Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of *Star Trek’s* Culture of Consumption

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In this article, I examine the cultural and subcultural construction of consumption meanings and practices as they are negotiated from mass media images and objects. Field notes and artifacts from 20 months of fieldwork at *Star Trek* fan clubs, at conventions, and in Internet groups, and 67 interviews with *Star Trek* fans are used as data. *Star Trek*’s subculture of consumption is found to be constructed as a powerful utopian refuge. Stigma, social situation, and the need for legitimacy shape the diverse subcultures’ consumption meanings and practices. Legitimizing articulations of *Star Trek* as a religion or myth underscore fans’ heavy investment of self in the text. These sacralizing articulations are used to distance the text from its superficial status as a commercial product. The findings emphasize and describe how consumption often fulfills the contemporary hunger for a conceptual space in which to construct a sense of self and what matters in life. They also reveal broader cultural tensions between the affective investments people make in consumption objects and the encroachment of commercialization.

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*Star Trek* is perhaps one of the great consumption phenomena of our time. The science fiction series has been hailed as “the most successful and lucrative cult phenomenon in television history” (*Entertainment Weekly* 1994, p. 9). To date, the original *Star Trek* television series (which ran from 1966 to 1969 and became enormously popular in syndication) has spawned four spin-off series and nine major motion pictures, and it has accounted for billions of dollars in licensed merchandise revenues. Exemplifying a cultural phenomenon, *Star Trek* fans run the gamut from commonplace mainstream viewers to highly devoted members of an alternative subculture.

The commercial and cultural impact of *Star Trek* demonstrates the important role that mass media images, objects, and texts play in contemporary cultural life (see, e.g., Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Kellner 1995). It is also widely accepted that subcultures provide influential meanings and practices that structure consumers’ identities, actions, and relationships (Hedige 1979; McCracken 1997; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thornton 1997). Previously, consumer researchers have studied mass media texts and influences (e.g., Hirschman 1988, 1998; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993), cultural consumption meanings and practices (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Holt 1997; McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997), and consumption-related subcultures (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). That these topics are interrelated has been previously theorized. In their ethnography of skysdiving culture, Celsi et al. (1993) averred that mass media enculturation of a dramatic worldview was an important factor motivating the culture’s high-risk consumption. Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 57) note that key consumer images in the Harley Davidson subculture were formed as new bikers engaged with dramatis personae drawn from mass media images of outlaw bikers as well as other archetypes such as the cowboy. Holt (1997, p. 345) also speculates that these bikers partake in the masculine characteristics “inscribed historically in Harleys through intertextual linkages to working-class rebellion in film and other mass-cultural texts.” In their cultural mapping of the mountain man phenomenon, Belk and Costa (1998, p. 220) found it important to study “mass-mediated representations of historic mountain men that provide the raw materials for contemporary fantasy construction.” Indeed, the central imagery of many subcultures, such as punks, surfers, hippies, Goths, and hackers, often relies on mass media representations for its mythical icons, places, and times (see, e.g.,

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The article is organized as follows. Some of the key problems of the subcultures and cultural-studies literatures are reviewed to provide a theoretical basis for the investigation. Ethnographic methodology and Star Trek as an ethnographic site are explained, followed by an elucidation of themes drawn from field note and interview data. The concluding sections present the development of a model of consumer-media articulations in Star Trek's culture of consumption and discuss its implications for consumer research and theory.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Subcultures and Subcultures of Consumption

Various aspects of consumption-related subcultures have been emphasized by consumer research: their mode of acculturation (Celsi et al. 1993), their self-selection and hierarchical, ethnos-driven structure (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and their shared cognitive consumption rules (Sirsir, Ward, and Reingen 1996). Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) have coined the useful term "subculture of consumption" to refer to the phenomenon, defining it as "a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity." In their empirical and theoretical development of the term, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) situate it among other distinguished subcultural studies that analyze groups whose members define themselves within a broader cultural context, finding meaning and community largely in terms of holding contrasting positions (many consumption-derived) against that cultural background (e.g., Hebdige 1979).

However, this foundational subcultural literature has not gone uncriticized. Thornton (1997, p. 4) opines that "the prefix 'sub,' which ascribes a lower or secondary rank to the entity it modifies, gives us a clue to one of the major assumptions of [the subcultures'] tradition of scholarship—namely, that the social groups investigated in the name of 'subcultures' are subordinate, subaltern or subterranean" or are "deviant," "debased," illegitimate, or of lower socioeconomic status. Transnational anthropologist Ulf Han nerz asserts that the term "sub" introduces a range of ambiguities. Is a subculture "simply a segment of a larger culture, or is it something subordinate to a dominant culture, or is it something subterranean and rebellious, or is it substandard, qualitatively inferior? While the first of these alternatives is undoubtedly the most solidly established in academic discourse...all the others have a way of sneaking into at least more popular usage, and at least as overtones, with a great potential for confusing issues" (Hannerz 1992, p. 69).

While Hannerz considers the subterranean, rebellious, and substandard inferences of the term unwelcome connotations, Thornton indicates (overstating matters, in my opinion) that these are underlying main assumptions of this tradition of scholarship. Although subcultures can be studied as non-deviant phenomenon, the vast majority of subculture studies do tend to examine issues of deviance, often through celebrating "the intrinsic worth of groups otherwise vilified" (Slack and Whitt 1992, p. 578). Regarding the term "subculture," Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (1992, p. 8) suggest that the term has sometimes been overextended. Whereas earlier cultural studies in Britain focused on cultures that, at that time, possessed "sufficient experiential and social depth and stylistic coherence to become a way of life," they assert that researchers need to be more reflective in their use of the term and to avoid "granting subcultural status to what are essentially American leisure activities" (Nelson et al. 1992, p. 8).

In order to be able to theorize the interplay of mass media-influenced consumption meanings and practices between subcultures and wider (or macro) culture, it is necessary to consider three points raised by critics of the subcultures literature. First, this study deliberately seeks to encompass American leisure activities. These activities, which may not possess the depth and coherence of a way of life, should not be unreflectively granted subcultural status. Second, the notion that consumption-based subcultures are often associated with deviant behavior is often valuable because it helps clarify the moral order that is being resisted and negotiated. However, it may be theoretically useful to designate a related term completely free of these connotations. Third, Holt (1997) contends that the empirical development of the subcultures of consumption concept infers that the shared consumption of the same object (and, presumably, text) necessarily expresses a commonly shared identity. A new conceptualization may assist in avoiding this inference so as to reveal potential heterogeneity among the identities and other beliefs and practices of ostensibly homogeneous subgroup members.

The term "culture of consumption" is used to conceptualize a particular interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that particular groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives. This definition is informed by the intertextual linkages of objects, texts, and ideologies in consumers' cultural meaning systems (Thompson and Haytko 1997); the industrial influences on contemporary subcultures and cultures (e.g., Appadurai 1986, 1990; Schouten and McAlexander 1995); and the contextual embeddedness of meanings as they are embodied and negotiated by culture members in particular social situations, roles, and relationships (e.g., Hannerz 1992; Holt 1997). The definitional foregrounding of a system of images, texts, and objects (see, e.g., Appadurai 1986) permits exploration of cultural heterogeneity not accorded to conceptions that privilege a shared system of meaning. Obversely, this addresses...
Holt’s (1997) critique of the subcultures of consumption operationalization because the level of commonality or divergence of consumption meaning is not presumed by the concept, but by what is of empirical interest. With this theoretical focus established, I now turn to the methodological justification behind the use of Star Trek fan culture as a consumer research site.

METHOD

Star Trek as Cultural Site

Created by World War II pilot and ex-Los Angeles Police Department policeman Gene Roddenberry (Alexander 1994) and launched during the apex of the cold war and the U.S.-Soviet Union space race, Star Trek is a science fiction series set 300 years in the future, in a postcapitalist social and technological utopia. The five Star Trek television series and nine major motion pictures all feature the intergalactic adventures of various crews of “Star Fleet Command” space-faring vehicles as they traverse the universe exploring “strange new worlds” and seeking out “new life and new civilizations” (Whitfield and Roddenberry 1968, pp. 202–204). Regarding its cultural impact, a 1994 Harris poll found that 53 percent of the American public considered themselves to be Star Trek fans (Harrison and Jenkins 1996, p. 260; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, p. 4)—a figure that likely includes many fans who casually follow the television series. Much smaller than this popular fan base is the Star Trek subculture. Star Trek’s subculture is linked to the pre-existing groups of speculative fiction fans (i.e., fans of fantasy and science fiction), which had been gathering in America and England since the early 1920s. These groups employ the terms “fandom” or “media fandom” to describe their institutionalized culture and community (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). “Fandom” is the more general term, often applied to literary fans. “Media fandom” more specifically references fans of television and motion picture speculative fiction. Science fiction writer and historian Frederick Pohl (1984, p. 47) has described fandom’s subculture as follows:

The members shared interests and outlooks that the rest of the world disdained. They thought in terms of science and the future, and when they were not reading or writing about those things, what they wanted most was to talk about them. In so doing, they gave birth to that unique cultural phenomenon, science-fiction fandom. It is very difficult to explain science-fiction fandom to anyone who has never experienced it. The closest analogy, perhaps, might be to the “cellar Christians” of pagan Rome, small, furtive groups of believers, meeting in secret, shunned or even attacked by outsiders, or as fans came to call them, the “mundanes.”

Attesting to the utility of this subculture as a site of academic investigation, ethnographic studies have yielded rich theoretical and descriptive understandings of audience interpretation (Amesley 1989; Jenkins 1992), media feminism (Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1997), and fan production and resistance (Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). However, Grossberg (1992, p. 52) has been critical of a subcultural model of fandom, in which “fans constitute an elite fraction of the larger audience of passive consumers.” He urges scholars to try to “understand the difference” between these groups by studying consumers rather than simply dismissing them as uninteresting. Conceptualizing the boundaries between science fiction subculture and the wider fan population suggested by the Harris poll, Tulloch and Jenkins (1995, p. 23) distinguished between fans as “active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretive institution” and followers as “audience members who regularly watch and enjoy media science fiction programs but who claim no larger social identity on the basis of this consumption,” although Tulloch and Jenkins acknowledge that “the boundary between the two groups remains fluid and ultimately somewhat arbitrary.”

The differences between fans and consumers suggested by Tulloch and Jenkins’s (1995, p. 23) distinction construe consumers (passively termed followers) to have “no larger social identity” as fans of media science fiction, presumably because they are not “active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretive institution.” Alternate perspectives, however, place individual identification with and affective investment in mass media images and objects—rather than subcultural participation—as the essential characteristic of fandom (e.g., Grossberg 1992; Harrington and Bielby 1996). Similarly, the current ethnography employs a self-identification criterion to fan membership in order to deemphasize some of the ideologically derived differences between fans and consumers, that is, that fans (1) consume resistently while (2) physically gathered together into communities using (3) creative and subcultural participatory acts rather than the consumption of mass-marketed objects. Hence, while the research perspective employed in this article is attuned to Tulloch and Jenkins’s (1995) demarcation, it also explores the wider fan population that they term “followers,” as well as the more subcultural variant they term “fans,” and traces the fluid cultural boundaries between these groups.

Ethnographic Sites and Procedures

Colored by my own personal history as a devoted viewer of Star Trek and a collector of related merchandise, this ethnography is the result of 20 months of fieldwork between 1995 and 1997 in three sites that manifest a range of forms of Star Trek fan interaction: from its most macrocultural and anonymous to its most subcultural and intimate. First was the structured and intimate local microculture (Hannerz 1992, p. 77; Sirsi et al. 1996) of fan gatherings. I joined, became an active member, and participated on the executive board of FanTrek, a (pseudonymously disguised) Star Trek and speculative media fandom club located in Canada. I also participated in SuperMedia, a media fandom convention planning committee. Over the following year, I was a participant-observer at 32 fandom-related meetings and events. FanTrek had about 150 members, although only about 30 attended the club’s monthly meetings. Of those 30, approx-
imately 58 percent were male, and 60 percent were between the ages of 25 and 40. Seventy-two percent of the executive board seats were held by females, including all of the top positions, and the typical 10- or 11-person board meeting contained only two or three males. The prevalence of females in executive roles is common in Star Trek and speculative media fandom, and this has been previously noted by Bacon-Smith (1992), Jenkins (1992), and Penley (1997; for a prominent fan’s perspective, see Trimble 1983).

The second site was the congregation of local microcultures and interested (but not regularly institutionally participative) fans through participant-observation of five Star Trek- and media fandom-related conventions (four in Canada and one in the United States). These first two sites permitted me to observe and understand the actual behavior or “perspective in action” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Gould et al. 1974) of Star Trek fans enacting consumption practices. The third site was the more regionally dispersed and loosely affiliated interchanges occurring through the medium of virtual community manifesting through newsgroup postings, Web pages, and personal e-mail correspondence. This component of the investigation complemented in-person fieldwork and interviews with unobtrusive observation, downloading and posting of messages to fan newsgroups (e.g., rec.arts.startrek.current, rec.arts.startrek.fandom), construction and maintenance of a World Wide Web Star Trek Research home page, and e-mail interviews with fans.

Couched within this combination of on-line and off-line fieldwork, I conducted semistructured informal interviews. The fieldwork was enriched by two personal interviews of approximately three hours each with two different Canadian Star Trek fans (“Hilary,” during a room party at a convention, and “Evan” at his home).1 Discussion and interactions with FanTrek and SuperMedia members (e.g., “Theodore,” “Walt”) were captured in field notes and through e-mail communications. I conducted e-mail interviews (or cyber interviews) with 65 different self-proclaimed Star Trek fans (e.g., “Jacob,” “Stephanie,” “Sarah”). These fans sent e-mails from domains in the United States (69 percent), Canada, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, and Japan. Approximately 52 percent were identifiable as female. Their stated age ranged from 13 to 66 years of age. E-mail interviews ranged in duration and depth from a single short response to dozens of detailed multipart exchange transpiring over 14 months. Personal and cyber interviews allowed access to the “perspective of action” that Star Trek fans used to explain their behavior as fans.

The result of this data collection was a large qualitative dataset consisting of approximately 440,000 words of field notes, interviews, and member checks; 260,000 words of artifactual data; and 267 photographs. This material was examined in detail during and subsequent to the data collection process, during which it was coded by hand. Analytic formulations of grounded theory were tested and enhanced by further fieldwork, as well as through reference to artifactual data and photographs. The NUD*IST qualitative analysis computer package was also employed. Text revision incorporated a conscientious attempt to consider the perspectives of culture members by formally presenting research findings in person at a FanTrek fan club meeting and a Star Trek convention, by sending out e-mails, and by posting the research document, unedited and in its entirety, to a publicly accessible Web site.

Articulation Theory as Key Interpretive Construct

While the intersection of culture and mass media, or subculture and popular culture, may be a subtext of many sociological and anthropological inquiries, their study forms the focal point of only one field: cultural studies. Like consumer research, cultural studies is not a monolithic body of theories and methods but instead, as Stuart Hall, one of its most prominent scholars, explains, has included multiple discourses and multiple and contending trajectories, methodologies, and theoretical positions (1992, p. 278). Scrutinizing everyday culture, cultural studies eschews socially exclusive definitions of culture, preferring instead to inhabit the interstices between intellectual, aesthetic high culture, and the so-called popular culture of mundane everyday life. “Although cultural studies cannot (and should not) be reduced to the study of popular culture [i.e., entertainment and media products], it is certainly the case that the study of popular culture is central to the project of cultural studies” (Storey 1996, p. 2).

Like critical theory, one of cultural studies key problems is to “transform existing structures of power” (Black and Whitt 1992, p. 572), furthering a socialist agenda dedicated to critiquing and intervening in the inequities of market capitalism (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Storey 1994). Theories regarding the popular uses of media products assume an important role in this effort, and a central theory guiding this research is Hall’s (1980) notion of articulation. Articulation is a subtle and generative notion that combines a theory of contexts with a method of characterizing social formations that avoids reductionism and essentialism. As defined by Hall (1986, p. 53, emphasis in original), articulation is “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute or essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways. . . . The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.”

Articulation theory plays on the double meaning of the term: “articulation” refers both to a speech act (an articulated discourse) and a linkage of different elements (in the theory these are social forces). Articulations are discursive-ideological links between social concepts such as a particular social

1Pseudonyms have been used throughout in order to protect informant confidentiality.
class and a particular race or cultural belief. As a critic of market capitalist culture, the cultural theorist's goal is to separate out the elements of the ostensible unity—that is, to disarticulate the misleading links that promote a false consciousness—and then to rearticulate them to links that would further the aim of social betterment and emancipation (Hettick and Lozada 1994; Murray and Ozanne 1991). As with McCracken's (1986) movement of meaning model, articulation theory conceptualizes the socially enacted linkages (articulations) among consumption objects, texts, and images and particular consumption meanings, identities, and practices. The theory further directs our attention to the separation (disarticulation) of these linkages and their active recombinations (rearticulation) into new linkages by other social actors and forces (including the researcher). So construed, it provides a contextually sensitive theory for conceptualizing the dynamic connection, disconnection, and reconnection of social meaning and practice to the Star Trek culture of consumption by various social actors and institutions.

I now turn to the ethnographic themes. The following section explores the role of powerful utopian fantasies in the Star Trek subculture. The next theme considers Star Trek fans' sense of being a socially constructed boundary that shapes consumption. After that, the highly affective articulations of Star Trek as a religion or myth are examined as well as the social structuring of fan meaning and practice. The final theme considers how utopian and commercial articulations are employed to navigate between the profoundly personal investments in Star Trek and its superficial status as a commercial product.

ETHNOGRAPHIC THEMES

"For The World Is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky": Consuming Star Trek as a Utopian Sanctuary

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. (OSCAR WILDE, The Soul of Man under Socialism [1895])

Intolerance in the 23rd century? Improbable! If man survives that long, he will have learned to take a delight in the essential differences between men and between cultures. . . . It's a manifestation of the greatness that God, or whatever it is, gave us. This infinite variation and delight, this is part of the optimism we built into Star Trek. (GENE RODDENBERRY, quoted in Whitfield and Roddenberry 1968, p. 40)

We're following a philosophy of living. We are creating a society that the man [Gene Roddenberry] dreamed of. (FanTrek FLEET CAPTAIN "HILARY", personal interview, August 5, 1995)

This section explores fans' (and marketers') influential construction of Star Trek as a utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised. As Roddenberry's authoritatively toned and quasi-religious quotation above suggests, Star Trek's text is unabashedly utopian (although, as an action-adventure series, the show also could be quite violent). The series was utopian in many respects, breaking many prevalent social taboos by offering an ethnically and racially diverse crew working together in the future, and women and people of color in positions of power (Alexander 1994; Chernoff 1998; Shatner 1993; Trimble 1983). The Star Trek episode "Plato's Stepchildren" is historic for featuring American television's first interracial kiss. Star Trek thereby demonstrates in a particularly forceful fashion the assertion of Dyer (1977) that contemporary mass media texts must, in order to be entertaining (i.e., provide pleasure), link to images and ideals that are utopian. Although his emphasis is on ideology rather than pleasure, Jameson (1979, p. 144) similarly notes that "works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being explicitly or implicitly Utopian as well."

Many fans employ Roddenberry's utopian articulations to express their attraction to Star Trek consumption, using energetic and politically charged images that position the text's images against the imperfections of the extant social world. "Elaine" is a 37-year-old mother of twins from Virginia who has participated in American Star Trek fan clubs, contributed to and edited "fanzines" (fan-written and published magazines), and attended conventions. She affirms that Star Trek "was the symbol of a world where there was no racism, poverty, deformity, idiotic nationalism, or political injustice . . . we [plural for fan] have put much of our energy into it, and into making the world a little more like the Federation which we admire so much" (e-mail interview, January 20, 1996). Like many other fans in this study, Elaine interprets Star Trek not as simple entertainment, but as an aspirational vision. "Christine," a popular culture scholar living in the Midwest who has attended one Star Trek convention in the past, succinctly summarizes this perspective by saying "At its simplest, what Star Trek means to me—and, I think, to many fans—is possibility. . . . People do want to live in the Trek universe" (e-mail interview, June 3, 1996).

Frequently, Star Trek's social utopianism is metonymically glossed by the IDEC acronym. The acronym IDEC stands for "Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations," a Vulcan religious philosophy that was presented in the original Star Trek series. The egalitarian IDEC philosophy holds that diversity should be embraced, and not simply tolerated. "Andrew" is 26 years old, lives in Britain, participates in a British Star Trek fan club associated with Starfleet International, attends conventions, and collects Star Trek books and other merchandise (which he calls "props" and "odds and sods"). For him, the philosophy of IDEC and the Star Trek subculture are conceptually intertwined:

[IDIC] contrasts so sharply with much of what we see today—politicians, religions or at least religious people, just small minded individuals in general pourng hate and scorn on, well, whichever scapegoat they want to pick on this week. The "I can't do anything but hate you because you vote..."
Labour/you are gay/your skin is a different colour to mine/you don’t believe in the same god as me” view that you see all around you. In Star Trek, and in Star Trek fandom, this isn’t present. I once heard someone describe going to their first Star Trek convention as feeling like coming home. My first reaction (after getting over the newness of it all) was “yes. THESE are my kind of people.” (Andrew, e-mail interview, parentheses in original, October 18, 1996)

Andrew’s comments construe fandom as a social sphere in which acceptance of differences is the norm. Andrew sees this in terms of a sharp contrast with the modern world in which powerful exterior forces such as politicians and those in control of religious dogma seek to accentuate social differences to drive people apart. Opposed to “modern government” (“Veronica,” e-mail interview, June 30, 1996), opposed to “idiotic nationalism” and “political injustice,” Star Trek is contrastingly described by these fans as a symbol, a utopian text that might confer social harmony to the mundane world as it does to fans in fandom. The utopian sense of the communalism inside fandom contrasted with the alienation of the mundane world outside is a theme also explored by Jenkins (1992, pp. 280–283, citing Dyer 1977), who describes fandom as a gateway to a realized utopia, a place where fans “find a space that allows them to discover what utopia feels like.”

Inspirationalspeachesthatassociate Star Trek and its fan subculture with these ideals are common fare at conventions. “When I go to conventions and I see people of all sizes and shapes and abilities, and when I see people with nerve disorders that can’t really sit properly and so on, I still know what’s in their minds. They are saying, ‘In a better world, I can do anything! I’ll be there in a better world. In a better world, they will not laugh at me or look down their nose at me’” (Gene Roddenberry, quoted in Chernoff 1998, p. 116).

In numerous instances, the Star Trek text, and creator Gene Roddenberry’s extratextual annotations to it (see, e.g., Alexander 1994; Chernoff 1998; Trimble 1983; Whitfield and Roddenberry 1968), explicitly articulate Star Trek’s social utopia with a sense of empowerment that attracts into fandom those in stigmatized social categories. Some fans assert that Star Trek fandom (like science fiction and speculative fiction fandom in general; see Pohl 1984) is a place where many of those who do not easily fit into mainstream social roles (i.e., those who are already stigmatized in some sense or another) can find a form of sanctuary and acceptance. “Leslie” is a female government worker who is in her fifties. She has been a member of the science fiction and Star Trek writing culture (which she terms “the print camp”) for three decades and writes and performs “filk” songs (science fiction-themed folk music).

U.S. science fiction has always had a strong affinity to square pegs in round holes. The stereotypical (or perhaps archetypical) sf fan is the geek, the nerd, the dweeb, the guy with glasses and a hypertrophic vocabulary. The opposite of the football star, the guy who’s still a virgin at twenty-one. . . . Star Trek appealed to women as well as men, but still to people who felt alienated. This was the great appeal of Mr. Spock. Critics kept chasing red herrings like Mr. Nimoy’s “animal magnetism” (magnetic, yes—animal, no) instead of accepting the witness of his fan mail: I’m lonely, too. . . .

Still, propeller beansies and Trekkies do exist, and fandom does tolerate them. We don’t emulate them, and they are nowhere near as typical as the media portrays, but they’re there. . . . Any refuge for those who become typical fans cannot help attracting people less capable of handling their lives. . . . Better they should be attracted to fandom, there they have at least a chance of growing, than to drugs or “cucks” or hate mongers. Even if it does saddle us with them. (Leslie, e-mail interviews, parentheses in original communication, February 20, 1996, October 29, 1996)

Leslie links fan identification with Star Trek’s intellectual, alien, strong, but emotionally repressed Mr. Spock character (see Trimble [1983] on the “Spockie” phenomenon) as a focal point of interest attractive to people who have been stigmatized by those who are less intelligent, less inclined to fantasy, and perhaps more privileged in terms of social status, social skills, or physical appearance. Statements from other fans demonstrate commonality with Leslie’s more general contention that the affinities of a certain type of intelligent but alienated individual will direct them toward science fiction and Star Trek consumption. In the following fan narratives, the system of consumption images and objects itself—not only the fan subculture—provides a form of sanctuary. “Catherine” is a 17-year-old female living in Geneva, Switzerland, who publishes her own Star Trek fanzine and is an active Star Trek Web surfer but does not otherwise participate in institutionalized fandom. She explained that she did well at school, but “until this year, I didn’t really have any friends. Being very lonely, it [Star Trek] was (and still is) a way to escape this very mean environment” (e-mail interview, April 7, 1996). American immigrant, convention attendee, and daily newsgroup reader “Lucy” stated that “To me, Star Trek is a real thing. My friends want to have me committed for thinking like this but I use Trek to escape” (e-mail interview, June 18, 1996). Elaine also describes her early involvement in Star Trek in escapist terms: “It was a fantasy refuge for a desperate misfit” (e-mail interview, January 20, 1996). Christine prefaces her comments by explaining that the Star Trek universe is “desirable real estate, a place that people would actually like to move into.” She then writes, “I was avoiding the term ‘escapism,’ but I’ll use it now in Tolkien’s sense. There’s a lot in our real existences that is prison-like. The impulse to escape is a natural one” (e-mail interview, June 3, 1996).

Christine, Elaine, Lucy, Catherine, and Leslie all reference the idea of escape in relation to loneliness and alienation. The notion of escape and its relation to loneliness and
alienation may hearken back to popular and academic notions that television viewing (particularly entertaining, fantasy-oriented television; see Schramm and Roberts 1974) is a potentially addictive form of escape that does little to help one cope with reality. Postman (1985) has condemned television content in general for hopelessly blurring the distinction between reality and fantasy and therefore emasculating society’s ability to cope with reality and change. In examining the notion of escape, Katz and Foulkes (1962) proposed that all mass communications imply a form of escape. Katz (1996, p. 15) contends that the notion of escape is, therefore, in itself unproblematic: “What matters is not only the destination defined by the text. Equally important is the identity one assumes for the trip, what one takes along, and what one brings back. . . . Let us reserve escape for those who do not bring anything back.” This statement begs the question, What do fans bring back from their escape into Star Trek? For Swiss fan Catherine, involvement brought not only escape but knowledge of the English language, “lots of friends all over the world,” and “something to dream about” (e-mail interview, April 7, 1996).

From the wide range of fans who spoke to me, from those active in the community to those completely secretive about their fandom, Star Trek provided positive role models, exploration of moral issues, scientific and technological knowledge and ideas, Western literary references, interest in television and motion picture production, intellectual stimulation and competition through games and trivia challenges, fan writing and art and music, explorations of erotic desire, community and feelings of communitas, and much more. Some researchers have emphasized that television use can facilitate face-to-face interaction and can also have considerable social and interpersonal utility (Cohen and Metzger 1998). The Internet milieu in which these particular e-mail interviews were conducted, however, has been found to be related to alienation from friends and family (Kraut et al. 1998). That the five informants mentioned above were female and responded to a Web page call for a dialogue about Star Trek with an interested (male) researcher may indicate a methodological skewing of the sample toward those who are female, alienated, and desire escape. My sense is that the Internet, like the spaces of female-dominated fan clubs, offers a place where people who need to can feel safe.

These data suggest the important and intertwined role of fantasy content and utopia in Star Trek as well as, perhaps, in the immensely symbolic mass media fantasies that commercially promote the sales of everything from travel to Web pages to cologne. Like fantasies, utopias located in a certain time or space are popular paradoxes that stitch impossibility and dreaminess together with deep motivational power and desire. They are potent symbols that, as Levitas (1990) avers, express and touch a part of the collective unconscious, representing the deep-seated need of humanity to strive for perfection. Belk and Costa (1998) have noted the ability of fantasy simultaneously to enable escapism and the utopian social construction of self-transformative cultural realms “of possibility, of character development, of challenge and performance” (p. 236). Brown, Maclaren, and Stevens (1996, p. 677) assert that the dream worlds of perfect images created, manipulated, and disseminated by marketers indicate that “marketing more than any other contemporary cultural institution is arguably the keeper of the late twentieth century utopian flame.” Brown et al. (1996, p. 676) explain that the less grandiose “utopias of fresh breath, clean clothing, shiny hair, safe sex and instant credit” are reflections of the more “low-key” preoccupations of our “postmodern times.”

However, Star Trek’s images and, indeed, those of many Internet and other technology companies seem to demonstrate that powerful progressivist utopias in the Comtean and marxian tradition are alive and well. If utopias represent universally deep-seated needs (Levitas 1990), how much more motivational as a marketing instrument must be the image of a world without injustice, intolerance, or poverty than a world of minty-fresh breath? While not necessarily appealing to those social system players who benefit from injustice, intolerance, and poverty, how warming to fandom’s middle-class square pegs and alienated outsiders must be the promise of Star Trek’s utopian glow, how remarkably appealing its ideology of the underdog? Fans in some sense represent the fallout from a society that promotes handsome team-playing jock and Barbie images at the expense of the geeky, the brainy, the overweight, the independent, the resistant, and the different. Out of the strands of their own social difference, fans have woven something that can be construed as a liberatory space (Jenkins 1992), a self-authenticating simulation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), a delusional system (Promoting false consciousness; Goulding 1985), or some complex combination of these possibilities.

“Get A Life”: Star Trek Consumption and Stigma

In this subsection, I explore the stigma of Star Trek consumption as a social fact that shapes subculturally relevant meanings and practice. As Jenkins (1992, pp. 9–12) details, the negative Star Trek fan stereotype is metonymically glossed by a famous (or infamous) “Get A Life” skit on Saturday Night Live in which Star Trek actor William Shatner confronts two unattractive, nerdy male fans (“Trekkies”) at a convention, asking them “You. Have you ever kissed a girl?” Trekkie stereotypes associate Star Trek consumption with fanaticism, immaturity, passivity, escapism, addiction, obsessive consumption, and the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Star Trek fans on-line often applied these negative categories to themselves. For example, “Natasha” began her correspondence with a confession: “I must admit to being addicted to Star Trek” (e-mail interview, May 29, 1996). Because they are based on articulations of deviance that have wide social circulation, these classifications, rather than being factual indications of the nature of fandom, can also be interpreted as indicating fans’ pre-emptive acknowledgment of the behaviors expected of those within a potentially stigmatic category. Such disclosure of potentially discrediting information is an information control technique of stigmatized persons (Goffman 1963, pp.
100–101), which was facilitated by the social distancing of
the on-line medium. Because of social costs, fans in person
generally self-stigmatize less.

Another important alternative is publicly to conceal or
cover over and minimize one’s identity as a Star Trek fan.
The fan identity seemed to act as a boundary preventing in-
person, institutionalized fan consumption. “Sarah” is a 24-
year-old college student interested in the Christian impli-
cations of Star Trek. She is a Star Trek collector with limited
in-person Star Trek social activities. She said that the per-
ception of fans as “compulsively attached” to a television
show, or as “near-addicts . . . HAS affected my involve-
ment in Star Trek, from a general embarrassment of my Star
Trek toys to a reluctance to be pegged as a Trekker” (e-mail
interview, September 17, 1996). Consider this more exten-
sive quote from American Star Trek fan “Stephanie” (43
years old):

I have to admit to keeping pretty quiet about my devotion
to the show for many years simply because people do tend
to view a Trek fan as weird or crazy. Only my family and
my closest friends were aware of how much I enjoyed the
show or that I bought all the books and, later, other items.
Several tragedies in my family culminating with [my son’s]
illness . . . made me realize how short life is and I began
to broaden my horizons, so to speak, where Trek is concerned.
In 1993 my husband and I went to Pasadena to the big Star
Trek convention there; [my husband] visited with his sister
while I really experienced the whole Star Trek phenomenon
for the first time. Since then I have proudly worn my Bajoran
earring and not cared about the looks I get from others—although it is amazing how many people know that it
is a symbol from the Trek universe! . . . I have also met,
through correspondence, other Trek fans and some of these
people have become very close friends. We have a lot in
common and have had some of the same experiences as
corns our love of Trek and other people’s reactions to
that. . . . As a matter of fact, I have a friend, [Francine],
who has told me of everyone she knows. . . . I am the person
having the most fun with my life, thanks in part to Star Trek
& the many people I have met through our common interest
in that show. I don’t think that makes me sick or weird or
crazy. (E-mail interview, April 18, 1996)

Stephanie is also attempting to manage her identity, albeit
with a different outcome. As with Sarah’s aversion to
attributions of compulsion, Stephanie also fears debilitating
inferences of mental illness. She refers to an existential ex-
perience that followed a personally trying time in which she
apparently overcame her fear of stigma. This incident
indicates that a considerable amount of psychological pressure
has accrued around the matter of her fan status. This tran-
sitional resolution of acceptance is described by Goffman
(1963). The resolution is transitional because the stigmatized
individual still inevitably finds herself or himself in a social
arena in which her or his ego identity is constantly in need
of detailed argument and discussion. Stephanie seems to
have come to the conclusion that, despite its negative social
image, being a Star Trek fan is central to her identity. This
episode has some similarities to the self-transformational
process described by Schouten (1991) and Schouten and
McAlexander (1995), except that, while the main obstacles
of Schouten’s (1991) and Schouten and McAlexander’s
(1995) informants were physical and financial, Stephanie’s
are primarily social. She is held back by shame, by concern
about the way people will view her. Her transformation of
self takes place not simply because of the affective carrot
(“how much I enjoyed the show”), but despite the stick
(“people do tend to view a Trek fan as weird or crazy”).
Her intensified consumption (“I really experienced the whole
Star Trek phenomenon”) occurs not as the fulfillment of a
self that becomes outwardly more desirable but as the out-
ward fulfillment of the self’s desires (“how short life is,”
“broaden my horizons”). Rather than continue denying or
covering her membership, Stephanie decides to cope with
her stigma by being honest with herself, finding others of
her own kind, and joining this stigmatized group. Once in-
side the group, the stigmatic image serves as a spur for
bonding and a source of communitas. After she joins the
subculture she dons what Goffman (1963) would term a
stigma symbol, a highly visible sign that advertises her mem-
bership in a stigmatized group.

In Goffman’s terms, Stephanie transitions from being a
discreditable person (one whose identity would be spoiled
if they were identified as a Star Trek fan) to a discredited
person (one whose identity as fan is instantly obvious).
Sarah, with her fan identity hidden, remains in a state of
tension and discreditable. Taken together, the narratives of
Sarah and Stephanie suggest that the bridge between being
a follower and being an active participant in Star Trek fandom
as an institution is balanced over a whitewater of psycho-
logical and social tension. One of the ways this tension
can be dealt with is through the realticularation of Star Trek
consumption meanings with social categories of popularity
or normality.

**CAN SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME WHY WHENEVER THERE IS A MEDIA STORY ON STAR TREK FANS, THE FIRST PERSON THEY GRAB IS SOMEONE WITH CHEAP SPOCK EARS AND A BAD FITTING COSTUME A TOTAL GEEK, AND PROUDLY SAY “HERE IS A TREKKIE”?** It may be an attempt to ridicule Trek fans. The media does that sort of thing all the time when it wants to
demonize certain groups of people. On the other hand, it may
just be another example of the media always presenting the
extremes. A Star Trek fan in a suit and tie or jeans and a T-
shirt doesn’t make “good television,” but one in full uniform
and makeup does. (Posted on rec.arts.startrek.current news-
group, August 29, 1996)

As this Internet posting suggests, by asserting that the
media wants to demonize Star Trek fans and that the Trekkie
stereotype is an unjustified extreme, discourse that normal-
izes Star Trek consumption has become an important insti-
tutional activity of Star Trek subcultures and microcultures.
It occurs collectively at Star Trek conventions and fan club
meetings as cultural figures and fans rearticulate Star Trek consumption meanings by either asserting their everyday qualities (what Ang [1985] would term a populist argument; see, e.g., Jenkins 1992, pp. 19–22) or legitimizing their utopian-sacred qualities against incursions of profane, negative, and stigmatic associations. “Cecilia,” a 26-year-old Australian student fan who watches and reads about Star Trek (particularly academic commentary), described an Australian convention in 1996 in which one of the guests (Marc Alaimo from Deep Space Nine) had, in a speech, “stressed the normality and naturalness of fandom without being patronising about it, or even assuming that it was ‘other’ in the first place” (e-mail interview, November 20, 1996). In a speech she gave at the Toronto Trek convention, which I attended, Majel Barrett-Roddenberry (Gene Roddenberry’s widow) rearticulated Star Trek with social categories of respect for diversity, the universality (and hence normacy) of alienation, and the formation and furtherance of a future utopian society free of injustice. “That’s the reason we’re here, to celebrate the kind of television program which will help ensure future generations will not have to carry the memory of persecution and trial and subjugation with them all their lives. Television that is inherently human, with the message of course that we are all alien in one way or another and that all of our problems are simply conditions which exist in order to draw us together. And you know draw together we really must, for it’s the only way to the future” (field notes, August 5, 1995).

At a FanTrek board meeting, “Stella,” one of the board members who always appeared at meetings in uniform, made a motion that Command Crew members should be required to wear Star Trek uniforms to all the fan club’s social functions. My field notes taken at the event capture some of the dynamics as board members debated the motion.

[Stella] said that wearing the uniform would attract a whole lot of attention. Someone, perhaps [Theodore], said “It also might attract laughing.”

“What are we trying to hide?” [Stella] exclaimed. “Are we trying to hide what we really are. This is what we are.” She was quite passionate about it.

[Selena] resisted [Stella’s] suggestion. She said she simply felt more comfortable wearing something casual at command crew meetings. What did it matter if we wore a T-shirt, or a sweat shirt or the actual formal ST uniform, as long as “it was something Star Trek?” [Ophelia] spoke and said that she felt that wearing the uniform would make the occasion seem more special. That events were just like anything else when we were all dressed in our street clothes. But wearing our Star Trek uniforms reminded us why we were here. [Stella] then said that she was very disappointed at the [Gene Roddenberry’s death memorial] Wake and Bake to see only three people wearing uniforms, including herself. “That is the most important day of the year to us,” she said, “That’s the day we honor our founder [Gene Roddenberry].”

[Delilah] said that she didn’t feel the uniform would be comfortable for command crew meetings. [Reuben (Stella’s boyfriend)] then spoke strongly in support of [Stella’s] motion. He said he felt that wearing a uniform puts us in a positive frame of mind, that it transmits a message to everyone that sees us. [Leora] spoke again and said that this motion has strategic implications, that it shows that we are trying to change our image, that we’re not satisfied with the status quo, that we’re becoming more aggressive as a club. [Samantha] agreed that uniforms have important outreach implications for the club. (Field notes, December 2, 1995)

In an impressive display of democracy, everyone was given time to speak their opinion before a vote was held. The fan club’s vote was eight in favor, with three abstentions. However, the edict was never enforced (or mentioned again). Stella was, as usual, the only one who wore her costume regularly at meetings. Despite its apathetic conclusion, the fan club’s heated debate vividly demonstrates how the meaning of the Star Trek uniform is a sensitized concept. The fans’ dialectic surrounding it not only expresses the cultural tensions of acceptance and denial of stigmatized identity, but the articulation and intensification of group meanings that can serve to counterargue stigma. From this dialectic we can see the struggle to reinforce institutionalized meanings of the uniforms as creating a more special, ceremonial—even a sacred—atmosphere, particularly for solemn events that honor “our founder,” or during which charitable and recruitment-oriented outreach activities are performed. Yet despite these internal meanings of “dignity,” “special occasion,” and “positive frame of mind,” which articulate Star Trek fans to a group of farsighted social utopians, the FanTrek fans struggle collectively to negotiate the uniform’s significance in wider society as a stigma symbol. While Reuben seems convinced that the uniform “transmits a message” that is positive, Theodore notes that the message might not be understood and would simply invite ridicule. Interestingly, in a later, smaller FanTrek committee meeting (three people in attendance), Theodore argued exactly the opposite. In this committee, within which he was the most expert in matters of fandom, and in which he often adopted a mentorship role, he forsook his prior knowledge of Star Trek stigma and dialectically attempted to rearticulate the positive social category of the egalitarian and socially utopian campaigner.

[Theodore] mentioned that we would have to wear our uniforms at the upcoming food bank sort that we would be doing as a club. [Theodore] and [Walt] had a long debate over wearing a uniform, an argument I had already witnessed several times before.

Walt: I have ambitions. What if someone from work saw me? Some guy here on the floor saw me at [recent convention]. Fortunately, we’ve both kept that a secret.

Theodore: You have to learn to be yourself, to feel secure at expressing what you’re really all about. When I tell people that the uniform symbolizes my devotion to the series, to Gene’s vision, and I tell them about the philosophy behind
the show, about treating everyone equally no matter what
their race or creed or size or color, they’re impressed, they
want to know more. (Field notes, March 13, 1996)

These uniform debates convey the tension between identity
politics and the reinforcement of stigmatic mainstream per-
ceptions of Star Trek fans as (1) immature (the association
to Halloween, thus costumes rather than uniforms) and (2)
mentally unstable (engaging in inappropriate dress/behavior,
crashing fantasy with reality). In FanTrek, the tension mani-
manifests in a subcultural struggle over consumption meanings
between those inside and devoted to the subculture (who
must be true to “what we really are” and “what you’re really
all about”—which is defined by referring to the embodiment
of “Gene’s vision” and “the philosophy behind the show”
that impresses and interests people) and those who would
place Star Trek consumption into stigmatizing macrocultural
categories. My field notes also contain numerous incidents
in which students, other academics, family, and friends con-
fronted me with the negative stigma of the Star Trek fan.
Often, those close to me would express concern about the
impact of the research to my own identity. The uniform/
costume (also called the outfit) frequently appears at the
center of that unease: “But you didn’t wear the costume,
did you?”

The presence and potency of Star Trek consumption stigma suggests a finding more generally relevant to con-
sumer researchers. While the presence of stigma acts as a
psychic boundary that prevents many from entering into a
deeper relationship with Star Trek’s material culture and
personal community, it also acts as a boundary that, once
broadened, encourages depth of involvement. As Holt (1997,
pp. 335–336) explains, differing consumption patterns acts
as a type of symbolic boundary between collectivities.
Crossing this boundary into stigmatized consumption seems
to provide the thrill of the forbidden. In a pluralistic world,
stigma is also a celebration of individuality that helps col-
lectives of consumers differentiate themselves from other
collectives. For Star Trek fans, stigma allows them both to
differentiate from the unimaginative outer world of the mund-
danes, and to legitimate the ecclesiastical utopia of their
IDIC ethos. Overcoming the Trekkie stigma entails a form
of freedom and self-acceptance that has been compared to
homosexual unclothing (Jenkins 1996; Tulloch and Jenkins
1995). Going public as a member of a stigmatic subculture
encourages in some more general sense a freedom to express
oneself more openly, to live life more freely (Goffman
1963). As one might expect, this also may include spending
as freely as I saw many people spend at Star Trek conven-
tions (where I spoke to and observed numerous people
spending over $1,000 on Star Trek merchandise in a week-
end). Although they may harbor unpleasant meanings of
deviance, stigmatic subcultures of consumption combine
threat and psychic tension with freedom, intense devotion,
and communitas. Understanding stigmatic subcultural con-
texts may therefore inform our understanding of compulsive
shopping as an expression of freedom, belonging, and status-
building (O’Guinn and Faber 1989). For members of these
subcultures, as well as for the marketers that seek relations-
ships with them, stigma may be an interestingly double-
edged sword. Etymologically and conceptually, the origins
of stigma are in the religious sphere. I therefore turn in the
next subsection to an examination of the many articulations
of Star Trek’s culture of consumption to mythic, sacred,
and religious meanings—articulations that underscore the
imense affective investments that fans make in the culture.

“A Kind of Higher Existence”: Star Trek
Consumption as Religious and Mythic

In a personal interview, FanTrek Fleet Captain Hilary (a
38-year-old lawyer) explained that Star Trek “is a philos-
ophy that almost approaches a religion. That’s what it is.
It’s replacing religion, for a lot of people” (personal inter-
view, August 5, 1995). Later in the interview, Hilary de-
scribed Star Trek as something that “has been given” and
contended that Star Trek stands in relation to people as
“something higher than themselves.” Her descriptions cap-
ture the extraordinariness and greater-than-the-self qualities
of the sacred (see Belk et al. 1989). This sense of the sacred
in Star Trek’s culture of consumption is emically glossed by
the frequent use of the term “devotion” and is noted by
some fans completely uninvolved in fandom as an institu-
tionalized activity. For example, “Tracey” is an American
who considers herself to be a Trekker although she has never
been to a Star Trek convention and owns only a single rather
conventional piece of Star Trek merchandise (a “Generations”
movie videotape). Yet she also expresses this sense of
Star Trek as aspirational and extraordinary: “There is a
kind of higher existence in the world of Star Trek that many
of us wish to attain” (e-mail interview, November 18, 1996).

These articulations of Star Trek as a religion or myth are
individually interpreted in a myriad of ways, as suggested
by the narratives of some different fans. “Jacob” is an Amer-
ican Star Trek fan who works in the computer industry,
surfs Star Trek Web sites, and has attended three conventions
(but was turned off by their commercialism). He identifies
himself as “a Christian” and notes that he does “see a lot
of searching for God in the episodes . . . (God really speaks
to me through Star Trek [as crazy as that sounds . . . ]”
(brackets and ellipses in original; e-mail interview, No-
ember 29, 1996). Jacob interprets Star Trek as religious in a
very different sense than Hilary. While Hilary accepts Star
Trek’s philosophy as a literal and self-contained truth, Jacob
actively reads the text for religious interpretations that ac-

cord with the Christian faith or truth that is part of his life
themes and goals (see also Mick and Buhl 1992). Interest-
ingly, Jacob’s interpretation of Star Trek actually affords
him with satisfying meanings contrary to those its creator
(a secular humanist and often quite vocal atheist) intended

to express (Alexander 1994). A different style of Star Trek
sacredness is given by “Harvey,” a 35-year-old computer
programmer. Harvey finds that, for him, “Trek does have a
certain mythic resonance” (e-mail interview, November 24,
1996). He cites central Star Trek characters Kirk and Spock
as personally meaningful “Jungian archetypes.” When re-read with critical scrutiny he believes the Star Trek text can encompass a form of New Age and scientized spirituality. Harvey’s invocation of Star Trek’s “mythic resonance” recalls Wagner and Lundeen’s (1998) scholarly approach to the study of the Star Trek text; they examine Star Trek as “American mythology,” contendng that the show’s “phenomenal appeal has to do with its ability to confront and express, in a gratifying mythic way, some of the central concerns of American culture” (p. 4).

Dialogue comparing the Star Trek text to classic Western mythology and Star Trek fandom to religious belief circulates frequently through fan and academic discourse (see, e.g., Jindra 1994, 1999; Porter and McLaren 1999). These metaphors, held among fans with many different degrees of institutional involvement, articulate Star Trek consumption not only to sacred meanings but also to social categories of religious identities and practices. Belief in Star Trek’s utopian vision, along with various structural properties of the subculture, were interpreted by Jindra (1994) as evidence that the Star Trek fan subculture should be considered a civil religion (see Bellah [1967] 1974). “Star Trek fandom does not have the thoroughgoing seriousness of established religions, but it is also not mere entertainment” (Jindra 1994, p. 50; see also Jindra 1999). Jindra asserts that Star Trek is considered by some as more meaningful and popular than many traditional religions because, like American (and perhaps modern) culture, it faces the future, rather than the past.

In her description of fandom, the activities of FanTrek and of Star Trek fan clubs in general, FanTrek Fleet Captain Hilary articulates them with Gene Roddenberry’s vision, Star Trek’s IDIC philosophy, and religion:

And they say “Well, what is it you’re doing? What is [FanTrek]?” And I said, “Well, We’re Star Trek enthusiasts. We took a look at Gene’s vision of the future and we thought, ‘It’s great to dream about it, but if we don’t do something, if we don’t get off our butts and do something now, we’re not going to have it.’ And so that’s what these Star Trek clubs are about. There are people who said ‘We’re not going to sit here and wait for the future to happen. We’re going to create it.’ Okay? . . . blood donor clinics . . . collecting food for food banks, sorting food for food banks. . . . It’s a service club. And whereas a lot of the established service clubs are male. They’re male, they’re older. White. Okay? They are exclusive clubs. . . . The Star Trek service clubs, going upon the ideal of Infinite Diversity, intentionally encompass all religions.” (Hilary, personal interview, August 5, 1995)

In her seemingly literal and evangelical response to the text, Star Trek transcends science fiction and entertainment to become a profoundly motivating vision of the future. Rather than passively viewing or considering this vision (“dream about it”), being a Star Trek fan for Hilary requires immediate activity in the real world (“get off our butts and do something now”). Hilary’s comments suggest her belief that it is a moral imperative for Star Trek fans to “create” the future depicted in the show. Inverting the “Get a Life” parody (Jenkins 1992), Hilary suggests that Star Trek in its entirety provides a moral compass around which fans can center their lives, one as all-encompassing as a religion. Concordant with Hilary’s perspective, Hark (1979, p. 37) opines that, unlike the majority of television series, the original Star Trek series developed a “consistent individual morality” and struggled “to deal philosophically with major social questions.” Recapitulating a popular and influential fan aphorism, Jindra (1999, pp. 217, 229) also finds that Star Trek has become “a way of life for many of its fans” and, “for many,” has “taken a place alongside the traditional metanarratives and mythologies of Western cultures.” In terms of her moral (but not necessarily her religious) interpretation, Hilary’s comments also reflect the history, general ideology, and institutional practices of Starfleet International, an international organization of fan clubs begun in 1974, which currently boasts over 4,000 member clubs.

In FanTrek, Star Trek’s moral imperative manifests through dialogue about potentially legitimizing actions such as inclusive membership policies and the regular performance of charitable community work. However, interesting disjunctions appear when comparing talk with walk. It was often said that ethnic diversity was a foundation of the club (other clubs are “white . . . they are exclusive clubs”). However, I observed no active, direct effort to recruit, or to incorporate materials that might satisfy the interests of, people from diverse social, economic, and racial backgrounds. It was therefore unsurprising that most of the members were very similar in age, ethnic origin, and race. Out of about 30 people present at meetings, I noted only two visible minorities. Of potentially even greater interest to consumer researchers, I observed that the vast majority of the club’s time was spent discussing previous and upcoming television and movie products, related books, merchandise, and conventions. Catalogs were circulated. Items were offered for sale. Entertainment products were extensively critiqued and reviewed at every club meeting. These commercially centered activities were in fact the primary activities of the fan club. Similarly, although they contain charity auctions and other charitable events, the behavior at most conventions centers not on moral discourse or social betterment, but on entertainment product production and consumption. At board meetings, conversations revolved around upcoming conventions and internal fan club matters. These dialogues did not treat current social, political, or environmental topics—matters that might be expected to concern a social club truly committed to moral undertakings. The fan club’s charitable events were annual or biannual events conducted ceremonially (they required the donning of the uniform). These events appear to serve the important ritual purpose of legitimizing the moral dialogue of the club’s leaders. Supporting Star Trek–related consumption seems much closer to the core purpose of FanTrek, its board of executives, and the Star Trek conventions I observed.

This disjuncture raises the interesting question of how to
interpret the many comparisons of Star Trek to myth and religion. Clearly, these deliberate and deliberated comparisons of Star Trek and religion develop and reinforce the utility of Belk et al.’s (1989) sacred consumption construct; O’Guinn and Belk’s (1989, p. 237) exploration of “the interdependence of media, politics, religion and consumption” in American culture; O’Guinn’s (1991) exploration of the religious facets of fan consumption; and Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995, p. 50) implication that a subculture of consumption such as the Harley subculture can confer a sacred domain within the everyday life of its participants. The findings indicate that groups of consumers can and do consciously utilize the notions of sacred consumption, and of consumption as religion, in order to legitimize their own (perhaps stigmatized or guilt-ridden) consumer behaviors. By emphasizing the “metaphysical over the material” in their consumption meanings, this group of consumers may be using these meanings as a distinction strategy to mark or emulate the practices of a cultural elite (Holt 1998, p. 20). Related to this, the findings also suggest the powerful legitimating role that charity, community, religion, and spirituality still play in an ostensibly postmodern world.

Perhaps most important of all, the fact that parallels to religion and the sacred are found so prevalently in Star Trek discourse and debate demonstrates the remarkable level of affective investment that some (perhaps many) contemporary consumers can collectively make in a commercial product such as Star Trek. According to Grossberg (1992, p. 63), “one cannot exist in a world where nothing matters.” He asserts that what we currently describe as a fan is the contemporary articulation of a necessary relationship which has historically constituted the popular, involving relationships to such diverse things as labor, religion, morality and politics. Thus, there is no necessary reason why the fan relationship is located primarily on the terrain of commercial popular culture. But it is certainly the case that for the vast majority of people in advanced capitalist societies, this is increasingly the only space where the fan relationship can take shape. It is in consumer culture that the transition from consumer to fan is accomplished. It is here, increasingly, that we seek actively to construct our own identities, partly because there seems to be no other space available, no other terrain on which we can construct and anchor our mattering maps. (Grossberg 1992, p. 63)

Mattering maps (Grossberg 1992, p. 57) are organizations of self-identity that guide the investment of affect. They encompass the marking out of different places (“practices, pleasures, meanings, fantasies, desires, relations and so on”), their different purposes, and the different moods in which they can operate. They “define different forms, quantities and places of energy,” tell us “how to use and how to generate energy,” how to navigate our way “into and through various moods,” and “how to live within emotional and ideological histories” (Grossberg 1992, pp. 57–58). Consumption, particularly the culturally enmeshed consumption of entertainment, seems so vital because it is on so many consumers’ mattering maps, providing them with a place to locate some of their own identity and power and to invest themselves in particular ways. This insight explains how an entertainment product can serve as the basis for building local communities, performing charitable works, warding off social stigma, forging utopian perspectives, hearing God speak, or engaging in analyses of archetypes and myths. It also helps explain how the consumption of many different types of products can be so deeply intertwined with life themes and goals as to be overtly considered ideological and sacred. Entertainment and other types of consumption potentially feed into the workings of identity, the possible self (see Schouten 1991; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), life goals and themes (Mick and Buhl 1992) so that they become emotionally wired into networks of personal and social energy. Theorized in this manner, products that matter to people are utilized by them in a self-stimulating fashion similar to the various energy-enhancing and energy-depleting products and activities described by Gould (1991).

The notion that entertainment products (commercial popular culture) afford both some of the key conceptual spaces available in contemporary society for constructing identity and a sense of what matters in life is important to consumer research theory. Understanding the role of entertainment in personal identity contributes to the important work of “searching behind the symbolic facade” of media texts to “discover why certain acts and products have come to be culturally viewed as sacred or secular” (Hirschman 1988, p. 357). More generally, it may help explain why the powerful and far-flung images of the entertainment industry have been found ideologically implicated in the central identity myths of consumption subcultures such as Harley Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), sky divers (Celsi et al. 1993), and modern mountain men (Belk and Costa 1998), as well as in a wide range of everyday consumption practices (e.g., Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Using these potent images as a source of social differentiation, fans create practices that reflect their social situation (their affinities) and relate them to appropriate behavior in general society. These themes of the structuring of consumption practice are explored in the following subsection.

“A More Appropriate Detachment”: Affinities and Consumption Practices

Social differences undergird the diversity and internal complexity of Star Trek’s cultural system. Within the various Star Trek subcultures and microcultures, different individuals elect to match their own imperfectly overlapping demography, interests, fantasies, life themes, values, and skills with a set of distinctive consumption practices and meanings that emphasize certain facets of Star Trek’s text, images, and objects. For example, middle-class children of immigrants such as Hilary and Walt shared a personal desire to express Star Trek’s utopian ideology, and this social similarity brings them together under the aegis of a Starfleet International–related fan
club. Sarah and Jacob had idiosyncratic yet related Christian readings of the Star Trek text as one that could express Christian values of tolerance, peace, and respect, but whose manifestation as a fan club organization offered little of interest. In Klingon-based cultures, such as KAG (the “Klingon Assault Group”), groups of (what I observed to be mainly lower-middle-class males) fans join together to emphasize the militaristic (and/or linguistic, and/or spiritual-philosophical) meanings of Star Trek’s longhaired, forehead-ridged wild warrior race through a variety of different consumption practices such as martial arts, literature translation, philosophical discussion, and pagan religious ritual. Competitive Star Trek game-playing subcultures that I observed at conventions seemed to be composed almost exclusively of young (early teens to early twenties), white, middle-class, and upper-middle-class males. Max Weber’s ([1922–1923] 1946, pp. 62–63) theory of elective affinities proposes that, during the process of institutionalizing or routinizing a set of consumption practices, groups of similar members of society elect from a complex group of ideas (for Weber, e.g., religion, politics) the cultural concepts and world images with which they have a sympathetic affinity, convergence, or point of coincidence.

Some of these social regularities were explored in greater depth by Tulloch and Jenkins (1995). They found that a microculture of mainly white, mainly middle-class female fans read Star Trek for its character relationships and previously marginalized female characters (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, p. 197; see also Bacon-Smith 1992; Penley 1997). In contrast, the largely male Massachusetts Institute of Technology “techie” students competitively scrutinized the technical elements of the Star Trek text for scientific validity and special-effects wizardry (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, pp. 217, 220–229). Providing another contrast, the Gaylaxians, a fan club of gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans, read Star Trek for its social utopian aspects, seeking places to read “queer meanings” into it and to perpetuate activist letter-writing campaigns (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995, pp. 237–265). This intersecting cultural pluralism of consumption meanings and practices is the marker of elective affinities. These affinities arise as groups of similar members of society reframe the various facets of Star Trek’s culture of consumption that have engaged their imagination. In a nondeterministic, complex, and sometimes contradictory manner, Star Trek’s images and objects become fertile ground for an impressive variety of cultural consumption practices. These include militaristically based competitive games, paralinguistic scholarship, scientific appraisal, religious exegesis, philosophizing, gay activism, or community volunteer work depending, to some extent, on whether one is male or female, young or old, technically educated or uneducated, or lower-middle-class or middle-class. The particular path of consumption meanings and practices followed is conjunctural with a range of other collective identifications (e.g., gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, social class; Holt 1997, 1998).

Another instance of cultural negotiation is found in the way that some fans relate the forms of Star Trek consumption practices to standards that will be considered appro-

priate by general society. While fans diverge in the range of consumption practices they employ, many of them share a fundamental positioning and policing of their own consumption practices as against the extreme and stigmatized Trekkie image. Consider the different ways these three fans use consumption to express their relationship to Star Trek.

**Interviewer:** What types of Star Trek–related activities do you engage in?

**Mitchell:** I watch the show. I enjoy it. I find myself using many of its situations and characters as metaphors for different discussions I find myself in. (E-mail interview, September 17, 1996)

(In a prior interview, Leslie had previously commented that when alternate trial juror in the Clinton Whitewater case Barbara Adams donned a Star Trek uniform, she demonstrated the difference between a Trekkie and a Trekker because Trekkers only wear the uniform “when it’s appropriate.”)

**Interviewer:** Interesting, but who defines appropriate? Is appropriate always consensual? Why isn’t she seen simply as pushing the boundaries?

**Leslie:** Of course, “appropriate” is consensual . . . . Were I a jewelry wearer, I would probably wear an IDIC for jury duty, but I would not wear Vulcan ears or Star Fleet uniform. (E-mail interview, April 16, 1996)

**Interviewer:** Do you consider yourself a Star Trek fan, a “Trekker,” or a Trekkie?

**Cameron:** To me, a “Trekkie” is someone who is pretty much lost in the fantasy world of Star Trek, someone who has taken an escapist approach to the show and almost literally escaped into it. I like to think I am a fan with a more appropriate detachment from the show. (E-mail interview, May 25, 1996)

Each of these informants combines the same central social category of the Trekkie with divergent consumption meanings articulated by different subcultures to arrive at a personally appropriate level of Star Trek consumption. Mitchell is a Ph.D. student studying conflict analysis and resolution. For him, containment of the text means viewership of the series on television and incorporation of some of its ideas and concepts into his daily life. In his e-mail interview (September 17, 1996), he glosses religion and compulsion by terming himself a “devoted viewer” and by explaining that he will “go to extra lengths to make sure I don’t miss an episode.” However, he finds himself “leery of groups that define themselves by commercialized possessions” and does not buy or use Star Trek services or merchandise (beyond one “incriminating coffee mug”). Mitchell is not involved with what he terms the “hard core” and “soft core” of fandom: the personal involvement of conventions and clubs, the learning of “conversational Klingon,” and “Star Trek trivia.” Disciplined and contained, with Star Trek confined solely to the television screen, Mitchell utilizes meanings
that draw on wider cultural articulations about the proper role of television programs and audiences. He positions his consumption against more extreme uses that expand Star Trek's fantasy into the reality of language studies, trivia studies, communal gatherings, and "incriminating" physical objects. In comparison, he finds his own devoted consumption of Star Trek to be appropriately moderate.

Leslie (who is in her fifties) also refrains from purchasing commercial Star Trek merchandise. Instead, her consumption is personal and communal. Although she is very active in the print- and film-related subcultures, Leslie delineates the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate consumption practices and contexts, and she suggests that these terrains be consensually (i.e., subculturally) policed. Referring to Barbara Adams's wearing of a Star Fleet uniform to court during the Whittaker case, Leslie applies subcultural articulations linking the IDIC philosophy of social utopianism to socially appropriate forms of consumption. For Leslie, a Star Fleet uniform is not acceptable for jury duty because it expresses devotion to fiction in a superficial manner, in a way that can confuse the reality of the philosophy with devotion to outward signs, such as Vulcan ears or Star Fleet uniforms. She notes that "Trekkers," (a category of fan she privileges) "don't do it in the streets and scare the mundanes" (e-mail interview, April 16, 1996). Violations of mainstream standards reinforce articulations of Star Trek fan subculture members with the mentally ill who confuse fantasy and reality. In Leslie's account, Adams's Star Trek consumption exemplifies the extreme, undisciplined, and inappropriate fan who, unlike herself, cannot properly restrain and contain her exuberance.

Cameron, a 31-year-old collector of Star Trek prop replicas, also finds superficial fan activity pervasive and inappropriate, but he defines his own "semiobsessive" collecting activity as substantially different. During his attendance of Star Trek conventions ("mainly to look for items to add to my collection"), he found many fans' "slavish" devotion to actors to be superficial and "kind of sad and creepy." Appropriate consumption for Cameron consists of the collection of authentic props used in the series. Applying the consumption practices of a particular branch of fan collecting subculture, he views his own consumption as critical and realistic rather than superficial and escapist in regard to the show's production. His aesthetic seeks to penetrate the series and understand it on a deeper level. This allows him to distance and control, even to play with, the boundary between reality and fantasy, as suggested by his description of how "cool" and "subtle" it was to display Star Trek props along with his other home decorations, "as if there were nothing unusual about them." Uniting him with the escapist utopian text, he noted the "powerful sense of fantasy wish fulfillment in creating an environment in my house that made it seem as if I was living in the Star Trek universe." Still, he claims that to maintain an "appropriate detachment" from the show allows him to state that he is "studying it on a variety of levels." For Cameron, his prop collecting practices and his study of "behind-the-scenes/making-of" books facilitate his proper separation of the real from the fantastic and serve as a form of appropriate consumption that keeps Star Trek and its more extreme and escapist fans in proper perspective (e-mail interview, May 25, 1996).

These narratives inform our understanding of cultures of consumption by demonstrating how consumption is structured by stigmatic stereotypes. These narratives express a strong desire to contain and control cultural consumption. This desire for control may in some cases have the effect of legitimizing further consumption of a particular type (as it seems to have done with Cameron the collector). Culture members use mainstream-related narratives of agency and control to differentiate themselves from the deviant, out-of-control, and extreme consumer (the "hard core," "slavish," Adams). Claiming to be capable of controlling and containing one's stigmatic consumption may be akin to substance abusers who note that they can quit any time they please, that their consumption is actually average; in doing so they attempt to reclaim their spoiled identities (Goffman 1963). These claims signal discomfort with identification as a member of a group, pointing to a secret shame, an embarrassment that one is a member of a culture of consumption, and perhaps a denial that one's own consumption may be considered stigmatic by wider society. Cameron's claim of "appropriate detachment" is also revelatory of a stance found more generally. People often make similar claims about their own immunity to the influence of advertising, which is effective only on others. This belief that awareness and willpower create a personal exemption from influence may only make the medium more powerful. For consumers of many kinds, claims of containment signal the stigmatic aspects of consumption, aspects that the following subsection suggests may actually be quite commonplace.

"The Philosophy Is More than the Merchandise": Navigating the Utopian and Commercial Enterprise

This subsection explores some of the articulations of mythic and commercial meanings fans use to navigate between their profoundly personal investments in Star Trek and its ostensibly superficial commercialism. While scholars such as Goulding (1985) read the Star Trek text as an American ideologue, the series does depend to a considerable extent on a disarticulation of its socially utopian future from contemporary capitalist meanings. Traders in the original series, or later series' alien races such as the insatiably greedy Ferengi, are portrayed in an unfavorable light, and their capitalist avarice mocked in the show's narratives. Although some monetary units are mentioned in the show (credits, pressed latinum), it is clear in the text that the earth in Star Trek's future is part of a paramilitary galactic government that generally functions without money.

The irony of Star Trek's socially utopian and anticapitalist text being produced by and firmly situated within a commercial and commercializing culture is captured by the origins of IDIC, the Star Trek fan subculture's central creed.
Actor William Shatner, who played Star Trek’s Captain Kirk, relates that, as Star Trek’s original series drew to a close, Roddenberry opened a mail-order business called Lincoln Enterprises in order to sell a small line of Star Trek merchandise directly to fans (1993, pp. 286–289). At the same time, Roddenberry—who had not rewritten any scripts that season—imposed a script rewrite on a current episode. The rewrite contained what Shatner terms a “pointless” speech in which Captain Kirk “speaks of the praises of a medal of honor known as the ‘IDIC’ which stands for ‘Infinite Diversity From [sic] Infinite Combinations.’” Shatner (1993, p. 287) calls this scene’s inclusion “Gene’s rather thinly veiled commercial” for the IDIC medallions that would soon be marketed by Roddenberry’s Lincoln Enterprises. Shatner (1993, pp. 288–289) terms the producer’s action “Gene’s marketing ploy” of the “scene/commercial.”

How do fans negotiate this complex irony, which positions the sociopolitical category of a noncapitalist social utopia and commercial avarice in such uncomfortable proximity? One way is through an isomorphic strategy that rearticulates Star Trek’s legitimating consumption meanings onto consumption practices expressing a capitalist profit motive. This marriage of utopian values and collection of valuables is evident in the narrative of “Warren,” a collector who shops for Star Trek merchandise every weekend. The stated reason for his purchases?

Simply this . . . I buy them as an investment for my children’s future. . . . True, while I buy Star Trek items for investment, I can also go into my “STARTREK” rooms and envision what it might be like to actually be the curator of the first ever Star Trek Museum. Wow, did that sound fanatical. I treat them with the utmost respect of anyone who deals in an investment. While they are nice to look at, PLEASE DON’T TOUCH. In fact, I insist anyone new in my household to look at my collection; much to my chagrin, most walk away with that “He’s a real nut” look on their faces. (E-mail interview, November 15, 1996)

Although he justifies them by emphasizing “investment” and selling “this stuff at a profit,” the terms Warren uses (“utmost respect,” “don’t touch”), his curatorial fantasy, and his disappointment and humiliation (“chagrin”) indicate that he is also employing articulations that link elitist high-culture consumption practices (Holt 1998) onto the Star Trek text, and sacred articulations (Belk et al. 1989) onto Star Trek merchandise. He follows his self-critical reflection (“did that sound fanatical?”) with a reinforcing and legitimating comparison of his behavior to the typical investor. Balancing the educational, nonprofit orientation of a museum curator charged with a culturally important myth with the avaricious assessments of an investor, Warren uses the consumption practice of collecting to navigate Star Trek’s ironic meld of commercial capitalism and utopian mythos (for more on collectors and collecting, see, e.g., Belk [1995]).

The tensions between the commercial and the sacred are surprisingly evident in the dialogue of some fans regarding Paramount, the legal owner of Star Trek’s trademarks and copyrights. Paramount is currently a division of Viacom, a multinational entertainment conglomerate whose shares are publicly traded and whose objectives are to maximize profit and return to shareholders. However, some fans transfer intriguing consumer desires onto Paramount. “I don’t think Paramount gives a flying f *** about developing and growing Star Trek as an enduring mythic story through which we can explore potential futures and magnify our current situation and dominant narratives. They want to make money, end of story” (Mitchell, e-mail interview, September 17, 1996).

Mitchell’s comments indicate his belief that Star Trek is a cultural property (“an enduring mythic story”) that is or should be collectively owned. “We” use it in order to understand and orient our society and ourselves; it is on “our” mattering maps. Star Trek is seemingly no longer an entertainment product, but a myth, a sacred text, a type of holy relic. Similarly, in filk writer Leslie’s account, “Paramount is a mediocre U.S. business with the bad luck to have its myopia juxtaposed to a vision . . . . After years of dithering, they made Trek a thing or two, which puts their franchising into direct contrast with fandom” (e-mail interview, October 29, 1996). Leslie’s account articulates the “myopia” of an exclusive concern with short-term profits in business (the “cash cow” approach, “franchising”) with Paramount and finds it contrasting with the text’s utopian or sacred “vision”—something akin to a revealed truth. The expectation that Paramount treats Star Trek as sacred is a theme that also permeates FanTrek’s Captain Hilary’s explanation of the decline of the Star Trek subculture.

A lot of the Star Trek fan clubs right now are almost at the point where they can barely stand watching the show because, because the merchandise has, has Trekked them out. The expression is “Trekked out.” Well I’ve got three members of the command crew who are Trekked out. They don’t care if they see a dealer anymore, because the stuff—they’re sick of looking at it. The philosophy, however, is living right on. The philosophy is more than the merchandise . . . . There’s been dolls that would just make you ill. They’re supposed to be Spock, but how they ever, you ever—how could you ever make a doll look less like Spock? You know what I mean? So if I thought they were just doing this to protect the quality of their merchandise, I wouldn’t object. But they’re just basically protecting a cash cow. And that I do object to. (Personal interview, August 5, 1995)

Hilary’s comments categorically link Paramount’s commercial exploitation of Star Trek with former fans now finding Star Trek consumption repulsive or at least not attractive (i.e., “Trekked out”). She suggests that Paramount’s commodification of Star Trek through merchandise commercialization has led to former Star Trek fans being saturated with the television show (they are “barely” able to “stand watching the show”), resistant to purchasing from dealers at conventions, and “sick of looking at” Star Trek merchandise in general. This manifests as a type of dise-
quilibrium, an overextension that she (using the term as a verb later in her interview) calls “overmerchandizing.” For Hilary, what matters about Star Trek is ideological, immanent, immaterial, and moral, something sacred that exists beyond the ability to be capitalistically (materialistically?) exploited. In an almost Cartesian dualism, she dearticulates the utopian from the commercial and sifts the sacred from the profane as she states that “the philosophy is more than the merchandise.” The philosophy, she implies, is more eternal, more authentic, more untainted, more transcendent, more visionary, more liberating, and more perfect than the merchandise. Echoing the famous 1960s logos and ethos, Star Trek’s utopian meanings are “living right on” within the subculture, even if they are no longer present in current products. Displaying strong emotions during our interview, Hilary stuttered with righteous indignation while telling me about the Spock doll, a doll that “would just make you ill.” Her emotions indicate her desire for Star Trek, its fans, and their practices to be treated as deeply meaningful and extraordinary. Instead, she believes Paramount sees Star Trek and its fan subcultures not as a sacred cow, but as a “cash cow,” a commercial property that exists only to be exploited.

In a newsgroup posting, “John” similarly relates the poor quality of the new television shows to the inauthenticity behind its commercialization. “Sadly, some sun-drenched valley type is calling the shots over bottles of Evian during a power lunch, basing the stories strictly on some market research firm’s numbers. ‘Lowest common denominator’ anyone? *sigh* Now I know why I only drop by Star Trek once or twice a year anymore” (posted May 1, 1996, on rec.arts.startrek.current).

Also viewing the careless treatment of products as symptomatic of a careless treatment of fans, Leslie (who describes her view of Paramount as “contemptuous”) interprets a recent scrambling of the order of episodes in the release of Star Trek videodiscs: “once again Paramount comes off as chasing the bottom line and to hell with the fans” (e-mail interview, January 31, 1996). These accounts draw from negative macroracial articulations of Star Trek with categories of an elite, uncaring business class that relates to Star Trek fans merely as numbers. It seems ironic that, in an age in which marketing literature is abuzz with relationship marketing, consumers are also saying that they long for deeper relationships. These fan comments about Paramount indicate that the heart of the relationship is marketers’ caring for the product, not just the profit that can be generated from it. As devoted consumers, fans are constantly scanning and evaluating signals that inform them whether the products they care about are on or off their producers’ mattering maps. Mattering is what separates the “sun-drenched” market research-driven “valley type” from the “visionary.”

The narratives of Hilary, Mitchell, John, and Leslie contrast with those of fans who see Star Trek objects’ investment value as coexistent with its sacred values. Their comments indicate that certain modalities of marketing and monetizing a culture of consumption’s content commoditize and defile it. Ang’s (1985) ideology of mass culture relates closely to some of this ideological bracketing. She found that very popular cultural products and practices, largely because their commercial character and their creation under criteria of economic marketability, were widely considered and labeled bad mass culture. Some of her informants found the television show Dallas to be a type of fraud because it was a commercial product, one “whose makers’ aim was simply to rake in money, loads of money” (During 1993, p. 404). Sacred meanings are eroticized by articulations of crass materialism. They require counterbalancing decommodification (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) or resacralization (Belk et al. 1989) practices. This need to cleanse the product of its commercial meanings and conjure up its sacredness is enacted through practices of rearticulation. In the Star Trek culture of consumption word and deed are marshaled to link Star Trek to its hope-filled utopian future vision, charitable acts, moral and inclusive community, anticapitalist politics, egalitarian philosophy, and perhaps even its (high-cultural) scientific and literary references, past lack of commercial success, and history as a site of audience activism.

These informant comments also hearken back to a mythic “uncontaminated” time (see Coontz 1992) in the culture of consumption’s past. In this nostalgic time, the culture of consumption existed as a true vision, which was propagated but not exploited (it was, presumably, merchandized properly, but not overmerchandized); it was shared with consumers but not used to exploit or cheat them. Our culture seems permeated by this tension between mythic utopia and commercial encroachment. Consumer dialectic on just about any topic that is on their mattering maps almost unerringly reveals that it has become too commercial and is simply not the way it used to be, for example, holidays like Christmas and Easter, professional music or theater, professional or collegiate sports, vacation destinations, children’s birthday parties, and so on. The range of topics demonstrate the much broader cultural discomfort with the commercialization of the things that matter to us, with a feeling of being trapped and at the mercy of distant corporate actors who own the things that matter to us. Although the mythic past may in some sense be recreated and rearticulated through decommodifying (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and sacralizing (Belk et al. 1989) communal practices, absent an effective resistance or rearticulations strategy to navigate a culture of consumption’s ironies, a consumer will inevitably find less energy and power in that culture. As the text, images, and consumption objects drop off these consumer’s mattering maps, they either leave the culture behind, or emphasize its ideological and noncommercial elements, facets that still retain their mythic sheen.

**DISCUSSION**

This ethnography analyzes some of the articulations of meaning and practice fans use to relate to Star Trek’s system of mass media images and objects. Evident throughout these articulations are macroracial ideologies, such as those that
stigmatically link fantasy entertainment consumption with social categories of mental illness, addiction, immaturity, superficiality, and compulsive consumption. Poised alongside these articulations are other sets of managed meanings construed by fans and mass media producers, for example, those that link Star Trek consumption to practices connoting egalitarianism, hope, and utopianism. Institutionalized into fandom, consumption practices are influenced by these meanings, as well as by socially structured affinities (e.g., gender, age, class) and by the need to conform to macro-cultural categories of appropriately controlled consumption. Through these meanings and practices, individual fans legitimize particular differences, locate their own sources of identity and power, and invest themselves into the social world in particular ways.

This interplay of individuals, subculture, wider culture, and cultural producers occurring through the Star Trek culture of consumption evinces a process that has been conceptualized more broadly in Hall’s encoding and decoding theory (Hall 1980). In the past, mass culture audiences were conceptualized as passive recipients of hypodermically injected ideologies of false consciousness—audiences were seen to be overpowered by the texts of dominant cultural elites (e.g., Goulding 1985; Hirschman 1988, p. 345; Nelson et al. 1992; Neuman 1991). Goulding (1985, p. 81), for example, has described Star Trek fan activity as “industrial consumerism . . . a mindless compulsive path, compounded by media satiation.” Particularly since the early 1980s, theory and research have instead emphasized that the meanings audiences draw from the mass media are a dynamic and contested terrain, built within the “interaction between active audience and active media” (Neuman 1991, p. 89). In fandom, the process is subculturally mediated. Mass media reception in fandom is driven by an affective relationship with the culture of consumption that affords each fan a source of identity, power, difference, and mastery. The entire process as observed in the sociohistorical context of Star Trek fan culture circa 1995–97 is represented in Figure 1, which offers a model of the consumer-media articulations in a mass media culture of consumption.

In this model, the articulations of cultural producers are conceptualized not only as encoding certain preferred (Hall 1980) social meanings into consumption objects and images but also as providing a superintendence of those meanings that legitimize and moralize a range of consumption practices. Early in Star Trek’s history, Gene Roddenberry sought the institutional support of the elite community of science fiction fans for his new series (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995).
In citations of his writing and interviews, Roddenberry promoted particular interpretations of the Star Trek culture of consumption, and of its subculture, reinforcing and linking them to social categories of sanctuary for the alienated and for social utopians, to egalitarianism and tolerance values, to rationalist belief in science and technology, to secular humanist philosophy, and even to religion (Alexander 1994; Whitfield and Roddenberry 1968). With the variety of shows, writers, actors and other players, different television series, motion pictures, and novelizations associated with Star Trek, the infused ideology is inherently multifaceted rather than a monolithic “preferred reading” (cf. Goulding 1985; Hall 1980). It is instructional to note, however, that this is still a structured ideological text reflecting the common interests of production stakeholders.

Another contestable, but hegemonically overseen, terrain is the very definition of the interrelated images and objects that constitute the unity of a particular culture of consumption. As documented by Amesley (1989) and Jindra (1994), Star Trek fans on-line and in person refer frequently to Roddenberry’s and Paramount’s declarations of Star Trek canon to assess what constitutes the first level of authentic or real Star Trek. As Jindra’s informant succinctly states it, “‘canon’ means that Gene Roddenberry (or his duly appointed representative) has declared something to be officially part of the ‘Star Trek’ universe” (Jindra 1994, p. 45).

Canon fundamentally unites the various Star Trek cultures and subcultures through participation in a shared “coherent” “cosmology” (Jindra 1994, p. 45), which is under the express influence of Roddenberry and his “appointed representative” (currently Paramount’s Rick Berman). Nonetheless, fans individually and collectively negotiate the relevant boundaries of cultures of consumption, interweaving fan texts and other media properties to accord with their personal and subcultural affinities.

The model’s representation of macrocultural articulations includes the meaning-creating activities not only of individual (nonfan) members of society, but of other media producers, advertisers, critics, journalists, scientists, schools, academics, and other cultural intermediaries (McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997) who might articulate certain social categories onto a particular system of objects and images. Although this model diagrammatically represents the macrocultural articulations as an internally consistent and self-contained whole, it should be read as representing the consumption meanings set forth by a vast range of diverse cultures, institutions, and actors in various states of dialectical and ideological contestation (e.g., Appadurai 1990; Hannerz 1992). To this cacophonous perspective, however, must be added the relevance of empirical studies indicating the influence and pervasiveness of certain articulations, such as Ang’s (1985) ideology of bad mass culture and the negative Trekkie stereotype. In summary, the model presented above portrays the process by which consumers who have invested themselves in cultural texts are continually drawn into dialectical interplay with producers, subcultures, microcultures, and wider cultural meanings and practices in order to legitimate and express what matters to them.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this ethnography have the potential to inform our understanding of entertainment and mass media consumption and of consumption in general. In this section I discuss the manner in which consumers’ apparently active and postmodern blurring of fantasy and reality is still subject to influential social constraints. I then explore some of the implications of rearticulation and mattering maps to our understanding of sacralization and resacralization processes, and the making of cult products. Finally, I discuss the way myriad consumption objects are disarticulated from the reality of their commercial origins and rearticulated with legitimating messages of moral community.

This ethnography has portrayed a group of devoted consumers socially constructing reality. They construe fantasy-oriented consumption objects as, in some sense, real: as a real part of industry, media, or entertainment history; as an expression of real universal ethics; as a more or less faithful manifestation of their creator’s real intentions; and as a generalized prediction of the real future. A postmodern stance celebrates activities such as these that blur the oppressive modernist boundaries between the fantastic and the real. As a modernist utilitarian sensibility wanes, “the illusory separations between the real and the simulation . . . dissolve . . . When these simulations capture the imagination of a community, its members begin to behave in ways that authenticate the simulation so that it becomes the social reality of the community” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, pp. 250, 252). This would suggest that what Postman (1985) critiques as a debilitating flaw of television content may instead be symptomatic of a more general condition of contemporary, or postmodern, society. It may also be taken as evidence of a “semiotic democracy” (Fiske 1986; see also Hedberg 1979, p. 104) in which “people drawn from a vast shifting range of subcultures and groups construct their own meanings within an autonomous ‘cultural economy’” (Morley 1995, p. 312).

However, this notion of a semiotic democracy can seriously blur the perception of a cultural field structured by relations of power and difference (Hall 1980) and can suggest that all, rather than merely some boundaries that are socially constructed can be blurred. So, for example, Hirschman and Thompson’s (1997, pp. 57–58) comparisons of consumers to cultural bricolage who demonstrate a high degree of flexibility in being able to rearticulate mass media images (in general) may have been analyzed at too high a level of interpretive abstraction to reveal many important social structures and differences (e.g., religion, class, subculture). But, as suggested by the evidence for Weber’s (1946) elective affinities and the stigmatic imagery described above, mass media meanings do possess important social boundaries. Thus, contemporary consumers cannot exist entirely in authenticated simulations. They are frequently required in their dealings with wider society to read, assess, and confront, as an annexation of the culture of
consumption's system, other categories such as associations of stigma.

This should suggest caution for consumer researchers using the term "active" to refer to media reception or consumption in general. First, the term may problematically insinuate that interpretations of media texts, or of any other consumption image or object, can be relatively free of sociocultural influences. As Ang (1990, p. 247) notes, although "audiences may be active, in myriad ways, in using and interpreting media...it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful."

Second, the findings complicate the notion that the typical consumer is a "paragon of creative individuality" (Miller 1995, pp. 28–29) who routinely interprets media images and consumption objects in a resistant, deconstructive, or counter-vailing manner (Morley 1995). As the multiple invocations of "canon" and "Gene's vision" by numerous fans indicate, all consumption meanings are not created equal. Some are "preferred readings" (Hall 1980) that are much "more firmly institutionalized" (Holbrook 1997, p. 344) by subcultural, producer and/or macrocultural forces, probably through processes of repetition (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997), as well as by communally and individually resonant meaning transfer (McCracken 1986).

Although the consumers in this study exhibited a range of consumption meanings and practices, these were structured by social and institutional forces such as their own social situation, the articulations of subculture members, institutional practices, and cultural producers. This analysis therefore confirms, expands, and develops Hirschman's (1998) postulations regarding the bounded diversity of expert consumers' textual relations, which take place as individualized meanings, and which are constructed within the interpretive confines of an ideological structure. It also develops the important constructs of subcultural and cultural production and superintendency for use alongside consumer research accounts of mass media reception such as Hirschman (1988), Hirschman and Thompson (1997), Holbrook and Hirschman (1993), and Thompson and Haytko (1997).

Extended beyond the context of mass media consumption, the insights from this ethnography may inform our understanding of a range of other consumption phenomena. This ethnography has explored a particularly large and loyal subculture of consumption that has continued for well over three decades. In order to understand the remarkable success of this marketing franchise, this research suggests that entertainment products are key conceptual spaces that consumers in contemporary society use to construct their identities and their sense of what matters in life (Grossberg 1992). This realization may contribute to our knowledge of the process of sacralization (Belk et al. 1989). Providing a conceptual space that is set apart and extraordinary—an alternate, timeless, mythic, and mysterious reality, an ecstatic place where one can sometimes stand outside of oneself—entertainment consumption may offer, for some, the very quintessence of sacralization. For those who elevate it onto their mattering maps, particular forms of entertainment help structure hier-

ophany, krathophany, commitment, mystery, objectification, and other qualities of sacred consumption (Belk et al. 1989). The mythic and artistic sheen of entertainment products and celebrities may even help us understand how advertising (itself often, arguably, an entertainment product) helps construct consumption that will be treated as sacred.

It has been suggested recently that entertainment content has infiltrated almost every aspect of contemporary American marketing and consumption. According to Wolf (1999, p. 4), Americans live in an "entertainment economy" in which "entertainment content has become a key differentiator in virtually every aspect of the broader consumer economy." His notion that products and services must contain entertainment, or the "E-factor," suggests that entertainment is becoming a ubiquitous part of our consumption reality, embedded in every type of product and service. But as it becomes ubiquitous, entertainment also becomes mundane. This ethnography suggests that, to find the extraordinary or sacred, a special effort or even a retreat away from mainstream forms of entertainment may be required. Further research in this area would help clarify how entertainment and other cultural texts, images, and objects decay and are revitalized.

Other important contributions to consumer research theory emerge from understanding the processes by which particular entertainment products become parts of consumers' mattering maps (Grossberg 1992). Fans are devoted, loyal consumers who invest more of themselves in their consumption and, therefore, who expect more from it. Very similar processes may drive consumer involvement, interest, affinities, belief in, and loyalty to particular products or forms of consumption. Consumer researchers should consider studying the situated cultural and subcultural articulations that underlie the new product marketer's Holy Grail of a cult product such as 3Com's Palm Pilot, the Apple iMac, the Polaroid iZone, the Volkswagen Beetle, Ural motorcycles, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), or the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN). This article suggests that researchers look for stigmatic boundaries (that enhance internal community), subcultural sanctuaries (that sponsors loyalty), fantasy-oriented imagery (that engages the imagination), moral utopian and mythic dimensions (that provide ideological legitimation and help build the possible self), and amelioration of the taint of commercialized cultural exploitation.

This ethnography found that producers and subcultures rearticulated entertainment texts, images, and objects with legitimating meanings of moral community in order to bracket them from the unavoidable reality that they are commercial creations—and thereby to enhance consumers' consumption experiences. Legitimating marketing and consumption practices may actually be widespread. Products and services abound that vaguely promise a "friendly face," a "neighborhood store," "America first," environmental friendliness, and support of local schools and colleges. Handelman and Arnold (1999) note the "public purpose marketing" of superpremium ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's;
the “enlightened capitalism” of beauty boutique Body Shop International; and the patriotic buy American policy, record of donations to community charities, and oft-stated commitment to family values of cutthroat discounter Wal-Mart. They suggest that these activities are acts of legitimation demonstrating that a company’s actions are in accord with social norms. Even Philip Morris, the tobacco company not usually noted for its sense of moral community, has found it useful to advertise its association with charitable causes such as shelters for battered women. The need to distance consumption from commercialism and link it to moral community may also underlie the formidable growth of charitable social causes in marketing, which is termed “cause-related marketing.” Interestingly, in keeping with this explanation, cause-related marketing has been found to be more useful in promoting the purchase of frivolous luxuries than practical necessities (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). The findings of this ethnography indicate that articulations of morality and community are not only important marketing acts but also essential components of the meanings and practices that structure consumption practices on a cultural and subcultural level. In summary, this research suggests an increased need in consumer research for attention to the intertwined roles that entertainment, fantasy, stigma, legitimation, and utopia play in contemporary culture and consumer behavior.

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