

Pop Art and the Symbiosis of Post-War American Consumer Culture

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Abstract: Based on this paper, the symbiotic relationship among American Pop Art and consumer society after World War II, at that time, the movement was not an attack on mass consumption but rather a process of cultural legalization. According to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Jameson's discussion about cultural logic in the era of late capitalism, this study will conduct a detailed analysis of Pop Art techniques for transforming commercial images into purely artistic works through close readings of artworks such as "Canned Soup," "Green Coca-Cola Bottle," and "Duplex Paintings by Marilyn Monroe." Research showed that a three-pronged symbol construction of Pop Art's repetition pattern, strict branding implementation, and celebrity commercial model jointly creates an aesthetically inclined image-for-use product network that transfers social value among users while eliminating the gap in taste definition by marketization mechanisms. The most far-reaching legacy of pop art is to legalize brand consumption as an aesthetic experience. This culture is still driving brand promotion and international collaboration of arts and business, as well as consumers' self-definition in the new era.

Keywords: Pop Art; Consumer Culture; Sign-value; Cultural Capital; Post-war America; Brand Symbolism; Andy Warhol

1. Introduction

Pop art's emergence in the US in the late 1950s and early 1960s is tied to the rise of consumer culture in America. After World War II, when the United States emerged as a country of widespread consumerism and a large-scale production and distribution system based on brand goods was established, a group of painters was born under the impact of massive celebrity culture—Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Tom Wesselmann, among others,

did not turn away from this trend towards abstract self-reflection during their period. Rather than being interested in utilizing the image composition method based on components of supermarkets, billboards, and mass-circulated newspapers. This choice was neither arbitrary nor politically naïve. In recent years, scholars have pointed out that selecting commercial images for study is an inevitable transformation of the relationship between fine arts and economy [1,2]; its influence extends far beyond the art exhibition; it affects people's overall concept of consumption in society.

There is an increasing number of scholars who are questioning the traditional view of Pop Art as a form of satirizing consumer culture—its empty material abundance, etc.—which has long dominated research; it fails to grasp its real purpose. Pop Art did not reveal or challenge the logic of consumerism but rather promoted and sustained this trend through a certain degree of legitimization of image culture in fine art forms. Through this means, it has performed what Bourdieu calls an "adjustment in cultural capital"—by making consumer goods, brands' logos, and stars part of "lower-class culture," they become objects for thought that belong to aesthetics. It also allowed consumption to be an acceptable manner of cultural expression and social participation, thereby reinforcing the idea that consumerism is intertwined with identity and social status in post-war America.

There are four main parts of this paper. It introduces the background factors such as history and economy at home after World War II that promoted America's consumer culture development and subsequently led to pop art. It then constructs a theoretical system mainly based on those proposed by Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and Jameson to help us explore more deeply what caused such phenomena as "the circulation." Thirdly, it introduces some representative works of pop art and explores how they make consumption culture visible for

people. Highlights brand symbols and the commercial application of stars. In other words, how the movement has altered business forever and what this is going to mean for brand strategy and marketing. This study takes into account recent findings in various fields of art history, cultural theories, and consumer science at the crossroads of Pop Art [3-5].

2. Context of History: Post-war US consumer boom

During the period from 1946 to 1960 in America, economic and social conditions had never been so good as they are now. Real personal consumption expenditure increased more than two times between 1945 and 1960; Suburban homes began to proliferate, and TV sets started being used for entertainment at home; At this time, there was a widespread trend towards multimedia advertising in households. Because there was a lack of demand for goods during wartime and then a large surplus of production at peace, it became an extremely abundant sellers' market. Addition of hundreds more products in terms of number; Continuous updating and release of models each year in cars, etc.; The added complexity of visual grammar in brand identities creates distinctions between similar items using colors, shapes, and symbols. Pop art, as an object for recreation at ease and a means to communicate emotions among people during this period when life is prosperous and there is abundant culture [6].

The crisis of the leading image styles in American fine arts, such as Pop Art, had already begun when it emerged. Abstract expressionism is the movement including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem De Kooning; they all believed it could help people release their emotions and be more spiritual than before. Against the vulgarity of commercial culture and the pressure of mass society, all people were made the same. The high status of its own work in pop art came from the strict hierarchical division of 'high' versus 'low' art. Therefore, while shifting away from Abstract Expressionism would be considered an aesthetic change at first glance, in fact, it is no more than changing where to escape consumption-capturing culture—Abstract Expressionism seeks retreat within one's own heart under the threat of all-consuming consumer society, whereas Pop art has always been deeply rooted in capitalist production techniques. According to

Lipiński's comparison [7], there is no such phenomenon as changing its course among many post-war artworks worldwide; however, it can be realized due to special circumstances of Western consumer society. It is also backed by the fact that pop art's formal methods can be used in state-controlled cultural economies without having the same cultural effects due to a change in content from consumerism-based situations.

3. Theoretical framework.

Based on the three interrelated areas of social and cultural theory that form the theoretical foundation for this paper, they are listed in Table 1 below. Each body presents an explanation for how Pop Art is connected with consumer culture. The frameworks allow one not only to describe the consumer image in Pop Art but also to uncover the systematization mechanism of this form of reproduction and legitimization for capitalist consumption, which includes analyzing how these images reflect and influence consumer behavior and societal values. The ideas of Jean Baudrillard are probably the most directly related to the argument made in this paper. According to Baudrillard's 1970 article "Consumer Society," satisfying people's basic requirements involves meeting their material wants, while spiritual pursuits are different; however, this process constructs a set of standards that indicate one's place in society. In consumer society, things are important not because they can be used to meet a need, but because they are part of a coded system of cultural references and social differences. Baudrillard explicitly stated that pop art is an excellent demonstration of this semiotics in art. He referred to this phenomenon as "homogeneous with industrial and serial production," not as a critique [8]. The concept of simulacra, developed in his later works, further extends this examination to expand it to simulate phenomena where repeated reproductions, such as pop art, repeatedly recreate consumer images into virtual models without being recognizable as originals anymore; however, for consumers today, these simulated images are often far more persuasive than any physical objects could ever be.

According to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory presented in "Distinction," culture can be understood in this way: According to Bourdieu, the distinction between "high" and "low" cultures is not an objective aesthetic hierarchy

but rather a social arrangement intended to maintain class power; people who possess legitimate cultural capital for appreciating 'legitimate' works display their social standing by showing taste [9]. Pop Art deliberately broke with it by treating things such as Campbell's Soup Cans and Coca-Cola Bottles, which cultural elders previously regarded as illegitimate aesthetics in pursuit of class distinctions, as acceptable artistic subjects. Recently, some scholars have explored empirically the continuous effect on

distinguishing culture from such difficulties; this may lead to a new model for achieving distinctions in contemporary cultural circles [10]. Explicit rejection of popular culture has given way to a kind of "culture eclecticism," which treats various types of cultures, including classic and contemporary art and film and television programs for mass consumption, equally and equitably as signs of cultural wealth. A considerable portion of this change has been that Pop Art allowed consumer products to enter the realm of art.

Table 1. Theoretical Frameworks and their Applications in the Analysis of Pop Art

Theorist	Key Work	Core Concepts Applied	Application to This Paper
Jean Baudrillard	Consumer Society; Simulacra & Simulation	Sign-value; hyperreality; orders of simulacra	Explains how Pop Art imagery operates as self-referential sign-systems detached from reality
Pierre Bourdieu	Distinction (1984)	Cultural capital; habitus; field	Illuminates how Pop Art redistributed cultural capital by elevating consumer goods to art
Fredric Jameson	Postmodernism (1991)	Cultural logic of late capitalism; empty signifier	Positions Pop Art as paradigmatic postmodern cultural production mirroring commodity surfaces
Marshall McLuhan	The Medium is the Message (1964)	Media as extensions; global village	Contextualises Pop Art's use of mass-media forms as content—medium shapes artistic meaning

Jameson's idea is that the cultural logic of late capitalism enhances understanding by placing Pop Art in a broader framework of capitalist culture. Warhol's characteristic of his work being an empty signifier—a surface reflecting the fetishism of consumer goods but lacking any deeper meaning—matches up with Tratnik's more current philosophy of criticism that claims Pop Art could not be fully powerful because it adopted this form of representation and did not question it. According to these theoretical frameworks, while Pop Art's relationship with consumer culture was described as being mediated by formal structure or ironic distance, in fact its primary role was embodied in an affirmation of this form-of-culture system for consumers.

4. Pop Art's Visual Strategies and Consumer Legitimation

4.1 Brand Symbolism and the Elevation of the Commodity

Pop Art's most direct influence on consumption culture is through the application of brand imagery such as logos, package designs, typeface usage, and color combinations to enable people to recognize various types of

consumer products in commercial settings after World War II. Table 2 shows that, based on the research content of each chapter, the characteristics of traditional craft products as a form of contemporary art can be seen from various angles.

Table 2 shows that the visual strategies used by pop artists were not random. Instead, they were parts of an entire system of formal choices aimed at reproducing the aesthetic logic of mass-produced consumer culture in the gallery space. Warhol used silkscreen printing, which is a form of commercial reproduction technology, to produce such artworks as "Campbell's soup cans" that were both mass-produced items for daily consumption and high-end cultural artifacts available on the market. In this way, he blurred the boundary line dividing goods produced in society from works created with an artistic purpose in terms of production processes and products themselves. According to Yang, the commercialization of Pop Art [2], which is its basic form for cultural operations in the market, integrates commercial tools into fine arts while simultaneously creating a kind of culture by transforming works of art into images; as a result, they belong to one domain of cultural values.

Table 2. Key Pop Art Works, Visual Strategies, and Consumer Culture Functions

Artwork	Artist	Visual Strategy	Consumer Culture Function
Campbell's Soup Cans (1962)	Andy Warhol	Repetitive silkscreen; mass-produced aesthetic	Industrial replication of everyday consumer goods as fine art
Marilyn Monroe Diptych (1962)	Andy Warhol	High-saturation colour; serialised celebrity image	Transformation of celebrity into a circulating sign-value commodity
Green Coca-Cola Bottles (1962)	Andy Warhol	Brand logo, uniform product serialisation	Explores democratic consumption ideal through brand ubiquity
Whaam! (1963)	Roy Lichtenstein	Ben-Day dots; mass-media comic print style	Elevates mass-media imagery to the gallery, blurring high/low art divide
Soft Drink (1962)	Tom Wesselmann	Collage; advertising iconography; packaging	Integrates commercial advertising materials directly into fine-art composition

Examining the brand image of Robert Cai, Gengzhu, and Zhang [3] provides a closer observation on this particular commercial environment where he made such a choice. Warhol selected these works as subjects not only because he was interested in this phenomenon but also because they represented a specific period—the late 1950s and early 1960s, known for fierce competition among national brands on the American market—with the goal of making art by transforming them into artworks. In this way, Warhol's works served as a particularly forceful support for brand image being

recognized as a legitimate and culturally significant medium of information transmission; through their reproduction of the company logo in a highbrow art space, he implicitly regarded such symbols with artistic value. As shown in Figure 1 below, as formal qualities of Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans"—their repetitive appearances, strict reproductions of commercial fonts, and intentional lack of painterly individualism—they all aim to realize the visual rules of industrial brand dissemination in an art gallery setting.



Figure 1. Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962. Thirty-two canvases of synthetic polymer paint. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

4.2 Celebrity Commodification: Marilyn Monroe as Consumer Sign

The second main way that Pop Art makes stars more popular among consumers is the systemic commercialization of them. Among all his works about Marilyn Monroe, Warhol created the most numerous ones. After Monroe died in August 1962, The Marilyn Monroe Diptych was produced quickly; it serves as proof for the argument I will develop later. Su's analysis indicates that Warhol's depiction of Marilyn Monroe reduces it to an object without

individuality, transforming its former original appearance into a commodity symbol that fits into this fixed form; it is endless repetition rather than being extraordinary in itself and like other commodities such as Coca-Cola bottles, which exist simply because there are many and where they belong within this overall sign system of modern consumer culture. There is no chance coincidence behind its link to the post-World War II era; rather, it emerged as a result of increased material wealth during those times and the growth of the entertainment industry, along with Monroe's fame, all contributing to this

relationship.

The importance of this commercialization of celebrity for the main point of the paper is that it shows that Pop Art's sign system goes beyond the inanimate consumer goods that are usually talked about and includes human identity itself. As pointed out by Baudrillard, Monroe's appearance in Warhol's silkscreen paintings can be regarded as a case study for the fourth level of simulacra; it exists independently and does not need to refer directly to any real-world conditions. Highly saturated colors; intentional blurring of photographic details; Multi-screen printing reproductions—Through all these methods, it hides Monroe's personality and presents to us only an object that one could purchase. If celebrity images function as commodity symbols in the same way that brand logos and products' packaging do, then engaging with celebrity culture is not an ordinary experience of escapism but a fundamental means for individuals to join into the semiotic system driving consumer society's survival. As shown in Figure 2, the change of Marilyn by Warhol through repeated application is arranged as follows:



Figure 2. Andy Warhol; Marilyn Monroe Diptych, 1962. Acrylic on Canvas. Tate Modern, London.

5. Commercial Legacy: Art, Branding and Modern Consumer Identity

The commercial and cultural heritage that legitimized the pop art's consumption-oriented images can be found during its birth period; moreover, it will have a significant influence on the marketing and brand communication activities, as well as changes in user identity formation for consumers at this stage. Based on the "art infusing effect," when works of art appear in products' ads or other forms of media

consumption, consumers will have a stronger impression of higher value and competitive prices because of this upgrade; in Pop Art, it is first introduced into advertising to achieve commercialization through this mode of expression. Using Quach et al.'s empirical study published in the *Journal of Business Research*, we find this effect operates not only via the underlying association between products and artistic prestige but also by way of multiple layers of psychology behind consumers' sense of genuine self-actualization under the background that Pop Art has set up models for people to express their culture acceptably as consuming branded goods; however, it is considered a kind of commercial activity at present.

A comprehensive edited book titled "Pop art and beyond: gender, race, and class in the global sixties" by Mona Hadler and Kalliopi Minioudaki demonstrates that although the rise in consumerist imagery as a form of legitimization for popular culture was primarily associated with Anglo-American society, it has been widely received and rejected globally: from Brazil to Japan, Yugoslavia to India. According to Lipiński's comparison, the specifics of Pop Art were directly related to Western consumer capitalism that gave rise to it. However, its formal strategies and broader cultural connotations that the visual language of consumer culture constitutes an aesthetic field were able to be disseminated widely and thus become part of the worldwide language of contemporary branding. Nowadays, there are many instances of collaboration among renowned brands such as Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami or Jeff Koons, between Supreme and various galleries, and between Coke and several contemporary art figures—these are all based on the cultural freedom introduced by Pop Art during the 1960s.

Smith's recent theoretical extension of Baudrillard's framework to digital goods [8] suggests that the path started by Pop Art's commodification of art signs has continued into the age of NFTs and digital consumer culture. If Warhol's silkscreens are the third level of simulacra—images hiding an absence of real-world reality—then modern NFT art belongs to Baudrillard's fourth-level simulacra, where copies do not have originals and there is no longer a distinction between art and commodity. Symbiosis between pop art and consumer culture has not brought an end to history but rather

continues to be a continuous cultural process with far-reaching effects still shaping the development of digital commerce and consumers' identities today. Mao and Smolik's use of Baudrillard to examine the fashion culture in this study supports that pop art—converting ordinary items into coded symbol values by positioning them within certain frameworks of culture—is still necessary for the reason of today's luxurious goods' marketing.

6. Discussion

Based on the above analyses, several important conclusions can be drawn from a study into consumer culture as well as an understanding by consumers themselves of how art functions in commercial communication. The evidence shows that according to the argument in this chapter, Pop Art's link with post-war American consumer culture is characterized neither as irony nor dispassion; rather, it presents structures of identity that are homologous and reinforce each other. Through the use of images from consumer culture, pop art restored legitimate power to the meaning of production for mass consumption among consumers.

This consequence will affect the entire theory about how art is connected to ideas. Based on the traditional view of pop art being an act of satirizing society, all art does not need to connect directly with that particular period in history. According to the evidence provided in this paper, it can be inferred that this assertion cannot hold true; rather, art performs functions similar to those of a tool for ideological indoctrination, like pop art. Warhol's works have been frequently sold at auction, appearing on consumer goods, and entering advertisement campaigns, thereby becoming completely integrated into the commodity system of this reflection. As pointed out by Su, in terms of confirming after death, the sale of Warhol's Shot Sage blue Marilyn for \$195 million in 2022 is evidence; additionally, as an object to make celebrities famous, it has now become a product. Based on this article, we may assert that there has been a rise in using artistic images in the current era's luxury advertising; it stems directly from Pop Art. Even though such a mutual relationship between art, commerce, and brands has persisted over many years since then, it was first manifested as Pop Art that appeared in the early 1960s.

7. Summary

This paper argues that Pop Art and Post-War American consumer culture had an authentic connection in their relationship: Born out of the reality of consumerism, it also promoted and endorsed this situation through systematically elevating commercial images to aesthetic status. Drawing on the theoretical bases for Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and Jameson, it can be observed from this study that as an art form deeply embedded in the consumer realities of post-war America, Pop Art had a profound impact both in terms of content and method. Examining some individual works of art can illustrate how Abstract Expressionism achieved such a significant breakthrough through its unique visual techniques of serial repetition, vivid colorization, and precise imitation of brands: Campbell's Soup Cans, green Coca-Cola Bottles, and the Marilyn Monroe Diptych.

The changes have affected the business cycle of this sector across highs and lows for some time now. Pop Art provided a stage for modern art-infused brand creation, luxury brand collaborations with artists, and the commercialization of cultural identities. Therefore, the movement is no longer present; it remains part of the contemporary marketplace. Cultivating people's concepts of what kind of products they want to buy and the culture that should be integrated through purchases. In subsequent studies, through investigation of how digital consumer culture (e.g., NFTs, social media brand building, and influencer marketing) has arisen and influenced changes in the symbiosis among art, business, and consumers that was initially proposed by Pop Art, it will be possible to expand our understanding of this problem.

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