand.

When bottled water appears to have been so successfully marketed and integrated into everyday life, it may seem unnecessary or even petty to focus on the exceptions. Why worry about Coke’s little known failure to market spring water in the 1990s when Dasani has become so ubiquitous? Is it necessary to make so much of plastic bottles when Perrier is still available and popular in glass? But it is in these moments of failure and change, especially those most unanticipated, that we can better glimpse what understanding and, most significantly, changing consumption might entail. While the phenomenon is in many ways still about water, brands and logos, as the chapter title indicates, it is also very much a story about bottles as it is here that water and brands converge. It is in bottles as dynamic object of possibility that things become information. It is also here that possibility becomes probability, where information becomes material. As an object that is both abstract and concrete, bottled water circulates as information, but this information has a tendency to have material effects: it becomes embedded in bottles.
and entangled in practices (Barry, 2001; Shove et. al, 2007). Bottles remain containers for water, but they are increasingly becoming other things: surfaces for logos, a means of hydration ‘to go,’ and their very proliferation and movement is implicated in the redefinition of practices and possible alternatives.
4
Objects, Information
and Normalization(s) of Bottled Water

Fixedness is a matter of moments of stability in a sequence of change and it is always in danger of disappearing (Lury 2004: 130)

I have argued so far that, even for a product that is inextricably entangled with information about health and safety, environmental and ethical concerns, an emphasis on objects themselves (including brand and bottle) significantly transforms narratives of normalization in ways immediately relevant to both understanding and changing consumption. Marketing, however pervasive, persuasive and persistent is not reducible to a question of misinformation alone; information is dynamic, it becomes material, alters products, and creates new realities as bottles become enfolded in practices in sometimes
unexpected ways. As such, both the marketing and the normalization of bottled water emerge as uneven processes of stops and starts, reframing, reversals and reintroduction, which have been concealed in the dominant narratives by an exclusive focus on water provision and production/acquisition statistics. Continuing to question the relationships between objects and marketing and associated understandings of consumption and normalization, in this concluding chapter I consider some of the implications of taking bottles seriously both theoretically, and in terms of policy and other initiatives.

**Questioning the Objects of Marketing**

Lash and Lury’s (2007) most recent work is about the emergent properties of things, about what is happening now that might foreshadow the future. Asserting that the present is characterized by collapsing distinctions between different kinds of things, they argue that the objects discussed in their work were at one point things, but not media. For material consumer products these shifts predominantly, although somewhat problematically, mark the transition from commodities to brands. As demonstrated, both Perrier and Dasani share many properties of such branded products and can be understood as media in this sense. However, returning to the nuances outlined in chapter two and the cases of normalization considered in chapter three, does this in itself constitute a ‘new autonomy for objects’ in relation to the bottle of water?

Throughout the Perrier and Dasani examples there is an ongoing tension between the brand-object and the materiality of the bottle itself. At some points, such as with Perrier in the late 1970s, it appears that marketing and information successfully reframed the product, and that practices followed suit. In others, as with Perrier’s transition to plastic, it is bottles and consumer practices that appear to alter marketing and information.
Approached relationally especially in terms of use, the 1906 bottles of Perrier – simultaneously status symbols, table water, drink mixers and medicine – were not necessarily the ‘identical objects’ of Lash and Lury’s (2007) commodities. Conversely, despite providing an exemplary case of branding, in other ways Dasani remains the ubiquitous material commodity, arguably more mass produced than previous bottled waters. While Lury’s (2004) brands (re)organize production and consumption across space and time, the bottle of water is itself an object entangled in such relationships, implicated in reproducing and transforming the organization of practices: of drinking water, carrying bottles and hydration ‘to go.’ Marketing is not limited to the reframing of products, disseminating information or even brand mediation, but includes active attempts to insert products into such practices.

While marketing certainly involves a considerable mobilization of resources, from other perspectives, the dynamic characteristics of things-as-media are neither novel nor limited to informational properties. If ‘new’ objects, such as digital cameras, feature in the work of Shove et al. (2007) it is at least in part because such observable moments of transition and reorganization help make visible the role of things that are otherwise taken for granted. And it is possible that computers, digital and information objects – the proliferation of things in which the interrelations between humans and non-humans are more evident, and as Latour (2005) would say ‘explicit’ – have precipitated an interest in objects or provided another vocabulary that has simply made such understandings more accessible. If one aspect of the objects of marketing, however, is most convincingly ‘new,’ it is the speed with which the brand appears able to react to changing consumer practices, perceptions and concerns. And it is Lury’s (2004) conceptual resources from
new media theory – feedback, flows, interface, the update – that help capture the nonlinear trajectories and adaptability of brand-marketed bottles.

As the Perrier and Dasani stories illustrate, feedback from consumer practices and perceptions is increasingly integrated into marketing and even production, embodied in bottles of water, materialized in mobile form. By no means unique to these brands or limited to matters of convenience, other examples provide evidence of the timely integration of negative responses to the consumption of bottled water into the most recent products. In reaction to the environmental impact of disposable plastic, BIOTA water is packaged in corn-derived biodegradable ‘PLA’ bottles. Noting that the large majority of bottles are never recycled, the company explains that “even if BIOTA’s PLA bottles end up in the trash, you’ve still made a difference by buying a product made from a 100% renewable resource” (BIOTA, 2007). For those with ethical concerns, bottles of Ethos Water, the Starbucks brand of choice, bear labels that proudly proclaim its purchase is “helping children get clean water.” Ten cents from each bottle sold in Canada and five cents from those in the US is donated to water projects around the globe. Acquired by Starbucks in 2005, available in all Canadian Starbucks since March 2007, there are plans for a major distribution increase through a partnership with PepsiCo in the near future. Such waters are not longer relegated to ‘niche’ status but are as, if not more, widespread than the concerns they purportedly address. Ethical concerns are ‘translated’ into material form.

While these additional examples illustrate the intentional appropriation of ‘resistance,’ the brand is something that ultimately escapes definition in terms of purposive actions alone (Lury, 2004). Lash and Lury’s (2007) cultural objects are self-reflexive objects that move as much through accident as design. But the brand, as an
‘open system’ is designed to take advantage of such movements, of pattern and randomness, of things necessarily spinning out of control (ibid: 147). The brand relies on the unintended effects of products in use and consumers engaging with the brand ‘on their own terms.’ Responses are integrated into the “new direction for product planning and developments as the brand mutates as it evolves” (2007: 150). If bottled water does not in itself demonstrate a new autonomy for objects, such movements between information and design, marketing and practice, arguably take on new significance with brand marketing.

The Ongoing Processes of Normalization

While convincing in part, the accounts presented in the introductory chapter construct normalization as a linear and largely statistical increase in consumption: each year greater amounts of bottled water are produced and distributed by corporations with equally expansionary marketing budgets. Focusing instead on the bottles and the shifting practices and perceptions that figure in the branding and re-branding of bottled water produces a rather different narrative of the increasingly rapid re-normalization of dynamic objects. Despite considerable evidence indicating bottled water was pervasive at the time of its introduction, the Dasani bottle of ‘washed’ water required not only introduction but significant explanation, further suggesting the ongoing work required for ‘bottled water’ to remain normal (Hand and Shove, 2007). That the volume of bottled water consumption has increased exponentially points to the importance of thinking about changing patterns of demand, but to say normalization is simply the diffusion of a single product is to miss the movements of the myriad products and practices that constitute the generic phenomenon, and most importantly, jeopardizes the efficacy of efforts to change consumption patterns.
Bottled water may not necessarily represent a new category of objects marking the passing of commodities, however, this does not imply bottled water today is the same consumer product it was a hundred or even ten years ago: marketing and use, both intended and otherwise, have changed considerably; bottles are made from new materials implicated in different practices; and the water itself is redesigned and repoliticized. A strong sense of this change is provided as Perrier – the brand that could most obviously be about the properties of the water or socio-economic status – becomes a matter of convenience, while the now ‘everyday’ plastic bottles of Dasani water begin as marketing and logos and information. In each period of intense activity in Perrier’s history, bottled water appears as a different object, and recent developments are replete with failures and unexpected turns for even the most established products and corporations.

Again, Perrier and Dasani, along with BIOTA and Ethos are but a few of hundreds of waters available, but even these limited examples demonstrate the diversity of the present, suggesting the wide range of possibilities as both brand and bottle reconfigure consumer practices and perceptions are themselves remade in return. While the phenomenon changes, it is also constituted by many things at the same time, as different bottles of water have lives and trajectories of their own irreducible to a uniform statistically defined practice of ‘consumption.’ In conjunction with the discussion of the brand, such an account of normalization and the integration of bottled water into multiple facets of everyday life suggests that, in its flexibility and fluidity, research-intensive brand-marketing is interwined with, more closely parallels, and is possibly increasingly aware of, such a conceptualization of consumption and normalization as diverse processes of things-in-use (Thrift, 2005). Increasingly efficient at reacting to such dynamic processes through incorporating or circumnavigating changes and concerns, such a
relationship presents new challenges for those wishing to change consumption practices, including that of bottled water. Yet these processes are neither permanent nor complete; ‘normality’ does not imply stasis, but always provisional configurations that leave space for redefinition, reintegration and reinvention.

Redefining Hydration: The Challenge of Changing Consumption

These considerations have immediate implications for policy and other initiatives aiming to ‘redefine hydration.’ If bottles are integral to understanding consumption practices and transform our understanding of what normalization actually entails, then they in their many manifestations must also be taken into consideration by those interested in inducing particular changes. The relationships between objects and brand-marketing outlined above have potentially profound implications for sustainability efforts as dynamic objects adapt to changing perceptions and practices to reproduce long-standing, if not identical relationships. Reflexive objects that can, and even thrive through, appropriating negative concerns potentially frustrate anti-bottled water efforts as actively voiced consumer concerns lead towards new products rather than reduced consumption. As with many environmentally or ethically grounded products, with both Ethos and BIOTA continued consumption is the ‘solution’: Ethos offers a ‘reduced-guilt’ option, while BIOTA exemplifies the technological fix. Rather than even attempting to change consumption practices themselves – and pointing towards the difficulty of doing so – a product is offered that is less harmful when ‘inevitably’ thrown away. However, BIOTA bottles, filled at a source in Colorado, do little to reduce energy concerns with packaging and shipping. Moreover, if, as these two examples demonstrate, consumer perceptions and
practices become materialized in objects, this challenges the very concept of contesting consumption and what exactly is being resisted.

Many commentators have suggested that the triumph of bottled water is due to the marketing of the product when nothing similar exists for tap water. While an account involving ‘open’ brands and dynamic bottles points towards impermanence and flows, it does not result in a problem limited to the content or availability of information. It appears that bottles have become a ‘necessary’ part of drinking water ‘on the go,’ where the materiality of objects themselves – rather than concerns about water alone – is essential to reproducing practices centred around mobility. Part of broader configurations of habitual consumption entangled with seemingly unrelated transformations of factors such as mobility, these practices are unlikely to be ‘reverse-engineered’ by water focused ‘anti-marketing.’ Many efforts to de-normalize bottled water, however, attempt just that.

Not only are initiatives based on similar assumptions to those challenged by this work – the phenomenon is about water quality but not bottles, the problem is one of (mis)information – in some cases they are even directly modeled after the advertising of bottled water. As in this example from a 2003 campaign, the City of Toronto has been actively promoting its municipal supply through a series of bus shelter and newspaper advertisements (see below). However this amounts to a rather problematic attempt at altering the image of a glass of tap water through a superficial association with the qualities understood to make bottled water desirable. Simply ‘telling’ consumers a glass is convenient is not only unlikely to change habitual practices, but directly contradicts the particularities of what actually constitutes the convenience of bottled water in terms of its mobility. Effective marketing of alternatives too must incorporate information about
consumers, taking what people are doing with their water, and what bottles might be doing with people into consideration.

Returning to Coke’s efforts to redefine hydration and Perrier’s recent campaigns, it is crucial to note that while substantial funds are certainly channeled into advertising, marketing efforts do not stop at representation. Accordingly more promising than simply informing people of the purity and convenience of tap water, are initiatives such as Toronto’s ‘HTO to Go’ project. On request, mobile water stations provide drinking fountains and taps for refills as an alternative to bottled water at events. Similarly, other initiatives involve the distribution of free ‘City of Toronto’ refillable bottles and the purchase of bottling equipment with the aim of providing water for the public sector. Consistent with reports of a ‘return-to-the-tap crusade’, San Francisco has recently passed new regulations forbidding the spending of city funds on bottled water (Kingston, 2007).
As a result of such efforts, bottled water may have been labeled ‘the latest environmental sin’ (ibid.), but if it has supplanted SUVs from this position, it is not because such a negative image rendered gas-hungry vehicles obsolete. Despite the growing consensus that bottled water is the new symbol of water and excess, attempts to change consumption remain limited by the problems of actually getting people to drink tap water or reuse bottles – problems complicated by the many transformations and practices with which bottled water is entangled.

**Final Thoughts: Practice-Oriented Provision**

Bottles, however implicated in practices and reproduction, remain filled with water, and are together connected to questions of safety, risk and convenience among others. Far from existing in isolation, the consumption of bottled water is caught up in equally dynamic reconfigurations of spaces, time, health and hydration, entangled with a multiplicity of changes that information alone is unlikely to ‘undo.’ Although specific stories are beyond the scope of this project, such issues – including how they are perceived by consumers themselves – could further contextualize the phenomenon in future research. This might extend to an empirical examination of the redesign of public spaces, the addition of Dasani vending machines, the unnoticed decision to not install new water fountains or even pay phones, and the rearrangement of grocery stores to prominently display single serving multipacks. Time is also reorganized, as bottles add water to a growing collective of portable goods and mobile objects indicative the shifting ways in which life is coordinated and scheduled (Southerton, 2007; Urry, 2000).

Whether marketing-instigated or not, bottled water is part of the process of redefining hydration alternatives: there is the tacit knowledge behind automatic apologies
to guests, the bottles implicit in health advice on staying hydrated, and the assumption that bringing home water in bottles is more convenient than that from the faucet. Drinking tap water becomes a sign one is lacking knowledge about health, or alternately, resistance to corporate power and a means of making an environmental statement. As such, both tap and bottled water are repoliticized, at the centre of new discourses and practices which go beyond questions of safety and simply re-educating people as to the quality of tap water.

While the focus of this thesis is on objects and information, bottles and marketing, this is not to downplay important questions of public and private responsibility. This discussion is not just an alternative or addition to other facets of the phenomenon, but integral to an understanding of them. This is in line with Shove et. al’s (2007) argument that objects are implicated in creating new practices and patterns of demand in an active sense. To follow one issue, there is indeed another narrative emerging in relation to concerns of water provision. And, in tandem with this thesis, bottles are very much actively involved. Prior to the late 1990s there is not a single mention of bottled water as convenient in the Globe and Mail aside from emergency situations where its consumption is described in exactly the opposite terms. Concerns surrounding the mobility of bottles are also noticeably absent from the advertising at this time, especially given how prominently convenience figures in current explanations of bottled water consumption. In this context, there is a noticeable trend towards alternatives that appear in, or take for granted, the necessity of water in bottled form. Restaurants in California have begun to filter, bottle (and sell) their own tap water (Kingston, 2007), and Wilk (2006) concludes his article by suggesting that non-governmental organizations provide water in reusable bottles, donating the profits to water projects. Moreover, a recent article suggests that in bottling tap water for everyone, the City of Toronto could “solve the convenience issue”
(Knelman, 2007). If convenience has rather mysteriously become an, if not the ‘issue,’ it may be worth questioning the bottles themselves. In terms of provision, and the private/public concerns dominating water debates, here demand is not framed in terms of who controls water mains or the necessity of reinvesting in water fountains, but rather the identification of an unprecedented ‘need’ for publicly sourced bottles of water.

Accordingly, questions of what is provided, by whom, and how, should also be approached in terms of the actual practices of ‘consuming,’ rather than solely focusing upon material or informational resources – the quality of water, the ‘accuracy’ of information - alone. If bottled water and related practices of drinking have effectively transformed such questions of improving provision, they too challenge common sense understandings of what provision itself entails:

If material artefacts configure, rather than simply meet, needs and desires, those who give them shape and form make a distinct contribution to the transformation and persistence of social practices (Shove et. al, 2007)

As with the ‘social lives of things,’ the implications for questions of the responsibility for enabling and engendering sustainability extend beyond moments of provision. As one designer notes, “to design is to shape the future” (Masumi cited in Lury, 2004: 39). The question of how to design a more ‘sustainable future’ remains.
References:


Mittelstaedt, Martin. 2006. “The Religious was on bottled water; Church groups decry profit-fuelled craze.” The Globe and Mail, September 23.


Zipern, Andrew. 2001 “In this new campaign, the words of the advertisers are written on the subway walls.” *New York Times*, September 28.