

Save Money. Live Better. Hypermart

"The hypermarket is already. . . the model of all future forms of controlled socialization: retotalization in a homogenous space-time of all the dispersed functions of the body, and of social life (work, leisure, food, hygiene, transportation, media, culture)" (Baudrillard p. 76).

In July of 2008, "Wal-mart" changed to "Walmart" – an unremarkable change by most standards, but Walmart's rebranding efforts is not something the company took lightly. The visual logo of the world's largest retailer is a calculated piece of rhetoric meant to persuade (Demos). Through this one image Walmart reveals its desires to project a persona. The repeated, unconscious and almost inescapable viewing of the logo makes it a powerful rhetorical device. This paper attempts to explain how Walmart's new logo constructs a reality for its customers and invites them to play a part in its rhetorical act (Campbell p. 22). In particular, I analyze the visual rhetoric of Walmart's new logo and the material rhetoric of the store to argue that the rebranded Walmart constructs a "God" persona. This God persona can only exist in a hyperreal state where an organization can blur the boundary between provider and production, employee and customer, store and economy, consumer and commodity. This paper begins by contextualizing Walmart's rhetorical situation (Bitzer), I then explain Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hypermart, the framework through which I will analyze the Walmart structure. Then, through a critical analysis of Walmart, I expand on the hypermart concept to further understand the material, visual and persona rhetoric of the Walmart Supercenter – specifically, I define the concept of a God persona embodied in Walmart's new logo. I then conclude by speculating on how rhetorical critics can judge the effectiveness of this rhetorical method.

Walmart's rhetorical situation, as described by Blitzer as is complicated, integrating economics and government. As the industry leader, businesses look to Walmart for a model. This

is evident in businesses that associate with Walmart, because the retailer demands efficiency from itself and suppliers. Using its large size and purchasing power, Walmart has required suppliers to upgrade computer systems, decrease production cycle length and encouraging offshore manufacturing before Walmart will accept a contract with the supplier. Increasing efficiency of suppliers is necessary to fulfill the vast inventory and quick turnaround Walmart requires. Walmart demands performance at equal efficiency to their own, which makes organizations that do business with Walmart more nimble and profitable. As Robin Prever, former CEO of Saratoga Beverage Group, said, "With a customer like that, it changes your organization. For the better. It wakes everybody up. And all our customers benefited. We changed our whole approach to doing business" (Fishman, 2007). Walmart also provides a huge market for suppliers. Businesses benefit tremendously by placing goods in Walmart because of its huge market share. Twenty-one percent of all money spent on groceries in the United States is spent in a Walmart store (Wikinvest, 2009). The company expands to accommodate this huge market, immediately rendering the market necessary for company's subsistence. As the relationship grows businesses find themselves being pushed for lower and lower prices. Walmart reviews each product every 12 months and will requests a price cut based on a speculated cost of the product's production. If the supplier cannot accommodate the speculated price, Walmart will provide the product either through a new supplier or through one of the in-store brands. Suppliers accept the price cut because having your product pulled from 4,000 stores is devastating for a business (Fishman, 2007). These factors give Walmart considerable leverage over the United States and global economy, blurring the distinction between economy and corporation. This

economic leverage also allows the Walmart corporation to exercise considerable power over its employees and customers.

In an ecosystem where the only rule is cutting cost, employees and customers stand to be marginalized as mere commodities, evident from the current class action lawsuits lobbied against the corporation. Walmart has faced strong criticism regarding employee discrimination, for example, there are currently 1.5 million workers filing a suit against Walmart as a discriminating employer. In February 2007 the case *Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.* was granted class-action status allowing women to file claims against their employer for practices such as denying promotions, denying management opportunities and denying equal pay for equal work (Walmartclass.com 2009). According to expert witness Richard Drogin, women make up 92 percent of cashiers but only 14 percent of managers; it takes men an average of 8.6 years to become manager and women 10.12 years. Further, women are paid 15 percent less than men at the store manager level. All of this information was analyzed from Walmart's own employee database (Drogin 2003). Drogin's report is 46 pages of graphics and statistics about Walmart's discriminatory practice against females. There here have also been cases of Walmart's employees practicing racial discrimination. There is a class action lawsuit filled against the retailer because of discriminating practices when hiring truck drivers, and in 2005 the *Boston Globe* reported a suit against Walmart greeters who were racial profiling customers (Lewis, 2005). This marginalization is systemic, in comparison, Costco has better wages, unionized labor and better health care than Walmart employees. For example, after four years of employment a Costco employee will be making seven dollars an hour more than a Sam's Club employee (Walmartwatch). Walmart will continue to be plagued by these problems until they either solve

them or win court battles. On top of these concerns, the corporation has also faced criticism for its environmental impact.

Many environmental concerns are directly related to the Walmart business model. There are over three hundred abandoned Walmarts across the country resulting in over 500 million square feet of unused retail space; this is roughly the size of all of the industrial space in the city of Atlanta (Zeiss, 2007). These hollow concrete shells stay vacant because very few retailers are capable of filling them. An empty Walmart typically stays empty causing watershed pollution and aesthetic clutter. The environmental impact of Walmart is also evident in the number of vehicle miles people use to shopping there. On an average weekday, Walmart generates over 10,000 car trips. Since 1990, the number of vehicle miles for shopping purposes has risen 40 percent, however, the jump is not associated with more trips to the store. The average trip is now two miles longer. This same study shows that the amount of traffic a store receives is proportional to its size (Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2009). Further, because local businesses usually go bankrupt when a Walmart moves to town, shoppers have fewer local alternatives. Just as suppliers become dependent on Walmart's large market, consumers in communities with a Walmart become dependent on the retailer as local businesses close.

Walmart opening in a community precipitates the closing of local stores in small communities as well as a rise in crime. The 'Walmart phenomenon' was first coined by Kenneth Stone in 1995 to mean that smaller stores that sold the same products as Walmart struggled while those selling different products were unaffected. This effect is most pronounced in towns with less than 5,000 people in a twenty mile range of a Walmart (Stone, 1995). The documentary, *Walmart: The High Price of Low Costs*, depicts main street stores that have closed their doors

because of Walmart (Greenwald, 2005). Beyond small businesses, Walmart also encourages crime in its large, usually ‘unmonitored’, parking lots. One police incident is reported every two minutes at Walmart, which, on a store-by-store basis is six times as much as a Target, the retailers closest competitor. While Walmart is aware that guarded lots do decrease crime, lots are left unsecured because of the expense (Wakeupwalmart.com, 2006). This crime happens despite the surveillance systems that Walmart has in place. The cameras are merely symbols of deterrence, explained by the hypermarket described by Jean Baudrillard.

Baudrillard’s concept of the hypermarket is described through the vocabulary of the hyperreal. According to Baudrillard, the United States has entered a state of hyperreality, a precession of models without reality. This is simulacra, a fourth order of simulation where signs mask the absence of a profound reality (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). Baudrillard describes the hypermarket as existing as part of the network of simulacra. The hypermarket is part of the satellized city – the “metro area” supplanted the city. It is decentralized and programmed like the to-and-fro of commuters. Through the hypermarket the model of modernity emerges – an abstraction of time and space where the functions of the body and social life are fulfilled by the hypermarket. This market blurs the distinction between “cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means (Baudrillard p. 30).” We can see this in the economic power, the devaluing of humans, the self-checkout and the surveillance cameras. Surveillance is a sign of order but also one of control and repression .

Even repression is integrated as a sign in this universe of simulation. Repression become deterrence is nothing but an extra sign in the universe of persuasion. The circuits of surveillance cameras are themselves part of the decor of simulacra (Baudrillard p. 76).

Baudrillard mentions surveillance specifically, but through my material, visual and persona analysis of Walmart I hope to expand upon the understanding of the Hypermarket. Materialist rhetoricians believe there is a rhetorical statement in a physical body. Scholars point to the human body's ability to amplify and convey different kinds of messages. Indeed, to analyze a logo as merely a visual would be incomplete. The Walmart store is the most experiential and sensual contact an individual has with the company. Thus, the store carries meaning in the physicality and operating parameters. We can relate Walmart's physical and operational methods in three areas: reliability, size and abundance. There are nearly 1,000 Walmarts averaging in 100,000 square feet. Another 2,500 are Walmart Supercenters. Supercenters sell groceries and are a smaller derivation of the Hypermart USA prototype. Supercenters operate twenty-four hours a day everyday except December 25th. This makes the Supercenter a highly reliable entity. On average, Supercenters are twice the size of a regular Walmart – "regular Walmart" itself being a distinction only possible in a world of simulacrum. The size and number of stores compounds the idea of abundance that the company perpetuates by keeping their large stores consistently stocked. The Walmart spectacle of abundance, extreme size and reliability turn Walmart into a hyper-real entity.

Walmart itself is a simulacrum that creates a hyper-real state inside of its stores. By providing reliable abundance, the company constructs a hyper-reality that has no bearing on the natural world that exists outside of it. A single Walmart store is a spectacle of size where a shopper is able awe at the scale. The hyperreal state is intensified by the use of florescent lighting, creating an environment of perpetual light, devoid of windows connecting the structure to the outside world. This allows the shopper to exist inside of the rhetoric and believe that their

goods come from Walmart, ignoring the global-economic and agro-environmental structure that exists beyond the walls and supplies the store. Through Walmart, the distinctions between employee and customer is blurred through the self-checkout line just as the corporation itself distorts the boundary between government and governed. The in-store brands and sheer scale of existence renders the distinction between provider and production meaningless. Further, because of the retailer's extreme size, it is impossible to avoid viewing the rhetorical act of the logo and advertising campaign that do not occlude reality, they mask the absence of a reality. The analysis of this new logo corroborates the non-existence of the real because the recently changed logo builds a persona for Walmart as a God-like provider.

Walmart's logo exhibits a visual rhetoric with persona and tone. Defined by Campbell and Huxman, the persona is the role the rhetor takes in relation to the audience and the tone reflects the attitudes towards the subject and relation to the audience (p. 59). The new design's colors create a tone that is friendlier with softer colors and less forceful imagery. The cold cobalt blue of the old logo and is replaced by a pleasant sky blue; the bold capital letters are replaced with a delicate, modern lowercase typeface. A bright orange "starburst" has been added to the design, which is actually an evolution of the star-hyphen in the previous logo. This serves the practical purpose of a symbol that can stand alone and can compete with Target's highly brandable design. The "starburst" implies the star which humans are most familiar, our Sun. Replaced is a very forceful visual style with a more subversive suggestion. Walmart is associating itself with the sky and the Sun, the outer limits of the experienced world. This visual statement corresponds to the material reality of a Walmart store.

When outside of the building, shoppers experience a simulation of Walmart through its logo. Logos are hyper-real in that they abstract the reality of the company they symbolize and over-simplify it. The sun and sky that are depicted in Walmart's new logo imply the size, reliability and abundance that exists inside of a Walmart store. Thus, the image acts as a guide for how a shopper and employee should view the Walmart experience. Consumers are invited to play the role of Walmart Shopper, an abstracted representation of life and quality of life through the cyclical nature of consumption. The sun and sky projects a reality where Walmart is interwoven and inextricable from the human experience, a projection where even outer referentials such as the Sun and the earth sky begin to blur with the boundary of man's creations. The 24-hour market becomes the provider and producer and any reference of where the food came from or how it can be provided so inexpensively is lost. By putting other stores out of business, Walmart – or businesses that can compete with Walmart – become the only option for consumers. Walmart exists within the sprawl of highways and fast-food restaurants and occludes that those structures are man-made and designed to entice and control our thoughts and actions through advertising. In this urban sprawl of signs and symbols that no longer reference reality but instead hide it, Walmart has become a sort of post-modern God.

To understand Walmart as a God, we must first define the attributes of God and of a God experience, we can then correlate this understanding with the hyper-real construction of the Walmart network of stores. Different cultures and traditions vary in their understandings of God, making it difficult to propose a single definition. Nevertheless, I have chosen a traditional definition of the God entity and a psychological definition of the God experience. A widely used definition of God is a being that exhibits omnipresence, omnipotence and omniscience

(Princeton WordNet). Thus, a God-like entity would be perceived as being constantly present, demonstrate extreme power over other conceived structures of power, and possess knowledge beyond the comprehension of outside entities. This is a simple, concrete definition of God, however, to fully understand the God experience it is important to look at how the brain makes sense of its perceived reality. For this, Leowald's *Papers on Psychoanalysis* provide a suitable and concise definition:

This is the thrust of psychoanalysis, of the endeavor to transform unconscious or automatic repetitions – memorial process in which we do not encounter ourselves and others – into aware and re-creative action in which we know who we and others are, understanding how we got to be that way, and envisage what we might do with ourselves as we are. In such memorial activity, which weaves past, present, and future into a context of heightened meaning, each of us is on the path to becoming a self. (Leowald)

Synthesizing these two definitions gives us the attributes of the God idea and a mechanism through which humans create heightened meaning out of life, a function attributed to the concept of God. Thus, an entity exhibits a God persona when it uses repetition and natural memorial processes to create within a subject an understanding of self that naturally implicates that entity, and where the subject views the entity as inconceivably more present, powerful and knowledgeable than the subjective self. The God persona necessitates a hyper-real situation where the entity is inextricable from a subject's reality, supplanting it. The God persona is enacted when a subject perceives reality and self through the entity while accepting the entity as outside the subjects ability to actuate change because of the entity's God-like attributes. These aspects cause the subject to view the God as part of the natural order, accepting it as a viable reality. Walmart enacts a God persona by exhibiting God-like attributes, constructing a reality for consumers to live inside, using its position of power over the consumer and by projecting

through a hyperreal state. Walmart projects an experienced reality which offers a simplified understanding of the company, the self and the world through its rhetorical act.

When discussing Walmart's God-like attributes, it's important to specify that customers must only perceive Walmart as having these attributes relative to themselves. Walmart's size and number of locations, discussed earlier, satisfies the qualification of omnipresence. There are few situations when a Walmart is not a car ride away. Walmart's omnipresence empowers the store because it causes the customer to depend on a Walmart's reliability and abundance. The second attribute, omnipotence, is satisfied by having a vast amount of wealth and legal power at its disposal. There are multiple instances of Walmart putting pressure on businesses and local governments, which exemplify Walmart's power as the world's largest retailer, making it incomprehensibly more powerful than the consumers it serves. The qualification of omniscience is satisfied by the massive inventory system that Walmart has developed and maintained. Tracked are statistics on inventories, consumer purchasing trends, employee pay and raise history along with video recordings of the activity inside of a Walmart. This means Walmart has significantly more information about their customers than the customers have about Walmart. These aspects create an asymmetrical balance where the consumer holds little to no autonomy, power or knowledge over the Walmart corporation. This dichotomy of power makes Walmart seem impossible to understand except through the projected advertising efforts which create a hyper-simplification of the internal structure.

"Save money. Live better" invites the consumer into a Walmart lifestyle where their purpose is clearly defined. Customers are only expected to save money and live better. Consumers are presented with Walmart as the means through which they perform these two

actions. Through this mechanism a consumer begins to view their reality through the lens of Walmart, seeing it as part of the natural order. Walmart is the largest provider of food in America, heightening its importance to provider of essential nutrients. The Walmart lifestyle is also one of abundance and reliability allowing a consumer to construct their reality through the repeated, unconscious act of consumption without feeling guilty because of this hyper-abundance. Walmart controls through the signs of surveillance and makes its customers employees through the self-checkout line. It is the unconscious, repeated act of consumption that Walmart helps construct a shopper's understanding of themselves, fulfilling the second aspect of the God Persona.

Implying any ability to understand an individual customer's construction of self and reality is presumptuous, further, to imply that Walmart or any entity is important enough to constitute the entirety of these aspects in an individual is beyond naïve. However, in Walmart's rhetorical act the intentions to fill this psychological need is apparent. Through the Sun and the sky, Walmart implies its abundance and reliability, the aspects that blur its existence with reality. The extension of this is the material store, which turns shopping into spectacle. The store itself implies a complex global-economic structure required to stock the 200,000 square foot building, however, the intricate nature of the system, which implicates over 2 million employees, is impossible for a single person to understand. The inability to understand the structure leads to a consumer's perception that there is no way to actuate change. This message is reinforced by the appearance of the Sun imagery and the word "Unbeatable" throughout the store. Thus, the individual comes to understand their small role as consumer inside of a comparatively massive structure beyond their control.

With no ability to actuate change inside of a global-economic structure that is “unbeatable,” the consumer has two options, either to accept the Walmart reality or reject it. However, this decision is not presented directly, it is subtly implied through the cyclical act of consumption, something necessary to life. Throughout this cycle, the store blurs reality and fantasy, obscuring the complicated structure that allows for its operation. Instead of seeking to understand the outside structure, the hyper-real state of Walmart seduces the consumer with the simplicity of consumption. The Sun and sky logo project a reality where Walmart is the outer limits of the experienced world. Walmart is always brightly lit and plentiful. Walmart is reality. Thus, through shopping at Walmart, customers are seduced into accepting Walmart as part of existence and inextricable from reality itself.

It is important to understand that through Walmart’s new branding efforts, it seeks to shape consumer construction of reality and self. By representing the company through the imagery of a Sun, Walmart nods at its size and desire to be at the center of the American lifestyle. The new logo also serves as an alternate-reality-ideal for the physicality that is the Walmart store. This ideal masks the absence of reality, because the Walmart story *isn't* reality, it is a structure built on top of something we would have once considered real. The logo acts as an anchor for the unconscious, repetitive action undergone through the act of consumption, weaving itself into an individual’s conception of self and reality. Further acting upon the individual is an idea that Walmart holds too much power to actuate any real change, which causes gradual acceptance of Walmart as the natural order of life, inextricable from reality itself. Once the individual has this conception, the understanding of self through the “Save money. Live better” logo becomes way for individuals to live comfortably inside of the global-economic system. The Walmart logo is

presented as an alternative to reality that a consumer finds easily accessible and understandable. As rhetorical critics, it is important to judge the effectiveness of this rhetoric.

Walmart's logo change is nearly a year old, which is not enough time to determine the effectiveness of the rhetoric. I would, however, like to present the methods of judgment. By looking at revenue generated we can determine how successful the rebranding has been at persuading customers. Further, the results of the class action lawsuits will give an indication of whether Walmart is powerful enough to control the government, however, we would be left with the question of the class action suit merely occluding the fact that Walmart does control the government through lobbyists. Walmart's environmental impact will greatly affect its baring on reality, because its abundance is not sustainable. By building solar panels, buying local food and goods and beginning to emphasize quality and price, Walmart could greatly lower its carbon footprint. What these solar panels would mean in reference to the logo would also be a subject worth analysis. Further, brand loyalty would be an interesting metric to study because it would help verify the God persona – ideally, a customer would only shop at Walmart and would only be able to actuate change through Walmart and the act of consumption. It will be interesting to see how Walmart handles the current economic crisis and whether customers begin to understand the implications of their consumption habit. As population grows and commodities become more scarce, we will begin to see the true nature of Walmart. We could see a productive hyperreality where Walmart is responsible for sustainability and customers must only consume and do what Walmart asks of them (under the guise of being sustainable). Alternatively, the entire hyperreal structure could implode upon itself.

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