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Buzz marketing and the loss of authentic self

**An investigation of the motivational structure of marketing in
the personal sphere and its potential consequences on social relations.**

ABSTRACT FOR 90/120 CREDIT THESIS

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Abstract:

I begin my thesis by linking the rise of buzz marketing in recent years to general economic, medial and social developments in society, while mainly focusing on the shift from a modern to a post-modern pattern of production and consumption. I also point out the great symbolic significance that consumption has as a signifier of a personal identity in contemporary society. I then go on to investigate the motivational structure of the specific buzz marketing system of the Swedish marketing firm Buzzador AB. Based on empirical studies and inspired by Karl Marx's theory of surplus value, I map out the basic and advanced motivational structures of the system and on the basis of these structural models I make the point that the motivation of the individual buzz agent to engage in buzz marketing does not solely rely on material gain from the marketing firm, but also on the symbolic capital that can be obtained from the personal network. I further propose that the gain of symbolic surplus value is an important motivational factor for both the marketing firm and its clients.

I then go on to discuss the possible consequences of buzz marketing on social relations within the personal sphere. My main point here is that the attempted systematisation of individual consumption is a form of rationalisation within the personal sphere, which may lead to a personal alienation from individual consumption and thereby ultimately to the loss of the authentic self.

Keywords:

Bourdieu, buzz marketing, Buzzador, friendship, Habermas, habitus, marketing, Marx, personal sphere, public sphere, surplus value, symbolic capital, word of mouth.

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Introduction

My interest in buzz marketing first came about in the autumn of 2007, when I was doing a presentation about branding and subtle marketing strategies at the Department of Cultural Sciences at Lund University. As a part of the presentation I showed a clip from the 2003 documentary film *The Corporation* where Jonathan Ressler, the CEO of the American marketing firm Big Fat, Inc., talks about implementing commercial messages and brands in everyday life through different types of undercover marketing.[1] The point of undercover marketing is to go beyond the boundaries of traditional advertising by integrating branded goods and/or information about branded goods in a variety of social environments such as the street, the workplace and even private homes for consumers to see and hear, without any clear notification that a commercial message is being relayed to them. One of the methods that Ressler mentions is hiring "a group of attainable, but still aspirational people",[2] who market products to people both without and within their personal network through informal conversation and interaction. This is essentially what buzz marketing is all about, although the case I will be using in the following text does not involve a monetary salary for the buzz agent, but a more informal compensation in the form of product samples.

While some of the marketing methods described by Ressler seemed a bit unlikely to me at the time, I none the less found the whole concept and possible scope of undercover marketing both fascinating and somewhat ethically problematic. In 2003, when *The Corporation* came out, buzz agents would not reveal their position; indeed Ressler states that the buzz agent "could be your brother. They sign a confidentiality agreement; they never talk about it – if you ask them [whether they are buzz agents] they're going to say 'no'".[3] While this practice of secret buzz agents has since been altered (at least officially), the colonising and commodifying role of the buzz marketing system in relation to social interaction within the personal sphere still raises a range of relevant ethical and social issues and in my view constitutes a very interesting sociological field of study.

Purpose

My purpose with the present text is to gain an understanding of marketing within the personal sphere and to explore its possible consequences on social relations. To this end, my point of departure will be three main questions: a) what has prompted the development of a buzz marketing

strategy?, b) what incites the active agents within the system to participate in buzz marketing?, and c) what consequences might buzz marketing have on social relations within the personal sphere?

To answer these questions, the following text consists of three chapters that explore different aspects of buzz marketing. In the first chapter I relate buzz marketing to the general trend of post-Fordist marketing and advertising, that is partly a result of cultural studies of consumerist behaviour and communication studies from the 1960's. I do this to contextualise buzz marketing as a sociological phenomenon by showing that it is rooted in the same modernisation processes that sociologists have concerned themselves with for well over a decade. Thus, in this chapter it is made clear that the rise of buzz marketing is strongly connected to general technical, economic, medial and social developments in modern and post-modern society.

In the second chapter I go on to map out and analyse the motivational structure of the specific buzz marketing system of the Swedish marketing firm Buzzador AB (from now Buzzador). I mainly base my analysis on material collected from written sources and on empirical experiences from my minor field study. I construct this model to gain an in-depth understanding of buzz marketing as a system, to explore the role of the individual buzz agent within that system, and to show that buzz marketing is not only an economic and managerial phenomenon, but also a social one in which the personal credibility of the buzz agent is commodified and utilised by the marketing firm. This becomes clear, as the analysis of the motivational structure shows that the incitement of the active agents (client, marketing firm, buzz agent) within the system is not solely of a material nature, but also relies heavily on the exchange of symbolic capital derived from the personal sphere.

In the third chapter I take this point further and look critically at buzz marketing as a form of colonization of the personal sphere. Here I discuss the possible effects that buzz marketing might have on social relations, the personal sphere and the authentic self when the interaction within the field becomes commodified. This is a central and classic sociological question, which harks back to both Marx's thoughts on exploitation of the worker and to Weber's ideas of the on-going rationalisation of modern society.

Definition of key terms

In the descriptions and discussions that follow in the rest of the thesis, I use a series of terms that need to be defined clearly for the reader. I have already briefly touched upon a few of these but here I will explain their significance somewhat more thoroughly.

As can be deduced from the title of this paper, *buzz marketing* is a central term in the text. To clearly and briefly define the meaning of buzz marketing is no slight challenge, as the term is sometimes used synonymously with other types of post-Fordist marketing methods, such as viral-, blog- and word-of-mouth marketing. At other times, however, these marketing methods are regarded as separate categories. The basic common factor of all these types of marketing is that once instigated by a marketing company, they primarily function via peer-to-peer communication, that is to say private persons using their personal credibility and network to spread information about a product to other private persons. With viral- and blog marketing this interpersonal communication specifically takes place on the internet (through blogs, videos, chain e-mails, etc.), and often reaches a wider audience than word-of-mouth marketing, which usually takes place through direct verbal and/or social interaction within a personal network. Buzz marketing, then, is often understood to cover all the different media of viral- and word-of-mouth marketing.[4] However, when I use the term buzz marketing in this text, I am primarily talking about commercially induced direct social interaction around a certain brand product within a personal network.

Another frequently used term in the text is *buzz agent*. Buzz agents are private persons who have signed up with a marketing firm to receive and test free products. They then conduct buzz marketing by spreading information and/or samples of the product to the people in their personal network. Some companies pay the buzz agents, but in the case of Buzzador, the buzz agents receive no monetary compensation for their services.

The *buzz marketing system* is to be understood as a field of social and commercial relationships in which the distribution of money, samples of branded products and information about branded products takes place. In a specific buzz marketing system there is a certain *motivational structure*, which is to be understood as a collection of factors that motivates the active agents within the system to participate in buzz marketing.

One of the things that characterise buzz marketing is its transcendence of the boundaries between the *public sphere* and *personal sphere*. To define these spheres, I turn to the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas who describes how the development of the bourgeois public sphere has led to a narrowing of the private sphere.[5] It is difficult to briefly explain the full meaning of the term public sphere, but according to Habermas the bourgeois public sphere "may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public", where people engage in a debate and political confrontation with public authorities.[6] The public sphere, then, is to be perceived as a sphere that lies between the purely private realm and the state. This could of course entail many areas of contemporary society, but the most relevant part of the public sphere in relation to the issues

brought up in this thesis is *the market*. As for the personal sphere, Habermas uses the term *intimate sphere* to describe the last remnants of the private sphere.[7] Along with the creation of the bourgeois public sphere the private sphere turned into a rather closed and isolated social context, to which the individual could retreat. The personal sphere is to be understood as that peripheral part of the private sphere, which has not yet been de-privatised. As such my term can be seen as a parallel term to Habermas' intimate sphere, but as a consequence of the still ongoing integration of the public and private spheres and the dwindling importance of the traditional family, which Habermas relates strongly to the intimate sphere,[8] I feel that personal sphere is a more fitting term in the context of today's society.[9] A central aspect of the personal sphere is its dominant discourse of communicative action, which is aimed at sociability and reaching understanding.[10] This is quite distinct from the purposive-rational action, which has become ever more prevalent in the rationalised public sphere.[11] Communicative action rests on common convictions and promotes a higher degree of openness and trust within social relations in the personal sphere than is typically the case within the public sphere,[12] and this – as we shall later see – is important when it comes to the effectiveness of buzz marketing.

The term *authentic self* is to be understood as an embodiment of the inherent personal beliefs and values of the individual person. These beliefs and values are reflected in the taste and praxis of the individual. The authentic self is not an absolute constant, but is continuously affected by occurrences in the surrounding environment and/or the social interaction with other agents.[13] In this respect the authentic self can be related to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term *habitus*, which is to be understood as "a system of lasting but changeable dispositions through which agents perceive, judge and act in the world". A system which is "a product of history and at the same time produces – or rather orchestrates – praxis, and thereby further history".[14]

Method and theory

In this segment I will clarify my methodological approaches and reflections. I will also list a selection of texts that deal with buzz marketing and briefly discuss in which way this thesis differs from those previous writings.

The main parts of the thesis consist of an analysis of the motivational structure of the buzz marketing system of the Swedish marketing firm Buzzador and a discussion of the possible consequences of this type of marketing on social relations. These parts of the thesis are based on

different qualitative research methods, which I will describe below. It should be mentioned, that while parts of the thesis are based on empirical studies, the historical overview of the emergence of buzz marketing is mainly based on economic and sociological texts that can be related to buzz marketing and to contemporary society.

In my empirical study I applied two qualitative research methods in order to gather the information that serves as a basis for the analysis and the discussion. First I collected articles and other documents (newspaper articles, websites, blog commentaries, books, etc.) related specifically to Buzzador and to buzz marketing in general. The documents mainly serve as a source of background knowledge about the company and its methods, and are used to gain a holistic understanding of the way buzz marketing is viewed and commented upon by different agents in society. Buzzadors' own website was particularly useful in this process, both as a document in itself and as a source of links to articles about the company.

As a second methodological approach, I have conducted a minor qualitative empirical field study: I signed up as a buzz agent for the Danish department of Buzzador and carried out a campaign in order to gain a more thorough knowledge on how the different steps in a campaign at Buzzador works (sign-up information, campaign suggestions, evaluation methods, point system, etc.), how the company communicates with its buzz agents, and to get a first-hand experience of what the motivational factors for a buzz agent might be. This approach gave me very useful emotional as well as structural insights that had a decisive impact on my analysis of the motivational structure of the buzz marketing system.

Apart from the abovementioned empirical methods, I considered conducting interviews with members of the salaried staff at Buzzador and with a selection of their buzz agents. I believe this approach might have given a broader impression of the field of study as well as a more in-depth knowledge about the strategies and motivations behind the marketing system. However, due to the limited nature of the thesis both regarding time and space, I decided that this approach would become too extensive. Especially finding buzz agents who would be willing to participate in my investigation would have been very time-consuming, as their identities are kept as classified information only available within the company.

While the analysis of the buzz marketing system and the discussion of the possible consequences of buzz marketing on social relations are based on empirical experiences, both chapters are also grounded in different sociological theories. I will go into some of the applied theoreticians in the next segment, but first I will briefly discuss how the present thesis differs from previous writings on buzz marketing.

Since buzz marketing has become a trend within the marketing world in recent years, it is perhaps not completely unexpected that this thesis is far from being the first academic text written on the subject. Along with the myriad of articles, internet sites and books like *Connected Marketing. The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution* edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden,[15] academic texts such as the recent master theses *Customer as Marketer: a new model* by Alexandra Wahlqvist, Caroline Wallin and Niclas Wejrot[16] and *How the customer becomes the company's salesperson with word-of-mouth marketing – a case study of the company Apple and the product iPod* by Louise Alm and Martina Bengtsson have also focused on the phenomenon from an economic and managerial point of view.[17] In the working paper *Word-of-Mouth as Dialogic Discourse: A Critical Review, Synthesis, New Perspective, and Research Agenda*,[18] authors Kerimcan Ozcan & Venkat Ramaswamy claim to focus on what they call the "human entity (individual self- and community-related factors)" rather than the "consumption entity (a firm's offerings)". While the authors do focus on the characteristics of the individual buzz agent and investigate the circumstances under which consumers discuss products, the main problem with the term human entity is that the text seems to relate to people solely as consumers and not as human beings.

What all these writings have in common, then, is their basic economic or managerial perspective, which has a tendency to primarily regard humans as instruments that can be used to further a commercial agenda. Their focus lies on critically analysing different aspects of buzz marketing in order to evaluate what consequences the implementation of various strategies has for the clients' brand equity and to continuously find ways to improve the marketing system. As such it is important to understand that when we speak of a critical perspective on buzz marketing from an economic or managerial point of view, the main purpose is not to problematise the praxis of buzz marketing in itself; instead the critical aspect of the analysis of buzz marketing from these perspectives consists of a critique of the dominant discourse within the marketing world, and seeks to investigate whether or not the currently applied method is the most effective.

With its sociological outset my thesis takes a different approach to the one outlined above. While I am still interested in the buzz marketing system as an economic and managerial tool, my thesis primarily investigates buzz marketing as a social phenomenon. When I map out the buzz marketing system of the Swedish marketing company Buzzador, I primarily do so not in order to see what the clients and marketing company get out of buzz marketing, but to gain an understanding of how the system motivates the buzz agent and how being part of the system affects both the buzz agent and his/her surroundings. When I conduct a critical discussion about buzz marketing, my focus is not on

finding ways to further maximise the monetary and symbolic surplus value of the clients. Instead I look critically at buzz marketing as a social praxis in order to determine what the consequences of marketing within the personal sphere might be on social relations and the authentic self.

Applied theoreticians

In my thesis I make eclectic use of the work of different sociologists and other theoreticians, the most prominent of which I will briefly present here. A fundamental theoretician in my work is the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose field theory and writings on symbolic capital lie at the heart of my understanding of the motivational structure of the buzz marketing system: Buzz marketing can be seen as a part of the struggle for symbolic capital, which takes place at any given time within the field of a specific social network and which enables an agent to obtain or maintain a position within said field.

Another theoretician that has influenced my interpretation and understanding of the buzz marketing system is the German political economist Karl Marx, whose theory of surplus value has been central in mapping out the motivational structure of the marketing system.[19]

I have already mentioned Jürgen Habermas, whose thoughts on the transformation of the public (and personal) sphere and on communicative action have been important sources of inspiration. Habermas' theoretical work on communicative action is to some extent built on the work of German sociologist and political economist Max Weber, whose work on the ongoing rationalisation of society also forms part of the theoretical background for my thesis.[20]

Apart from these classic and established theoreticians, I also use some of the theories on post-Fordist production and consumption put forward by professor of Organisational and Marketing Communication Roy Langer,[21] and the work on branding and marketing by professor of sociology Adam Arvidsson.[22]

1. Production and consumption in modern and post-modern society – a brief historical overview

Within the last 30 years there has been a significant rise in the use of marketing methods that go beyond traditional forms of advertising such as TV-commercials, ads in magazine, billboards and window displays. While all of these traditional techniques are still being used, the array and demand for complementary marketing methods – like buzz marketing – that often blur the boundaries between commercial messages and other medial and social discourses, has grown immensely. In this chapter I present a brief overview of the combination of the technical, economic, medial and social developments that has led to this transformation from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production and marketing within western societies.[23] As this fairly recent change is part of a much more extensive societal development, which has its roots in the industrialisation of the western world from the late 18th century onward, I will begin by briefly relating some of the social theories concerning the rise of modern society.

Modern production, marketing and consumption – the rise of Fordism

As many scholars have pointed out, the gradual shift in the west from a pre-industrial society to an industrial one brought a lot of important societal changes with it.[24] One of the most important tendencies connected with the industrialisation and the rise of the modern capitalist society was the ongoing process of rationalisation. The production, which had previously been a part of the private sphere of the individual family and which was largely based on commodity exchange, was rationalised and became part of the public sphere.[25] Instead of working for themselves, many now began working in large-scale production as wage labourers. As Marx has pointed out, the increased rationalisation of production – which came to include Taylor's timing and division of labour and later the Fordist implementation of the assembly line – and the conversion of commodities (of which labour itself was one) into money had a significant impact on the individual a well as on society as a whole. According to Marx the consequences of the division of labour were a loss of knowledge and skill and a dehumanisation of the individual worker in favour of effectiveness and accumulation of capital for the owner of the means of production (the capitalist).[26] In the modern production process the worker no longer functioned as an independent human being, but as a bought

and sold commodity of labour power. This development begot a sense of personal and professional alienation, as "the labour [had] ceased to belong to the worker".[27]

With the rationalised production process came other circumstances that had significant impact on society and human relations. The German sociologist Georg Simmel believes that the urbanisation and the subsequent life in the city, which was related to the centralisation of production, meant that a more rational but also emotionally detached behavioural pattern emerged.[28] Similarly Weber described the disenchantment of the world (the loss of the religious and metaphysical) and the rise of purposive-rational action at the expense of traditional and value-rational action in the whole of modern society.[29] As he writes, the limitation "to specialized work, with the renunciation of the Faustian universality of man which it involves, is a condition of any valuable work in the modern world".[30] In other words, modern life can be seen as a "departure from an age of full and beautiful humanity" that has been irreplaceably lost within a world of purposive-rational action, which is the only truly valuable form of action in modern society.[31]

Where Weber saw the rationalisation of society and the life world as an almost all encompassing development, Habermas later problematised this view and expanded Weber's initial theory of action, introducing a distinction between social relations that are "mediated by interest positions" and orientated to success on the one hand (purposive-rational action), and on the other hand those "determined by normative agreement" that are aimed at a mutual understanding (communicative action).[32] Since the modernised work processes and the mass market created "depersonalised work relationship[s] linking the employee to an institution rather than to other persons" with whom he could interact socially,[33] and bearing in mind the previously mentioned lack of public empathy of Simmel's city dweller, I would consider the rise of purposive-rational action to be closely connected with the expanding public sphere, while communicative action, which is based on empathy and agreement through common convictions, mainly exists within the remainders of the private sphere; the personal sphere.[34]

As the Fordist mass production – where goods were no longer produced with a specific target or purpose in mind but rather for the open market – became prevalent and the circulation of goods gradually expanded from a local to an international level, advertisements for products became necessary to a higher degree than had previously been the case. The emerging sender-centred mass media, first in the form of mercuries, newsheets and newspapers, and later through radio, film and finally television, played an instrumental role in the marketing to what was then perceived as a fairly homogenous mass population of consumers,[35] and were also based on the notion that such a mass indeed existed; as Langer points out, the use of mass media marketing "implicitly includes a

particular perspective on consumers [...] underestimating consumers' reflexive minds and victimizing them".[36]

Like Langer, I believe that the idea of a homogenous and passive mass of consumers that could be reached and persuaded into buying products ought to be understood as a parallel to the idea of the workforce, which existed solely as a unit of labour power in the Fordist production, rather than as a population of individual, skilled and reflective human beings. With their common focus on "quantity, popularity, mass-appeal and majority opinion" and their "behaviouristic perspective on human action and view of human nature", which neglected the interpretative ability of the individual, mass production and the mass marketing in one-way media were closely linked.[37]

Post-Fordism: receiver-centred production and marketing

The behaviouristic view on consumers began to shift in the second half of the 20th century. As the French cultural theorist and sociologist Jean Baudrillard saw it, the increased population density of the urban areas had brought about a desire for the individual to differentiate himself from others, which had not been so dominant in the smaller communities and groups of pre-industrial society.[38] In a contemporary context – after all Baudrillard wrote his book *The Consumer Society* in 1970 – one might add to these thoughts on the influence of urbanisation, that the emergence of communication channels like the internet and media like global satellite TV has further increased the desire to stand out, and has to a certain extent rendered physical context irrelevant. Due to contemporary technology the population in rural areas is under very much the same influence as that of the cities.

According to Baudrillard, the wish to differentiate oneself is expressed through the active consumption of symbols – signifiers of status and social distinction – that had previously been of a more firm character like that of "birth, blood and religion",[39] which could not be exchanged and consumed. As such I would say that consumption becomes a way for individuals to position themselves within a certain social field. However, Baudrillard did not see individual distinction as the only function of consumption, but rather saw consumption "as a system of communication and exchange, as a code of signs continually being sent, received and reinvented – as *language*".[40]

A few years before Baudrillard, in 1967, the Italian philosopher and semiologist Umberto Eco presented his view on the chain of communication in the essay "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare", in which the active interpretation of the receiver was heavily emphasised, and the idea of

the almost absolute power of the sender to control the message was obliterated.[41] Eco was not alone in his approach to the creation of meaning, and the new dominant perspective on the communication process, along with Cultural Studies of everyday life and consumer habits, meant that the 1970's saw a paradigm shift in advertising and marketing. The consumer went from being seen as a passive and reflexive recipient who could be coerced and seduced into buying products, and instead came to be seen as an active and reflective individual, who was in effect an empowered part of the production of the meaning and symbolic value of commodities.[42]

The changing view on the consumer and the realisation that the presupposed existing homogenous mass in reality consisted of a wide array of disparate social groups with very diverse values, tastes and world views necessitated alternative strategies to the sender-centred models of mass production and mass marketing.[43] On the production side the change meant that flexible work practices were "elevated over the specialisation of labour [...] and mass production [...] reputedly replaced by computer-aided customisation of the post-Fordist era".[44] This flexible production of mass customised products is a combination that is meant to give the consumer a feeling of control and empowerment, while at the same time enabling the producer to assemble the goods consumed from a collection of prefabricated and standardised modules.[45]

Marketing-wise there was an increased focus on branding and storytelling, on the use of non-traditional marketing channels and on "the blurring of boundaries to other public discourses and social practices".[46] If traditional advertising had been about persuasion and indoctrination through the dictation of uses for products to a passive mass of consumers, the new methods, with their focus on the will and abilities of the individual consumer, were based on a form of *ancrage* and *relais*, to speak with the French social theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes,[47] which subtly directed the consumer into a controlled space within which he could feel free to interpret the brand according to his own experiences, perspectives and needs.[48] This approach sits well with consumers who, as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out, use the active consumption and reinterpretation of products as signs as a means of creating their own identity as individuals, which has become uncertain with the loss of the more traditional hierarchal structures.[49]

For businesses and consumers alike the focus has generally moved away from production and consumption of physical products and onto a more symbolic level, where the consumption of products as social symbols and the production of brand equity, measured in the amount of talk about the brand and the image (goodwill) amongst consumers, are essential.[50] This change partly reflects the technical changes that society has gone through since the 1970's. Two-way communication channels like the internet made it both possible and necessary to maintain a

dialogical contact between producer and consumer. And the increasingly active two-way communication has meant that the border between producer and consumer has become blurry. Where Fordist advertising had primarily taken place within the public sphere, some of the new forms of differentiated and personalised marketing methods, which were results of the new media technology and the dialogue between producer and consumer, took a step into the personal sphere.

Recognising that people have always been talking with their peers about their experiences with objects of consumption,[51] one of the new ways to reach consumer has been the implementation of different forms of peer-to-peer marketing that are meant to get people to talk about brands in a more organised and measurable manner. Buzz marketing, which systematises the communication surrounding brands through the use of buzz agents hired to integrate certain branded goods and/or information about branded goods in a variety of social situations and to instigate brand oriented conversations, is one example of peer-to-peer marketing.

In a time when brand equity is deemed all-important, it is logical that a marketing method that instigates social interaction and conversation around a brand will be sought after, and on the surface it may seem quite easy to understand what benefits the client and the marketing firm get from buzz marketing; increased brand and product awareness and monetary gain. However, this does not immediately explain why an unsalaried private person would make the decision to become a buzz agent and bring commercial interest into his/her own personal sphere, when many people simultaneously complain about the daily subjugation to a myriad of commercial messages from more conventional outlets. In his investigation of post-Fordist marketing methods, Langer cites an informant who himself works in advertising as saying that as a private person he thinks that it "would be great, if there would be one single place to go to, where there are no advertisements at all".[52] As I see it, the personal sphere to a certain extent constitutes the last remnants of such a place. Why, then, are all of the approximately 65.000 buzz agents currently working for Buzzador in Sweden willing to sacrifice this relatively commercial free social environment in return for free products?[53] A possible answer might be that there are other types of profit to be made from buzz marketing than immediate material gain. In the following chapter I will look closer at the case of Buzzador and analyse the motivational structure of their buzz marketing system in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of what might motivate the different active agents (client, marketing firm, buzz agent) to participate.

2. "What's in it for me?" – the motivational structure of a buzz marketing system

I first became aware of the Swedish marketing firm Buzzador in November 2007 through an article about the firm's plans to expand its activities to the Danish market. At the time the firm had approximately 60.000 Swedish buzz agents – so-called buzzadors – and were aiming to establish a base of a further 10.000 buzz agents in Denmark by the end of the first quarter of 2008.[54]

The entrance of Buzzador on the Danish marketing scene came at an opportune moment for me, as I had contemplated a sociological study of buzz marketing from the perspective of the buzz agent for some time. Once I made the definitive decision to write my BA thesis on the subject of buzz marketing in December 2007, I went to the website of Buzzador and joined their network of buzz agents. I saw my signing up and carrying out campaigns as a form of field study, through which I was hoping to gain a qualitative understanding of the whole marketing process from the perspective of the individual buzz agent.

In this chapter I combine my experiences from this minor field study with empirical information from written documents to describe and analyse the way that the specific buzz marketing system of Buzzador functions and to construct a model of its motivational structure. By doing this I aim to clarify and expand the understanding of the factors that incite all of the active parties within the system to participate in buzz marketing, though my main focus lies on the role and motives of the individual buzz agent.

A brief outlining of the buzz marketing process of Buzzador

In the particular marketing system of Buzzador, the marketing company distributes selected products (for instance an electric shaver or candy items) provided by corporate clients like Coca-Cola, Philips, Campbell's, etc.[55] to a network of buzz agents, who test and incorporate the products in their daily lives. The buzz agents doing campaigns for Buzzador are unsalaried, but generally get to keep the products after the campaign is over.[56] After testing the product for a period of time and forming an opinion about it, the buzz agents discuss their experiences with members of their personal network (friends, family, colleagues, etc.). Along with the product, the buzz agents receive an information folder about the campaign product, which may contain historical and other relevant positive information that can be used when discussing the product with their peers. Apart from passing on information and personal experience, the buzz agent may also distribute samples or

vouchers within the network, depending on the specific nature of the product being tested; in the first campaign I conducted for Buzzador in February 2008 I was given an information folder and six bags of sugar-free sweets to share with members of my personal network in order to get their opinions on the product. In the second campaign, which I was given the opportunity to sign up for in April 2008, the product to be campaigned was a coffee maker. This campaign included discount vouchers for the purchase of a coffee maker of that particular brand and model from a particular chain store.[57]

After conducting a buzz marketing campaign, the buzz agent is required to report back to Buzzador through an online questionnaire, which amongst other things concerns how many times the buzz agent has talked about the product, how many people the buzz agent has been in touch with and what the overall response of the members of the network to the product has been like.[58] The feedback from these questionnaires is collected by Buzzador and passed on to the relevant client as an assessment of the campaign.[59]

Once the campaign has been reported successfully to Buzzador, the buzz agent receives a number of points that determines his/her ranking in the internal hierarchy of the buzz agent network.[60] The number of points is an important factor when Buzzador decides which buzz agents to use for popular campaigns for more exclusive or expensive products; more points means a better chance of being selected as a participant.[61]

Basic model of the motivational structure – initial empirical experiences

Based on the above rundown of the buzz marketing process we can construct a basic model of the motivational structure of Buzzador's marketing system (fig. 2). The model is inspired by Marx's idea of surplus value; in the system, a Product (consisting of money, physical product, and information about the product) is passed down through the chain of distribution. Each link in the chain takes part of the value out of the Product before passing it on, but simultaneously produces some form of surplus value that is absorbed by one of the other links. In this way, each link (except for the client) produces more value than it consumes.

In the basic model we see how the client supplies a Product consisting of money, a physical product, and information about the product to Buzzador. Buzzador absorbs the money (their primary motivational factor) from the Product before passing it on to the buzz agent. Thus, the buzz agent receives a Product consisting of a physical product and information about the product. The
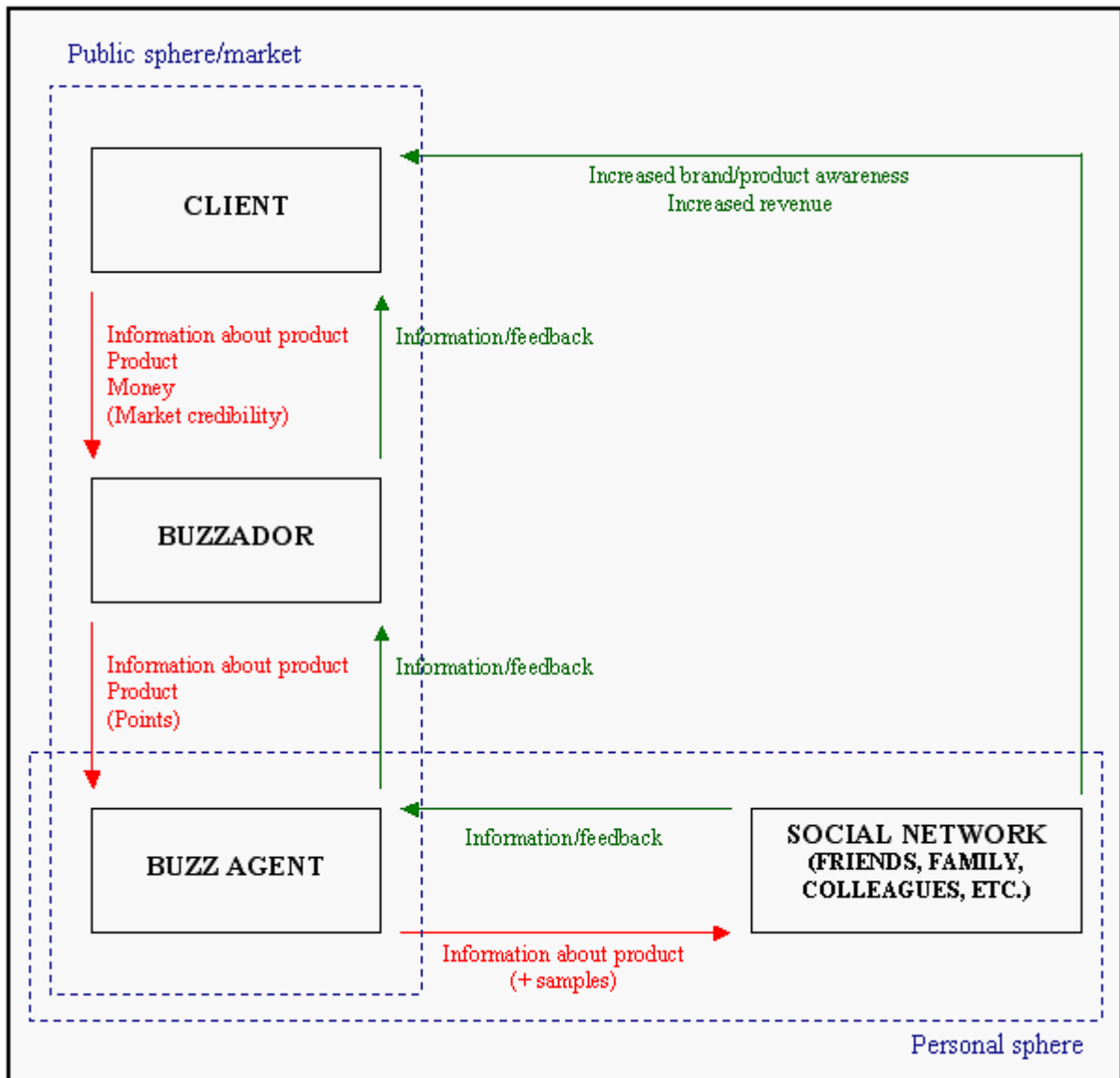
Figure 2. Basic model of the motivational structure of Buzzador.

buzz agent absorbs the physical product (primary motivational factor) before passing the Product – now consisting of product information and perhaps sample products – on to the social network. Compared to the active agents in the system, the members of social network seem to get very little out of the buzz marketing campaign, since at this stage the Product has largely been depleted of value apart from the commercial message. It is therefore my theory that their main motivation to "participate" is not the Product itself, but rather their social obligation towards the buzz agent.

As mentioned, each link in the distribution chain (except the client) not only absorbs part of the Product but also produces a greater value than it consumes, which goes to one or more of the previous links in the chain. In the case of the buzz agent, he/she produces value by imbuing the

Product with his/her own social credibility through the consumption and integration of the Product in the personal sphere. Theoretically this makes the Product more attractive to other members of the personal sphere, as personalized recommendations are far more effective than what is perceived as mass-produced and impersonal commercials.

In the basic model, the social network produces two forms of surplus value; firstly, through the exposure to information about the product via a social relation, an increased awareness of the product/brand is created. This increased awareness, and the potentially increased revenue that may follow from it, are the main motivational factors for the client to participate in buzz marketing. Secondly, the social network gives feedback to the buzz agent about the product. This feedback is passed on from the buzz agent to Buzzador who then processes the information and reports back to the client. This product feedback is the secondary motivational factor for the client. Buzzador awards symbolic payment in the form of points to the buzz agent, which determines his/her ranking in the hierarchy of buzz agents. These points are the secondary motivational factor for the buzz agent as they represent the promise of future attractive campaigns. The collection and analysis of the information provided by the buzz agents serves to legitimise the buzz marketing strategy by giving the client a tangible assessment of value for money. By conducting a well-documented campaign for a corporate client, then, Buzzador gains market credibility and increased potential revenue from future corporate clients (secondary motivational factor).

The basic model of the motivational structure of the buzz marketing system of Buzzador is based on my initial experiences with buzz marketing and on the basic principles of buzz marketing described in chapter 1. However, as I also stated in the first chapter, I find it unlikely that all the people who have signed up as buzz agents would bring commercial interests into the relatively commercial free social environment of the personal sphere in return for free products alone. I believe that the fact that many thousands have signed up to become buzz agents has to do with more intangible motivational factors hidden within the system, which can be brought to light through further analysis.

Advanced model of the motivational structure – the importance of social interaction and symbolic surplus value

The basic model above represents what appears to be a fairly balanced exchange system with a large degree of reciprocity where each active agent in the chain consumes and produces an almost

equal amount of value. While at first glance the model seems fairly representational of the buzz marketing system of Buzzador, this is only the case as long as focus is kept on basic motivational factors, like the buzz agent receiving free products, the marketing company earning money and the client achieving increased brand awareness and possibly increased sales.

In the following segment I will analyse my empirical material further in order to uncover and incorporate the hidden motivational factors of buzz marketing as a social system of exchange in a more advanced model. In the process it will become clear that the symbolic value produced within the personal sphere actually surpasses the formal value production and exchange within the public sphere, and that this symbolic surplus value, which originates from personal social relations, plays an important role in motivating both the client, Buzzador and especially the buzz agent to participate in buzz marketing.

The social process of buzz marketing, which in part creates brand awareness, is not quite as simple as it might first seem. In reality what happens when buzz marketing takes place is not just the creation of increased *brand awareness*, but also of *positive brand associations and social credibility*, which arise from the personal social connection between the buzz agent and members of the social network. The direct personal connection is the main thing that separates buzz marketing from more traditional marketing methods, and it is also an aspect that raises certain ethical issues. For instance Cand.merc.jur. and expert in consumer behaviour, ethics and social responsibility Mette Reissman considers buzz marketing to be a method that "leaches on peoples credibility",[62] while Agnete Sigurd, who works as a lawyer at The Danish Consumer Council, says that "it is problematic, because your guard is down when you are sitting with your friends in a private sphere and you are not ready to be confronted with a marketing campaign".[63] Whatever the ethical qualms, which I shall return to, I perceive the establishing of an emotional link between the brand and the potential consumer via the social credibility of the buzz agent to be an important motivational factor for the client, as the resulting positive associations with the brand may lead to increased sales.

Before I began my empirical study, I had a notion of the above-described importance of the social interaction from the point of view of the client and the marketing firm, as this is a fundamental part of buzz marketing theory. However, the importance of the value production within the private sphere *for the buzz agent* first really became apparent me, when I received my first package from Buzzador. When I picked up the white cardboard box with the campaign product at the post office, it was covered in the little red logos of Buzzador (fig. 3). I had seen the logo before, but had not earlier noticed the small text "Be the first to know!" that is written underneath it. With this simple catchphrase, I find that Buzzador cleverly insinuates a more intangible benefit from

buzz marketing than the physical products that are distributed to the buzz agents; the social status that knowledge of new products and trends can entail.

Figure 3. Box and logo on box from Buzzador.

Buzzador is not alone in putting forward the idea of obtaining social status through buzz marketing. In their working paper on word of mouth, Ozcan & Ramaswamy refer to the phenomenon as "a tactic to gain attention, exhibit connoisseurship, suggest pioneering spirit, demonstrate insider information, connote status, evangelize, confirm own judgement, and assert superiority".[64] And it has long been an established theory that consumption (in any form) at once distinguishes the individual from other individuals and binds members of groups together. For instance, Baudrillard partly sees consumption as "a process of classification and social differentiation in which sign/objects [sic] are ordered [...] as status values in a hierarchy".[65] A process in which "you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group [...] or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status".[66]

The focus on the social element of buzz marketing – and indirectly the potential social status that can be derived from being a trendsetter within a group – is also prevalent both in statements from commentators,[67] and in the testimonials of buzz agents. One buzz agent, who goes by the name Dioda says: "[Buzz marketing] is a fun way to communicate about new products for both me and my friends; when you are amongst the first people to get to test them. That was one of the biggest reasons why I became a Buzzador".[68] This testimonial, like many others on Buzzador's website, shows that it is apparently both the free products and the "fun" interaction with members of the

social network around the products that the buzz agents find motivating. It has to be mentioned that since these testimonials were found on the company's own website, there is the possibility that they are not entirely authentic, and perhaps have been created by the company to manipulate potential buzz agents to participate in the system by generating a myth of social acceptance surrounding buzz marketing. Even if this is the case, I find the testimonials to be very relevant empirical material, because the myth they represent is likely to influence the real-life buzz agent's idea of buzz marketing, and thereby establish the myth as reality over time.

While being a buzz agent may have some impact on social standing within the hierarchy of the personal sphere, the marketing company only indirectly supplies the buzz agent with symbolic capital by providing new information and products, since the symbolic capital that can be obtained from being perceived as a trendsetter is neither inherent in the information nor in the product itself. Rather, it is the actualisation of privileged information and/or a trendy physical product through social interaction within the personal sphere that produces symbolic capital. As such it is the social network that provides the buzz agent with the symbolic capital that indicates the buzz agent's position within the hierarchy of the social field.

Since the obtainment of symbolic capital is tied to the specific social network in which the buzz agent operates, and since – as Bourdieu points out – each social network exists as a field with its own set of values and accepted forms of capital,[69] it could be argued that the amount of symbolic capital gained from being a buzz agent depends on the dominant values within the specific social network in relation to the characteristics of the specific product being promoted: If a buzz agent invests part of his social capital in a product by promoting it, and the product falls completely outside of the existing value norms within the social field, it is not likely to strengthen his position. Such an investment of social capital could instead be taken as a sign of ignorance of the legitimate values of the specific social field, and the hierarchal position of the buzz agent be weakened. As an example from my field work, I certainly did not feel very cool or in the know when I was conducting a campaign for a brand of sweets, which, through more conventional advertising channels, has come to be associated with German pensioners and their grandchildren.[70] In this case the product felt too far removed from my personal values, and from those of my social network.[71]

However, contrary to the theory outlined above, I did not feel the social repercussions I had expected from representing a product, which was incongruent with the dominant values of the social field. Instead, throughout the campaign I became aware that the people I spoke with generally showed little interest in the product itself, and seemed much more interested in learning about the concept of buzz marketing. The argument above, in which the nature of the specific product is

identified as essential to the production of symbolic capital, then, appears to be too narrow; it would seem that it is not *only* the product, but *also* the mere participation in buzz marketing (regardless of the product) that provides symbolic capital and enables the buzz agent to obtain a position as an innovator within the social hierarchy of the personal sphere. In fact, in my specific case, is was not at all the free product in itself, but rather the access to the means by which the product was obtained in the first place that was valued by members of the network and which produced symbolic capital.

Of course, as is the case with a certain product, the amount of symbolic capital that the mere participation in buzz marketing can produce is also dependent on the dominant values within the concrete social network; it is possible to imagine certain social networks, where this praxis would be recognised as an unwelcome commercialisation, and therefore would not produce any positive value for the buzz agent. However, unlike the shifting products, which a buzz agent may campaign despite them not coinciding with his or her personal taste in order to gain points, I find it unlikely that the praxis of buzz marketing would be undertaken unless there is a certain a priori expectation of acceptance from the social network.

The described independent symbolic value of being a buzz agent suggests that the commercial function of buzz marketing is two-sided; not only does it serve to spread awareness of a certain brand or product, it also aims to spread awareness of Buzzador and of the praxis of buzz marketing itself. This may explain why – legal and ethical issues notwithstanding – the company insists on the buzz agents identifying themselves, not just as buzz agents, but as agents working specifically for Buzzador. Spreading awareness of Buzzador as a brand in its own right and as a means of obtaining free products and social capital (cf. the myth-building testimonials on the company website) is a way of expanding the company's network of buzz agents, which, in turn, can be used to attract more lucrative clients and campaigns.

The branding of the marketing firm itself has a significant effect, as Siff Skovenberg, who is the project leader for Buzzador in Denmark, explains: "We always see a high increase in the number of people who sign up as buzzadors [buzz agents] after the first campaign. The 3.000 [Danish buzz agents] we have now could be doubled for the next campaign."[72] The continuing recruitment happens through the social praxis of buzz marketing, whereby the buzz agent supplies Buzzador with social credibility – some of which *may* be passed on to the client, depending on the product – that is ultimately based on the notion of future opportunities. Even if the specific campaign, through which Buzzador is introduced to members of the social network, is not particularly interesting, the point system, which entails the promise of better campaigns and more interesting products in the future, serves as sufficient motivation to participate.
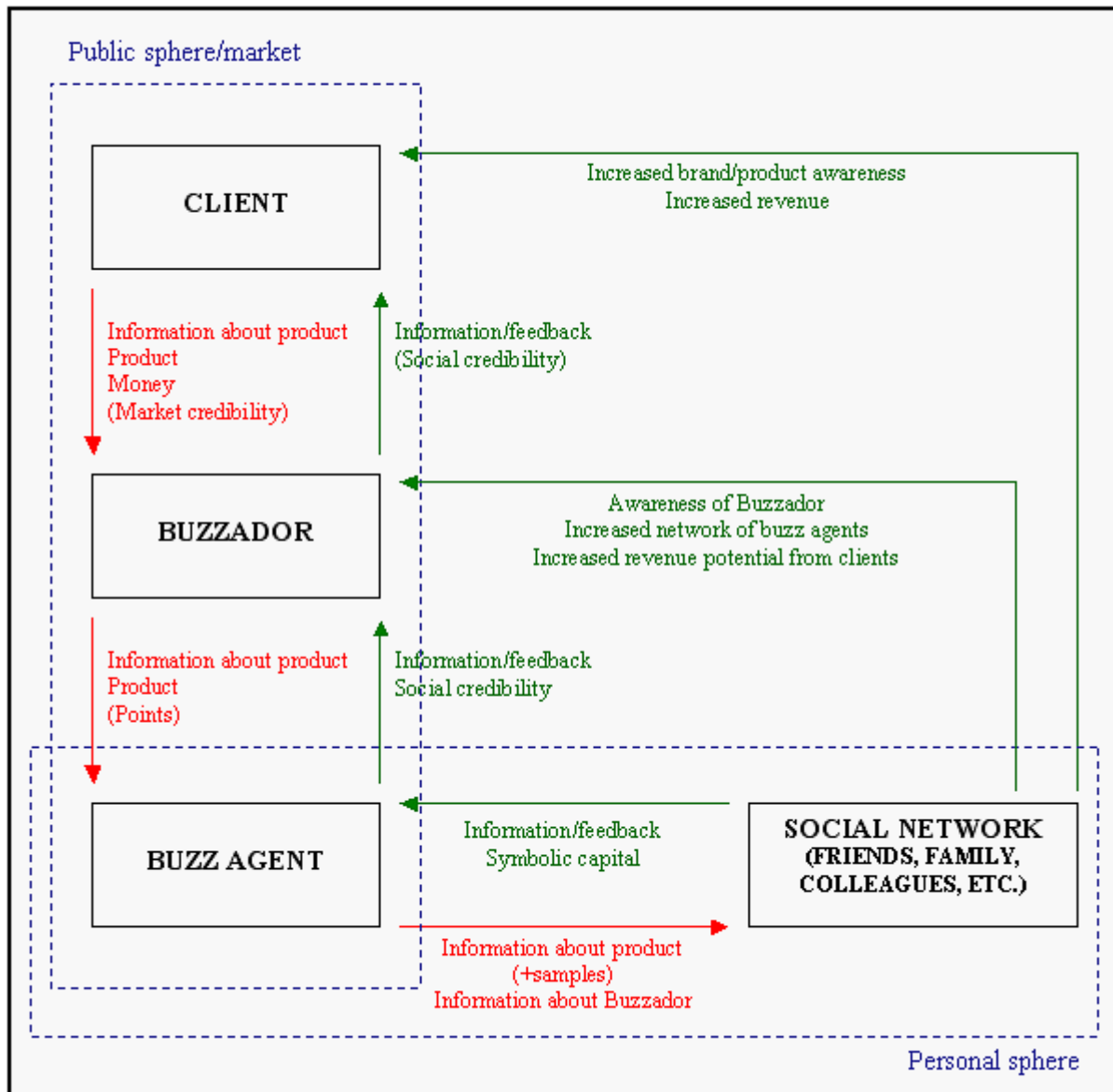
Figure 4. Advanced model of the motivational structure of Buzzador.

To sum up, from the above analysis of the structure of Buzzador's buzz marketing system – which is rendered visually on this page (fig. 4) – it is clear that buzz marketing entails a much more complex exchange of symbolic capital than the previous model would suggest; the buzz agent's role is not merely to create awareness of the client's product, but also to invest his own social capital in the product/brand and in buzz marketing as an independent phenomenon in order to gain social credibility for Buzzador and, perhaps, the client. The buzz agent, in turn, also gains symbolic capital from the social network, not necessarily through the specific campaign product, but through his affiliation with Buzzador and the access to free products, which suggest originality and innovation.

This capital can then be used by the buzz agent in the ongoing symbolic struggle for a position within the social field.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are commentators who find the leaching on people's credibility – that is to say the companies' use of private buzz agents to appropriate social credibility from the personal sphere – unethical. Seeing as how consumption has become a great part of the production of personal identity in contemporary society, I also see certain problematic perspectives in the praxis of buzz marketing, as commercial interests transcend the boundary between the public and the personal sphere and begin to dictate the products that are being consumed on a basis different from the individuals' uninterested personal taste.[73] In the following chapter I will discuss what this development might entail for social relationships and the authentic self.

3. The loss of authentic self? – a discussion of the potential social consequences of buzz marketing

In the previous chapter we found buzz marketing to be part of a symbolic struggle over positions within the social field of the personal sphere – a symbolic struggle that was, of course, present before the implementation of buzz marketing. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out, a field is defined by the specific nature of the inherent struggle for legitimate forms of symbolic capital, as the "*boundary* of the field is a stake of struggles".[74] While the struggle may not be new, its character does seem to have changed over time. As established in chapter 1, personal and professional alienation, which is a result of the de-traditionalised industrial society with its increasingly rationalised and fragmented production methods, has played an instrumental role in creating an existential vacuum in modern man. As an effect of the gradual loss of a firm and traditionally rooted sense of self, consumption has taken on an important role as a creator of identity, which it previously did not posses to the same degree, and it increasingly functions as a signifier of the individual's position within a relatively mobile social hierarchy. This increased focus on the individual consumption of goods as social signifiers has meant that consumption has gradually become an integral part of a symbolic struggle for favourable positions within the social field.

While the importance of this role of consumption today is difficult to dispute, it is my argument that the effects of the specific consumption, which takes place through the implementation of buzz marketing, stand out significantly from regular individual consumption. This is mainly due to the blurring of the boundary between the public and the personal sphere that is inherent in buzz marketing. A point that is perhaps best clarified by going back to one of the sociological classics. When Marx wrote his book *Capital* near the end of the 19th century, he specified that the worker engaged in two distinct forms of consumption:

The worker's consumption is of two kinds. While producing he consumes the means of production with his labour, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption. It is at the same time consumption of his labour-power by the capitalist who has bought it. On the other hand, the worker uses the money paid to him for his labour power to buy the means of subsistence; this is his individual consumption. The worker's productive consumption and his individual consumption are therefore totally distinct.[75]

Marx's distinction above between the *productive consumption* of means of production and the *individual consumption* of means of subsistence is very clear. Looking at buzz marketing, however, this clear-cut boundary somewhat fades away. Within the buzz marketing system of Buzzador the

buzz agent (the equivalent of Marx's worker) still consumes the means of production, and, as we have seen, through this consumption still produces symbolic capital of a greater value than that of the consumed means of production. However, as opposed to the conditions within the industrial production model, where raw materials and money came into the equation, the consumed means of production in the buzz marketing system solely take the form of *finished products*. Due to the absence of monetary gain (i.e. wages), by which the buzz agent can acquire his own means of subsistence, and the fundamentally altered character of the means of production, it becomes difficult to distinguish clearly between Marx's two forms of consumption: Since the buzz agent's sole material payment is the consumed means of production, these to a certain extent come to fill out the role as means of subsistence as well.[76] The result – and the purpose – of buzz marketing, then, is a degree of systematisation and dictation of individual consumption, which means that members of the social network may no longer be able to distinguish clearly between products that are consumed as a genuine expression of the buzz agent's personal taste (means of subsistence) and of those that are in fact planted in the social environment by the marketing company (means of production).[77] As argued in chapter 2, it is precisely the credibility gained from products being presented as expressions of personal taste, which is the specific hallmark and the very raison-d'être of buzz marketing.

As I see it, the dissolving of the boundary between individual and productive consumption and the colonisation of the personal sphere by commercial interest may also have certain consequences on social relations. In order to grasp this, however, it is necessary to understand the important role that personal values and taste – expressions of the authentic self – play in building and maintaining social relations within the personal sphere. If friendships and other relationships are built on mutual social attraction and the expectation of reciprocal social rewards, as the British sociologist Ray Pahl and other theoreticians suggest,[78] it is logical to assume that there must exist a certain degree of common interest and taste within the specific social sphere that can form the basis of a meaningful social exchange. While I do not regard friendships as a purely utilitarian phenomenon, I do believe that certain common denominators – forms of legitimate social capital that all can agree on, to speak in the terms of Bourdieu – are necessary to tie a specific social field together. It is through these denominators that the expectations of reciprocal exchange of social rewards can be consummated.

The reciprocal expectations of social rewards that make up social relations, then, are based on shared values and tastes, but also on another very important factor; the notion of trust,[79] which in turn is founded upon open and honest communication without ulterior motives. Here we touch upon

Habermas' idea of communicative action, which, with its emphasis on open communication and lack of hidden motives, aims at sociability and reaching understanding rather than purpose-rational ends.[80] I bring Habermas' term into play here to make the point that if the values reflected in the style and praxis of an agent are of a purpose-rational nature rather than a true representation of the authentic self, the basis for friendship and social interaction could become undermined.

Which brings us back to the social issues connected with buzz marketing. Having established the importance of trust and honest communication, and the significance of the reliability of the social signifiers that agents apply to express their individual identities, it is not difficult to see how the praxis of buzz marketing may cause problems. Even if products – and their related value signals – linked to buzz marketing constitute a fraction of the total goods consumed within a social network, the validity of goods as significant social expressions of the individual's identity may still be depleted since the commercially planted products are actively and purpose-rationally campaigned and emphasised as relevant signifiers. Through the focus of the campaign they may take up a relatively big portion of the social interaction compared to other products that might reflect the taste of the buzz agent more accurately. One possible consequence of the introduction of this form of purpose-rational action in the personal sphere might be the loss of trust in consumption as a valid social signifier, since it becomes difficult to discern the meaning of the presence of a product.

Another possible consequence of the implementation of buzz marketing – and the rationalisation of the personal sphere that it entails – may be deduced from the effects of the rationalisation process that took place from the 18th century onward due to the industrialisation. As we have seen in chapter 1, the production of goods that what was once a means of creating a personal identity was turned into a systematised and rationalised process, which alienated the individual professionally and personally. In the contemporary context of buzz marketing the increased rationalisation of consumption within the personal sphere may prove to have a similar effect. As individual consumption is appropriated and itself consumed as a form of labour-power by the marketing firm, the buzz agents – and, as the validity of consumption as a signifier decreases, ultimately all agents within the social network – become alienated from precisely the individual consumption, and thereby from an important source of the creation of personal identity. Thus the alienation once again leads to the exposure of the existential vacuum within man, which can no longer be filled by individual consumption.

The described loss of trust in the social signifiers and the alienation from the individual consumption, which is the result of the implementation of buzz marketing, constitute considerable changes in the social environment of the personal sphere, and as such may have a significant effect
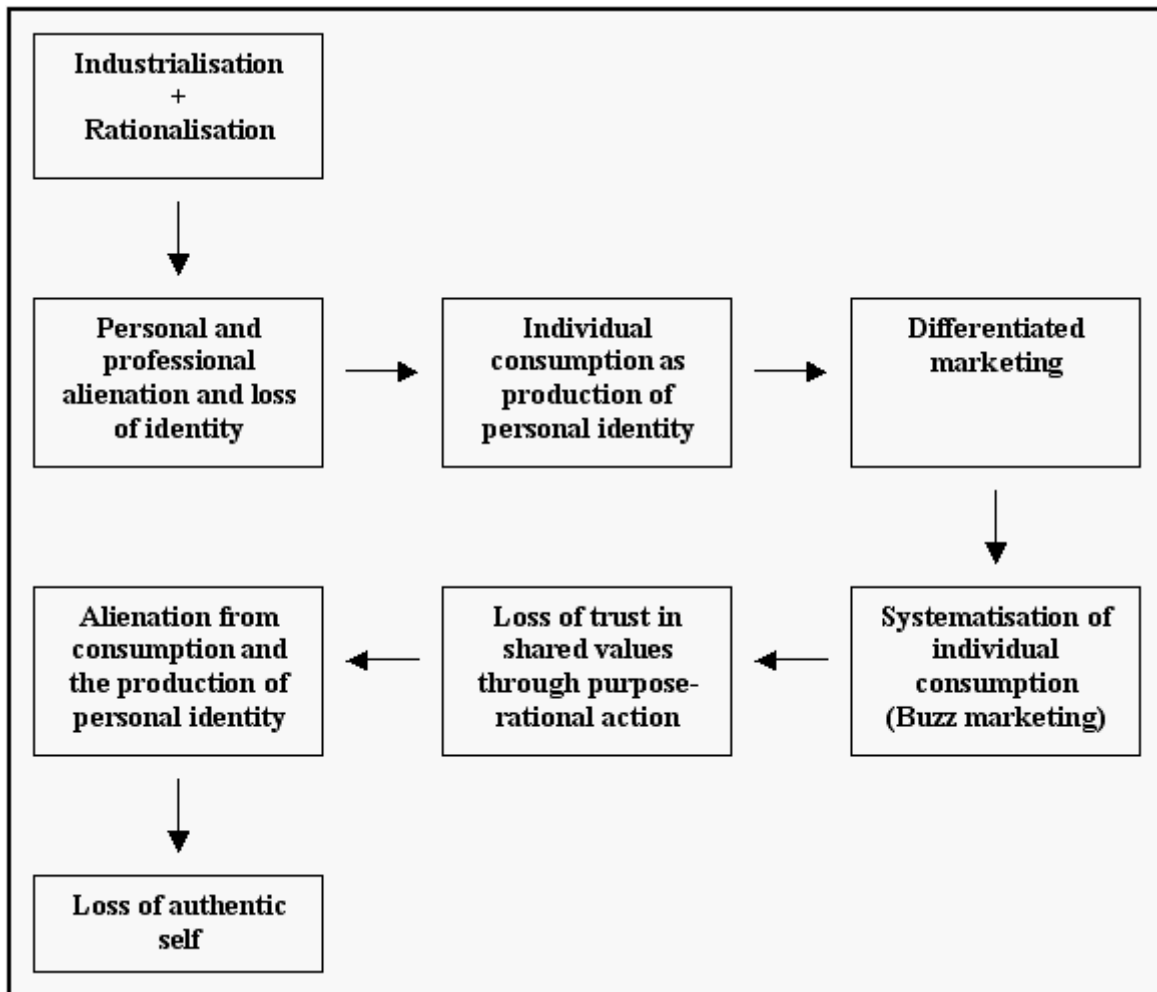
Figure 5. Causes and effects leading to the loss of authentic self.

on the development of the authentic self.

As a product and a producer of history and social interaction with other agents within the field, the authentic self is not an absolute constant, but is continuously adjusted to – and affected by – the surrounding environment and the agents within it. As we have seen, there are expectations of honesty and reciprocity in the exchange of social rewards within the social field. When a buzz agent breaks the ethos of honesty and brings a campaign product, which he may not truly endorse or see as a part of his authentic self, into the social field of the personal sphere, other agents within the field may adhere to the social norm of reciprocal exchange and react by acknowledging these "false" signifiers as legitimate social symbols.[81] Through this social praxis, the campaign product is not only integrated in the social sphere but also becomes accepted as an expression of the authentic selves of the agents over time; what started out as a false social signifier presented with ulterior motives by a buzz agent is mirrored in the socially demanded recognition of other agents within the

field and thus becomes a de facto part of the legitimate capital of the field. This integration means that even the buzz agent, who is aware of the initial deception, comes to see the product as an expression of his authentic self over time, since he too will mirror the acceptance of his peers. Looking at a visual representation of the whole reaction chain described above (fig. 5), it is clear that the implementation of buzz marketing within the field of the personal sphere may lead to a *loss of authentic self*, as the buzz marketing system's means of production, which are initially only *presented* as valid signifiers, gradually *become* legitimate social signifiers.

Thus it would seem that the personal sphere – one of the last remainders of the once so important private sphere where, according to Habermas, the individual could retreat, contemplate, and critically implement the impressions of the public sphere in his own personality[82] – has been conquered by the purpose-rational discourse of the public sphere. While still retaining a sense of freedom, the individual consumer has actually become a new sort of commodity of labour power, which the industry has adapted to fit the demands of post-Fordist society. With a flair for the dismal, one might say that we, through our willingness to cut corners in attaining symbols of social status, have added another padlock on the door of Weber's iron cage.

Of course other scenarios are possible. It could be argued, that the very praxis of buzz marketing may ultimately function as an emancipation process as in time its offering of free products could bypass the significance of material consumption and offer the beginning of a liberation from objects as social signifiers. Then, in the social relations of tomorrow, we may all be buzz agents, consuming the products that are supplied as means of production, but we may also have learnt to look past products and brands and to relate to each other on a deeper level as inherently unique human beings. In reality, however, social relations that are not somehow based on material strivings would defeat the very purpose of buzz marketing. And an optimistic vision of egalitarian society like the one rendered above inevitably beckons the question: By what means will we then seek to set ourselves apart from our peers?

4. Conclusion

In this text I have analysed and discussed buzz marketing as an economic and social system, and I have discussed its possible consequences on social relations. In the first chapter I looked at the background for the development of buzz as a marketing strategy, and established a connection to the modernisation process, the continuing rationalisation of society that began in the 18th century, and the loss of the traditional identity of the pre-industrialised society. I showed how consumption and active interpretation of goods as social symbols has become a way of creating an individual identity in modern society, and how the producer's recognition of the diversity and interpretative ability of the previously assumed homogenous mass has lead to new and differentiated approaches to marketing and advertising. Identifying buzz marketing as one of these new methods, I have pointed out the apparent paradox of individuals allowing commercial interests to become an integral part of their personal sphere, when, at the same time, many complain about the increasing commercialisation of society.

In the second chapter I followed up on this paradox, seeking to understand what incites the buzz agent to participate in buzz marketing. To this end, I looked closely at the different factors that motivate all the active agents within the buzz marketing system of the Swedish marketing firm Buzzador. I constructed a basic and an advanced model of the motivational structure of the system based on written material and on my fieldwork as a buzz agent. In the advanced model I focused on less tangible and immediately recognisable motivational factors, and I looked specifically at the symbolic value that is created through social interaction around a brand within the personal sphere. This symbolic surplus value, I have argued, is a significant motivational factor, not only for the client, as the basic model would suggest, but also for the marketing company and the buzz agent. I further made the important point that it is not mainly the specific product of a certain campaign that earns the buzz agent symbolic capital from the social network. Rather, it is the access to products, that is to say the connection to Buzzador, which members of the personal sphere attribute value to. Another point made here is that the one link within the distribution chain that gets very little out of buzz marketing is the social network, wherefore I find it likely that members of the network mainly participate out of social obligation to the buzz agent.

In the third chapter I went on to discuss the possible effects of buzz marketing on social relations within the personal sphere and on the authentic self. I made the point that buzz marketing represents a systematisation of consumption that in effect blurs the boundary between the means of subsistence, which are expressions of the buzz agent's personal taste, and the means of production,

which are placed in the social environment with an ulterior motive. I then pointed out that this unclear distinction might lead to a loss of trust in consumption as a valid social signifier and to an alienation from consumption, which, in turn, would once again expose the existential vacuum within man. As I have argued, due to the culture of reciprocal exchange within social relations in the field of the personal sphere, the authentic self may also be affected, as "false" signifiers are turned into de facto legitimate social signifiers over time. On this basis I have concluded that buzz marketing may ultimately lead to a loss of authentic self.

Notes

[1] Mark Achbar & Jennifer Abbot, *The Corporation*. Big Picture Media Corporation 2003.

[2] *ibid.*

[3] *ibid.*

[4] Paul Marsden, "Introduction and summary" in Justin Kirby & Paul Marsden (ed.), *Connected Marketing. The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*. Butterworth-Heinemann 2006, pp. xvi-xvii

[5] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. (1962) Cambridge: MIT Press 1989.

[6] *ibid.*, p. 27.

[7] *ibid.*, p. 152.

[8] Habermas refers to the intimate sphere as "the family with its interior domain" – *ibid.*, p. 30.

[9] On the change of the meaning of family and the role of friendship in contemporary society, see for instance Ray Pahl, *On Friendship*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2000, pp. 2f.

[10] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1*. (1981) Boston: Beacon Press 1984, pp. 285f.

[11] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (1904-05) New York: Dover 2003, pp. 180f.

[12] Habermas 1984, p. 287.

[13] Indeed the American philosopher, sociologist and psychologist George Herbert Mead says that "it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience", though once a self has been established it does not necessarily need the input of other individuals to exist. – George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*. (1934) Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 1962, p. 140.

[14] Margaretha Järvinen, "Pierre Bourdieu" in Heine Andersen & Lars Bo Kaspersen (ed.), *Klassisk og moderne samfundsteori*. 4th edition. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag 2007, p. 353 (my translation).

[15] Justin Kirby & Paul Marsden (ed.), *Connected Marketing. The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution*. Butterworth-Heinemann 2006.

[16] Alexandra Wahlqvist, Caroline Wallin & Niclas Wejrot, *Customer as Marketer: a new model*. Master Thesis at Lund University School of Economics and Management 2008.

[17] Louise Alm & Martina Bengtsson, *How the customer becomes the company's salesperson with word-of-mouth marketing – a case study of the company Apple and the product iPod*. Master Thesis at Lund University Department for Service Management 2007.

[18] Kerimcan Ozcan & Venkat Ramaswamy, *Word-of-Mouth as Dialogic Discourse: A Critical Review, Synthesis, New Perspective, and Research Agenda*. UMBS Working Paper 2003.

[19] Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. (1867) London: Penguin Books 1996.

[20] Weber 2003.

[21] Roy Langer, *Advertising beyond Fordism: New Subtle Advertising Strategies, Formats and Contents*. CCC Working Paper 2002, no. 1. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School 2002.

[22] Adam Arvidsson, *Brands. Meaning and value in media culture*. London & New York: Routledge 2006.

[23] Langer 2002, p. 7.

[24] See for instance Habermas 1989, Marx 1996, Weber 1995.

[25] Habermas 1989, p. 152.

[26] Marx states that the modern production process "develops a one-sided speciality to perfection, at the expense of the whole of a man's working capacity" – Marx 1996, p. 470, and further that "the social productive power of the collective worker, hence of capital, is enriched through the impoverishment of the worker in individual productive power." – *ibid.*, p. 483.

[27] *ibid.*, p. 1016. Elsewhere Marx explains the process of alienation in more detail: "the worker always leaves the process in the same state as he entered it – a personal source of wealth, but deprived of any means of making that wealth a reality for himself. Since, before he enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [*entfremdet*] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [*fremder Produkt*]." – *ibid.*, p. 716.

[28] "Instead of reacting emotionally, [the city dweller mainly reacts] with his intellect, which comes to dominate the inner life through the increased consciousness that arose from the same cause. [...] All emotional relations between human beings are based on individuality, while the intellectual relations see people as numbers, i.e. as elements which in themselves are unimportant and only of interest to the extent that they perform something that can be measured objectively." – Georg Simmel, "Storstäderna och det andliga livet" (1903) in *Hur är samhället möjligt?* Göteborg: Bokförlaget Korpen 1995, pp. 196f (my translation).

[29] Weber 2003.

[30] *ibid.*, p. 180.

[31] *ibid*., p. 181.

[32] Habermas 1984, p. 284. "A communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing the decisions of opponents." – *ibid*., p. 287.

[33] Habermas 1989, p. 153.

[34] Habermas 1984, p. 287.

[35] An overview of the different forms of early advertising methods can be found in Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication*. London & New York: Methuen 1982, pp. 15-38.

[36] Langer 2002, p. 3.

[37] *ibid*., p. 6.

[38] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and structures*. (1970) London: Sage Publications Ltd 1998, pp. 64f.

[39] *ibid*., p. 93.

[40] *ibid*.

[41] Eco, Umberto, "Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare" (1967) in Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes. Travels in Hyperreality*. London: Minerva 1995, pp. 135-144.

[42] Arvidsson 2006, pp. 18ff.

[43] Langer 2002, p. 7. However, as Langer points out, these new methods did not replace the old means of mass communication, but rather functioned as a supplement; "sender-oriented communication and marketing models show an almost amazing ability to survive in both popular and professional understanding of how mass communication works." – *ibid*. p. 6.

[44] *ibid*., p. 7.

[45] *ibid*., p. 8.

[46] *ibid*., p. 9.

[47] Ancrage (anchorage) is to be understood as a guide that keeps the interpretation of polysemic signs grounded and aimed at a certain direction. Relais (relief) is to be understood as the opening up of many possible interpretations and associations *within* the limits set by ancrage – Roland Barthes, "Bildens retorik" in Kurt Aspelin & Bengt A. Lundberg (ed.), *Tecken och tydning. Til konsternas semiotik*. Stockholm: PAN/Norstedts: 1976, pp. 120ff.

[48] "[Brand management] is not about imposing ways of using goods, or behaving or thinking as a consumer. Rather, it is about proposing branded goods as tools, or building blocks whereby consumers can create their own meanings." – Arvidsson 2006, p. 68.

[49] Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2007 pp. 110ff.

[50] Arvidsson defines brand equity as "the productive potential that the brand has in the mind of consumers" and sees it as the most important factor in the assesment of brand value – Arvidsson 2006, p. 74.

[51] The consumer talks about products with other members of their social network "if for no other reason than confirming one's cognitive, affective, and behavioral investments." – Ozcan & Ramaswamy 2003, p. 8.

[52] Langer 2002, p. 13.

[53] Obviously I do not mean to say that, without buzz marketing, no commercial influence takes place in the personal sphere. Visual signs like logos and other brand symbols are as natural a part of this sphere as of any other, but they are not placed in the same deliberate and controlled manner, as is the case with commercials within the public sphere.

[54] Morten Zahle, "Nu skal du bare høre?" in *Jyllandsposten* (Forbrug section), November 14th 2007, p. 4. Article also available at http://www.buzzador.com/pressdocuments/Jyllandsposten_14_Nov_2007.pdf (link tested on May 25th 2008). At the time of writing, Buzzador has approximately 65.000 buzz agents in Sweden and 3.000 in Denmark and are now aiming at reaching 10.000 Danish buzz agents within the first half of 2008 – Mona Samir Sørensen & Louise Gade Sig, "Mund til mund-reklame vinder frem i Danmark" in *Politiken* (Lørdagsliv section), May 3rd 2008, pp. 4f.

[55] These client examples were found in *ibid*., p. 5.

[56] "You will normally be able to keep any samples, but in the case of e.g. test driving a new car, you will obviously not be allowed to keep it." – http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=37&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[57] https://www.buzzador.com/dk/userdoc/Indbydelse_Philips_Merrild_Senseo_DK.pdf (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[58] The questionnaires also contain more specific questions in connection with each product that vary from campaign to campaign. The three examples of general questions given here were all taken from a questionnaire I answered in connection with my first campaign in February 2008.

[59] "At the end of each campaign we collate a report for the client based on what you and your friends thought about the product. Which is why it is so important that you always report back as soon as the campaign is finished." – http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=37&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[60] A table of the point system can be found at
http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=37&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[61] "You will be able to collect points and in so doing be part of the most attractive campaigns." –
http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=51&Itemid=3&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[62] Sørensen & Sig 2008, p. 4 (my translation).

[63] Zahle 2007.

[64] Ozcan & Ramaswamy 2003, p. 10.

[65] Baudrillard 1998, pp. 60f.

[66] *ibid*., p. 61.

[67] For instance communications consultant Bjarke Svendsen from Retail Institute Scandinavia says that people "think it is fun to gain access to new products, and it might also be a way to become a bit of a trendsetter and first mover." – Zahle 2007 (my translation).

[68] http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=40&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008).

[69] "A field [...] amongst other things defines itself by defining stakes and specific interests that cannot be reduced to the stakes and interests that are characteristic of other fields (it would not be possible to incite a philosopher to play for the stakes that geographers play for)" – Pierre Bourdieu, "Nogle egenskaber ved de sociale felter" (1976) in Pierre Bourdieu, *Men hvem skabte skaberne?* København: Akademisk Boghandel 1997, p. 117 (my translation).

[70] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqcOP7Al88s (link last tested on May 25th 2008).

[71] In this particular campaign, Mette Nielsen, who is the brand manager at the client company identifies the target group as women above 30, which is not the core of my social network – Sørensen & Sig 2008, p. 5.

[72] Siff Skovenberg quoted in Sørensen & Sig 2008, p. 4 (my translation).

[73] Obviously this "uninterested personal taste" is also heavily influenced by commercial agendas and advertising, but the difference is that these influences has so far primarily been exercised in the public sphere, not in the personal.

[74] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." (1983) in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. Columbia University Press 1993, p. 42.

[75] Marx 1996, p. 717.

[76] Naturally I am not suggesting that this is a complete takeover of the individual consumption, as most buzz agents also have salaried jobs that provide them with the opportunity to acquire means of subsistence from other sources than Buzzador.

[77] This is an ethical problem, which Buzzador has apparently attempted to resolve through their policy of openness: http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=35&Itemid=37&lang=en (link tested on May 25th 2008). However, commentators, like lawyer Agnete Sigurd, are not convinced that this is sufficient: "The firm does write on its website that you have to point out that you are a buzzador [buzz agent], but since you are gaining points and get rewarded with new products [...] one might fear that people forget to tell their friends." – Zahle 2007 (my translation).

[78] Pahl refers to the Austrian sociologist Peter Blau, but also points out that not all agree with Blau's focus on exchange theory and market rationality – Pahl 2000, pp. 49ff.

[79] *ibid*., pp. 61f.

[80] Habermas 1984 p. 285. It should be noted, however, that since the actions of the agents within the field can also be seen as part of the symbolic struggle for positions, the actions cannot be characterised as wholly uninterested and solely aimed at understanding for the sake of understanding, even if the personal sphere may still be *dominated* by communicative action.

[81] This validation process is naturally dependent on the nature of the products and on the hierarchal standing of the buzz agent.

[82] H.P. Bahrdt quoted in Habermas 1989, pp. 158f.

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Frequently asked questions: How do I get points?
http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=37&lang=en

Frequently asked questions: How is Buzzador financed?
http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=37&lang=en

Frequently asked questions: Should I tell people I am a Buzzador?

http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=35&Itemid=37&lang=en

Frequently asked questions: What are the benefits of being a Buzzador?

http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=51&Itemid=37&lang=e n

Invitation to campaign

https://www.buzzador.com/dk/userdoc/Indbydelse_Philips_Merrild_Senseo_DK.pdf

Meet some of our Buzzadors

http://www.buzzador.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=40&lang=en