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Consuming Inequality: The Phenomenon of Consumption as Entertainment Among Mad Men Viewers

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by

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The historical shift from a producer to a largely consumer-based economy, coupled with increasing socioeconomic stratification, has renewed and massified the significance of Thorstein Veblen's (1967 [1899]) 100 year-old observations. Veblen put consumption into a social- and class-context; consumption in his work is more than just a matter of desire—it is the symbolic act of separating master from slave. In consumption Veblen saw the ultimate evidence of socioeconomic inequality in a society of strangers: consumption (for instance, clothing or a vehicle) is a way of visibly indicating one's class standing. It is an aggressive act insofar as it represents one's class "superiority" over others. But Veblen could not have at the time predicted that the public, person to person relationship that characterized conspicuous consumption in *Theory of the Leisure Class* would eventually undergo a conversion into the viewer-object relation of modern media and entertainment. Far from the hostile image Veblen painted in 1899, popular entertainment today broadcasts the lifestyles of privileged socioeconomic classes that fail to represent the everyday situation of their audience. Shows like Say Yes to the Dress, Project Runway, and others portray consumptive capacities far beyond that with which even the shrinking Americans middle-class could identify. Popular entertainment of previous decades was not immune to the portrayal of ostentatious consumption, but as the popular TV show of the 1980s, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" suggests, portrayals of conspicuous consumption were often contextualized as the rarified practices of a small group of wealthy elite. Today, depictions of ostentatious consumption seem to approach or attain the status of thematic characteristic in popular entertainment. This is particularly evident in network and cable TV programming, which tends to formulate a unified high-end lifestyle depiction

The popularity of these shows contradicts Veblen's theory insofar as inequality in consumptive capabilities—far from existing as a source of turmoil—becomes a function of entertainment. As will become clear below, conspicuous consumption is the ostentatious material representation of socioeconomic inequality. It is important to distinguish and clarify attitudes toward inequality (as expressed through conspicuous consumption) of viewers of contemporary entertainment. Do viewers see conspicuous consumption as an entertaining factor, or does it serve a different function? If it is entertaining, what does this mean for the viewer's perceptions of socioeconomic inequality? The answers to these questions are important because they can shed light on the condition and possibilities of contemporary popular insight and reform. This study investigates how conspicuous consumption as entertainment represents a different set of attitudes toward inequality as compared to Veblen's conspicuous consumption, one that necessarily suggests a normalizing of inequality on the one hand, and very positive reactions toward themes of consumption on the other.

I have conducted a series of interviews centered on viewer-reactions to the show Mad Men to investigate these questions. Mad Men is a popular television program depicting the lavish lifestyles of members of a 1960s Manhattan advertising firm. The program depicts consumption in both theme and setting as it leads viewers through the lives of very powerful, privileged individuals with high consumptive capabilities. My interviews with Mad Men viewers suggest that viewers generally find consumption to be an entertaining part of the show, and tend to view it positively. Positive viewer reactions

to consumption contrast with negative viewer reactions toward situations in which Mad Men's powerful characters break social norms. Thus the inequality between viewers and the show's characters as signified by the latter's social and consumptive power is only perceived in a negative light when social norms are broken, consumption remaining safe from this negative reaction. This finding suggests that, perhaps, inequality is itself a social norm.

Below, I provide a brief overview of Veblen's writings on conspicuous consumption from his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1967 [1899]), followed by a review of the relevant literature surrounding this concept since Veblen's initial writing. In order to give context to the assertion that inequality is a social norm, I discuss two relevant theories: Marcuse's notion of the "technical administrative apparatus", and Smith's concept of sympathy. I use these theories to posit that viewers react to on-screen inequality with what is, following Marcuse (1970), a largely value-neutral mentality, while at the same time attitudes toward inequality—insofar as it is outwardly expressed through consumption—can be described as a conservative, positive attitude toward consumption and avenues toward wealth (reflecting Adam Smith's notion of "sympathy"). These assertions are investigated below with an exploration of my interview data, including an overview of my methods and design weaknesses. I end with a discussion of my conclusions and some directions for future research.

Literature Review

Conspicuous Consumption in Context

Veblen describes "conspicuous consumption" as "the specialized consumption of goods as an evidence of pecuniary strength" (Veblen 1967 [1899]: 68). Conspicuous consumption is a visible indication of one's ability to consume at a high level and capacity to leisure. In communicating socioeconomic status through consumption, consumption becomes an essentially social activity. Thus how one consumes—rather, one's capacity to consume—holds significance beyond the pecuniary transaction: the possession of property is the basis of both popular esteem and self-respect. Veblen writes:

> So long as the comparison [of one's wealth to others'] is distinctly unfavorable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard (Veblen 1967 [1899]: 31).

There is for each community and class a "mean" level of wealth (communicated by outward displays of consumption). Individuals living below this mean should feel dissatisfied, and those above should feel "restless" with competition. The language of consumption is for Veblen an inherently uncomfortable one. Wealth is communicated through consumption in order to provoke class distinction, which Veblen describes as a thinly veiled master-servant relation (Veblen 1967 [1899]: 53).

The notion of consumption as an inherently social activity carries through today. Importantly, the notion has been extended to describe consumption as a symbolic system with the capacity to communicate distinct social meanings (Baudrillard, 1980; Leiss et al. 2005 [1990]). The context in which these meanings are communicated, however, has changed since Veblen's publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. While Veblen presents communication through consumption as an essentially uncomfortable, face-to-face affair (perhaps similar to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of boundary work, or "snobbing") modern-day media carries a different relation: the inequality between viewers and the individuals they view on-screen functions as an important part of entertainment. Consumption is the basis of many popular programs today including, as I will discuss, Mad Men.

There is a large body of literature discussing how individuals react to displays of wealth and how these reactions manifest themselves in changed spending habits, aspirations, and subjective well-being. In a study of undergraduate business majors, Madel et al. (2006) show a correlation between positive consumer attitudes toward luxury products and a positive attitude toward one's future career outlook (in terms of expected income). The latter, interestingly, was variable depending upon if the researchers showed the students a narrative about a successful fellow business major or one severely in debt. The participants given an article about a successful business major tended to rate him/her as "smarter, more successful, and more likeable than the unsuccessful target" (2006: 60).

Of particular interest is the so-called "relative position hypothesis" in well-being research, which seeks to measure the effects of relative income and wealth on subjective well-being (as opposed to aspiration effects, as in the Madel et al. article, above). Alois Stutzer, in a study on the effects of perceived community wealth on subjective well-being, writes: "People look upward when making comparisons. Aspirations thus tend to be above the level already reached. Wealthier people impose a negative external effect on poorer people, but not vice versa" (Stutzer, 2004: 5). Stutzer's survey data found that community wealth indeed tends to increase individual aspirations, and as it does so, "higher income aspirations reduce individual well-being, ceteris paribus" (Stutzer, 2004: 3). Miles and Rossi (2007), in an experimental study, found an even more substantial correlation. The authors found that individuals, without knowing their earnings relative to the rest of society, ranked their satisfaction based on the size of their income. But once the hypothetical earnings of the others in the study were revealed, satisfaction was primarily correlated to relative position. Individuals given hypothetical incomes higher than the rest of the participants became more satisfied with their earnings, and those with less became far less satisfied with the initial figure, regardless of the participants' starting amount (for a more exhaustive overview of happiness research, see Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2008).

While these studies test Veblen's assertions in terms of conspicuous consumption as a visible phenomenon, they do not strike at the *root*, the structural foundation of its existence: inequality. They normalize inequality, in a sense, by introducing it as a *personal* characteristic. In observing that Persons X and Y differ in terms of aspiration,

subjective well-being, or spending habits, these studies fail to ask the former how their participants view the context, or root causes, of their relative difference. The "relative position hypothesis" fails to recognize the contingency behind the notion of "position", a serious oversight, as the notion of "position" is necessarily prerequisite to that of "relative." Indeed, "relative positions" of inequality are just that: inequality.

My research is thus different from the above studies in that it seeks to reflect that conspicuous consumption is a social practice that functions as a signifier of existing socioeconomic inequality. At the same time, these signifiers serve a second role in their function as a component of entertainment.

Conspicuous Consumption as Entertainment

In analyzing conspicuous consumption as entertainment, I can only problematically maintain Veblen's original definition. Conspicuous consumption as entertainment is qualitatively different from Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption in three major respects. First, conspicuous consumption as entertainment does not occur totally in material reality. By this I mean that while Veblen's conspicuous consumption entails a face-to-face encounter, the consumption I am discussing takes place between viewer and produced-reality. Veblen's conception of the consumer-viewer relation assumes that both viewer and conspicuous consumer occupy the same immediate reality, though each may hold different understandings and pre-conceived notions of what they experience. Entertainment, however, *produces* a reality to viewers that, as Schor (1998)

notes, over-represents upper and upper-middle class consumptive capacities, thus providing consumers with a version of reality they might not have otherwise experienced. Schor (1998: 80), citing a study by O'Guinn and Shrum, writes

> The more people watch television, the more they think American households have tennis courts, private planes, convertibles, car telephones, maids, and swimming pools. Heavy watchers also overestimate the portion of the population who are millionaires, have had cosmetic surgery, and belong to a private gym, as well as those suffering from dandruff, bladder control problems, gingivitis, athlete's foot, and hemorrhoids.

Television has the power to skew viewer perceptions of what qualifies as a "normal" or average consumptive capacity toward high end, high capacity consumption. Spending, as a symbolic activity, is a way to obtain a perceived state of the rest of America. In an interesting testament to the power of this relation, Schor found in her study of Telecom employees that each additional hour of television viewed per week leads to an average decrease in $209 of savings.

As I will show with my discussion of Mad Men below, acts of consumption in entertainment, along with character and plot development, come together to broadcast particular lifestyles and norms. The world depicted in these programs is a mix of the cultural producers' interpretations of the world around them and their predictions of what viewers are willing to accept. And media spawns new interpretations and creative material as culture producers themselves have been/are influenced by media from *other*

cultural producers. Writing on record companies, Negus (1999) notes that the activities of culture producers

> should be thought of as a part of a 'whole way of life'; one that is not confined to the formal occupational tasks within a corporate world, but stretched across a range of activities that blur such conventional distinctions as public/private, professional judgment/personal preference and work/leisure time. (Negus 1999: 20).

Similarly, Griswold (2008) describes culture producers as existing in a "culture diamond." The culture diamond consists of interactions between four factors: the "social world," the "cultural object," culture producers, and culture receivers. "Culture objects" can be defined as "a shared significance....that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated" (Griswold 2008: 12). "The social world" constitutes the "economic, political, social, and cultural patterns and exigencies" that form a temporally contingent context to cultural objects, their producers, and receivers (Griswold 2008: 15). For Griswold, the cultural object, once produced, is subject to meaning making of not only its producers, but its receivers. Shared meanings are, at the same time, at least partly contingent upon the social world in which the object is produced, at the same time as these meanings change the social world itself.

Culture producers are a part of conspicuous consumption in entertainment in that they form a cultural object with its own meanings and depiction of reality. The intricate set of relations behind the production and reception of a cultural object (such as, for

example, an episode of Mad Men) is unique from Veblen's original model of conspicuous consumption as an observer-signifier relation occurring entirely in material reality.

Secondly, conspicuous consumption as entertainment differs from Veblen's model in terms of its positive audience reception. Conspicuous consumption, in being a factor of entertainment, is a part of the programs selected by audiences, or even the primary motivating factor in choosing to watch a particular program. In contrast, Veblen presents conspicuous consumption as a nearly inescapable part of social life in capitalism; it is an unpleasant phenomenon, one through which individuals with relatively fewer resources than those around them suffer against their will. Yet entertainment depicts inequality through conspicuous consumption and seems to garner positive responses, at least in terms of ratings (and in other ways, as my interview data suggests). Indeed, Carey suggests that, far from alienating viewers, media may serve a *ritual* function of reaffirming society's existing values (Carey 1989).

However, while the consumption of media entertainment can be framed as a voluntary act, not all of its effects register at the level of viewers' conscious apprehension. Research indicates that media entertainment effects viewers at both conscious and unconscious levels. Media entertainment often depicts consumption implicitly, and one could argue that these implicit consumptive acts have transformational effects upon viewers. Leiss et al. write, in discussing advertisements, that media strives to "illuminate those half-formed, inarticulate yearnings that individuals can be brought to recognize only through the play of image, icon and symbol" (Leiss et

al. 2005 [1990]: 227). Eva Illouz (1997) has argued that implicit depictions of consumption are instrumental in shaping the types of lifestyles put forth in advertisements and entertainment, as she demonstrates through an analysis of the large role played by advertisements depicting consumption on American mainstream conceptions of "romance" throughout the late 19th to mid-20th centuries. Much of the power of these lifestyle depictions comes from their unconscious character. For instance, Perkins et al. (2008) argue in a discussion of the unconscious effects of advertising that elements which do not elicit *explicit* responses on the part of viewers (such as implicit consumptive acts) can trigger and appeal to unconscious attitudes and preferences.

The third and most important way in which conspicuous consumption in entertainment differs from Veblen's conception is that the context of entertainment entails an attitude toward inequality unique from the latter. Again, conspicuous consumption is a necessarily competitive act; the messages put forth are registered negatively by the receiver not only in terms of estimating popular-esteem but also self-esteem. But the perception of conspicuous consumption as entertainment seems to entail, on some level, a *positive* attitude toward inequality: it suggests that most viewers would not so much be interested in the *difference* between their own consumptive capacities and those on-screen, but rather in the power, allure, and fantasy of the consumptive act itself. But socioeconomic inequality is an implied piece of depicted high-end consumptive acts; it is the prerequisite, the prelude to the story. This fact does not pass unnoticed by viewers, as I will discuss in my findings section, but they accept socioeconomic inequality as a norm, as that which *is*, without implication of the *ought*.

Two theories of the way individuals view socioeconomic inequality are particularly relevant here: Adam Smith's (2000 [1790]) concept of "sympathy" and Herbert Marcuse's (1970) notion of the "technical-administrative" attitude. When Smith speaks of sympathy, he does not use the term in the conventional sense. Rather, "sympathy" for Smith can be an explanatory factor in the resolution of class resentment at the level of the individual. Smith defines "sympathy" as any "passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned" to which "an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his *situation*, in the breast of every attentive spectator" (my italics). The focus Smith places on "situation" is important. He notes that sympathy is primarily a function of situation, not emotion. When applied to inequality, this observation yields interesting results. As Smith so beautifully writes,

> When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is so apt to paint it, it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state. It is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires.... Their benefits can extend but to a few; but their fortunes interest almost everybody.... Neither is our deference to their inclinations founded chiefly, or altogether, upon a regard to the utility of such submission, and to the order of society, which is best supported by it. Even when the order of society seems to require that we should oppose them, we can hardly bring ourselves to do it.... The strongest motives, the most furious passions, fear, hatred, and resentment, are scarce sufficient to balance this natural disposition to respect them (Smith 2000 [1790]: I.III.17).

What Smith indicates is that inequality is not viewed in a negative light because the subordinate many can find no moral problem with the wealth of the few. Individuals and their flaws may be regarded with contempt; abuses of fortune may be seen negatively; but Smith believes that few (Smith being one of these few) could ever find fault with the benefits they so desire, nor the avenues of acquiring them. One is free, then, to fantasize without significant emotional turmoil over the lifestyles of the wealthy, imagining that they, too, would enjoy that societal position.

Representing a very different theoretical camp, Marcuse also examines the mystery of seemingly voluntary inequality. As Marcuse argues in his *Five Lectures* (1970), inequality in modern society appears to the individual in a normalized fashion mirroring something of a bureaucratic, technical-administrative quality. Inequality is viewed as positional, necessary, as different positions within a bureaucracy appear necessary to the functioning of the organizational whole. The technical quality with which the capitalist mode of production is treated in modern society provides a discursive field in which inequality is not perceived at the level of morality, but in terms of the rational demands of economic efficiency. A situation thus arises in which the dominated "masses" cease opposition, and any remaining "opposition [is] integrated into the positive whole"; "the antagonistic interests that were previously irreconcilable seem to have passed over into the true collective interests." (Marcuse 1970: 16). The perception of socioeconomic inequality as a *technically necessary* phenomenon normalizes its existence and largely eliminates its moral quality (Marcuse 1964).

Thus from Smith and Marcuse emerges an explanation that sees modern individual perceptions of socioeconomic inequality as deriving a positive quality in terms of the hedonistic consumptive manifestations of inequality on the one hand, and in terms of its conceptual normalization as an element of systemic necessity on the other.

From a series of interviews with viewers of the show Mad Men, I have found that viewers tended to view on-screen conspicuous consumption as a fundamental part of the show's entertainment. As I will discuss, reactions toward inequality and consumption in my interviews suggest that respondents' attitudes parallel those discusses by the described theories of Marcuse and Smith.

Methods

My primary focus in this study is to illuminate the broad *relations* entailed and their importance concerning attitudes toward inequality. This research is exploratory in its aim to uncover viewers' responses to conspicuous consumption in media entertainment. As such, the research does not engage some of the categories of data more typical to sociological studies of media, for instance, data on viewer demographics, media consumption patterns, or content analysis. Instead, my intention is to illuminate the relationship between viewers of entertainment and the conspicuous consumption in what they watch, and the importance of this relation in terms of viewer attitudes toward socioeconomic inequality.

I have conducted a series of nine interviews (four males, five females) in order to understand how conspicuous consumption changes in entertainment and what this means from the perspective of viewers. I use interviews, as opposed to survey data, to identify audience perceptions in order to provide flexibility in the range of answers. Individual audience members may respond to particular episodes, characters, or themes in such an enormous variety of ways that survey data, unless structured as open-ended as an interview session, could hinder the full expression of viewer perceptions. The trade-off is that this method does not allow for a large sample relative to what might be obtained through survey data.

The program I have chosen to analyze is Mad Men, a popular program centered upon the high-end lifestyles of the employees in an early 1960s advertising firm. I chose Mad Men because of what I consider to be its heavy display of consumption as a centerpiece of the show's entertainment. Indeed, the themes of consumption in Mad Men are inescapable, as they are a primary part of its plot. Furthermore, I believe Mad Men is a good choice because of the large amount of press it has received for its popularity and fashion trend-setting.

Case Selection

Mad Men exhibits consumption in both theme and setting. The show centers on stylish, attractive individuals with expensive lifestyles. Settings include expensive

restaurants, lavish homes, and high-rise offices as the main characters attempt to craft slogans and advertising campaigns for large corporations in the interest of need-creation.

Mad Men does not generally exhibit individual acts of consumption; rather, acts of consumption are implicit and part of a particularly rich, spectacular lifestyle supported by high-end jobs, advanced education, and significant means to consume. This "Mad Men" lifestyle is depicted in a vintage context of black-tie restaurants, highly visible white male dominance, and a golden age of American industrial growth. The white male characters are the top of the social and economic ladder, holding nearly unlimited consumptive ability—which includes sexual and racial dominance over women and blacks as objects—and jobs of (nearly) un-alienated labor with a high degree of creative-control. The setting of early 1960s affluent, powerful, booming Manhattan facilitates the depiction of characters who have little resistance to their desires, the subjects to which nearly all others are objectified. Viewers at the same time can idolize these characters and their lifestyle: while the morally negative inequality appearing alongside the Mad Men lifestyle can be brushed off (falsely) as a relic necessary to make the show an accurate period-piece, the sexiness, the sense of power, and the raw consumptive abilities of the characters themselves are timeless. The main characters appear as gods of consumerism, New York an Olympus.

The Mad Men lifestyle is indicated not only through imagery, but also through the vocabulary used by the program's characters. Common phrases are often augmented in the script in order to relate to themes of consumption. For example, in regards to a young

female secretary's prospects for a date, one character remarks, "She's browsing, and like most of us, she's disappointed in the selection of merchandise." Later, when an employee, Kenny, is making advances on the same secretary, a character remarks to him, "I don't see any money changing hands, Kenny."

Expressed attitudes of the shows' characters toward behavior that falls outside the high-end, consumption-intensive lifestyle that forms the norm in Mad Men serve to define the characters' class position by means of symbolic violence. One example is the apparent divide between eating at a restaurant—i.e., being served—versus making one's own meal. This seemingly minor difference was highlighted in an episode when a young secretary brought her lunch to work instead of going out to eat; she was treated like a child by her coworkers, who then brought her with them, insisting that a man pay for her.

This is not to say that all lifestyle depictions in Mad Men are consumption-positive. Rather, characters within the show are generally depicted as stressed, unhappy, and/or desperate. Yet the foundation of the characters' despair is not so much directed toward the troubles of consumption as an act—this act is usually carried through with both style and pleasure—but the suppression of pleasure by the reality principle in pursuing the outer reaches (read: *non-consumptive* pleasures) of the characters' lavish lifestyles; these are the gray limits of the white male characters' Olympian status. Negative depictions of the characters' lifestyles generally grow through individual character flaws in pursuing pleasure or desire in the face of societal norms.

An exception to this rule is embodied through the depicted attitudes of men toward women. In Mad Men, male characters treat women as objects to be consumed, but unlike the other acts of consumption in the program, this act is depicted in an overwhelmingly negative light, with the show's female characters portraying clear frustration or unsettling acceptance. This very frequent occurrence can be interpreted as a strong critique of consumption, because it transfers the consumptive relation to human beings instead of inanimate objects. But this space of critique runs counter to much of that which makes the show entertaining to its viewers: fortune embodied in a sexy, stylish form of characters and lifestyles that are, though problematic, still desirable. The critique is immediately crippled, ironically, *because* women have voice and inanimate objects do not. The latter form of consumption is differentiated, and continues to be embodied, in very desirable forms capable of producing distinction and at least surface happiness.

Sample

There were two requirements in selecting respondents. First, respondents needed to be viewers of at least one season of Mad Men. Secondly, I did not include college students in my sample. My reasoning in excluding college students—though they would have been the most convenient sample from which to draw—was based on my concern that college students could be more likely than the average US population to (a) come from backgrounds of above-average wealth and (b) to be financially dependent, throughout their college years, on those families. The skewing of my sample with financially dependent college students from relatively wealthy backgrounds would quite

possibly fill my sample with individuals unable to seriously differentiate their own consumptive abilities and social status from the characters of Mad Men. Additionally, I tried to make sure that roughly equal numbers of my respondents were male and female. At the outset of the study, I wanted a balanced sample in terms of gender because of the controversial depictions of both male and female "roles" displayed in the show and the omnipresent objectification of women by the show's male characters. Both of these trends are discussed below. I did not, however, control my sample for class, race/ethnicity, age, or education. Education is a factor that may have biased the sample, as most, if not all, of my respondents have participated in secondary education.

I used social network sampling and convenience sampling to recruit study participants. All but two of my interviews were conducted by phone and recorded. Interviews ranged from twenty to forty five minutes long. The recordings were transcribed and coded based on the interview schedule, detailed below.

Interview Schedule

The interview schedule changed—though not substantially—after the first two interviews, as I began focusing more on respondents' feelings toward inequality. Additionally, some questions were eliminated that had seemed too abstract in the first two interviews. For example, broad questions asking participants about their views on the show's portrayed lifestyle were eliminated in favor of more specific questions regarding particular aspects of how they view themselves in relation to the lifestyle.

Interview questions were based on respondents' reactions to conspicuous consumption, though the concept was not stated in the questions themselves. Instead, I asked respondents questions pertaining to their specific attitudes toward the themes presented in Mad Men. Especially key here are the themes of the main characters' lifestyle, which acts as a display of not only lavish consumption but also white male dominance in terms of economic power and social prestige; and the main characters' occupational goal of manipulation and need-creation. Interviews began with questions pertaining to viewing habits: how often the respondent watches the show; with whom, if anyone, they watch it; and what kinds of things they talk about. These questions were followed up with inquiries into the role they believe fashion and high-end lifestyle play in the show, and how they react to it themselves. Interviewees were additionally asked to place (if possible) the main character, Don Draper, into a particular class, and to explain their reasoning. Next, questions focused on participants' own consumption: participants were asked if shows like Mad Men or other media informed their sense of style and what is popular. Participants were also asked if the Mad Men lifestyle seemed desirable. Importantly, I asked interviewees to describe their reactions, if any, to the show's portrayal of manipulation and need creation. Lastly, I asked respondents to analyze the symbols put forth in the imagery of the show's opening credits.

My interview schedule presents a limitation of this study: by focusing on conspicuous consumption in entertainment, expressed viewer attitudes toward inequality, consumption, and social norms (as addressed in the findings below) are necessarily

limited by the fact that respondents are not responding to material phenomena. There may be a great difference between reactions to show-based events and those occurring in material reality. However, both these depictions of inequality occur as a part of "everyday life"; media does not exist completely outside of, but parallel to, material reality. Even so, further study of this topic should include comparative findings concerning viewer/observer reactions to material versus media reality.

Findings: Viewer Reactions to Mad Men

Mad Men depicts protagonists who exhibit privileged, upper class lifestyles. Consumption plays an important role in these lifestyles, as it is the primary indicator (through explicit and/or implicit acts) of the characters' socioeconomic status and what their lifestyles entail at the material level. Class is indicated, then, just as Veblen had theorized: through visible displays of consumption indicating one's ability to spend and—equally important for Veblen—to leisure. What Veblen did not predict was that the interpersonal, public relationships expressed in *Theory of the Leisure Class* would also give way to a viewer-object relation through modern media and entertainment. The viewer voluntarily steps into a world in which high-class consumption is not only visible but central to the plot and character development. But what does this mean for the viewer? How are the above-mentioned symbols and content interpreted by viewers merely looking to be entertained? Is conspicuous consumption entertaining?

While Mad Men presents space for critique, this space is open to a variety of

interpretations from different viewers. This study uses in-depth interviews with viewers of Mad Men to better understand viewer interpretations of and reactions to the consumption depicted in entertainment media. Three important trends concerning viewer perceptions of conspicuous consumption have surfaced from my interviews: class recognition, emulation of consumption and power, and the existence of contradictions in this emulation. First, in terms of class recognition, viewers recognize the characters in Mad Men as both stylish and exhibiting an upper class lifestyle consisting of consumption and personal power. Secondly, viewers emulate the consumption and economic/social power displayed in the series, and both consumption and the characters' social and economic power is described by viewers as constituting a huge part of the show's entertainment value. In fact, most of my respondents expressed that Mad Men's depictions of consumption and power—these are of course linked—are a necessary part of their interest in the program. Lastly, there is a contradiction in viewers' feelings toward the consumptive activity displayed in Mad Men and their feelings toward the breaking of social norms. Both of these activities are made possible in Mad Men and legitimated in the show's plot through the main characters' tremendous economic power and social standing. Viewers thus hold a contradictory standing on power depicted in the program, in which the same economic and social power is both emulated and rejected on moral grounds. Such violations of social norms as infidelity, lack of trust, misogyny, racism, alcoholism, and indifference to children were cited in my interviews. Safe from viewers' moral rejection, however, is "inequality."

(1) Class Recognition

My interviews have shown that the fashion and high-end lifestyle in Mad Men does not slip-by unnoticed. Viewers find the characters of Mad Men to be very stylish, and notice changes in fashion as the show has progressed. In reference to the character of a young secretary, a viewer noted:

> She's just becoming more fashion-forward. I think she's becoming more confident. I mean, you can just see it in the past two seasons. But I think in this season in particular I think she's just coming into her own....she's starting to feel empowered. But, it's really—I mean the last three episodes she looked adorable, she didn't look sort of doltish....she really started to look like a Manhattan girl.

Another viewer, admiring the fashion of the show, expressed his sentiment that the office dress-scene should be the standard today. In fact, most interviewees indicated that their sense of what is fashionable, both in terms of trends and as far as personal taste, are and have been informed significantly by media, including shows like Mad Men. Three respondents were able to indicate actual impacts of Mad Men in particular upon modern fashion, citing things like vests, cufflinks, colorful sport-coats, and pocket squares.

Viewers use obvious cues, such as characters' clothing to discern the lavish lifestyle in the show. But viewers also discern similar meanings from other less obvious cues. In fact, all respondents in this study claimed to have identified the lifestyle through multiple cues related to varied forms of consumption. In a typical example, one respondent points to multiple markers linking conspicuous consumption to the lavish

Mad Men lifestyle:

> the restaurants that they go to. Oysters and, I don't know, all the liquor. And Betty with horse-riding—stuff like that. And Cadillacs…all the trappings of what everybody considered luxury and, you know, cutting-edge Manhattan—I guess Manhattan is probably a big element of that; just the setting of the imposing corporate building and the marble lobbies.

Additionally, respondents noted characters' houses, describing them as, suburban, attractive, and lavish. In fact, attention was paid to the most minute details of the characters' homes, down to the main character's large bed. Additionally, in one case a respondent noted the lack of occupational labor among the show's depicted housewives.

Interestingly, despite respondent consensus that the main (white male) characters in Mad Men held high-profile, privileged, powerful lifestyles, there was a divide between those who described Don Draper, the main character, as upper versus upper-middle class. Most viewed Draper to be upper-middle class, as opposed to upper class. The reasons for this characterization vary, but the most common viewer sentiment was that Draper was not truly upper class, or perhaps not even truly upper-middle class, because of his rags-to-riches history. One is thus presented with an interesting insight: individuals are not, according to my respondents, truly mobile in American society. Class upbringing has sticking power reflecting more the lessons of *The Great Gatsby* than Horatio Alger. Perhaps one could say, following Marcuse, that the kind of hyper-mobility experienced by Don Draper, while compelling, is nonetheless a defiance of his original systemic or societal "position." Indeed, when it was revealed in the show that Draper had obtained a

new identity in order to become successful, most interviewees responded by suggesting that Draper was "inauthentic." It is unclear as to what respondents would have thought of Draper had this point not been revealed, but the respondents' focus on Draper's personal authenticity coupled with a refusal to deny him, in their eyes, "entry" into the upper class (again, on account of his mobility) suggests to me that mobility itself, the violating of his original systemic "position" of inequality, colors these responses.

(2) Emulation Concerning Consumption and Power

Consumption was expressed by every interviewee as part of the show's entertainment and appeal, so much so that most viewers felt consumption to be *necessary* for holding their interest. In other words, the show would not be entertaining without high-end consumption. As one viewer noted, "That's what drew people in. That was the show pony. It was like, look they have all this money and living the high life in New York—they have to draw you in." However, the appeal viewers find in these images of high-end consumption cannot be separated from another aspect: the show's depiction of social and economic power relations.

Social and economic power are significant elements of the lifestyle that Mad Men puts forth. The early 1960s setting is a major part of these power depictions: the decade represents to viewers a time of post-war industrial boom and of white male dominance, a world in which characters have few limits or consequences to their actions. As one viewer noted,

> There is no line for anybody to cross. They can do whatever they want. They're making their own rules, and we don't have that luxury. You know, not that all those rules are things that everybody and their mother wants to break but, I don't know, things are so different now.

It is difficult to distinguish between viewers' enthusiasm for era and power—perhaps because they go together, as do economic/social power and consumption. Every respondent described the "era" as at least a leading factor in their initial attraction to the show. One viewer noted the "innocence" and "earnestness" of the 1950s, the "optimism" of the 1960s, and the professional clothing of the period in general as the early sources of his interest in the era. Several respondents described their interest as partly derived from the notion of the birth of industry, as shown in Mad Men through the show's depiction of the advertising industry and its clients. Advertising appears to viewers as sexy: it is a creative, high-paying job, one that occurs behind-the-curtain yet surrounds and defines their public and private spaces. Additionally, influential positions in the advertising industry appear as positions of power insofar as the advertiser shapes the public dream-world through mass message. Several respondents marveled at what they believed to be an "accurate" depiction of "what goes on" or "what it was like" in creating some of the most famous, influential, and widely-distributed advertisements of the era. Some respondents reminisced about specific brands whose advertisements they could still remember.

On the whole, Mad Men glorifies the unrestrained exercise of social and economic power, particularly in terms of consumption, and viewers tend to respond positively to this element of the show. Yet the show also locates limits to its characters' power, and the way in which it does this can have moral resonance for viewers. The characters in Mad Men are constantly struggling in their actions with the reality principle, with the push of society. In the program, this push tends to be portrayed negatively, as if the characters are going too far. Viewers react negatively when characters break social norms. There is a limit to emulation, a point at which the characters' ability to do whatever they want appears negative, because the characters use their economic and social power to break social norms. For instance, describing her reaction to the Mad Men lifestyle, one viewer balances her envy of the lifestyle against a normative rejection of certain lifestyle-linked behaviors:

> there's something glamorous about it, but I wouldn't want it. It's almost like I know better, like yeah that would be fun and glamorous but ultimately I wouldn't feel very good....I wouldn't feel good drinking and smoking all day, and having affairs on my lunch-breaks. I just think that there's some moral integrities that we don't live that way now. Or I don't, and I wouldn't feel good about myself if I were living that way. But it's fun to watch other people living that way.

Responses in my interviews did vary by gender in respect to questions of the relation between characters' social and economic power and lifestyle-desirability. Questions of lifestyle-desirability varied extensively between female respondents. The above quote is from a female respondent, but it is not the norm; no clear trend emerged

from female interviews, except that they were highly critical of the power and privilege of white-male characters, though they understood the possibility of the allure. Two female respondents felt the portrayal of women in the show to be fairly true to modern-day women's roles: objectified and limited in their being taken seriously in the workplace. Males were more likely to speak of this power in positive terms, though all were careful to show the flaws of that way of life. One respondent, after criticizing Don Draper for being "out of touch," went on to describe the male characters' abilities in the show as an appealing, entertaining depiction of what he has heard others refer to as "the good old days" of the ad business. In describing Don Draper's lifestyle, he said, "He does exactly what he wants. Who doesn't want a piece of that?"

(3) Contradiction in Emulation

Despite males' somewhat less enthusiastic denouncement of the Mad Men lifestyle, one can still see that there is a limit to how much viewers are willing to emulate: while the consumptive abilities and the sense of style tend to register positively with viewers, the character's power struggle with societal norms is viewed negatively. Consumption is a socially acceptable form of pleasure, and the only reality confronting it is one's spending limits. But spending limits as a form of "reality principle" or limitation do not really come to the fore in the program. Viewing the characters in Mad Men consume at a high level, viewers are both accepting and entertained, as indicated by my respondents' consensus that consumption is itself a main appeal of the show's entertainment, and in their emulation of the lifestyle of which that consumption is an

expression. As one viewer noted, "I'd much rather people dress like that than the way they do now. I don't know—I like the formality and everything."

Yet in viewing characters' power struggles with societal norms, viewers make judgments on the basis of social acceptability. For instance, a female respondent noted that she was entertained by the main characters' daily lives, by their "fashion, the high intensity, the drinking and smoking while you're working. It's the living on the edge stuff that now is pretty taboo, in the workplace." She expressed that the socioeconomic position allowing for this activity was portrayed positively, that the "show positions it as a desirable place to be in." But when asked whether she found this to be, overall, a desirable lifestyle for herself, she responded:

> I wouldn't feel good drinking and smoking all day, and having affairs on my lunch-breaks. I just think that, there's some moral integrities that we don't live that way, now. Or I don't, and I wouldn't feel good about myself if I were living that way. But it's fun to watch other people living that way.

One encounters a contradiction: both consumption and the violation of social norms are a part of the lifestyle depicted in the show, but while the former is value positive, the latter is negative. The respondent viewed the characters' social and economic power and, specifically, how that power is used toward consumptive activities, in a positive light, while she rejected the breaking of norms like infidelity, alcoholism, and even, it appears,

the possible effects of second-hand smoke.

This contradiction was a dominant theme in my interviews, and led interviewees to offer very critical reactions to the individual characters' positions in society as they continued to express their positive feelings toward consumption. Notably, viewers expressed their critiques of characters' actions and personalities in terms of "authenticity," internal struggles against societal norms, and (most frequently) shifts to materialism. Of course, these are almost inherent aspects of the freedom and power that gives the Mad Men characters the image of being so terribly chic and confident. It is little wonder, then, that viewers I interviewed have trouble distinguishing between their acceptance of consumption and disapproval of power. As one viewer noted,

> The lifestyle itself is just pretty staggering—obviously it's a period piece. But, I mean, just between the smoking and the drinking and the entertaining, it's sort of the disregard for other people—I don't know if it's sort of—that it's—you know, the disregard for people and relationships with people is what is interesting to watch. I'm not necessarily sure that it has to do with the fact that they can give up a hundred thousand dollars which at that time—even now—is, a shit-ton of money. Um, so I have a hard time sort of separating money from just the general lack of respect.

Another indication of this disapproval was evidenced by viewers' reactions to marriage abuses. Don Draper, the show's protagonist, has extramarital relations from the very first episode, and it is a primary theme in the show's plot. When asked about how Don treats his wife, Betty, one viewer responded,

> He's pretty out of touch. I mean he's just going through the motions in terms of the marriage. He's not really—he's not being truthful about—he's just not taking it seriously, like, oh, this is what you do in society so I'm just going to do this. It's not even, it's not clear if he's happy or not, he's just sort of disengaged

A particularly effective indication of this contradiction occurred when I asked viewers to interpret the opening credits of the show. The opening credits display in a stylized manner a man in a suit falling from the top of a skyscraper, passing by enormous glowing advertisements, and finally landing relaxed on a couch, cigarette in hand. While two respondents saw the opening credits as merely stylistic, without any particular meaning, the remaining respondents offered interpretations of the credits that ran contrary to their above-stated views on the program's consumptive themes. Respondents viewed materialism and work—major aspects of the show—as alienating factors for the suited character of the opening credits. One viewer described the "falling man" as "just drowning in advertising and materialism. He's…so out of touch with anything that's meaningful. He's all surface." Another interpretation suggested that the opening credits

> sums the show up….It's kind of just tragic on its own, because it's—I mean, he's falling but you're not really sure why, but he's falling over a sea of clients and it's clean and its crisp and it's stylized so it kind of speaks to the character of the show but it's—maybe it's just because I watch the show, but to me it's just a sign of *being lost*. [As for the end of the sequence]: I think it's about appearances. Don't see a sweat, kind of thing. There he is all collected in his suit and his cigarette, kind of thing,

and get right down to business and makes some money. (My italics).

These findings suggest that in viewing conspicuous consumption in entertainment, viewers' emotional reaction to inequality may only be expressed in reaction to specific character flaws and the problems of power that confront the characters. The program becomes a moral story when societal norms are broken. If the lifestyle Mad Men depicts has certain limits to happiness, these limits are not expressed in terms of consumption itself but in the way individuals apply their social and economic power outside the realm of consumption. The characters face audience criticism when they apply a mentality of consumption and waste to those around them. The program depicts this mentality of waste and consumption negatively, for instance, in depicting the male characters' objectification of women, or in Don Draper's lack of enthusiasm for his children. Respondents describe the mentality accompanying these themes in terms such as "being lost," a crisis of authenticity, a death in being "drowned by surface." Again, one can see the contradiction: in viewing the abstract symbols of Mad Men's opening credits, viewers display serious critiques of consumption as an alienating force. Yet at the same time, these viewers enjoy the stylishness of the show's characters. Viewers see consumption as not only a central aspect of the program's entertainment factor, but desirable as well. Also safe from these critiques, even in the abstract interpretations to the show's opening credits, is socioeconomic inequality. The viewers' focus on the possible alienating factors of the characters' privileged lifestyle—in focusing on the feelings of the individual characters themselves—suggests to me that they took these characters' wealth as a given. Viewer critique then relies upon the micro-view of "how do these wealthy characters feel" instead of a macro perspective that might seek to compare the situation of

Mad Men's characters to society at large. A focus only on the individual psychology of Mad Men's characters may highlight particular spaces of critique, but it also normalizes the characters' socioeconomic positions and wealth by focusing on only them.

Curiously, viewers did not respond negatively to the program's depicted consumer-manipulation, as displayed through the advertising firm in which the main characters work. An important theme in Mad Men is the notion of "creating needs"—marketing to consumers in such a way to trigger unconscious desires. Mad Men gives viewers a behind-the-curtain look into this process. Characters frequently say that customers don't know what they want "until we tell them." Mad Men's characters discuss at length how popular or population segment values might be used or influenced to sell a product. In later seasons, psychologists and test groups are used. Interestingly, most viewers described the advertising production process and the probability of its accurate portrayal as an entertaining aspect of the program. To my great surprise, no respondent described having an emotional reaction to the program's depicted manipulation, though most noted that they "probably should." One viewer stated that the thought of advertising as "creating need" had never even crossed her mind. But most respondents described the situation as a matter of fact:

> I suppose I should be mad, but I'm not. I mean I get sort of—it's just the truth, right? I mean, we know that that's what advertising is. We know that that's what it's doing. And we can fall for it, so to speak, but you only fall for it if you choose to fall for it. I mean we all make our own decisions.

When asked if she thought advertising to be in fact a *manipulating* force, the above respondent replied, "I guess it must be, because it works." Another respondent said that she was exposed to far more powerful examples of advertising manipulation than those found in Mad Men, because her public middle-school had been used by companies like Yoplait (for their "Go-Gurt product) as a consumer focus-group. Two respondents suggested that the show is perhaps "a big realization for a lot of people," but described their own feelings as neutral. Manipulation, then, appears to viewers as a curiously neutral aspect: the notion of "creating needs", while it limits consumers' ability to consume on their "terms," but it is an overall acceptable use of advertiser's power insofar as it is not unexpected; it does not violate social norms. Consumption is protected, then, from critique even as the power behind consumption—and, in this case, causing *others* to consume—is not the kind of power these viewers themselves possess.

Significance of Findings

Viewers react positively toward consumption and negatively when characters use their social and economic power—the same power prerequisite to high level consumption—to violate social norms. So why is this fairly uniform difference between reactions to consumption and power important? I believe that the true significance of this finding is the absence of inequality from viewer criticism. Inequality is omnipresent in this program, because it exists necessarily in the ability of the characters to live their depicted lifestyles. Inequality exists not only between the characters and society in general, but between the characters and the viewers themselves. For most viewers, the

inequality between themselves and the characters was not described negatively. In fact, all of my interviewees saw the characters' high socioeconomic status as exhibiting some very *burdensome*, or at least stressful, aspects. But as far as personal, negative feelings resulting from *difference*, there were no explicit remarks. While some interviewees downplayed the desirability of the Mad Men lifestyle, they did so specifically in terms of personal burden and the impacts to one's personality that might come with that lifestyle, as opposed to a moral or political opposition to inequality.

The attitude my respondents tended to display toward inequality is similar to that noted above in the discussion of Marcuse's "administrative technical apparatus". According to Marcuse, inequality in modern society appears to individuals as value-neutral because it is necessary for the systemic efficiency of capitalist society. Indeed, I have not found in my interviews any sort of intense emotional reaction to socioeconomic inequality, but a cool indifference to (or ignorance of) inequality mixed with an acceptance of its more visible elements. The fact that critique appears when characters violate societal norms, and critique is not prompted by displays of conspicuous consumption which signify inequality, suggests the possibility that *inequality is itself a social norm*, and as a norm, its being broken would be viewed in an equally negative light. For instance, the notion of inequality's normative quality could be an explanatory factor to respondents' above-described claims that Don Draper's mobility makes him "inauthentic". Outside of Mad Men, I would note that American mass-acceptance (at times) of trickle-down economic policies is a powerful indicator of the normalization socioeconomic inequality. This is an economic program assuming and requiring

inequality in its projection of efficient economic operation. The aim of trickle-down economics is not greater relative prosperity, but aggregate prosperity.

The notion of inequality as a social norm runs contrary to some existing research on Americans' perceptions of inequality and their moral beliefs. NPR (2010) recently ran a story on a new study by Michael Norton finding that Americans tend to underestimate US economic inequality. At the same time, the study found that Americans desire a state of economic equality that would trump even Sweden. Yet this conclusion regards economic equality in the abstract, not in terms of systemic meaning. What does the desire of equality mean without its material consequences? Most parents probably would like their children to remain pain-free, but they still send their children to dentists. A finding like Norton's can still remain valid even if inequality is a social norm, because respondents can have contradictory values and understandings depending upon how a moral question is framed. Answers can vary when posed in terms of the ideal, moral realm of the "just" character of inequality, and the material, everyday realm of how inequality functions in a capitalist society.

If one allows that inequality is a social norm, the disparity between the positive audience reactions to conspicuous consumption as entertainment and the negative interpersonal reactions to conspicuous consumption described by Veblen begins to makes sense.

The Importance of Conspicuous Consumption in Entertainment

Veblen is turned on his head when conspicuous consumption is applied to entertainment, because entertainment turns conspicuous consumption into a positive, entertaining phenomenon. My interview data has shown that audiences interpret and even demand displays of conspicuous consumption as an entertaining factor. This is impossible to reconcile with Veblen, but it is not to say that Veblen's theory is wrong; Veblen was simply writing about a different form of interaction. In entertainment, conspicuous consumption is impersonal, and is channeled through a crafted media—as opposed to a material—reality. With this new setting comes not only a different format of observation, but also a new realm of interpretation as lifestyles are portrayed to which viewers might not have otherwise been exposed.

US media producers have put out a series of popular programs based on conspicuous consumption, and these programs have effects beyond entertainment alone. Portes and Rumbaud (2007 [1990]), for example, note that a significant cause of skilled immigration to the United States has its origins in preconceptions of lifestyle-possibilities informed by American television programs. Another example is the booming field of neuromarketing. As the New York Times reported recently (Singer 2010), the object of neuromarketing is to compute "the whispers of the brain": "deep conscious stimuli" representing latent desire. The focus of this research is on media viewers and their reactions to on-screen phenomena.

But the most important finding here is that conspicuous consumption presents a view of inequality distinct from that described by Veblen. Veblen's understanding of society suggested at least some sort of emotional reaction toward inequality—inequality, once indicated through conspicuous consumption, had an effect on the observer, even if that effect occurred within the realm of consumption. Indeed, the reactions to inequality Veblen describes, namely, reduced self-esteem and competitive consumption, are not exactly positive. But they are *reactions*. The face-to-face, material realm of conspicuous consumption thus presents the "viewer" with a direct link to inequality. Inequality, for the observer, is not something "out of thin air".

But in entertainment, conspicuous consumption does, in fact, arrive in such a manner. It is similar to the type of "magical thinking" Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) adapted from Lévi-Strauss, in which the material realities of production are as mystified as miracles. In the realm of entertainment, viewers may apply what is on-screen to their own lives. A wide variety of social science research has addressed the question of how media influences social action (Bordo 1993), and notwithstanding a focus on audience agency, suggests that media exerts significant influence over the attitudes and behaviors of audiences. While beyond the scope of the research presented here, the topic of viewer effects remains an interesting one. For, if viewers apply what is on-screen to their own lives, they are applying a text that is the result of a producer's own mediated interpretation of material reality, not their own. In a sense, the mediated reality they interpret is, as one respondent suggested, "a cartoon" of everyday life.

I have suggested above that viewer reactions to inequality were overwhelmingly neutral. This is an interesting finding when contrasted to Veblen's work, but it is even more interesting when one puts this neutrality in relief to that which viewers *did* respond. Viewers responded negatively when social norms were broken, such as fidelity, trust, or responsibility over one's children and career. The lack of response to inequality, then, suggests to me that inequality is, at least on some level, a social norm.

Certainly this is a difficult argument to make solely based on this evidence—more research would need to be conducted in (a) differentiating attitudes between demographic groups, and (b) differing attitudes in regards to material versus entertainment/virtual displays of inequality. But what can be said is that, based on these findings, viewers in this study exhibit an attitude toward inequality that parallels significantly that described by Marcuse's administrative technical apparatus. As one interviewee said: "I mean, it is what it is, it's capitalism." At the same time, respondents seem to approach the products of inequality—namely, conspicuous consumption—in a way described by Smith and his concept of sympathy. Smith explains how individuals might be delighted in the depiction of what they don't have, in the delight of another's consumption. The delight Smith describes persists *despite* inequality, *despite* the observer's immediate denial of consumptive jouissance.

To summarize, three points in particular surfaced from my interviews with viewers of Mad Men. First, viewers take extensive notice of the characters of Mad Men displaying high-end lifestyles of high consumptive capacities. Second, viewers see

consumption as an entertaining aspect of Mad Men, and most even go so far as to suggest high-end consumption as a necessary aspect of their interest. Third, there is a contradiction in viewer feelings toward consumption and power. Viewers react negatively when characters break social norms. But this negative sentiment does not carry over to inequality in terms of wealth and consumptive power. This difference, I believe, can be explained in terms of the theories of Marcuse and Smith, as detailed above. In this sense, inequality is neutral, while consumption and consumptive capacities are positive, and remain active in the viewer's imagination and ambition.

These conclusions suggest a several important points of consideration. First, if one accepts Smith's concept of sympathy as an explanation of emulation and ambition surrounding consumption, what does this entail in terms of respondents' understandings of their *own* well-being and their individual and common conceptions of what constitutes "good society"? Do their utopian imaginations include inequality?

Second, to view socioeconomic inequality as a neutral phenomenon is to limit one's imaginative possibilities for radical insight. But does this limitation of radical insight extend into the material realm, or does it only emerge in the context of media entertainment? In other words, do my conclusions concerning viewer attitudes toward socioeconomic inequality remain valid when applied to explicit personal feelings surrounding inequality and its moral implications? Perhaps this distinction makes little difference for, if Smith's theory holds true, then even a fully recognized, unjust inequality

will not diminish popular sympathy for that which a stratified society can produce, in this case, through a capitalist mode of production.

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