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Better at Life Stuff: Consumption, Identity, and Class in Apple's "Get a Mac" Campaign

Randall Livingstone[1]

Abstract

Apple's "Get a Mac" advertising campaign defines for its audience the dichotomy between the casual, confident, creative Mac user and the formal, frustrated, fun-deprived PC user through a series of comical television spots featuring human representations of each technology. The company has been largely applauded over the years for their creative, innovative, and thought-provoking marketing, and "Get a Mac," winner of the American Marketing Association's 2007 Grand Effie award, fits nicely with Apple's tradition of infusing cultural ideology into their ads. Utilizing the methods of close reading and ideological criticism, this study considers the North American "Get a Mac" television campaign as a popular culture text with embedded implications about consumption, identity, and class. The text reveals a number of thematic dichotomies that obscure meaningful issues of difference and class while promoting the spectacle of consumption and the myth of self-actualization through commodities.

Keywords

advertising, class, consumption, critical and cultural studies, identity

"Hello, I'm a Mac"
—Mac (personified by actor Justin Long)

"And I'm a PC"
—PC (personified by writer/actor John Hodgman)

[1]University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

Corresponding Author:
Randall Livingstone, School of Journalism and Communication, 1275 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1275, USA
Email:livingst@uoregon.edu

Which are you? In 2006 Apple, Inc. rolled out an advertising campaign that would finally help each of us decide. In creating its Mac and PC characters, Apple defined for its audience the dichotomy between the casual, confident, creative Mac user and the formal, frustrated, fun-deprived PC user. This step beyond the tangible merits of a product is certainly nothing new in the advertising industry; much work has explored the intersections of advertising, culture, and ideology (Malefyt & Moeran, 2003; Williamson, 1983) and demonstrated the centuries old tradition of embedding ideology in ads (McClintock, 1994). The Apple campaign, then, fits snuggly into a long-standing tradition of using cultural ideology as marketing technique.

Since Apple's seminal "1984" Super Bowl commercial, the technology firm has used marketing strategies to position itself in popular culture and the popular consciousness. Apple's ads stand out from competitors' ads for their "indefinable element of cool" ("Apple's Ad Game," 2008), and the "Get a Mac" campaign "has weaved its way into the fabric of pop culture, generating buzz, Web chatter, blogs and comedic parodies" (Goldrich, 2006, p. 15). The advertisements have featured cultural icons and contemporary celebrities, often in lieu of displaying or demonstrating product offerings themselves (Shields, 2001). With more than 60 television spots in the U.S. market alone, the "Get a Mac" campaign is a turn away from the strictly image-driven campaigns of the 1990s, including the successful "Think Different" campaign, but not a complete about-face; similar to the 2002-2003 "Switch" campaign, "Get a Mac" attempts to integrate identity advertising and product information in hip, humorous 30-second declarations.

This study attempts to define what the trade publications dub indefinable. Utilizing the methods of close reading and ideological criticism, I consider the "Get a Mac" campaign in its entirety as a popular culture text with imbedded implications about consumption, identity, and class. My reading of the text reveals a number of thematic dichotomies that obscure meaningful issues of difference and class while promoting the spectacle of consumption and the myth of self-actualization through commodities.

Literature Review

In 2008 *Fortune* magazine named Apple its "Most Admired Company," ahead of both consumer stalwarts like General Electric and Proctor & Gamble and market phenoms like Google and Starbucks (Fisher, 2008). Gable (2008) considers such an honor a victory for the Apple "brand," citing its savvy use of graphics, logos, and advertising as key elements in building corporate reputation. Indeed, since Steve Jobs' reemergence as CEO in 1997, trade journals and the popular press have largely applauded the company's distinctive marketing as a return to the creativity of "1984" ("Apple 'Thinks Different,'" 1997; Cuneo, Elkin, Kim, & Stanley, 2003; Stone, 2009), though some detractors have found Apple's focus on image, not product, limiting (Garfield, 2001; Johnson, 1991). If recent financial reports are accurate, though, with Apple (2009) announcing revenues of US$7.9 billion and profits of US$1.14 billion in the fourth quarter of 2009 and a 17% year-over-year increase of Macintosh sales, the

focus on image is producing quite a healthy bottom line, even if its implications for identity politics are debatable.

Some recent qualitative work has taken on Apple's marketing allure over the past quarter century. Scott (1991) calls upon Burke's theorizing of "texts as strategies for dealing with situations" in her reader-oriented study of the "1984" Super Bowl commercial (p. 70). In a close examination of the 30-second spot, Scott (1991) examines how image, auditory text, and overt metaphor equate the buying of a computer with "a revolutionary act," one she labels a "deft ideological maneuver" on the part of Apple (p. 78). The analysis also highlights an early attempt by Apple to establish the casual, creative man versus organizational, working man dichotomy that would later be fully personified in the "Get a Mac" campaign.

Drawing on concepts from Foucault and Levi-Strauss, Shields (2001) argues that Apple uses mythology in the form of cultural icons to link consumers' aspirations with emerging technology in its 1997 "Think Different" commercial. The images of Bob Dylan, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and 14 other famous individuals visually fading into each other creates what Shields describes as "a mirrored heterotopian site of renewal and possibility" (p. 212), or what he later calls "an Apple-dominated world filled with consumers who, paradoxically, all 'think different'" (p. 215). The cultural common ground, or myth here, allows for both dominant and emerging ideologies to be exploited in the name of corporate branding (Shields, 2001).

A broader literature on branding, both from a pragmatic, business perspective and from a critical, cultural perspective, has emerged since the 1990s. Rooted in the reality that consumer markets have become flooded with a multiplicity of virtually identical products, and compounded by the revolutionary influence information technology has had on the world of advertising and communication, brands have become dominant in the minds of both corporations and consumers (Olins, 2000). Brands offer consistency in the form of recognized standards and symbols, but sharp marketeers also recognize that brands offer an opportunity for self-definition; as Olins (2000) explains, "We enjoy their company and depend on their relationship because they help us to define who we are. We also shape brands into what we want them to be so that they can help us to tell the world about ourselves" (p. 62). Aaker (1996) dubs marketing strategy that develops this personal dimension the "Self-Expression Model of Brand Personality" and explicates how successful companies like Apple actually personify a brand:

> As a person, the Apple Macintosh is perceived by many as friendly, unpretentious, irreverent, and willing to go against the grain. This personality has developed partially because the Mac is an easy-to-use, intuitive computer that even greets its users, but also because of the brand's user imagery, the activities of user groups, and the Mac symbol (a rainbow-colored apple with a bite out of it) and advertising. (p. 154)

The next step in branding, one that the "Think Different" campaign makes, is to largely or completely divorce brand from product (Olins, 2000). Nowhere in the

original commercial does an Apple product appear, and Shi's (2007) cluster analysis study of the 359 visual pictures employed in the print/poster campaign comes to a similar conclusion.

Considering the increased distance seen here between brand and actual product, the importance of a critical approach to what brands mean for personal identity and popular culture cannot be understated. Though the brand management perspective has permeated the literature, often overlooking or ignoring consumer perspectives and cultural ramifications of advertising messages, Askegaard (2006) points out that more attention is now being paid to "consumers' symbolic use of brands in their construction of group identities, meanings of everyday practices and meanings attached to personal self-images" (p. 93). Drawing on the work of cultural theorists such as Hall and Giddens, Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) argue that corporate management cannot afford to ignore the dynamic nature of identity's influence on consumer behavior any longer; postmodern contemporary culture demands consideration. Whereas Williams (1960) once called advertising "a system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but [. . .] strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology" (p. 705), Jameson finds the postmodern condition in these marketing messages, seeing them as "the end result of capitalism's relentless commodification of all phases of everyday existence," leaving us with "a vision of success and personal happiness, expressible solely through the acquisition of commodities" (in Marris & Thornham, 2006, p. 382). Jhally's (1990, 2006) work on cultural consumption in the Marxist tradition is also noteworthy here, as he critically discusses the rise of advertising and turn to consumerism that industrialization prompted.

The previous work on Apple's advertising messages demonstrates that the company relies heavily on brand image and consumer identity construction to sell personal electronics. Unlike previous ad campaigns, however, the short-lived 2002-2003 "Switch" campaign and the subsequent "Get a Mac" campaign that it inspired (and which will be the artifact considered in this study), Apple uses a new combination of visual and auditory techniques to continue its hyperconscious image management. Launched in May 2006 and produced by longtime Apple collaborator TBWA/Chiat/Day, sixty-six 30-second television commercials have appeared on both broadcast and cable networks in North America, with new spots rotated in for airplay and old spots retired on an irregular basis. During the campaign's run, each commercial was hosted on the corporate Apple web site at the time of its release, and a subset of the television spots was available at any given time. The final three "Get a Mac" spots were released in October 2009, and in May 2010 Apple removed all of the ads from their site, signaling the official end to the campaign (Marsal, 2010; Murphy, 2010). Each commercial has been archived by a number of online video sites, though, including AdWeek, YouTube, and Break.com.

Winner of the 2007 Grand Effie award and named by AdWeek as the ad campaign of the decade (Eaton, 2009), "Get a Mac" has been praised for the simplicity and charm of its production elements. Starring U.S. actors Justin Long and John Hodgman,

many of the ads feature merely the two characters, set against a white background, humorously interacting through dialogue, sight gags, and the occasional prop. Some spots feature secondary characters, and three holiday spots feature animated versions of the protagonists in a wintry scene, with Long and Hodgman providing voiceover. Composer and musician Mark Mothersbaugh (cofounder of the band Devo) provides the campaign's soundtrack in the form of a 30-second jingle featured in all spots except one (and accompanied by sleigh bells in the aforementioned holiday spots). Finally, each ad begins with the dialogue I quote at the beginning of this study, or from time to time a slight, comedic variation of such declarations.

Despite the seeming straightforwardness of these ads, though, the campaign presents dynamic content that often incorporates both oral and visual humor, logical and emotional appeals, cultural allusions, metaphor, and wordplay. In what may (tongue in cheek) be called its marketing system upgrade to "Get a Mac," Apple has offered a rich new text that prompts 21st-century questions about the interplay between advertising messages and consumer psychology, brand image and personal identity, ideology, consumption, and most importantly, the self. As such, this study explores the beliefs, values, and assumptions manifest in these commercials through embedded hegemonic devices or meanings in the artifact.

Method

Barthes' (1977) work on the order of meanings and Hall's (1982) method of close reading and concept of articulation guided my textual analysis of the "Get a Mac" campaign and allowed me to consider all aspects of content (visuals, dialogue, text, music) for their ideological implications. Heralded for his work in semiotics, Barthes (1977) identifies three levels of meaning in a cultural text, those of communication (or an informational level), signification (or a symbolic level), and signifiance (or what Barthes himself struggles to define, settling on the level of "obtuse meaning"). Woollacott (1982) highlights Barthes' "identification of second-order meanings, meanings beyond those initially noted" as a key contribution to the critical reading of advertisements and media messages (p. 99). Indeed, Barthes' semiological form of structuralism has influenced or informed the work of many critical theorists, including Stuart Hall.

Barthes' first- and second-order meanings have also been dubbed denotative and connotative, respectively, but Hall (1982) felt the semiotician's division of meaning was often misinterpreted as favoring the latter. Thus, Hall proposed the concept of articulation, which in a text's close reading would acknowledge the interplay and interdependence of these ordered meanings. In a broader project of ideological criticism, Foss (2009) suggests that articulation means the "establishment of a relationship among elements (such as beliefs, practices, and values) so that their identity is transformed" (p. 213). She then highlights Makus's (1990) application of the method in an early case study on computer hacking (an intriguing prelude to this study's consideration of technology). Touting the usefulness of the concept/method, Makus (1990) comments,

> Hall develops an especially rich critical theory of ideology and a critical method focusing upon articulation which offers possibilities for a flexible and incisive critique of discourse by guiding the critic's attention to specific connections between ideological elements and social, political, economic, and technological practices and structures. (p. 496)

As this study attempts to probe the ideologies in and around the "Get a Mac" campaign, as well as its greater meaning to the Apple ethos and U.S. culture of consumption, Hall's method of articulation, keeping in mind Barthes' sensitivity to orders of meaning, seems logically the most fruitful path to pursue.

The first stage in my analysis involved viewing the 63 spots in order of release (2006 to 2009) to obtain a holistic impression of the campaign. A running inventory of presented elements was kept in order to identify initial patterns, for as Foss (2009) describes, this stage of the analysis looks for "observable aspects of the artifact that provide clues to its ideology" (p. 214). After locating each spot on YouTube.com and bookmarking the corresponding links, this initial stage of analysis consisted of a single viewing of each 30-second commercial in order of release date. A few brief comments were recorded for each ad, usually noting production elements, unique phrasings or dialogue, and/or immediate thoughts or associations. After the complete viewing, a handful of notes were recorded to document initial impressions and perceived trends in the campaign. Finally, some heuristic methodological prompts (Foss, 2009) were considered to begin determining the campaign's intended meanings. This initial work proved most helpful both logistically (revisiting the web links, recalling props and characters, etc.) and analytically (thinking about trends and themes) when completing the close reading.

The next stage utilized Hall's method of close reading, which involves a deeper study of the campaign contextually, noting metaphors, recurring patterns, omissions, and production elements running through the spots. Working at Barthes' symbolic level of meaning, I began drawing out suggested ideas, references, themes, allusions, and/or concepts from the presented elements. My findings present specific instances and examples of such suggested meanings found in the artifact.

In the final stage of the analysis, I interpreted and critiqued the suggested meanings drawn from presented elements in order to identify dominant structuring strategies in the "Get a Mac" campaign. By grouping symbolic meanings in the ads, understanding their relationships and interdependence, and recognizing relationships between meanings in the campaign and greater cultural allusions and patterns, I propose the dominant ideologies expounded by the Apple ads and comment on the functions and consequences of these ideologies for U.S. audiences and U.S. culture. This commentary also allows me to address what the ideologies mean for the individual identity-building process many cultural critics argue is becoming increasingly dependent on consumption patterns and mass mediated advertising.

"Get a Mac": A Close Reading

As touched upon earlier, the "Get a Mac" campaign revolves around the interactions of two main characters, Justin Long's "Mac" and John Hodgman's "PC." A close reading, including a detailed visual examination and rough personality appraisal of these figures, is helpful in understanding the inner logic of these advertisements and much of the symbolism that their ideology is built on. Each character stands at roughly the same indeterminate height, though Mac's slimmer build and sleeker clothing style give him a slightly smaller look against the ubiquitously white stage background. Each character is a white, North American male (similar spots with different actors have been produced for the U.K. and Japanese markets), and the duo appear to be of comparable age (PC is perhaps meant to look a few years older). (Figure 1).

Similarities between the characters are limited to these basic traits, however, and individual styles and personalities emerge when the overall campaign is viewed as a unified text. PC is ever-present in standard business attire: earth-toned suits of brown, green, or tan over a white-collared shirt with matching tie and shoes. Always clean shaven, PC sports a short haircut and large, plain eyeglasses. By contrast, Mac stands out. Wearing cool blues, blacks, and grays, Mac prefers his shirts untucked, his sweatshirts unzipped, and his T-shirts showing (see "Time Machine" for 10 typical Mac fashions in one spot). His hair ranges from short to almost shoulder-length cuts but always appears trendy and styled, and his face often displays the beginning of a goatee. Mac often maintains his slim look by tucking his hands into his jeans' pockets. The animated holiday spots ("Gift Exchange," "Goodwill," and "Santa Claus") feature charactertures of PC and Mac that exaggerate these physical differences.

Personalities strongly mimic appearance in the fictional world of "Get a Mac," as displayed in a number of exchanges in early spots. PC, the consummate businessman, is interested in typical office work; "You should see what this guy can do with a spreadsheet," Mac jokes ("Better"). He is not, however, interested in creative productivity, as he tells Mac, "You were made to stimulate 10-year-old brains with your iLife jazz, while all I want to do is balance their checkbooks" ("Meant for Work"). PC's look and attitude conjure images of cubicles, paperwork, and boring but necessary employment; he would seem quite out of place at home or among children. PC is also prone to worry and often sick, as the ads offer a chance to bring the metaphors of computer problems—viruses, freezing, crashing—to life. Physical comedy is again used here to emphasize the point. In "Viruses" PC can't control a sneezing fit, while in "Restarting" he physically halts and starts the script again from the beginning. These early ads and others throughout the campaign show PC's self-awareness and anxiety regarding his health and marketability. In "Trust Mac" he is disguised to escape spyware; in "Self Pity" he keels over upon learning that Mac also can handle "work stuff"; and in "Accident" he reflects on death after a power cord mishap. His almost fatalistic worldview peaks in a number of spots ("Party is Over," "Surgery," "Office Stress," "Time Traveler") that chronicle the release and ensuing problems of Microsoft's Vista operating system, Apple's leading competitor product at the time.

Figure 1. PC and Mac

Mac personifies the antithesis of PC. Confident, calm, and collected, Mac consummately represents the Apple ethos by displaying a fun, knowledgeable, yet caring personality. He is smart and effortlessly adaptable to any situation, as he proves in both product "debates" with PC ("Out of the Box," "Stuffed") and witty banter ("Touché," "Better"). As his appearance foreshadows, Mac is more interested in personal productivity than with what would be classified as office work, though a few spots tout his equal ability for the latter ("Self Pity," "Touché"). Mac's image and personality call to mind jeans and sneakers, colorful creations, and enjoyable pursuits. In contrast to PC, Mac never worries about himself, though he does display concern and compassion for his ailing rival throughout the campaign (in "Viruses" he hands PC tissues during his sneezing fit, and in "Surgery" he listens to PC's medical plight).

In early spots we find Mac touting the "cool stuff" he is capable of: easy syncing with digital cameras ("Network"), creating home movies ("Better Results") and photo books ("Angel/Devil"), running both Apple and Microsoft operating systems ("Touché"). As the campaign progresses, however, Mac's position as a pitchman becomes less obvious, and he develops more into a continual counterpoint to the physical and emotional distresses of PC. In a number of spots (including the aforementioned "Meant for Work," "Party is Over," and many more), Mac's main role is to symbolically represent a "better way;" in a more recent spot, after hearing of PC's ridiculous attempts at improvements (bubble-wrap for protection, coffee cup holders for convenience), Mac asks with his only full line of the spot, "Shouldn't innovations make people's lives easier?" ("PC Innovation Lab"). Mac is transformed into a truly symbolic figure in "Elimination," as PC single-handedly proves his own inadequacy to a perspective consumer.

But whereas Mac is transformed into a more symbolic, passive figure as the campaign evolves, PC remains an active instigator of the platform debate. Most notably, he assumes the position of deceiver in his interactions with Mac, and later, with the tangible consumers who appear in the spots and the implicit consumer-viewers of the commercials. PC's mild dishonesty is first seen in one of the initial ads from 2006; in "WSJ" PC responds to news of Mac's positive review in the *Wall Street Journal* by fabricating his own accolades from the "um . . . Awesome Computer Review . . . Weekly . . . Journal." Soon his deception takes the form of trite rhetorical devices. In "Sales Pitch" PC plays on clichéd slogans like "supplies are limited" and "operators are standing by," while in other spots he takes on the personas of a politician, cheerleader, radio talk show host, and even scamming cupcake salesman to avoid actual, substantial comparisons with Mac (see "Podium," "Pep Rally," "PC Choice Chat," and "Bake Sale" respectively). In three spots ("Sabotage," "Surprise," and "Misprint") PC physically impersonates Mac to discredit the latter's image, while in another addressing the trend of younger consumers choosing Macs, he impersonates a pizza: "I'm trying to catch college students [. . .] When they come around looking for you, they'll see the free pizza, and then I'll get them!" (Figure 2). PC's deception seems limitless, as he even reworks the lyrics of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" into a sales pitch ("Santa Claus"). And yet in "Broken Promises," one of the final spots in the

Figure 2. "Pizza box"

campaign, PC assures the viewer that his newest operating system "won't have any of the problems" of the previous versions—"trust me."

The recognition of these text constructs and the patterns that emerge from a close reading of "Get a Mac" offer context and direction for an examination of the major themes presented and an interpretation of their hegemonic objectives.

Three Thematic Dichotomies: Work Versus Play, Sickness Versus Health, Difficulty Versus Ease

Obvious in even the initial viewing of the campaign, "Get a Mac" is built upon a two-product comparison and contrast structure: Mac versus PC. This close reading of the "Get a Mac" campaign, however, reveals both overt and symbolic meanings that seem

to group around three main binary structures: work versus play, sickness versus health, and difficulty versus ease. From these themes connections can then be made to larger concerns of consumption and identity, and the Apple ideology can be drawn out, examined, and critiqued.

By personifying the Mac and PC platforms for us through reverse anthropomorphism, "Get a Mac" does its part to guide us through the multiplicities of modern technology. A predominant binary offered is that of work and play, as most clearly demonstrated by the aptly entitled "Work versus Home" spot. Through the dialogue and props of this early commercial, Apple defines its notions of work and play, notions that carry through the entire campaign:

> Mac: Hello, I'm a Mac.
> PC: And I'm a PC.
> Mac: I'm into doing fun stuff like movies, music, podcasts . . . stuff like that.
> PC: I also do fun stuff, like timesheets and spreadsheets and pie charts.
> Mac: Ok . . . uh, no by fun I mean more in terms of . . . for example, it would be kinda hard to capture a family vacation, say, with a pie chart, you know?
> PC: Not true. [camera out to show a pie chart on an easel] For example, this light gray area could represent "hangout time," whereas this dark gray area could represent "just kicking it."
> Mac: [with a befuddled expression] Yeah . . . no, I feel like I was there.

The connotation here—that PC is inadequate for creative, "fun" pursuits—is also an indictment of PC's worldview that life is understood through the frame of work and that leisure pursuits need to be interpreted, and even experienced, through that frame. In fact, PC sometimes actually dislikes fun; in "Angel/Devil" he laments "Oh, fun. We tried that once. It was nothing but pain and frustration," and in "Counselor" he qualifies "creative stuff" as "completely juvenile and a waste of time." Alternatively, Mac represents a space where creativity produces bright, colorful, attractive results (see "Better Results"), a space where work is usually off camera from our lives. In "Meant for Work," we're told that this type of creativity is centered in the home, indicating a clear distinction between daily environments and their functions. Even the language of work is co-opted to serve this distinction; PC "calculates" how much time Mac wasted creating a photo book in "Flashback."

And yet some mixed meanings about Mac's relation to conventional work emerge in the text. In "Self-Pity" Mac appears in a quite fashionable suit—and what PC dubs "big boy clothes"—announcing "I do work stuff too. Come on . . . I've been running Microsoft Office for years." Indeed, Mac's compatibility with Microsoft Office and Microsoft Windows is featured in a number of spots ("Touché," "Misprint," "Pizza Box"). In "Office Stress" this compatibility prompts PC to give Mac a gift—a stress toy—commenting, "Microsoft Office 2008 just came out for Macs, so you're going to be doing a lot more work. I figured you'd need one of those babies." PC, however, immediately grabs the gift back and begins to use it as he reflects on the merits of Mac's

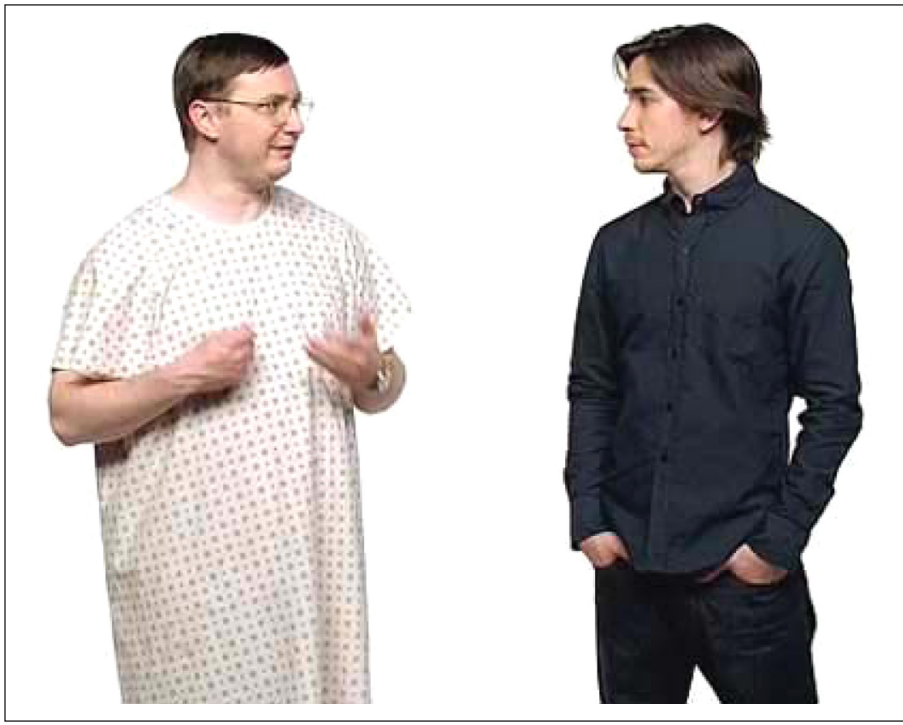

Figure 3. "Surgery"

compatibility. Throughout the campaign Mac remains unaffected by any stress associated with the type of productivity work that PC prizes, and spots highlighting this form of work rarely discuss his creative abilities. *Overall, Mac is found seemingly at ease in moving between less defined worlds of work and play, reflecting its adaptability in the flexible information economy, whereas PC appears to be stuck in the industrial paradigm that clearly differentiates what is labor and what is leisure*.

Sickness and health is another dichotomy represented in "Get a Mac"—or more literally, PC represents sickness, vulnerability, and weakness, while Mac represents exactly the opposite. As previously discussed, PC is repeatedly faced with threats to his health, manifested physically, cognitively, and emotionally. These hazards initially take the form of viruses and other forms of spyware and malware (malicious software) more common to systems running Windows-based operating systems, as well as internal system failures (such as freezing) that sometimes afflict these same computers. Apple's critique is general and universal here, only implicitly attacking Microsoft. Upon Windows Vista's worldwide release in 2007, though, a number of "Get a Mac" spots commented openly on Vista's weaknesses. "Party is Over," "Surgery," "PR Lady," and "Podium" chronicle the difficulty PC faces with his new operating system. (Figure 3). Subsequent spots focus on PC giving up hope of recovery and making the best of his condition ("Calming Teas," "Sad Song," "Yoga,"). In "Group," PC joins a

support group of computers "living with Vista" and takes the first step of "accepting that our operating system isn't working like it should." The reference here to a 12-Step Program suggests a bottoming-out for PC, though the subsequent comedy in the spot denies PC of any real chance of healing. Even smaller upgrades are difficult for PC; "Tech Support" presents just how clunky installing a webcam (for "serious videoconferencing," mind you) is for him. The campaign later revisits early messages about health with a slight revision of "Viruses" dubbed "Biohazard Suit," merely replacing some of PC's physical comedy in the former with a comical prop (the biohazard suit itself) in the latter.

Mac is never faced with a threat to his health in these spots, but rather is quick to point out his seeming invulnerability to computer viruses and malware. Except for the PC-impersonating-Mac spots (when Mac is usually off camera), Mac is represented as the embodiment of thriving adaptability. Not prone to viruses ("Viruses," "Biohazard Suit") or power-cord mishaps ("Accident"), Mac can even stand up to a level of children's recklessness that leaves PC punch-drunk ("Work vs. Home"). In fact, Mac represents a pillar of consistency over the course of the campaign, and changes in technology—or here, physical or mental states—are dealt with much differently for each character. As discussed, much is made of PC's upgrades, both small and large, but little fanfare is made of Mac's improvements. "Get a Mac" was launched in conjunction with the unveiling of Apple's MacBook line of notebook computers in 2006, and just 5 months after the iMac desktop line was revamped. Innovations introduced in these machines, from webcams to power cords to software, are presented as standard equipment, with the insinuation that anything less would be impractical. Two major operating system upgrades (Mac OS 10.5 "Leopard" and Mac OS 10.6 "Snow Leopard") have been released since the "Get a Mac" campaign debuted, and yet the spots rarely mention these advances. Of the six original spots broadcast within two months of Leopard's release in October 2007, only "PR Lady" mentions the new OS, and of the five introduced after the August 2009 release of Snow Leopard, none mention the new product. Despite his often-changing hairstyle and hip attire, these choices suggest an attempt to represent the core of Mac, the technology itself, as solid and consistent; any changes and adaptations made by Mac are largely diminished in magnitude next to the sickness and weakness of PC.

In a newer spot, "PC Innovations Lab," Mac responds to PC's ridiculous new features with the simple question, "Shouldn't innovations make people's lives easier?" Indeed, the character features and thematic clusters highlighted thus far lead to a grander macro-level commentary on the nature of technology, work, and life itself; do we want it difficult, or do we want it easy? The "Get a Mac" campaign clearly preaches a gospel of easy living, and Justin Long's portrayal of Mac—casual, friendly, easygoing—reflects this mantra. Early on, Mac's ease-of-use is highlighted; in "Out of the Box," Mac is up and running as quickly as the spot's title promises, and in "Network" he proves that "everything just kinda works with a Mac" by exchanging pleasantries in Japanese with a digital camera (personified). Mac seems to handle all situations with such repose: interactions with other technology, word play with PC, or greetings with new or potential customers.

Along with other aspects of the campaign, though, the emphasis on Mac's ease becomes spotlighted by the difficulties in which PC finds himself. In "Choose a Vista," life is complicated and identity uncertain for PC as he spins an operating system casino wheel, but Mac has "just one version with all the stuff you need." In "Trainer," "Legal Copy," and "Boxer," we find PC literally and figuratively fighting for his life, an interesting depiction considering PC's much greater current and historical market share. "Customer Care" features a frustrated and disheveled PC unable to find technical help, while Mac and Mac Genius, an Apple technical support guru, fade to the background. The Genius makes three appearances in the campaign and represents what is often the epitome of ease: letting someone else do the work. In "Genius," "Off the Air," and the aforementioned "Customer Care," the Genius is noted for her knowledge and ability to easily transfer files to a Mac (with the implication that the files are coming from a PC).

The dichotomies of "Get a Mac" underscored here call attention to the attitudes toward technology and users' interaction with technology that Apple has come to be known for—playful creativity, stability, and ease of use. More than a tool, though, Mac is advertised here as a persona and a lifestyle that users can appropriate for themselves through commodities.

Identity and the Consumer Society

A decade and a half before the first "Get a Mac" spot, Scott (1991) offered a prophetic take on the spirit of Apple's ethos:

> The Macintosh held the moment's possibility that computer technology would evolve beyond the mindless crunching of numbers for legions of corporate bean-counters. It was, as the print campaign claimed, the computer "for the rest of us." [. . .] Soft-focus, soft-sell commercials had characterized Apple products as being designed for creative people whose life and work were integrated, not compartmentalized like the organization man of the IBM image. (pp. 71-72)

Scott (1991) even mentioned that Mac wears blue jeans. And although Microsoft has replaced Big Blue as the Goliath to Apple's David, these comments are as relevant today as when they were first published. The binaries of work versus play, sickness versus health, and in turn, difficulty versus ease are heavily exploited in the "Get a Mac" campaign and serve to reinforce the corporate ethos that has developed from Apple's corporate mythology (Linzmayer, 2004), product design (Schaefer & Durham, 2007), and previous marketing campaigns (Jenkins, 2008; Scott, 1991; Shields, 2001). Apple clearly prepackages an identity construct with their technology.

The implicit question offered by "Get a Mac"—Do you want to be a Mac or a PC?—is a rhetorical one; we all want to be a Mac. As previously explored, Mac is the ideal model for a postmodern individual in the information age: he is playful and creative, yet able to get work done; he is immune to sickness and a fixture of consistency; and he easily navigates life like a fish in calm waters. In a consumer society like the

contemporary United Staes, we thirst for such models in our media, as they offer identity constructs and meanings of self that have largely disappeared from other aspects of lived experience. Advertising has been quite purposeful and effective in stepping in for such needs. Fox and Lears (1983) write of the accelerated "collapse of meaning" outside the self that consumer culture attempts to remedy by relying less on text, product features, and an appeal to traditional consumer "need," and more on symbolic imagery, demonstrated experience, and an appeal to consumer "want" (p. 21). Jhally (2006) takes this further, describing how these "wants" are then reinscribed back into "needs" for commodities through lifestyle advertising, offering a "fantasized completion of the self" (p. 91; see also Featherstone, 1987; Solomon & Englis, 1994). The white background of each "Get a Mac" spot serves to represent this world of lost meaning, upon which Apple paints a symbolic universe through image and character.

This dual dynamic of personal realization and social identification is a main part of both the text and subtext of "Get a Mac." PC vacillates between self-doubt and defensiveness as he struggles to find any level of personal contentment. His numerous attempts at deception and one-upmanship indicate a dire need to boost a virtually nonexistent self-esteem. And he is clearly part of the out-group, a point driven home by the equally pathetic, often sick friends (i.e., other PCs) who appear occasionally in the campaign. The antithesis of self-fulfillment, PC represents a postindustrial crisis of personal identity and meaning quite similar to the industrial crisis of identity and meaning that emerged nearly one hundred years prior.

Mac, on the other hand, faces no such crisis. Easy in his own skin, Mac feels no internal conflict to prove himself, and yet his coexistence in a world with PC constantly prompts him to do just that. Mac is equally equipped with witty wordplay and sincere compliment, indicating an intelligence and compassion in line with postmodern ideals of self-actualization. Of course, every customer who appears in the campaign ultimately shakes Mac's hand and joins his in-group, but more broadly, nearly every character ends up gravitating toward him—the boxing ring announcer, the personal trainer, the yoga instructor, the football referee . . . even the Mac impersonator planted by PC in "Sabotage." Mac represents *the* lifestyle for individual and social fulfillment.

The promise of Mac, though, is really "the cruel illusion of advertising," as commodities cannot in reality transform personal development as they do in these spots (Jhally, 2006, p. 104). Computers, likely the most dynamic consumer commodity to date, are still merely tools for achieving personal and social ends; they are not the ends in of themselves. This failure is well represented in the evolved thoughts of psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991), whose earlier work on the postmodern project of self remained optimistic that a social constructionist ontology could utilize technology to explore "the multiplicity of voices within the sphere of human possibility" (p. 247). By the adolescence of the Internet Age, however, Gergen (2000) considered this "technical ethos" an eroding force on personal relationships and communities, diverting attention away from concerns of the essential self and leaving an "inward examination of consciousness [that] yields not coherence but cacophony" (p. 206). The key here is

"inward examination," for as much as one identifies with Mac and the world he represents (or *wants* to identify), consumption remains an external search for meaning. Contemporary advertising has turned to grander projects of persuasion, discussed next, to address this contradiction.

Spectacular Consumption

A wide range of theory and literature has emerged in the last quarter century around the concept of spectacular consumption and the experience of postmodern consumers (Baudrillard, 1988; Deighton, 1992; Fox & Lears, 1983; Hebdige, 1988; Schor & Holt, 2000). Drawing on preceding work, Watts and Orbe (2002) define the spectacle as "a choreographed happening like a celebration or memorial that brings together the interpretive materials for rhetorical praxis;" unsatisfied with the conceptualization of spectacle as a static happening, though, they conclude that spectacular consumption "describes the process by which the material and symbolic relations among the culture industry, the life worlds of persons, and the ontological status of cultural forms are transformed in terms generated by public consumption" (pp. 3, 5). Advertising has long been considered and critiqued as a leader among the culture industries, offering artifacts of its own while financing the entertainment and leisure sectors (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944).

"Get a Mac" is a brilliant example of advertising's use of the spectacle to build brand community and engage consumers in a game of meaning. The outcome of this game, however, is known from the start, as Apple meticulously creates a viewer experience of positive association with Mac and negative association with PC. Indeed, this exercise is not expected to be fair, as the spectacle is not characterized by the exchange of meaning, but rather the transfusion of meaning (Watts & Orbe, 2002). "Get a Mac" prescribes a preferred reading consistent with the Apple ethos of creativity, independence, and play, and spectacular consumption offers a way to understand and reconcile why consumers seek commodities to satisfy their complex needs.

In her work on the experience of Nike stores, Penaloza (1998) details the four components of market spectacles. The first is the draw of a spectacle, or the agents, stories, and objects that attract the participant's attention. Despite the fact that computer hardware is the tangible commodity represented in "Get a Mac," objects play virtually no role in the draw, as the objects are metonymized into the more easily understood agents of the ads, Mac and PC. Brummet (1991, 1994) has written extensively on depictions of technology in film, contending that reducing technology to less threatening, less intimidating forms through the rhetorical device of metonymy allows the public to more easily understand their rapidly changing modern landscape, and more importantly, their place within it. Thus is the strategy in "Get a Mac," as Mac and PC offer familiar, recognizable characters in which to explore rapid technological change. In addition, Long and Hodgman's celebrity contribute to the draw here, as McCracken has observed that celebrities "encapsulate the values of a culture" (in Penaloza, 1998, pp. 345-346).[1] Finally, the narratives of competition and comradery, jealousy and

friendship, and success and failure seen specifically in each 30-second script and understood generally across the campaign are implicit storylines of our modern Western experience.

The second component of spectacle is the audience, and specifically the audience's participation in the spectacle. As a mass mediated spectacle, "Get a Mac" prompts viewers to contribute through symbolic identification with the life worlds of Mac and PC. Consequently, they can participate in spectacular consumption of the advertisements themselves, the analog and digital brand communities that these ads support, the purchasing experience at a state-of-the-art Apple Store, and the products themselves. Apple Store openings have become civic events, prompting hardcore enthusiasts to camp out on city blocks, while hundreds of others gather in throngs to experience the christening (Abraham, 2008; Phin, 2009). The distinctly modern stores, now a blueprint for corporate retail experiences ("Citi Rolls Out," 2011), feature a full-glass storefront, wood tables, stone flooring, and a "Genius Bar" where employees are happy to exorcise PC demons (Lohr, 2006). Such brick-and-mortar engineering of consumer participation also serves to legitimize the institutional sponsor (Foucault, 1979), which is the third component of spectacle. Here, Apple plays the role of corporate sponsor, a key one as Penaloza (1998) points out:

> Business institutions' role as vanguard of our collective social icons is a consumer research issue of increasing importance given the dual, global trends of commercialization and privatization. As institutional patron, business retains a distinct social contract as compared to the church or state. Further, as democratic-capitalist forms of political economy diffuse throughout the world, it is important for consumer researchers to consider the significance of corporations [. . .] in proliferating artifacts of value, a role historically held by their institutional predecessors, the church and state. (p. 347)

"Get a Mac" serves to reinforce the social power and cultural authority established over the company's history—a power and authority greatly diffused through their marketing.

Finally, the fourth component of spectacle is the process of meaning making that has been the topic of this study. "Get a Mac" acts as spectacle because of its "narrow focus, separation between actors and audience, and audience participation within a small set of approved responses" (Penaloza, 1998, p. 348). Indeed, the campaign would not be effective product advertising if it encouraged much action beyond the purchasing of Apple products and participation in Apple brand culture. Parody spots have been produced and posted to online video-sharing sites like YouTube, often lambasting the marketing more than the machinery, but the exceptionally long run of "Get a Mac" as an advertising campaign should be proof enough of its ability to create and transfuse a singular meaning: Apple products are better.

As a television advertising campaign with national saturation, regular distribution, and continuous evolution, "Get a Mac" lends itself more to Watts and Orbe's (2002)

definition of spectacle as *ongoing* condition, rather than *static* happening. As such, this spectacle can be seen for its ability to create and maintain community, and a bevy of web sites, fan sites, and blogs can easily be found online. Cult of Mac (www.cultofmac.com), Macenstein (www.macenstein.com), Hackint0sh (www.hackint0sh.org), Mac Rumors (www.macrumors.com), Apple Insider (www.appleinsider.com), and even I'm A Mac (www.imamac.com) are just a handful of the sites frequented by Mac enthusiasts. Other community members use their digital voice to creatively attack Apple's competitors (Muncy, 2009). And the cult of Apple enthusiasts is well documented (Caulfield, 2008; McLendon, 2009; Mitchell, 2008), with *Wired* Magazine comparing them to Hells Angels and Trekkies (Kahney, 2006).

As spectacle, "Get a Mac" uses the industry strategies of lifestyle advertising and the passion of their established audience to create a site of cultural meaning that is both controlled and public at the same time. At this intersection lies the promise of both economic success and cultural adoption, each of which "Get a Mac" has prompted, but here too lies the social responsibility inherent in mass communication, a responsibility that corporate actors have long shirked, downplayed, and complicated in the representations and messages of their marketing. This analysis concludes with a discussion of this intersection.

Class Obscured

The conceptualization of spectacular consumption applied to advertising serves to both highlight the powerful meaning created by brand experience and obscure some of the most problematic contradictions of consumer culture. Watts and Orbe (2002) explore how Budweiser has deflected attention away from primary issues of race in one of their ad campaigns through the use of spectacle. Similarly, "Get a Mac" obscures issues of class. Mac and PC, though alike in many perceived visual demographics (race, gender, age, nationality), represent distinctly different class positions. The resulting ideology Apple presents in the campaign is one that fits in well with the television discourse predominant during the medium's existence—namely, that consumption leads to class ascension.

Mac's lifestyle represents the self-actualized modern individual. His casual attitude and dress indicate a general freedom from the bounds of work (though we are both visually and verbally reminded in "Self Pity" that he easily navigates the office world as well). Mac has the distinct luxury of time, which allows him the liberty to express his creativity unfettered and the independence to vacation with family. He is not limited by obligation or, seemingly, by finances.[2] *Hidden here by the young, hip depiction of Mac is the reality that such a self-directed, flexible lifestyle is commonly riddled with risk, instability, and hyperindividuality, characteristics of postindustrialism that are often left out of the "digital" discourse* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fisher, 2010). Out of this context, Mac would seem to be classless, but in the context of "Get a Mac," he is upper class.

PC provides this context for Mac. Consumed by his work, PC represents the white-collar, middle manager of corporate America. His aversion to fun and penchant for ultra competitiveness, which sometimes stretch into areas of paranoia and moral degradation, epitomize the stress and obsession of American business. And yet PC does not symbolize the corporate elite, as we are given the sense that he works for someone else (whereas Mac is very clearly self-directed). Braverman (1998) was among the first work sociologists to note the myth of the white-collar worker in the 1970s, arguing that standard office jobs and the psychological states they produce are much more closely related to the monotony of industrial manufacturing jobs than to controlling ownership positions. PC is indeed caught in this trap; plainly neither poor nor self-sufficient, he is unhappily second class in "Get a Mac."

Competing conceptualizations of social class are much like conceptualizations of other social divisions (race, gender) and fit three main types: categorical, relational, and formational (Mosco, 2009). Class analysis in "Get a Mac" is best understood through the second approach; it is through the depicted relationship and comparison of Mac and PC that the deeper messages on class emerge. Defined in a Marxist sense, a class can be recognized by its antagonistic structural position to other classes in a market system of exchange, thus creating surplus value for itself or the other (McLaughlin, 2002). PC, then, is clearly the structural foil for Mac, whose more valued class position embodies the constructed, largely mythical American Dream of success and accumulation.

In addition, television viewing, advertising, and consumption have inherent class dimensions. Jhally (1990) argues, "Consumer free choice is free choice among those products that can be mass produced [. . .] Advertising does not create demand in this perspective but molds it and steers it in certain directions that work for the benefit of producers" (p. 15). Capitalism has created a clear distinction for most laborers between work time and leisure time. *For the upper class, this distinction is much less salient (or even nonexistent), while for the rest of us this distinction is marked by our work schedules and/or wage labor. In reality, however, this distinction is a lie for almost everyone*, as Marxist audience analysis indicates that television watching is, in fact, work (Smythe, 1977; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998); through watching commercial media, we are working for the system of capital by internalizing consumer ideologies and developing wants that will be ultimately satisfied through consumption (Jhally, 1990). *This "watching is working" or "leisure as labor" thesis has also been extended to the new digital media environment in which the portability and mobility of digital technologies no longer differentiates the sphere of labor from leisure* (Colby, 2007; McChesney, 2008). The money we earn from "conscious" work, then, flows to the top—i.e., producers, owners, the upper class—through our "unconscious" work, and classes are reinforced in the process.

As previously discussed, the work/play dichotomy constitutes a recurring theme in "Get a Mac," with PC as a comical, hapless Type A personality and Mac as a more ambiguous Type AB. PC's relationship to work is painfully clear, but Mac's is much less so; besides knowing that Mac has the ability to perform on par with PC, we are

generally unaware of his association with the economy of work. The campaign uses this dichotomy to emphasize Apple's playful, almost carefree image and appeal to consumers caught in PC's world (indeed, a number of later spots accentuate the ease of switching from PC to Mac). But in this structure, "Get a Mac" is both diverting attention away from its class representations and obscuring the deception of advertising and the promise of consumerism. *An example of what Jhally dubs the "cruel illusion" of advertising, the campaign creates expectations for personal transformation that cannot be met by commodities, and at the same time, promotes the material consumption—here, buying a Mac—that fortifies the class structures of the consumer society*. By consuming the spectacle of the ad campaign as commodity *and* consuming the tangible commodities themselves, we are doubly solidifying our class position in the ranks of workers much like PC.

Implications of Apple's Digital Discourse

This study attempts to slow down Apple's "Get a Mac" campaign, which we usually encounter in 30-second bursts of comedy and comparison during our television programming, in order to examine the critical cultural implications of its seeming ubiquity in our media diets. As demonstrated here, "Get a Mac" embodies dominant modern ideologies on identity, consumption, and class, though it obscures much of this ideology through a consistent portrayal of extreme dichotomies. In the end "Get a Mac" advocates for social ascension through class consciousness and participation in the consumer society, a promise that cultural theorists have consistently debunked since the emergence of lifestyle advertising in the postindustrial information age. The debate between Mac and PC, played out on the bright white canvas of "Get a Mac," deflects attention from the reality that consumerism only fully serves the market and its makers; for the project of self, it merely provides as false hope of self-actualization.

And yet many prominent figures in media and communication studies point to the emancipatory potential of the very thing that "Get a Mac" barely displays: the technology. Jenkins (2006) and Rushkoff (2010) are two strong voices in the conversation on digital culture who, while aware of the tradeoffs and dangers presented by this new version of consumerism, advocate for the empowerment of "prosumers" (actors who both produce and consume content) as a possible resolution to the paradox of consumer culture. Cheap and assessable technology is the catalyst for this rearrangement of power between corporation and customer, and fittingly, the story of another Apple advertising campaign brings into focus the issues surrounding prosumption. In 2007 an 18-year-old English student was contacted by Apple regarding the YouTube video he created featuring his iPod Touch; instead of asking him to remove the video, a strategy that Jenkins (2006) explains is often taken by media companies, the tech giant wanted to purchase the concept and involve the teenager in a professionally produced version of the work (Elliott, 2007). This now well-known example highlights the new capitalism of prosumption as fair and empowering, but it fails to address concerns of exploitation that are real and inherent in any reorganization of labor. Similarly, the

discourse of "Get a Mac" argues the simplicity of becoming a creator/producer if one possesses the right tools, as well as the social rewards of such a lifestyle, but completely ignores the social, economic, and legal (think copyright) barriers to this creative class that remain in place. New work on the economy of prosumption is exploring such concerns more deeply (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

The "Get a Mac" campaign's ultimate significance to media studies may lie in its contribution to the overall digital discourse of the early 21st century, which Fisher (2010) has identified as the primary tool for legitimating the shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. Fisher's (2010) analysis of *Wired* magazine suggests that the digital discourse serves a distinctly different purpose than the previous industrial discourse, the former functioning to mitigate the alienating nature of capitalism while the latter mitigated the exploitative nature of the economic system. Likewise, "Get a Mac," with its emphasis on consumption and class and its visibility in the popular consciousness, clearly advances the ideology of individuality over a more collectivist project of social advancement.

"Get a Mac" is a dynamic campaign and offers a number of avenues for further study not taken up here. In conjunction with the television spots, unique banner ads starring Mac and PC have appeared on the web (and have been featured prominently on the *New York Times* homepage). The nature and meaning of these new media products, how they fit with rest of the campaign, and how they influence online experiences all deserve both theoretical and practical consideration. In addition, Microsoft's 2008-2009 "I'm a PC" ad campaign (undoubtedly in response to "Get a Mac") raises both similar and distinct questions regarding identity advertising, technology, and consumption. Cross-cultural differences between the North American "Get a Mac" campaign and its U.K. and Japanese counterparts could also be explored in the context of lifestyle advertising and the social constructions of technology. Finally, critical research on advertising like "Get a Mac" must continue as the economic and political conditions around the globe push us closer and closer to an all-encompassing consumer society.

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1. Through their other work in television, film, and various media, Long and Hodgman each have cultivated a pop culture persona that adds to the familiarity of the U.S. campaign. *Slate*'s Seth Stevenson (2006) points out the possibility of oppositional reading in the campaign ads as he argues that the casting and reputations of these actors actually work against

the producers' preferred meaning for the campaign, as the target demographic is likely to identify more with Hodgman's lovable PC character.

2. On cost comparisons, John Dvorak (2009) of PCMag.com writes, "The Apple Macintosh generally costs more than a PC. End of report," though price is nonexistent in the campaign.

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Bio

Randall Livingstone is a 3rd-year doctoral student in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, whose academic background includes an MA in professional writing from the University of Massachusetts and further master's work in communication at Suffolk University, where he also taught in the English Department. His research interests include digital media and online communities, networks and network analysis, the political economy of communication, and advertising's role in society.