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Three Dreams: New Qualitative Analysis in the Dreamworld

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The dream economy throws up challenges in terms of how to do research. It also offers new forms of data that we must get to grips with if we are to understand the economy: current cultural phenomena such as amateur web pages, works of art and the appearance and disappearance of 'celebrities'. Happily, the dream economy offers solutions as well as challenges. In this paper we will apply a blend of three dream economy research methods: semiotics, discourse analysis and ethnomethodology. In so doing we will identify and develop new insights about three of the dreams currently circulating in the economy that stimulates and shapes consumer behaviour. The practical implications for marketing are discussed.

Introduction

The conference for which this paper was developed recognises a new economy in which consumers participate. It is an economy in which the practical and functional value of things is eclipsed by their ability to serve as conduits for meaning; to stand as representative signs or symbols for things of the imagination – ideas, hopes, aspirations and dreams. At its very simplest, this means that the value of a pair of shoes, say, no longer resides in properties of comfort, fit or durability but rather in the names **Prada** and **Nike**, and in the ability of those names to serve in consumer culture as *signs* of wealth, exclusivity, athleticism, achievement, and so on. The dream economy is one in which consumers understand themselves, their lives and other people through the selection and display of such signs. This circulation of signs and their associated dreams can be seen as the engine that drives consumer behaviour.

Having grasped the idea of the dream economy which, after all, is what branding has always been about, it is not very difficult to intuitively identify some of the dreams that are currently in circulation. If concrete evidence is desired, leafing through a consumer magazine or watching a few TV ad breaks will reveal an ample array of the dreams that are currently being peddled. With that as a starting place, the challenge is to investigate and research dreams as not just the inventions of marketers but as the social and cultural property of consumers. That is, we need to understand dreams as a part of consumers' own world – the world surrounding them today – which includes but extends well beyond the explicitly commercial and directive messages of marketing and advertising.

In fact, the challenge of the dream economy breaks down into two questions. Firstly, there is the question of *how* to do research. If the value of consumer goods were still defined by their functional attributes, we could continue with traditional, rational research approaches that are geared towards predicting or measuring things like customer satisfaction. However, when the commodity in question is a dream – no more than an abstract idea – then clearly some different research methods are needed. We can easily guess that these methods are likely to be qualitative rather than quantitative. However, even some qualitative methods can be seen as less than perfectly equipped for investigating the dream economy. The kind of qualitative market research with which we are all familiar is founded on a basically psychological model that investigates individual differences in attitudes, beliefs, preferences and so on. It investigates the inner psychological structures and mechanisms of individual consumers. What it does rarely is investigate things larger than, and outside of, the individual – things like society and culture. Yet the dreams presently circulating within the dream economy are clearly the social and cultural result of a group effort and not, after all, the private products of individual psychology – so to properly understand the dream economy we will have to identify some research methods that are adequate to the task.

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Secondly, there is the question of *what* to research. The dreams of the dream economy fall somewhere in between the initial aims and intentions of marketers and the private ruminations of individual consumers. They exist in the *collective* imagination, in the shared social and cultural space that brings consumers together. Explicit ads and marketing messages are certainly part of that space, in the sense that large groups of consumers are exposed to them and experience their exposure as something in common. However, the fabric of the dream economy is also composed of things like wedding videos, holiday postcards, pub quizzes, book groups, professional and amateur dramatics, skateboard parks, karaoke, speed dating, **Coronation Street** and **Heat** magazine. The raw material of the dream economy exists wherever large groups of consumers are exposed to the same thing, or where consumers come together in groups to develop cultural products and output of their own. We cannot expect to access those dreams through the necessarily constrained options of a survey questionnaire, nor even through the contrived and purposeful answers that are generated in focus groups. We must find a way past researcher-generated questions *about* dreams and go straight to the place where dreams themselves are located – in the social context and cultural output of the relevant consumer group. The dream economy challenges us not only to take up new methods but to bring on board new kinds of data.

In this paper I will try to demonstrate a few solutions to the challenges described above. In the pages to follow we will touch upon three of the dreams that are currently circulating within the dream economy and generate some new research findings and insights about them, leading to practical conclusions for marketers. We will generate findings by applying a careful blend of three distinct but related research *methods* that can offer an account of the dream economy and are either new or have enjoyed considerable new research and development in the period since the dream economy arrived. We will apply the methods to three varieties of *data*, selected for their topicality, their status as social and cultural products of the dreamworld, and their relative resistance to traditional forms of research. As the analysis unfolds, I will be advocating the use of both the methods and the materials because they are presently under-used in market research and yet they are uniquely suitable for understanding the dynamics of the dreamworld. That is, beyond any research findings that are specific to this paper, I hope to encourage clients and researchers in whatever sector to take full advantage of these kinds of methods and materials, so as to do research and produce findings that are attuned to the dream economy that shapes consumer behaviour today.

The dreams we are going to examine are as follows:

- a dream of personal transformation or alter identity;
- a dream of painlessness and freedom from care;
- a dream of hope's triumph over reason.

All are current in the dream economy and that means they are going to be useful in winning over consumers.

Methodology

Materials

Any one of the above-mentioned dreams would make a fascinating research project in its own right and in carrying out such a study we would want to bring together a variety of data. For instance, were we to focus on the dream of painlessness and freedom from care, I would want to cast the net widely and bring together lots of different examples of that dream becoming manifest in consumer culture. I would want to form a collection of pieces of cultural output such as conversations, confessions, songs, stories, jokes, videos, newspaper and magazine clippings, photos, cartoons and whatever else I could get my hands on in which the dream of painlessness was exemplified, so as to have some basis for comparison across different media and occasions of production. Clearly, it is not possible to analyse such a large data set within the confines of this paper. Rather, we will restrict ourselves to two or three samples of material that are interesting because they are topical, relevant and different from the data that we normally deal with in market research.

Firstly, we will look at a piece of contemporary art. Visual data are challenging for market researchers because we are used to dealing with words (qual) and numbers (quant), and the research methods we have evolved for doing so translate with difficulty or not at all to the wordless statements of painting, photography, sculpture and installation. Yet consumer culture is a highly visual culture and so we need to be able to get to grips with these kinds of materials if we are going to form an adequate account of what is going on.

Secondly, we will consider representations of a celebrity, defining that term as broadly as possible to mean anyone who is the subject of a lot of attention in popular culture and in the mass media, however briefly. The current British obsession with celebrities is a very interesting one. In many ways, the more banal, talentless and fleeting the celebrity, the more they reveal about contemporary British culture because their interest to the public is less easily 'explained away' with reference to their extraordinary talent, pedigree or whatever.

Thirdly, we will explore material from a personal web page. This relatively new medium is an increasingly popular platform for self-expression among Western consumers. As internet access increases, more and more people with no special economic status or technological know-how are publishing their own web pages as a means of announcing themselves and their opinions, indulging their interests and of course communicating with others. As I have discussed elsewhere (e.g., Lawes 2004), the technology of the world wide web raises some concerns for consumers

but it also facilitates new and interesting forms of behaviour, some of which will be relevant here.

Methods

To analyse the data we are going to use a blend of methods, all of which are in a period of rapid development, alongside developments in the dream economy. They are advanced tools for understanding dream economy behaviour. They are distinct but related; different branches on the same family tree, so they are highly compatible for use in combination. They have in common a post-modern perspective from which the very idea of the dream economy itself has emerged. Without getting bogged down in the theoretical details, suffice it to say that here is a set of research methods that works *because* of the unique characteristics of the dream economy rather than *despite* them.

The first method, *EM*, is properly called 'ethnomethodology'. *EM* is a well established method that was introduced to sociology by Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) as a means of paying full attention to people's *accounts* of themselves and the world around them. *EM* does this so as to examine people's common-sense knowledge, to develop a real 'insider's view' of the society under study. The objective is to form a clear picture of how society organises itself through people's talk, how local knowledge systems are structured, and what behavioural conventions or protocols seem to be in place.

EM may have been around for a while but in academic circles it has enjoyed continuous and rapid evolution since the day it appeared. Its sociological bent means that analysis can directly attend to the social and cultural environment within which consumers operate, rather than taking a detour via the inner psyche of the individual respondent. At the same time, because of its attention to concrete and specific accounts produced by consumers, it is in fact respectably empirical, and so analytic conclusions can be grounded in evidence rather than general theory.

The second method is *semiotics*. Having enjoyed roughly a century of research and development since its inception in philosophy (e.g., see Peirce, 1931-58) and linguistics (e.g., Saussure, 1916), semiotics has become *the* major research method with which to make sense of human communications using signs, and it remains the only sensible choice for analysing materials that are partly or wholly non-verbal, such as music, mathematics and visual representations such as graphic design and fine art.

For the purposes of this paper, we will not go into the internal dynamics of sign systems, though that would be essential for a project that relied on semiotics alone. Rather, in developing the analysis that's presented here, we will simply deploy some key semiotic principles that are visibly in tune with the principles of our other dream economy research methods and which give us some purchase on non-verbal data. It should be emphasised that this use of semiotics is for 'display purposes only' and

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that in a more nuanced analysis than can be attempted here, we would want to inform our activities with greater reference to existing and previous semiotic studies, knowledge of which should be a pre-requisite for doing this kind of work.

The third method is discourse analysis, or *DA*. A modern and interdisciplinary method, it owes much to EM and to semiotics. *DA* shares with EM its focus on language rather than non-verbal representation. However, *DA* extends its remit well beyond the spoken word and regularly investigates printed documents and things like TV and radio broadcasts. This means it regularly tackles materials in which there are non-verbal, graphic and time-based elements, explaining its close relationship with semiotics as elements of a programme for analysis. Lately, studies in *DA* have shown it to be a particularly effective method for understanding people's behaviour online.

DA, especially the form developed by social psychologists such as Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996) has also generated empirical findings about how people manage to make extraordinary things appear ordinary, the bizarre appear normal and the imaginary seem thoroughly solid and real. Clearly, this is invaluable in an economy where so much is contingent and abstract rather than functional and rational. It is an up-to-date research solution that brings together strengths from EM and semiotics and offers a range of practical applications.

Analysis

Without any more pre-amble, let's identify and analyse the first of our three dreams.

Hope's Triumph

In contemporary Western culture, there are few things to which the public responds better than a heart-warming tale of some plucky individual achieving their heart's desire against all the odds. I mention contemporary Western culture specifically because of its current emphasis on what philosophers are calling 'rugged individualism'. That is, at this point in time and space, we are far more moved by individual achievement than by shining examples of teamwork, while the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good features hardly at all in contemporary mythology (compared with the 19th and early 20th century, say, when tales of self sacrifice and martyrdom rewarded were very much in currency). All the attention is on the individual, who struggles alone and whose personal, innermost hopes and desires are finally realised and given public expression.

Looking around at the fabric of the dream economy – the mass of cultural detritus that surrounds today's consumers – there are abundant examples of this dream being played out. Lots of them involve people who are broadly definable as 'celebrities' and this is not surprising because the very idea of celebrity is one that focuses on the individual at the expense of the group and because just now, at the beginning of the 21st century in particular, celebrity is treated as an ambition in its own right. The proliferation of reality TV shows that offer to transform people into celebrities bears this out.

However, it is one thing to develop broad social theory and quite another to perform empirical analysis of real data, so let's do that now. The example I want to consider is drawn from a recent issue of **Heat** magazine (3-9 January 2004). For those unfamiliar with the title, **Heat** is an enormously popular weekly magazine that exists to feed the current British appetite for news, gossip and pictures of celebrities of every stripe. Specifically, the aspects of the January issue that will interest us here are the front cover and an interview with a newly formed celebrity on pages 6-8. The big news around this celebrity is that she was the winner of **Pop Idol**, a televised competition in which aspiring pop stars from all over Britain are given the chance to perform on TV and are ultimately subjected to the mercy of the public vote. According to **Heat**, a staggering 10 million votes were cast during the final of **Pop Idol** 2003.

The raw data are bursting with investigable phenomena but we shan't attempt an exhaustive analysis here. Rather, I want to point out two or three interesting items that will help further our understanding of the dream of Hope's Triumph. Semiotics helps us make sense of the front cover. It encourages us to ironise and denaturalise

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visual information, to ask why images and text are arranged in the way they are, why some things are included and others left out. The cover of the magazine is dominated by a large photo of the winner, Michelle, looking elated. The **Pop Idol** logo appears to the left, and just below the logo, and splashed across Michelle's photo are the following lines:

Extract 1

1. "I can't believe it!"
2. Michelle!
3. IN HER FIRST MAJOR INTERVIEW
4. MICHELLE TALKS ABOUT WINNING –
5. AND HOW SHE BRAVELY
6. OVERCAME WEIGHT INSULTS

Heat (3-9 Jan, 2004), p.1

Line 1, "I can't believe it", whether or not Michelle actually uttered those words, is of course the sort of thing competition winners are routinely expected to say. Both DA and EM encourage us to look at how speakers work to ward off negative inferences on the part of recipients, so saying "I can't believe it" is hearably an alternative to boasting, it's a way of *not* saying "I knew I was going to win all along". At the same time, the reading audience might reasonably ask on what grounds Michelle can't believe she won, and there are various ways in which this claim might have been bolstered up. For instance, she might have claimed "I can't believe it" with reference to the number and talent of her competitors, or with reference to her humble origins, or whatever. However, the text of lines 5 and 6 offers a different interpretation. In line 5 we learn that Michelle is 'brave' – remember, the idea of individual struggle, bravery and courage is key to the dream of Hope's Triumph – and in line 6 we are given to understand that this bravery is connected to "weight insults". The semiotic question of why this last nugget of information has been included – why give a front cover mention to "insults" as opposed to not mentioning it or mentioning something else instead? – is now answered. The 'news' is not just that Michelle won but that this is remarkable – something one "can't believe" – because she is fat.

Inside the magazine, on pages 6-8, is an interview with Michelle. We will not attempt to analyse the whole interview but focus on just the first paragraph. DA tells us that the introduction to stories, narratives and reports is always analytically revealing because it 'sets up' the story and primes readers so that they understand what is to be interesting and relevant about the material to follow. The first paragraph of editorial leading into the interview reads like this:

Extract 2

1. Every step of the Pop Idol journey has been a battle for Michelle
2. McManus. Everyone agreed that the girl had a great voice, but, as
3. Simon Cowell put it at the final 100 stage, “You’re standing in front of a
4. sign that says Pop Idol. That’s where we have a problem.” She certainly
5. didn’t fit the mould of your stereotypical skinny pop star. And with Foxy
6. knocking her appearance week in, week out and Pete Waterman
7. proclaiming, “You’re not a Pop Idol. You’ll never be a Pop Idol,” it looked
8. as though size-20 Michelle really wouldn't make it through to the final
9. stage of the competition.

Heat (3-9 Jan, 2004), p.7

Notice the use of the word “battle” on line 1, a concise semiotic sign for the Hope’s Triumph dream that does the same job as “bravely” on the front cover. Also notice that Michelle’s superior singing abilities are taken for granted on line 2 (again, a semiotic perspective invites us to be aware that an alternative story could have been woven about how a competitor whose voice nearly let him or her down finally scraped to victory). As constructed in the data here, Michelle’s singing is not in fact the interesting thing about her winning **Pop Idol** (though it is, after all, a singing competition). This is not a story announcing the career launch of a beautiful voice. It is a story about how personal affliction (and in contemporary Western culture, being a “size 20” is considered an affliction both shameful and damaging to self-esteem) can be overcome so that after all, and against all the odds, one is not merely accepted and appreciated but in fact an “idol” – someone aspired to and adored.

What does all this tell us about the Hope’s Triumph dream, and what are the marketing implications? In fact, there are lots of marketing exercises around that trade on the dream of Hope’s Triumph – the **National Lottery** is a particularly vivid example but there are lots of others, such as private **infertility treatments**, **charity appeals**, and so on. What the **Heat** example suggests is that stories of Hope’s Triumph are going to be particularly poignant and appealing where the individual does not just overcome seemingly impossible odds but when personal ‘problems’ that are both common and culturally frowned-upon are overcome too. These need not be to do with physical beauty but could include things like appearing unintelligent or badly educated (c.f. minor ‘celebrity’ Jade Goody), the shame of a partner’s neglect and infidelity (Princess Diana) or the tendency to lapse into alcoholism (George Best, Ozzy Osbourne). The key lesson to take from the Michelle McManus story is that we may not all be a size 20, but believing that one is too fat for success is very common indeed and as such it is going to strike a chord with large sections of

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the public who may thereby be encouraged to believe that hope could triumph for them too – if only they make the right consumer decision and purchase that ticket, make that premium-rate phone call, or otherwise invest in the right place at the right time. Moreover, the offered triumph does not even need to be one's own as long as consumers can perceive a similarity between themselves and the triumphant individual – though supporters of Michelle can have benefited only vicariously, those 10 million votes during the final of **Pop Idol** were paid for.

Painlessness & Freedom from Care

Like the Hope's Triumph dream, the dream of Painlessness and Freedom from Care is abundantly evident in today's consumer culture. For instance, there are lovely examples in the advertising and packaging of certain consumer medicines and hygiene products that, because of the sensitive nature of the problems they treat, set the focus of their communications well away from being too graphic about the problem itself, instead weighing their attention firmly on the side of the consumer benefit, namely the happy feeling associated with the problem having evaporated. For instance, sanpro advertising is a good example, most obviously the brand named **Carefree**. Advertisers conventionally do not draw too close to the 'problem' of menstruation, so we are left to infer it through an examination of the ways in which Carefree leaves you care free. Similarly, it's interesting to look at GI medicines – the sort of medicines that remedy stomach upsets and complaints of the bowel. Looking at the ads and packaging for products such as **Senokot**, **Windeze** and **Alka Seltzer** are extremely revealing both in the coy way that they allude to the problem they are intended to treat – or avoid alluding to it – and in the way that they offer images of freedom from care as the principal consumer benefit of the product.

Now let's have a look at how this dream is manifest in some cultural data outside of the world of marketing. The example we'll consider is an installation by notorious British artist Damien Hirst. The piece in question is called 'Holidays/No Feelings' and it consists of a large, glass-fronted cabinet filled with bottles and packets of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription drugs – drugs such as **Junior Disprol**, **E45 Cream**, **Ventolin**, **Largactil** and **Amoxil**. Approximately 100 different drugs are displayed in the cabinet and some are recognisably the same as items dispensed to consumers today, while others are now looking a bit dated, perhaps because the packs have since been redesigned. 'Holidays/No Feelings' is currently on display in London's Saatchi Gallery, and photographic representations of it abound.

In beginning to analyse this piece, there are two observations that we will want to make straight away. The first concerns the title. "Holidays/No Feelings" is a way of putting a particular slant or spin on the reason why people take these drugs, what it is they are trying to achieve. It might seem rather odd to illustrate the idea of 'holidays' with a medicine cabinet but clearly, in contemporary Western culture, a

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holiday is a contrast case, something that exists as an exception and alternative to some other, more ordinary state of affairs (and see Lawes, 1998, for a fuller analysis of the concept). Conventionally, people take a holiday *from* something and so through the reference to holidays in Hirst's title, we come to understand that the drugs offer a temporary relief or respite from some less pleasant state of affairs that is more normally the case, in contrast to the welcome effects of consuming the drugs. The other half of the title, 'No Feelings', is revealing because it highlights the benefit that the consumer is trying to achieve as a negative condition. That is, like pain-/lessness and freedom *from* care, 'no feelings' describes an absence of something rather than a positive end in itself. Thus, 'No Feelings' works with the idea of 'holiday' to construct emotional and physical woe as something that's standardly part of the human condition – it's 'normal', implies Hirst, for 'people in general' to endure negative experiences and therefore to be interested in solutions that put an end to that experience, even if only temporarily.

The second initial observation that we need to make has to do with the cabinet itself, and now we are really into the territory of purely visual communication so the relevant analytic tool is going to be semiotics. As I mentioned earlier, a key principle in semiotics is that when we approach a piece of visual communication we do not take it at face value, nor accept it as a simple, natural expression of the way things are. Rather, we make every effort to ironise and denaturalise what we see, to ask how it could have been different – because where there is difference, there is meaning. In this case, the observation I want to make concerns what kind of cabinet this is. Thinking about it, there are any number of cabinets, cupboards, shelves, chests, boxes and other such devices in which medicines could be sensibly housed. The cabinet could be large or small, transparent or opaque, open or closed. As it happens, Hirst's cabinet is large (4.5 feet high and more than 6.5 feet wide) and fronted with sliding doors that are closed but made of glass so the contents are clearly visible. It is in fact a pharmacist's cabinet, the kind you might see in a hospital. This inference is supported by not only the extraordinary range of medicines on display but also by the repetition of individual items within the case. Only a pharmacist's cabinet would contain nine packets of **Frumil** and seven tubes of **E45** - it's far in excess of the range and quantity of drugs a person would keep at home. The meaning to be extracted from this specificity and difference (pharmacy versus domestic medicine chest) is that pain and the dream of painlessness is not unique to some individual but is common to everyone, such that pharmacies are culturally necessary things, dispensing relief in large quantities to people in large numbers.

These being our initial observations, let's look more closely at the work and see what emerges. We will hang on to the semiotic perspective of denaturalisation and looking for difference. As we examine the contents of the cabinet, an interesting imbalance emerges. Though a fair number of Hirst's drugs are sold OTC, very few make the sort of concessions to consumerism in their packaging that we have come to expect and that are clearly visible in the GI products mentioned earlier, such as **Senokot** tablets, **Windeze** and **Alka Seltzer**. Specifically, there are two varieties of

Calpol Six Plus, with smiling blonde children depicted on the front of a bright red pack, and one version of **Junior Disprol** that bears a photo of a baby. That is all. The remaining 98 drugs on display do not feature any representations of consumers, superfluous decoration or appealing illustrations of the 'carefree' condition that the consumer will enjoy as a benefit of taking the drug. Rather, they are packaged in a very traditional, no-nonsense, pharmaceutical way involving simple geometric shapes, a limited palette of colours and plain text (a set of conventions that Hirst investigates thoroughly in his series 'The Last Supper'). To extract the meaning from this, imagine the implications if the situation were reversed – if there were 98 consumer-facing, attractively illustrated packs and only two of the no-nonsense, doctorly variety. In that case, we would encounter in Hirst's work a cacophony of voices, all attempting to address and seduce the cash-rich consumer, and a powerful message about the rather overwhelming proliferation of healthcare solutions from among which the hapless customer is expected to make a sensible choice (c.f. artist Andreas Gursky's photograph "99 cent" for a vivid example of forlorn and isolated shoppers adrift in a vast sea of consumer goods). If Hirst's work were more like Gursky's, we would encounter a message about the efforts of the drug companies to reach out to consumers and enter their minds and their homes. As it is, the opposite effect is achieved. The 98 no-nonsense, doctorly packets of medicine with their severe design, unpronounceable names and acres of tiny print serve to call our attention to the effort that consumers willingly make to come to the drugs, rather than having the drugs come to them. Individually decipherable, these packs all together are intimidating and make no concessions to consumer brand choice or ease of use. Collectively they make a strong statement about medicine as a metonym for science, and the faith and obedience of ordinary people who look to science to explain and alleviate the pain of the human condition, where once they might have relied on religion.

What should we take from this as the upshot for marketing? To draw our conclusions, it helps to imagine Hirst as a particularly sensitive and articulate respondent who has produced 'Holidays/No Feelings' as the result of participation in some unusually creative focus group. In this piece of work he has effectively delivered a long and expressive speech about pain and dis-ease as something that's not unusual or specific to a few individuals, but a feature of ordinary, everyday life – something that all people share and that they unanimously want to escape. He further describes the reassuring, impartial authority of science, exemplified in the pharmacist's cabinet, and from his description we can infer the fear, uncertainty and indecision of (literal or metaphorical) illness. Were he really a market research respondent, we could conclude that there will be no difficulty convincing people that they are suffering and that they are entitled not to (think of the colloquial expression "I need a holiday"), and, furthermore, that ads and packaging that speak with a calm, quiet authority are going to respond to consumer need better than those which try too hard to be friendly and personal. This has practical consequences for marketing even beyond the sector of medicine and pharmaceuticals. For instance, at the moment there is an emergent category of 'functional' foodstuffs that hover at the

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boundaries of food and medicine – think of **Yakult**, **Actimel** and **Danone Activ**. Hirst's work has implications for the marketing and packaging of products like these, as well as for the marketing of 'actual' drugs.

Transformation & Alter Identity

Cultural manifestations of this final dream are perhaps the most abundant of all. The fact that 'before and after' has become such an advertising cliché tells us something about how culturally entrenched is the idea of a self-contained solution that will transform unpromising raw materials into a beauty queen, a lantern-jawed hero, a professional at the top of their game, or whatever. The classic examples are those Charles Atlas ads from the mid 20th century in which the weakling, tired of having sand kicked in his face at the beach, takes a bodybuilding course and becomes a muscular action man, apparently overnight. More current examples would be things like the **Head & Shoulders** ads that suggest changes in both the appearance of dandruff and emotional mood as a consequence of using the product, or ads for cosmetic surgery providers such as **Rubicon Medical**, showing cosmetic transformations to faces and bodies in side-by-side before-and-after photos. However, contemporary Western culture is full of examples of the dream of personal transformation that reach well beyond the world of advertising. For instance, take the average British or American feature film. It is a truism of screenwriting that a satisfying hero may be flawed but he or she should have achieved some kind of transformation in the sense of acquiring self-knowledge, a new set of values or whatever by the end of the film. Think of **Trainspotting**, **Fight Club**, **Educating Rita**. As a result of insight and self-understanding, a new kind of personhood is achieved.

In the 21st century, one of the most exciting ways in which the dream of transformation or alter identity is manifest is through people's self-expression on the internet. It is a fascinating aspect of cyberculture that issues of identity and personal transformation are the focus of people's greatest hopes *and* fears about what may happen online. That is, on the one hand, there is a lot of anxiety about people creating alternative identities in cyberspace for the purpose of deception. Culturally, there's great fear of chatroom paedophiles masquerading as children, and despondent stories abound of folks who think they have found love online, only to have their dreams shattered when they finally meet the person behind the email. On the other hand, there's a huge amount of hope attached to the idea that people can discover new freedom, self-knowledge and self-esteem through the opportunities offered by the internet to invent a new identity. The research literature and cyberspace itself is full of examples of ordinary people celebrating the chance to overcome the disabilities and constraints of their 'real' selves and achieve new kinds of fulfilment. For instance, there's a memorable example cited by Turkle (1995) of a nurse called Annette who has discovered through the creation of her online 'self',

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Bette, that she is able to write poetry. Annette may be a nurse, but Bette 'is' a writer and as such possesses the confidence and creative resources that Annette lacks.

With that in mind, let us turn to our final sample of data. It is drawn from the website of a British man who calls himself Aquarion. The site appears to have been up and running for some four years and in that time Aquarion has added a good deal of content, principally diary entries, links and opinion pieces. The part of the website that will interest us is a passage of text from a page entitled "Article – Names". It reads as follows.

Extract 3

I've been wandering along the lines of "Who Is Aquarion" for a few days, and this is how it works:

To AFP: My Name Is Aquarion.

5. This accounts for both "If You Meet Me In Real Life" as well as, and especially "When I'm Online". The only *ONLY* reason my real name is on these posts at all is because in order to comply with the terms and conditions of news.cis.dfn.de (My major news feed) I have to put my real name on posts, at the very least in the sender field.

There is a reason for this, and it goes as follows:

10. When I joined the AFP for the most recent time, there was a very specific reason why I wanted to be anonymous. It was a legacy from a previous place, and meant that I never *ever* wanted anyone online to know who I was ever again. So I became Aquarion, which was the name of my website at the time
15. and was a name I quite liked the sound of. And I posted both here and on other groups as Aquarion for a moderately long time. Then I started doing meets, and my Real Name was announced. This meant that people started calling me by my Real Name online, which I was too shy and retiring to object to.
20. (Yes, Ha ha, Aquarion being retiring, I know. I've changed a lot since then) I respond to Aquarion, however, far easier than I do to my real name. Mainly because there are very few Aquarions in the world, and I'm unlikely to be mistaken when someone shouts it across the room.
25. So, Personally, I prefer to be called Aquarion. Even if you know what my real name is. Because it's what I prefer to be known as.

There are other reasons. The main one being that, although they are closer now than before, Aquarion is different to \$REALME, and I've had enough problems of the "Who Do I Want To Be Today...?" variety to keep

30. me going for a while.

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To Summarize the above: I'm only not anonymous because I comply with the T&C of my account[1], but really I prefer to be called after the name I post under.

If anybody tries to restrict my rights to be known as whatever the hell I

35. like, I will continue to argue with you.

(Not that anybody here has, yet)

To Summarize the summery:

Aquarion is a fairly mucked up person,
light blue touch paper, and stand well back.

40. Yours in total sincerity,

Aquarion D'Blue

[1] Yes, I *know* they have never been known to enforce this, but it is still the rules.

Aquarion (2004) <http://www.aquarionics.com/article/name/Names>

EM and DA will help us get to grips with this text. The EM emphasis on personal accountability helps us see that Aquarion is not simply expressing a preference for one or another form of address. More than that, he orientates to his preference as problematic and his account of himself is organised so as to anticipate and deal with those problems. For instance, in line 40, Aquarion signs off “Yours in total sincerity”, clearly an acknowledgement of the problem of deliberate insincerity – deception – as a feature of life online. In lines 9-14 Aquarion justifies himself with reference to some previous bad experience that was the result of his failure to adequately conceal his ‘real’ identity from troublemakers (notice the emphasis on “ever” in line 12, which stresses the severity of the problem he encountered without going into details). His allusion to this experience additionally serves the very useful purpose of rhetorically categorising Aquarion in a socially recognisable group of ‘innocent victims’ and distancing him from a contrasting group of internet wrong-doers. Moreover, in lines 23-24, Aquarion offers the conspicuously rational criterion of public recognisability as the reason for his preferred title (and notice how that distinguishes him from, and opposes him to, the sort of person who would go online for the express purpose of achieving invisibility and hiding from public view). In lines 5-8 and his postscript of lines 42-43 he presents himself as someone who follows “the rules” of service providers by exposing his “real name”, even when doing so is to his own disadvantage and even though the rules are conventionally not enforced. Finally, we should not overlook his ironic self-description of line 38: “Aquarion is a fairly mucked up person” – amongst other things, a display of self-knowledge and transparency that trades on the common-sense idea that someone genuinely “mucked up” would be unlikely to advertise the fact.

At the same time, interleaved with Aquarion’s various acknowledgements of the problem of deception are signs that he orientates to precisely the opposite issue: the

idea that the internet offers as its unique and characteristic benefit the possibility of a new self. Insights from DA help us to see how this is achieved. For instance, he makes effective use of techniques of *normalisation* and *nominalisation*, both of which are thoroughly researched and discussed in the DA literature (e.g., see Potter, 1996). On line 1 he uses inverted commas and upper-case letters to offer the self-reflective question of “Who is Aquarion” as the sort of question that persons in cyberspace might routinely encounter. He repeats the technique on line 29. It is not just that he personally prefers not to feel confused about who he ‘really’ is but in fact (he suggests) “Who Do I Want To Be Today ...?” is a common “problem” of a known “variety” that the reading audience could be expected to recognise. Moreover, notice the wording and structure of “Who Do I Want To Be Today...?”. Aquarion could have offered an alternative, something like “Who Am I?”, for example, but in fact he is hearably drawing on the culturally available resource that is the **Microsoft** strapline “Where do you want to go today?”. In so doing, he normalises “Who Do I Want To Be Today...?” as a problem of the technology and therefore not unique to the “mucked up” individual. Finally, we cannot conclude even a superficial analysis of Aquarion’s “article” without reference to the absolutely fascinating phenomenon that is “\$REALME” (line 28). This ingenious linguistic construction could only happen in textual form (there is no oral equivalent) and indeed only makes sense in the context of the net. It consists of three elements, all working together. There is the use of exclusively upper-case letters, the welding-together of ‘real’ and ‘me’ to form a single word, and the preface of “\$”. Away from cyberspace, “\$” reliably means ‘dollars’ but in the context of the internet, signs such as ‘\$’, ‘?’, ‘#’ and even ‘*’ take on a new and flexible range of functions that are unique to the digital environment and therefore function as metonyms for it. The combined use of these three elements serves to ironise Aquarion’s ‘real self’ and display it as no less constructed and contingent than the online version which is known as ‘Aquarion’. That is, had Aquarion simply inserted his ‘real’ name in place of “\$REALME”, readers might have had difficulty accepting that the two identities are different but equal and more or less interchangeable. There would have been the risk that readers would feel that Aquarion’s ‘real’ name was in fact the original and authentic ‘self’ that he ought to use, while the name ‘Aquarion’ looked, in contrast, like more of a costume or a disguise. However, his ingenious and imaginative construction “\$REALME” resembles an off-line ‘real’ name even less than “Aquarion” and so the reading audience is helped and encouraged to understand “Aquarion” as an adequately genuine and authentic ID.

What is the upshot for marketing? Clearly, the number and range of ways that it’s possible to exploit the dream of Transformation far exceeds traditional ideas of purchasing products so as to become a muscular hero or raving beauty, although those functions of the dream are still going strong. The lesson offered to us by Aquarion is that there are certain aspects of contemporary social life in which consumers themselves will put Transformation and Alter Identity on the agenda. The point, then, is to achieve some insight into why and how that happens, and to understand both the triggers and barriers so that we can offer products and services

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that help consumers do what they are attempting to do of their own accord. For example, the Aquarion text suggests that people are going to respond well to any product or service that helps them take advantage of the internet's opportunities for self re-invention while simultaneously facilitating their display of themselves as one of the 'good guys'. People are evidently looking for ways to mark themselves as honest and transparent, not despite but *because* they also want the facility to be anything but. Moreover, it may be that "Who Do I Want To Be Today?" articulates a consumer need that's even more relevant and genuine than "Where do I want to go?" and this is certainly something that would merit some more research. Evidently, thinking of the internet as a 'space' around which consumers travel – 'surfing' to places of interest and eventually returning 'home' - is only one possible metaphor for what people are actually doing online. It might be even more relevant and useful to provide people with metaphors that facilitate identity play, freedom and work on the self as well as those that facilitate travel and exploration.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper I described the dream economy which now underpins consumer behaviour and proposed that its challenges are two-fold. There is the question of how to do research, given that the traditional and most explicitly rational research methods may not seem entirely appropriate to the task of analysing abstract ideas such as dreams. Then, there is the question of what kind of data to use. The dreams now in circulation as a function of the dream economy are clearly not the unique and idiosyncratic products of individual imaginations – they are far too widely recognised and shared for that. On the other hand, it is also obviously the case that such dreams are not exclusively the product of formal, conscious efforts in advertising and marketing. On the contrary, the dreams that are really successful, in the sense of having the most resonance with consumers and stimulating their behaviour, are those which are already more or less indigenous to consumers' everyday social and cultural life. This social and cultural environment certainly includes advertising but it also includes a wealth of phenomena such as celebrity, conceptual art and cyberspace. The challenge of the dream economy is, therefore, how to analyse these kinds of data and bring them in to our repertoire, along with the kind of consumer talk that we normally deal with in qualitative research.

In the analysis that followed I have tried to offer some solutions to these questions. We have identified, and developed research findings about, three of the dreams that are currently part of the economy. We looked at the dream of Hope's Triumph and saw that tales of individual bravery and struggles to overcome culturally frowned-upon personal problems can be actively deployed to stimulate consumer spending. We considered the dream of Painlessness and Freedom from Care and saw 'care' manifest not as an aberration or a minority concern but a default condition

from which people will pay to take a holiday, especially when that solution is packaged and presented with an air of calm authority. We examined the dream of Transformation and Alter Identity, and saw that people are both concerned about problems of transparency and deception, and interested in taking up opportunities for self re-invention and identity play. Certainly, if we were going to investigate any one of these topics more thoroughly with a view to taking real marketing action, we would want to increase our sample of data. That is, if we were going to investigate more thoroughly the dream of Hope's Triumph, for example, we would certainly want to collect more than one example of that dream being played out, preferably across a range of different media, so that we could draw comparisons across the data set. However, in this paper, the task at hand has been to survey a range of contrasting dreams rather than contrasting examples of the same dream, and that we have done – drawing original conclusions in each case.

The data we have examined were chosen not just because they exemplify the fabric of the dream economy. More than that, they were selected for their relative resistance to traditional forms of analysis. Our conventional qualitative methods are great for investigating people's psychological constructs – their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, feelings and so on – and so it is no surprise that they have evolved with an overwhelming attention to researcher-elicited consumer talk in the form of interview transcripts and group discussions. This kind of researcher-generated talk is exactly the right sort of material to focus on if individual differences in psychology are the category of insight that one wants to achieve. However, if we want to examine the socio-cultural fabric of the dream economy we must cast the net more widely and make a point of including new kinds of data, even though many are difficult to analyse using traditional tools. This is especially true of works of conceptual art that feature few or no actual words, but it is also true of phenomena such as magazine articles and internet pages which may be authored *for* rather than *by* consumers, and which were certainly generated without a thought for the interests and agenda of the market researcher.

In the course of analysing these data I have offered semiotics, discourse analysis and ethnomethodology as the kinds of research methods that are equipped to handle dream economy questions. Used independently or together, they offer coherent solutions and explicit procedures for tackling the range of data with which we are concerned. We have here a repertoire of research methods that can tackle wordless visual art, commercial publishing and consumer behaviour in cyberspace with the same analytic 'reach', and from the same methodological perspective, as they are able to tackle conventional interview and focus group talk. Clearly, these sorts of research methods are specialised skills. At the very least, they demand a fairly thorough knowledge of the research literature, because that knowledge is the basis on which we justify and verify our analytic findings, and because without that knowledge the researcher is inevitably going to be very restricted in the kinds of phenomena they are able to observe in the data. As such, they do not lend themselves to casual acquisition on the job. However, that does not mean they cannot be demonstrated to good effect. I hope that in this paper I have managed to

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give at least an initial display of how this kind of analysis is done. In so doing, my objective has been to encourage the marketing community at large to recognise and take full advantage of both methods and materials, so that we may rise to the challenge of the dream economy and achieve a new, more complete understanding of the world consumers inhabit today.

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