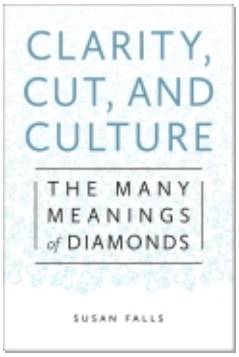
3. A Diamond Is Forever



3

A DIAMOND IS FOREVER

As ever more diamonds have been mined over the last seventy-five years, the industry has needed to develop a market willing to absorb new stocks (while making sure that there was little or no resale value). To achieve this, De Beers has spent millions of dollars each year on advertising through its marketing arm, the London-based Diamond Trading Company (DTC), and the Diamond Information Center (DIC).[1] The DTC sets goals that are then executed by an ad agency, partly by using the DIC as a mouthpiece. For example, De Beers's online site (www.ADiamondIsForever.com) keeps site visitors, over two hundred thousand per month, up to date on the latest DTC initiatives, offers a free download of a "bridal app," and endorses itself by citing the "Diamond Information Center." Print, web, and video ads are complemented by contests, billboards, and product placement in high-profile media events like the Academy Awards.

De Beers has consistently manipulated price and demand through strategic production and distribution; alongside such tactics, its marketing efforts have been wildly successful: over 70 percent of all American women own at least one diamond.[2] As displayed in advertisements, diamonds symbolize romance, status, and glamour. Ads also intimate that scarcity, beauty, and naturalness increase diamonds' value. Of course ads encourage us to go purchase diamonds, but how

much do they determine what we think about the meaning of these gala minerals? Ad content certainly played a role in many stories I heard, particularly when we talked about other people's diamonds. But other factors also shaped the way consumers talked about their own jewels: how they acquired the diamond, their relationship with the person from whom the diamond was received (in cases of gifting), attitudes about why it was purchased, and the biography of both the wearer and the stone. While most theory usefully observes consumers as members of identity groups (like those based on class or ethnicity) rather than as individuals, this chapter shows that, far from being batches of passive absorbers, consumers creatively interpret discourse in ways that may cut against their membership in identity groups. Combining analytic and ethnographic approaches, consumers can be productively theorized both at the level of individuals and at the level of groups.

Individuals and Groups

Consumption studies have successfully explored the symbolic potential of commodities, especially in terms of (re)producing ideology, in which people use commodities to construct national, racial, or ethnic identities. And a focus on differences among individuals is often called for in some studies, especially when ethnographic materials are present, as in Elizabeth Chin's (2001) work on Barbie dolls and children of color in Connecticut. Meanwhile, persuasive deconstructions of advertisements, like Robert Foster's (1999) work on brands in Papua, New Guinea, clarify how social categories or ideologies are maintained through marketing. In tracing the rise of advertising itself, Raymond Williams (1980) argues that ads, as powerful psychological tools that ensure economic reproduction, are "magical" in that they hide the conditions of production while transforming objects into "mere signs," where to consume is to sign(al) rather than to use (although I would argue that this is a somewhat false opposition, since signaling *is* using). In such works, consumers are molded by forces of discourse arising out of the relations of production.

People, said to be written by ad discourse, lack agency, individuality, and subjectivity, and there is little consideration of how local conditions impact the interpretive encounter between individuals and the commodities that ads tout.

In linking ad language to political economy and the discursive production of subjects, Betty Friedan (1963) was one of the first to explicate a relationship between advertising and identity, arguing that ads have the potential to create and communicate not only status but also (feminine) gender. Friedan reserved special ire for marketing aimed at housewives. Ads (attempt to) make housewives feel indispensable to the running of the house, a job, she asserted, that could be done by any "halfwit" and that requires only a "strong enough back and a small enough brain" to recognize and purchase household products and appliances. But the underlying framework of this argument, that women—or that people—passively soak up ad copy, is an untenable position.

Since Friedan's publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the gendering potential of ads has been continuously and vigorously interrogated in academia. Most ads do depict diamonds as strongly gendered. And while many people I talked with agreed that "diamonds are feminine," some argued that this is only the case because almost all jewelry is feminine, and that men should not wear any jewelry other than "traditional ornaments" such as cufflinks, watches, and wedding bands. So, while diamond ads are strongly gendering, even defining of femininity, this needs to be contextualized within overarching attitudes toward jewelry.

Working from another angle, theorists in the 1960s and 1970s examined advertising through the lens of structuralism. Judith Williamson's (1978) work showed how advertising promotes commodity fetishization, where commodities (like shoes or cameras) are social things whose meanings are divorced from their circumstances of production. Marketing can thus be viewed as a value-giving process that transfigures an object into what Karl Marx (1867) called a "social hieroglyph," where the real conditions of its production and value are obscured. A politics of reconnection, in

which consumers are educated about the realities of production, can, but does not always, reduce such fetishization.

Awareness about diamond production is uneven, but even the knowledgeable do not necessarily reject diamonds. "I just love diamonds and wearing them makes me feel special and feminine, and, well, like someone cares about me! They are sparkly and wonderful, and they go with everything and you can wear them to turn that plain outfit into something really special," one woman explained, just minutes before summarizing a story she had heard on the radio about "how the meaning of diamonds is manufactured by ads and there is a lot of manipulation involved."

I asked Ray, a fashion photographer in his late thirties, who believes diamonds are "overrated," whether there is a difference between wearing a small diamond and wearing a large one. He replied,

> No, no difference—big, small, it's all the same—people are not educated. Plus it's something—it's like everything actually, it's like politics, the environment—nobody gives a shit, they don't want to know. Even if they did somehow know, people are so cliché in this country they would still want it—they would still want their peanut-size diamond ring. Everyone wants that.

Ray's pessimism is supported by Lisa Bratton's (2001) research on correlations between education and desire. Her study examined whether knowledge about the history of the diamond industry influenced the beliefs, attitudes, purchase intentions, and behaviors of a sample of undergraduates. She found no change in attitudes or behaviors after the subjects learned more about the industry, suggesting a lack of concern for the social ramifications of participating in this commodity chain.

This apparent disconnect is partly explained by the fact that gaining information does not necessarily undermine the metaphors—subtle but powerful linguistic devices—that fetishize products in ads. In the case of diamonds, temporal metaphors rupture the connection

between knowledge about diamond production and consumption. Sallie Westwood (2002) shows that the phrase "A Diamond Is Forever" promotes what she calls "diamond time," which is predicated on symbolic associations having to do with romance, status, and heterosexuality. Diamond time simultaneously conceals the labor time of children and factory workers, and the gendering of gem production in India. She argues that the erasure of labor time in ads is essential to the success of other time frames, and thus to continued sales. Consumers, described as "complicit knowing subjects . . . in a fairy tale where we all want to believe that diamonds are forever," use diamonds for signaling to others the messages dictated by the industry and on occasion suggested by celebrity style gurus (Westwood 2002, 36). Looking at how time relates to consumerism through rhetorical deconstruction is an innovative approach, but Westwood's conclusions are not altogether congruent with the way consumers explained their own desires and practices to me, probably because Westwood's claims are based on a theory of meaning that makes it challenging to pick up individual divergences from the rhetorical statements in ads. Ethnography with consumers focused on the postacquisition context is one methodological answer to this problem.

Westwood's work is like that of Jean Baudrillard (1972)—both look at consumption as instrumental to identity formation through signing practices. Said in another way, meaning emerges from the way we use or display commodities, especially branded ones, to construct or perform identity. Within this framework, a commodity's use-value is secondary to its sign-value; it is a sign, intelligible to others (sign-readers), largely identified on the basis of class.

Other work in this vein shares the tendency to obscure individual agency, subjectivity, and history. Arthur Berger (2000), for example, explicitly denies the impact of the particular and the local in arguing that since advertising, on television in particular, broadly shapes people's behavior, its effects must be studied en masse, rather than at the level of the individual. And of course, advertising *is* a significant social force. How could it not be? In the mid-1990s, the number of advertisements

Americans were exposed to on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines was as high as four hundred per day, and if promotional messages, including logos on products and ads on billboards that we see but may not process, are included, this number could be as high as sixteen hundred. By 1997, this figure had exceeded three thousand ads per day by some estimates (Shenk 1997). Some contemporary estimates exceed even this astronomical figure (Kirn 2007). However, our relationship to marketing is indeterminate: just seeing a message is no guarantee of internalization—that even heavily advertised products fail more often than not is a testament to this point. Consumers may be lured by the symbolic associations ads promote, but they are not rigidly controlled by them. By focusing on the tensions between postpurchase interpretations and ad discourse, we can better understand how commodities work in everyday lives—in ears, on fingers, and around necks.

Consumers use the ideas they glean from ads as one resource among many to make meaning, but are likely to say that other people are less savvy than they are about marketing. For example, Suzanna, a married, twenty-something fundamentalist Christian, parroted a De Beers message when she explained that her engagement ring is "a symbol of our love for one another." But then she continued,

> Some people wear big diamonds, even when they go to the grocery store or to eat at a cheap diner, to show that they have money or whatever, but for me it's not about that. It's about the celebration. I am religious, so, to me, I see God's love for us shining in here. And plus I think I am pretty savvy when it comes to what's on TV, so I am not easily drawn into believing what's in the ads.

There's a logic to the tendency to generalize about generic diamonds while weaving elaborate, situated meanings for specific individual stones. Diamonds *in general* symbolize status and romance, but *this* diamond, the one on Suzanna's finger, in its material particularity, holds ideas, associations, and memories wholly her own. They are

situated within her awareness of ads and symbolic meanings, but also reflective of her own life and worldview. So, while the "A Diamond Is Forever" campaign encourages people to purchase and treat diamonds as symbols, people can undermine, ignore, or refuse ad symbolism using other semiotic strategies. Understanding the mechanics of these other strategies requires delving into a bit of technical language, but the payoff is worth it.

Symbolism

Many theorists and cultural critics use the term "symbol" to mean "sign" as it was understood by Ferdinand de Saussure. The Saussurean sign consists of two parts, likened to two sides of a coin that cannot be separated: the *signifier* and the *signified*, the word and the idea.

Saussure theorized the relationship between the signifier and the signified as one of shared convention, but the model poorly captures subjectivity and the singular, often creative and original, meanings of language, gesture, or material objects that make up everyday experience. To understand how commodities operate, then, it is precisely at the level of individuated particularity, contextualized within shared conventions, that focused research is most needed. This requires using a model of the sign that affords space for idiosyncrasy, a feature the Saussurean model lacks.

Luckily, there is an alternative: we can use the sign concept developed by Charles Saunders Peirce (pronounced "purse"). The Peircian model has the advantage of simultaneously explaining shared habits of signification and at the same time, keenly embracing subjectivity.

A Peircian sign has three elements: it stands for something to somebody in some respect or capacity. Unlike Saussure's two-sided sign, the Peircian sign is tripartite, encompassing a *sign-vehicle*, an *object*, and an *interpretant*. The association of the sign-vehicle (or sign) to its object takes place in some given consciousness, in time, and in a particular context. Semiosis is, therefore, a unique event, every time, and, although

we draw on experience and our behavior tends to be extremely habitual, we are not merely habit driven—any sign has the potential to give rise to any object for some interpretant.

Signs can thus be analyzed according to the relation of any sign (like Saussure's signifier) to its object (like Saussure's signified). The interpretant, the most powerful and intriguing element of Peirce's account (and which is totally absent from Saussurean theory), is the understanding that we have of the sign-object relation, or the way we translate the sign into object. And what is really special is that these understandings or translations can change considerably according to circumstances. Why? Since meaning comes from the interpretant—emerging from a process of interpretation—it is not a characteristic of the sign-vehicle itself. Here, meaning is more of an event or process than a thing to be apprehended.

Peirce eventually identified over sixty thousand different kinds of signs, but these were largely iterations of three basic types: *symbol*, *icon*, and *index*. Every potential sign has the potential to be treated as a symbol, an icon, or an index, depending on the situation. Similar to the Saussurean sign, a Peircian symbol refers to its object by virtue of a law, habit, or convention. It is an arbitrary association—there is no necessary link between sign and object. For example, a red octagon is a symbol of the imperative "Stop!" To say that a diamond means "love" or "romance" is to treat it symbolically, but this is due to "deeming," one of advertising's primary functions.

Deeming establishes a habitual association of sign to object through repetition and persuasion. Ads attempt to persuade us that some given meaning or association is attached to a product. Diamonds have been deemed a "quintessential symbol of eternal romance," according to one consumer. What happens to these symbolic significations at the individual level, after something is purchased, is not advertisers' particular concern. What does concern them is maintaining the notion of diamonds as a beautiful and necessary component of love, courtship, and status, which is why the industry challenges associations—for example, that diamonds

are traded for weapons used in brutal war and then sold to American consumers—that might tarnish their carefully managed symbolic load.[3]

Even when people understand how deeming works, it can remain a powerful force. Allen, a 32-year-old Wall Street broker, explained what he saw as the meaninglessness of diamonds to me:

> [R]omance is not what diamonds are about, or vice versa, even though a lot of people think that, it is just society that believes it. It's like flowers. If you send someone flowers by calling an 800 number and then they are all happy because you did something for them—diamonds are the same. People don't know why they like them, but they are just so darn happy to get one. But actually, it is an object with no meaning. People don't know why they think any of this and so to me it doesn't seem right—it is more or less a ridiculous concept. It is totally random—do you know the movie *Good Will Hunting*? The main star, Matt Damon, is asking this girl out and he is like, "We should go out for some caramels some day," and she says something like, "That's strange," and then he is like, "Well, going out for caramels is just as arbitrary as going out for coffee." Diamonds are just like that. It could have been anything. Why not just write the person you are going to marry a check? Just cut them a big fat check and hand it over?

So, ostensibly believing that diamonds have no intrinsic meaning, Allen rejects their association with romance. Nonetheless, he bought one for his sweetheart, thus fulfilling the aims of marketers that were established when Harry Oppenheimer hired N. W. Ayer to make a concerted push to massage American demand.

Oppenheimer and Ayer: The Rise of Diamond Advertising

In the 1920s, amidst a failing U.S. economy and diminishing demand for luxury items, control over De Beers was usurped by Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, owner of the powerful South African Anglo-American Corporation. In 1938, his son, Harry Oppenheimer, hired Gerald Lauck, president

of the New York advertising agency N. W. Ayer & Son, to spearhead a new campaign. At the time, about three-quarters of their stock went to engagement rings in the United States for about $80 apiece, but they were of poorer quality than those sold in Europe, where the market was never, and still is not, particularly robust. Oppenheimer hoped that an ad campaign could persuade middle-class Americans not only that diamonds were integral to courtship but that the purchase of more diamonds at higher prices was a direct expression of love (Epstein 1982a). Ayer took advantage of every kind of medium available to stoke demand.

Ayer's psychologists devised consumer questionnaires for focus groups, while public relations experts hosted special events to promote sales. Account managers even negotiated with film producers to have movie titles reflect well upon the industry—gems were placed in love scenes on the bodies of film stars—and arranged "photo ops" with British royalty. They even commissioned artists like Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso to develop images for their ads. Using feedback gathered from focus groups, "news" texts containing "historical" information were placed in major media for women to see.

Ayer's "Hollywood Service" provided copy to infotainment media about movie stars' diamonds. These press releases, including portraits of celebrities' ring-wearing hands, stating carat size and cut, were published in newspapers and magazines. Contemporary marketing continues to rely upon these same apparently successful strategies. "News" shows like *Entertainment Tonight* showcase the diamonds celebrities receive or purchase, often stating size and price. Popular magazine articles cover diamond "news," as when rap mogul Sean "P. Diddy" Combs spent almost $1 million on a diamond necklace for pop singer Jennifer Lopez after her break-up with actor Ben Affleck, or when the rings exchanged by actors Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, gold bands studded with multiple stones, were copied by a jewelry distributor, who was then sued by the couple to the tune of $50 million. And the popular website Pinterest contains an entire "pinboard," a section where users can find and add related images, dedicated to "Celebrity diamonds seen at the Oscars, BAFTA's,

and Golden Globes," which features photos of stars alongside close-ups of their diamonds.[4]

By 1941, sales had risen by a stunning 55 percent, which Ayer celebrated as the result of a new form of advertising in which no direct sale or brand name is sold, but the idea is impressed upon the public (Epstein 1982a). Continuing through the 1940s, Ayer sent authoritative representatives to high schools to educate young women about the importance of diamond jewelry, and published a portrait series called "Engaged Socialites." Based on a logic of emulation, the portrait series would, as explained in a 1948 agency strategy paper, "spread the word of diamonds worn by stars of screen and stage, by wives and daughters of political leaders, by any woman who can make the grocer's wife and the mechanic's sweetheart say, 'I wish I had what she has'" (Epstein 1982a). And when I visited the Hope Diamond—a blue diamond famous not only for its provenance but also for being cursed (Kurin 2006)—on display at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, I heard countless women, and even very young girls, using some variation of the phrases contained in that agency paper: "Oh God, I wish I had that," "I would wear that every day," or "I want that soooo bad." Steps away, a red diamond, one of the largest in existence and worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, was virtually ignored while people pushed one another to get closer to the Hope. Countless other stones—not diamonds—of all colors, sizes, and shapes are on display at the museum, but none elicited the excitement and desire expressed about the Hope and the colorless diamond collection featured in ad campaigns, which rely in part on the infamous tagline "A Diamond Is Forever."

Frances Gerety

In 1947, copywriter Frances Gerety came up with the slogan "A Diamond Is Forever." Even though it has been listed by market-watching journalists as the best advertising slogan of the twentieth century, initial response inside the agency was lukewarm. But within three years of the agency using it, an estimated 80 percent of engagements included the exchange

of a diamond. Ayer believed the growth of this trend was interrupted only by the desire of women to differentiate themselves from their mothers (a desire discovered through focus group research) and responded with a "Not Your Mother's Ring" campaign. This pattern of marketing to carefully tracked consumer responses continues today in the "Right-Hand Ring" campaign.

Ayer also set up the Diamond Information Center (DIC) as an in-house public relations department and authoritative front from which to release information. Drawing on Thorstein Veblen's (1899) notion of conspicuous consumption, the agency introduced the idea that a woman's ring indexes her partner's success. The persistence of this idea in conjunction with the perception of needing a diamond to legitimize an engagement was reflected in interviews with both men and women. Allison told me that when she became engaged, she informed her fiancé about what she wanted:

> There is no question that I want a diamond. And I told him that I was not going to wear some little chip. So I said straight out, "Don't even bring anything less than a carat around." He didn't want me to wear a small one anyway, as people might think that he was cheap. Of course he didn't want that!

Like Allison, Henry believes that by wearing a big diamond, a woman is "telling the world that 'Hey, I can afford it,' meaning the diamond and lots of other things too," but for him, and other men I interviewed, the connection between diamonds and status is complicated by the fear that too big a diamond is unbelievable or socially unacceptable.

> What I know about De Beers is just the ads I see: A Diamond Is Forever and all that jazz. I see those ads all around town. And I do feel affected by them, but I am a guy, and so what I really want to know is what women think. You know giving someone something like that is a big deal, and you

> don't want to screw it up by giving something too small, but something too big can also be wrong. I mean it could be a disaster!

But, I asked, what would he do if he had the money and his girlfriend wanted a big, even huge and expensive one? "Then," he replied, "the sky's the limit!"

There is a sliding range, highly individualized, within which diamonds can or should appropriately reflect status. I saw no consistent factor determining the extent to which people see diamonds as the type of status symbol Veblen imagined, although the idea that size can reflect a man's financial success was very often at play. Allen expressed a belief, shared by others, that evaluating someone's financial success on the basis of jewelry is "wrong because you can never tell if you are dealing with the real thing or a fake" and that "some guys will go into debt to buy something that does not fairly reflect their standing in life. They just want you to think they are up there, but they aren't."

Sally, who comes from a moneyed family and works with inner-city youth, agreed with Allen's basic assessment that reading status is risky, but for a different reason: people's "real" motives are hidden. As she has aged and "started to become aware of class issues," it is increasingly important to her that others not see her as "spoiled, as someone who is pretending not to be spoiled, or even as someone from a privileged class who is pretending to be from a lower class." The diamond earrings she once wore were demoted to permanent residence in a jewelry box in the midst of this "class crisis" because the associations of glamour and rank in the form "of having made it" were not in keeping with the way she wanted to be seen by others.

For Sally, diamonds not only can reflect being spoiled or privileged but also can reveal aspirations toward being middle-class—neither of which she finds desirable:

> But you know with diamonds, [class] actually doesn't matter, because people who are really poor and don't have anything will spend their last

> cent on a diamond, or something that looks like one, so that they will appear as if they have done all the things they are supposed to do and have been rewarded by being securely middle-class. So, as I see it, wearing diamonds is about being middle-class, about wanting to be middle class. And I don't want that.

To Sally, aspiring to look middle-class is "tacky." Wearing a diamond announces "a middle-class mentality" to the world and is for her, therefore, deeply unattractive. These ideas reflect her own class ideologies, social concerns, and experiences, as well as ad content, but are not congruent with the symbolic associations ads advance.

Anxiety about how strangers read gems as an expression of a partner's success was surprising in some cases, but for everyone who worried about such conclusions, another brushed them off since others who "don't know anything" are of no social consequence. This point was reiterated by those whose diamond narratives are known only to themselves, their closest friends, and/or their family. The memories, emotions, hopes, and stories that generate meaning are unknown to social others who misinterpret the stone on the basis of generic symbolic meanings seen in marketing.

During the late 1960s, as production ramped upward and producers looked for market shares outside of the United States, De Beers hired the J. Walter Thompson agency, with its expertise in international marketing, to develop campaigns for markets in Germany, France, Brazil, and Japan. Demand remained weak in Europe and Brazil, but the Japanese operation paid off. Images of Japanese women participating in nontraditional Western activities like biking or mountain climbing while wearing Western clothing and diamonds alongside swanky-looking Japanese men who looked on approvingly fired the imagination of the Japanese public. Within fifteen years, diamond consumerism had increased from less than 5 to over 70 percent, and Japan is now one of the largest diamond markets in the world.

Japanese demand is for small, high-quality stones whose perfection and cleanliness stand as a metaphor for the bride's virginal purity. A mar inside the stone is unacceptable, whereas in the United States, size is sometimes more important than clarity. Evidently, we love big things: a "Bigger Is Better" campaign ran in New York during the market boom of 2004, but the industry has, at other times, promoted small stones. In the 1970s, when their cache of small diamonds grew due to increased Russian production, De Beers launched a campaign that emphasized cut, color, and quality to promote small solitaire diamonds, tennis bracelets, and cluster rings. Consumers were urged to appreciate the sentimental aspect of the gift, rather than the size of the stone. Average carat sizes for purchases plummeted. The campaign was so successful that large stone reserves ballooned. By the late 1970s, campaigns to rebuild desire for larger stones while not erasing small stone demand had to be devised. The solution? Offer multistone jewelry, particularly large solitary stones framed by smaller ones, called "baguettes," a design still popular today.

Marketing has not only worked to encourage desires for differently sized gems but has also attempted to manage demand for color. Diamonds in ads are usually transparent, but because of shading treatments, greater availability of natural and synthetic colored gems, and product placement, colored diamonds—even yellow and brown "cognac" and "champagne" hues—have become fashionable. One night at a barbecue, I met Russell and Paige, a professional couple in their thirties, and told them about my research. While discussing their engagement ring, Russell said he felt sorry they had already purchased a stone when they found out about coloration. He "regretted the purchase of the clear diamond because what we really wanted to get was one of those new colored ones. They are really valuable because they are yellow!" But Paige reassured him, "This one is beautiful, and I wouldn't want anything different." She joked, "It makes me feel so, umm, traditional." Later in private she admitted to me that she really

did prefer a yellow one because it "would be something different." Perhaps the coloration ads had successfully provoked a new desire.

Sex Sells

Some people, however, have negative reactions to symbolic deeming and the appearance of diamonds in association with Hollywood stars. Claire, a film editor in her midthirties who describes herself as "not into diamonds," rejects the association of diamonds with celebrity:

> I know that the diamond companies are trying to make you feel like you have to have a diamond to be a legitimate part of society, but anyone can see through that. They are just companies with a really expensive product, and I think the whole Hollywood thing is caught up in it. I have no idea how the whole thing happened, but you see the Oscars or whatever and they are all talking about so-and-so's diamond, and how much it cost, and where it came from, like Harry Winston or whatever, and it's all just really stupid, if you ask me. I mean, who cares?

But although she eschews its symbolic associations with glamour and status, Claire does have a diamond. She says that its meaning is linked to the memory of her partner's grandmother and the close relationship he shared with her, and the hope that her and her partner's relationship will live up to their dreams and expectations (they are "committed, but not married").

Diamond ads, the content of which people are clearly responding to, have risen to the level of a cultural phenomenon, tracked by *Advertising Age* and *Brandweek*, publications that provide an additional layer of visibility to marketing. For example, in November of 2000, *Brandweek* covered the De Beers holiday campaign, reporting that De Beers had spent $15 million in television ads targeted to high-income men between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four to complement an online contest (Bittar 2000). De Beers had also purchased all 140 available ad spaces

in New York's former World Trade Center from which to bombard prospective buyers with "guy-humored" ads containing copy such as "Only her ears need enhancing," followed by, "Of course there's a return on your investment. We just can't print it here."

Many ads insinuate a link between sex and diamonds: The "Ever wonder why so many babies are born in September" ad was posted all over New York City in September 2003. In interviews, people who made an association between diamonds and sexual access usually did so with complicated attitudes. Some women equate receiving a diamond with "being possessed" and understand it as an exchange in which they are making themselves into, or allowing themselves to be treated as, sexual objects. And some men explicitly stated that giving someone a diamond is a way to ensure sexual access: according to Sally, wearing a diamond ring

> is like saying, "I have been bought!" He gave you the ring and now you are his, the whole thing is oriented around him. You are indebted to him and that's it, that's the extent to what you are getting from him, and now you have to spend your whole life paying him back. Gosh, that sounds terrible, but that's what it is all about if you know what I mean. It says, "I am conservative and into home decorating." Emeralds and rubies don't say any such thing. Wearing them, you are more saying, "Here I am, I am exciting and lovely!" I don't think diamonds are very sexy in that sense.

It is interesting to compare Sally's words with what Ian said.

> I was walking past a bus station over on Madison Avenue earlier and I saw an ad for diamonds, and it said something like, "Ever wonder why so many babies are born in September?" and then there is this image of this perfect diamond just reflecting all over with gleaming colors. And I was like, "Wow!"—and it took me a minute—I was truly perplexed, but then I was like, "Oh, OK, so the idea is that you give her the diamonds in December and then she starts fucking you like crazy and the fucking is better and it is so good that you get her pregnant 'cause she is so crazy

> to fuck you all the time." But I think that I am like most men, and men want to make women feel good and happy and, you know, turn to you and smile and be glad that they are with you and feel like they are in love with you and enthralled and all that, and the idea of this ad is that you can actually buy that. So in a way you are willing to lay out the dough and that is what people are actually appreciating. It is the sacrifice that turns women on, maybe, which I understand, but then there is the whole symbol thing too.

Ian's understanding of the exchange of diamond for sex is perhaps more generous than that of Tom, who, having seen the same ad, was talking about rap stars and "bling" when the subject of sex came up.

> These guys are simple conspicuous consumers. They have the money and they use it to adorn themselves. They don't have money in the bank; they are walking around wearing it. It's not like disposable income like I bought this coffee with. That's all they have. So people can see it and envy them. And women will want to have sex with them. And it's all the same with women, they get diamonds and then they have sex with you for the next thirty years. All women are hos [slang for whores], really—it's like a contract—I will provide for you, entrust you with my money, here's a diamond to prove it, and then you have sex with me. There is an expectation of fidelity, and women wear diamonds to show that they are taken, that they are marked. And there are those ads on TV and billboards all over town. Have you seen that one that says why babies are born? And the whole thing is how you can get someone to have sex with you if you give them a diamond. It's all so visible and out there, now you don't see that for pearls or sapphires, and here it is, a rock. A rock!! It's just a rock, OK? So, I mean, what's it all about anyway?

The way men understand women, sexual relationships, and gifting varies from person to person, but Tom, as it turns out, would give a diamond to a woman, even dipping into his savings to do so, even

though he sees the exchange as a kind of sexual purchase. The symbolic marketing of diamonds is ineffective on both Tom and Ian, who both told me that diamonds might be a symbol of love and romance to other people but that they "do not buy into all that" and are "aware of ad techniques."

For each person who finds the ads clever or sweet ("I just love those ads!"), another finds them insulting. Simone described one set of ads, and explained why she found them distasteful:

> [I saw] the ads for diamonds where there is a silhouette of a woman but there is a diamond on it, and the diamond is very present and sparkly but her whole face is erased. To me this is, like, such a major turnoff. I think "suburban" and I hate that. I mean there is supposed to be a person there! But in the ads it's like it's the diamond that matters and the woman is just faceless.

Ads sometimes feature celebrities to generate glamour—which is sometimes about sex but at other times about class or status.[5] In 2003, advertisers organized "tie-in" events—events where certain products are featured—associating diamonds with celebrity, fame, and success. Together with General Motors, De Beers built the "Diamond Cadillac," a car specially retrofitted with professional jewelry cases, studio lighting, and a make-up counter to transport jewels and stars to the Oscar night celebrations. Promoting associations with Hollywood is a mainstay in diamond marketing history: retailers report that designs worn by film, television, and music stars fly off the shelves as soon as celebrity-specific advertisements are broadcast.

Women I spoke with often recited the carat size and color of Oscar nominees' jewelry, or were able to otherwise describe it. A few who were knowledgeable in this way remarked on the "incredible beauty" of the stones. Others were critical: Jessica wondered how "these people get those diamonds, I mean I bet they don't even get to keep them. If they are even real! It's just a publicity stunt. Half the time they don't even look

that good." Even though she prefers not to wear diamonds because of the "exploitation of all the people involved," Jessica was quite well versed in who was wearing what. She explained,

> I had a neighbor from Sierra Leone and he only had one arm, and they had this meeting [in her apartment building] where they were talking about what had happened over there. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing a diamond. Especially when it's just that same ring everyone has, with, you know, that same boring setting. But mainly, like Nicole Kidman or whoever, they are just part of the whole machine anyway, so, I mean, who can be surprised that they are wearing diamonds? That doesn't make me want to run out and get one.

Jessica later qualified all of this by stating that when a diamond is handed down or in a very old setting, it is acceptable, even becoming a beautiful and cherished item.

Raise Your Right Hand

Taking another path to stimulate sales, a $6-million advertising campaign, with the tagline "Women of the World, Raise Your Right Hand," posits a feminist sensibility in encouraging women to make purchases in commemoration of career accomplishments. *Billboard Magazine* (Hay 2004) covered the campaign, which became even more visible when it appeared as a story in the *New York Times* (Walker 2004), the *Wall Street Journal* (Yee 2003), and *USA Today* (Carter 2002); celebrity and fashion magazines like *People* and *VIBE* then started covering the purchase of right-hand rings by public figures. The campaign—correlated with increased sales directly to women—received the "They Get It" award from Advertising Women of New York (AWNY), a watchdog group that tracks the construction of gender in ads. These right-hand ring ads feature svelte models wearing diamonds on their right-hand "bling-finger," accompanied by copy such as, "Your left hand says 'We'; Your right hand

says, 'Me.'" Others in the series read, "Your Left Hand Rocks the Cradle. Your Right Hand Rules the World" and "Your Left Hand Feeds the Family. Your Right Hand Takes the Cake." Since this campaign is responding directly to the construction of women in most diamond ads, it makes the tacit ideologies in those ads more explicit (where women are family oriented, passive, soft, and subordinate to their male partners).

But it is not just rhetoric that marks this campaign as special. At the level of material culture, the settings differ from solitaire or other engagement-looking jewelry, tending toward vertical, more playful motifs. In addition to the ad blitz, the DIC product-placed these rings on the hands of celebrities like Faith Hill, Julia Roberts, and Sarah Jessica Parker. A right-hand ring ad featuring Halle Berry as Catwoman was even tied into the opening of *Catwoman* in July 2004. Daria, a physicist in her early fifties, wears a right-hand diamond ring. She explained that "nobody was going to buy it for me, certainly not my husband who already gave me one diamond, so I had to buy it myself." Her big-by-any-standard stone is a "yellow diamond, but looks like a topaz, and it is something I did for myself, something different and just a little reward that I felt I deserved." Her explanation closely mirrors the commemoration of accomplishments, the sense of self-esteem, and the rewards for financial success that are suggested in ads.

The idea behind the right-hand ring campaign was to create a new occasion for diamond use by establishing diamonds as a potent expression of a woman's individuality and style in addition to diamonds' better-known symbolic associations with love and romance. Here, advertisers exploit the slippage that exists in symbols between the signifier and the signified to increase the array of diamonds' meanings. But DIC's strategies do not always work. Against the success of the right-hand ring, there have been spectacular campaign flops, such as the attempt to create a market for elegant men's wear.

Gender and Ethnicity

The failure of the men's campaign may be linked to the advertising industry's previous work to gender diamonds as female. Consumers feel that diamonds are for women, that they are "feminine," "sexy," "fun and charming," and "flirty." Giving diamonds an important role in her fashion sensibility, Ruth said, "They are so feminine and delicate, and if you wear anything else it *has* to match this concept of feminine and delicate, so you have to create the whole wardrobe around it. Men should not wear diamonds unless it is done ironically, in a rock and roll spirit." Many white, middle-class women I talked with agreed.

"Listen," Sally said, "any diamond jewelry on men is too much. Ostentatious. Actually, any jewelry on men is too much. Men should only wear, like, brushed steel at the most. Any gem at all looks gaudy and showy and therefore cheap. And it devalues the person." Renee also volunteered views on gender and diamonds. The gendering, and possibly ethnicizing, potential of men wearing diamonds is reflected in her answer to my question about whether men can wear diamonds. She replied passionately,

> No! Now that's what I call ugly and vulgar, but, then again, I don't think women should wear mustaches. Because that's not ladylike and, you know, I think it's OK for men to stick with a watch and a wedding band. That's it. I'm not a big fan of diamonds and onyx pinky rings. If I see that that tells me, "Hey, howya' doin', Vinnie Baggadonuts." Like a Mafia guy from Jersey or something. It tells me: slime factor. And then I start wondering if he has on a strapper t-shirt under there somewhere. You know, a "wife-beater," one of those white, ribbed Fruit-of-the-Loom things. So, no, I don't like that. Diamonds are not for men.

Renee's friend Allison echoed her assessment when asked what she thought about men wearing diamonds:

> Uggghhhh, I hate that! No way. There is no way to make that look good. I'm sorry but that's so cheesy and it makes a guy look like a cheesy mobster with a nugget ring. Call me judgmental, but if I see a man with a diamond, I don't trust him. If he has that bad of taste in that, then what else is wrong with him? I think, "What is wrong with this guy?" And like the man that sized my ring had on a diamond nugget thing, and I was like "Eeeeuuwwww, bless your heart, you poor thing. Don't you know how ugly that is?"

Tim also recalled Renee's point:

> I think that I actually stereotypically associate men wearing diamonds with Italian American, "Sopranos"-type people.[6] Yeah, it's the Sopranos type of thing, like a pinky ring. Sorry [apologizing for his candor], but I work in Human Relations, so I am honest. If I saw a man with diamonds I wouldn't think much, but until I knew the person I would wonder what they were up to.

Rosetta's approach illustrates a slightly more tolerant perspective: "I don't think diamonds are for men. Men don't wear them, except for hip hop [artists] and the elderly or metrosexual types, so I think they are female-associated, but the engagement ring is really about heterosexual marriages, but earrings don't have that kind of association; women, hip hop guys, anyone, both men and women, can wear diamond earrings."

Regardless of their feminine associations, some men are willing, happy, and even proud to wear diamonds. Henry (not into hip hop nor a metrosexual) says he would wear a diamond, but only under extraordinary circumstances:

> I don't wear jewelry. I mean I would if it were a gift from a loved one and I really respected their taste, then, and only out of respect for them,

> I might wear one for special occasions, but I don't like that. I don't like to draw attention to myself. Diamonds do that, you know, even though I don't really tend to notice them. But guys wearing diamonds? It's relative. I may end up with one. But, I doubt it. It seems like a copout, but it's too Italian goombah, or Sammy Davis with the big rings.

Arnold told me that although the secrecy of the industry bothers him, he would still wear a diamond:

> Not a big flashy ring, but perhaps something small and flush, or perhaps an earring, but only if it were of the best quality. For me I would only want a very good diamond, because I would know and that's what matters, it's like coffee or even tea, you experiment and try things and then you—well, for me, I like to buy the best, at least for me what seems to be the best, and it's the same with diamonds; even if I were to buy a cheap diamond that looked the same, if I thought it was somehow inferior, I wouldn't want that.

Diamonds in ads do symbolize heterosexual love, and indeed work to reproduce a kind of heteronormative marriage ritual. But against her views about the gendered/sexualized bent of engagement jewelry, Rosetta still wanted a diamond to celebrate engagement and, later, marriage, to her female partner. She has a few pieces of diamond jewelry from her parents, but this ring was one she chose herself:

> There is a diamond in my engagement ring, just a tiny chip. You know, at first it fell out, it is small, it's only worth like fifty bucks, so it is discreet, it does not look like a big pointy thing, you know how engagement rings look. But I like this design, Grace and I bought it. Actually I picked it out. I wanted an engagement ring and this is similar, I mean it is a diamond ring, and I wanted a diamond, but I did not like the way they all looked. [Engagement rings are] all very heterosexual and loaded like that, but this ring does not really look like an engagement ring. It is a band and a diamond so some people will see it as an engagement ring, of course, but

> with this setting I think it is less legible. It has the elements, but in a new way, so it's not the uniform.

The uniform, I came to understand, is a gold band with a solitaire placed in a high setting.

Men and women both described looking for engagement jewelry that was different from what they viewed as "common," "ordinary," or, perhaps less pejoratively, "traditional," to set themselves apart from the "trend-following crowd." Exemplars of inconspicuous consumption, Frank and June both wear wedding bands, but the diamonds are placed on the side where a casual viewer cannot see them. June's friend, Suke, wears a ring in which the diamond is on the inside of the band, touching the skin. Only she and her husband know it is there; to others it looks like a plain band. Taking "inconspicuous consumption" to the limit, the Japanese Hitachi Corporation sells the world's smallest diamond ring: a diamond that is only one five-billionth of a carat is embedded in a 0.02 millimeter-diameter tungsten ring, and can be seen only under a microscope.[7] This product highlights how poorly these stones index gender, sexuality, class, or anything else in a reliable way.

Caught Up

Consumers are affected by marketing in convoluted ways. There is no simple correlation between consumption and an acceptance of the symbolic attributes seen in ads. An expressive example of the "messy" reading of ads is Sally's story:

> I have dreams. One day I would love to have a really big, fat, emerald-cut emerald, even as an engagement ring. Actually I would rather have that than a diamond, especially not a diamond solitaire. The emerald would be something different, but it can still represent what a diamond represents, and actually this is what is interesting to me. It upsets me that diamonds are so constructed and important, but I still want them! You

> feel all this pressure to have a relationship, to get married, and get the ring, and we, my friends and I, say "until I have the rock"—as shorthand for saying that kind of relationship—"I am not going to live with a guy until I have the rock." So it's synonymous and that makes me angry. I mean, I am a sensitive and enlightened woman and I know enough to know that it should not be important, but it is! Why should it not be important? Because it's a material thing. It's a token. I mean don't get me wrong, I love nice things and gems, and stones are cool, I love rocks and stones that come from the earth, but diamonds come with a lot of baggage. Mainly status. I don't want to be that horrible woman in the De Beers commercial where they are in Italy and he is, like, yelling, "I love this woman," and then she is, like, "I love this man, I love this man," and it is so disgusting, and, I think it's for the three diamond thing, and the idea is that fifteen years of marriage have come down to a ring with a few rocks on it. It's so fake and socially constructed and I know that, and that's why it makes me really sad. But I am also part of society and, truthfully, I want those diamonds.

People like Sally do think of status, love, and romance when they think of diamonds, that is to say, diamonds in general. Tim explained why he purchased a diamond bracelet for his fiancée:

> I picked diamonds because they are more rare as far as jewelry is concerned, and it goes with the ring and they tell me that all diamonds match. I mean I looked at a lot of other stuff like silver and I thought diamonds were the most, I don't know, special, I guess, and for me it's tied to the whole marriage thing. I mean, I don't know what other people do, but I hear "diamond" and "ring" and that means marriage.

Interestingly, his fiancée told me that, for her, the engagement ring is about Tim stepping away from his pragmatic side to do something he would normally consider frivolous because he thought it would make her happy. The "stepping away" is what is significant, she said, in addition

to the "diamond is forever stuff. I don't really care about diamonds," but because "I know how important this was for him," partly because of the expense, she cherishes the stones.

And, of course, status is obliquely related to expense. Mary explained that she has not bought into the marketing, but she described one of her girlfriend's diamond purchases:

> [S]he is in her forties. She is not married, but she is really into diamonds and she started buying them. She calls them "starters" and she "trades up," as she calls it. She told me, "No man is going to do it for me so I have to do it myself," and for her it is a status symbol. Which I don't get, because you can go over to H&M and get the same thing for two dollars. And I defy anyone to tell the difference. I mean she overtly says that it is about status and power and she really cares a lot about it.

Like Mary, Allen notes that "a diamond is just a status symbol. Seeing it triggers you to say, 'Hey that's worth a lot of money.' If it's fake you could never tell the difference, but I think what most people think is, 'Wow! That's expensive.'"

So while consumers are ensnared in ad copy, at some level many remain cynical about the content, and try to distance themselves from the passive reception of corporate-sponsored symbolic meanings, particularly in terms of the troubled relationship that conspicuous consumption has with class or status.

This advertising, if you look at the level of the encouragement of purchases, does work; the retail market is worth more than $56 billion a year, while De Beers's advertising outlay is only just over $200 million, most of which is absorbed by the American market.[8] In our conversations, consumers constantly mentioned marketing phrases, but then welded them into new formulations in their own stories. Others denied the power of symbolism, but just by mentioning it, they shore up its authority: Mary Sue, a lawyer in her early forties, having inherited several diamonds, said that "in terms of the marketing, I haven't bought into it. I would never

spend my own money on diamonds and if someone ever did want to buy me something like that I would rather have something besides a diamond because I like to be different and my birthstone is ruby. Maybe an onyx, yes, I prefer rubies and onyx." Others qualified their statements about meaning with explanations about how "other people buy into the myth"—they use diamonds as a tired symbol—but how for them, meaning is spun personally. So the dovetailing of industry-promoted significations and creative interpretations swings from person to person. Semiosis—the act of making meaning—is a complicated, context-bound activity; diamonds can operate as more than passive symbols to help people perform a social role, understand the world (their world), or say something singularly human. We explore this in the following chapters.