Written response Unit 3 Projection 2

Abstract:

In a culture obsessed with individuality, we consume not just objects but difference. My project is a visual and theoretical investigation into the myth of consumer identity: how self-image becomes a carefully shaped version of ourselves, based on comparing ourselves to imagined ideals of other people.

At the centre of this project is the handbag-a portable symbol of aspiration, class, gender, and selfhood. A Prada bag performs class; a thrifted tote performs individuality, yet both are shaped by systemic branding and capitalist influence.

Through this lens, I explore how the bag operates not only as a personal container but also as a vessel of capitalist meaning, carrying both intimate belongings and external projections.

Context:

This project sits at the intersection of visual culture, consumer theory, and image construction It uses semiotics, systems thinking, and material culture frameworks to investigate how ordinary things, namely bags, bear symbolic weight and perform social identities. As Roland Barthes argues, we project mythic meaning onto objects; they become simplified narratives that help us make sense of our social roles, class aspirations, and emotional desires. These myths may not be "true," but they feel real because they are culturally reinforced, repeated through visual codes, advertising, and lifestyle media (Barthes, 1957).

My project questions how we perceive advertisements, how they are constructed, and manipulated to sell, to spark desire, and to drive consumption. It also critiques the value we assign to objects: what gives a bag its worth, and how does that differ depending on one's status? As Jean Baudrillard argues, in our consumption of objects, what we truly engage with is not the object itself, but the system of objects it belongs to (Baudrillard, 1996). Objects exist within a system of signs, a language in which each product communicates something about its owner. This system is carefully shaped by advertising and cultural narratives that attach meaning to things and then sell those meanings back to us.

While Baudrillard sees the handbag (or any luxury item) as a signifier within this symbolic system, Pierre Bourdieu critiques this by asking: "Yes, but who has the power to read and afford those signs?" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2). Cultural capital, knowledge and education plays a central role in how we assign and perceive value. People don't just consume symbols or meanings; they consume according to their *habitus*, a system of dispositions shaped by social background.

I believe there's a hierarchy and many different factors that shape why someone buys something. Meaning is projected onto things, but that projection also targets the consumer. Every brand holds its own values and targets a specific audience. Brands want us to *belong*, that's how they build loyalty. I'm examining the fashion industry as one that promises belonging, but in reality, is built on exclusivity. It's about wanting to be part of the fashion "tribe."

Choosing a product often feels like choosing a side, a way of saying, "That's who I am." When someone says, "That dress is so you," and a sales assistant echoes that it looks good on you, you're more likely to buy it. In *The Looking-Glass Self* (1902), Charles Horton Cooley argues that our self-concept develops through our perception of how others see us: we imagine how we appear to others, imagine their judgment, and develop feelings about ourselves based on that imagined judgment.

Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2009) explores this struggle with identity. He writes that while the identities of others seem solid and fixed, our own often feel unstable. In a world full of uncertainty, it's no surprise that people try to construct a solid identity and in our consumption-driven society, shopping becomes one of the main ways to do that.

This project also explores the idea of belonging in fashion, a world where exclusion and exclusivity dominate. Fashion is often described as the most difficult world to break into, critiqued for its superficiality. Brands carefully curate who is "invited in," creating their own worlds. When their target audience stops buying, they rebrand. Just because something is marketed as "timeless" doesn't mean we assign it timeless value. And fashion is an industry where you might be "in" one week and "out" the next. Drop or flop.

Brands choose us as much as we choose them and they do this through advertising, shaping what we see and influencing what we desire. This is even more powerful with social media. *Beyond Branding* (2003) responded to growing cynicism toward corporate influence. It argues that traditional marketing was too loud, too obvious. Instead, brands began adopting subtle, emotional, experience-led strategies. They stopped shouting and started blending into culture, ambient, trustworthy, familiar.

But social media also affects the consumer. It offers too many choices. One day, you're the Y2K girl; the next, you're a rockstar. It creates a paradoxical space, quiet but noisy, constant yet ever-changing.

At the core of this inquiry is the belief that objects do not exist in isolation. Following Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1996) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), consumer goods function as a language of signs. We speak through them, curating personas, signaling values, performing status. A designer handbag says something very different when paired with a Tesla than when carried with a tattered coat. A plastic Lidl bag becomes a marker of class, locality, or resistance, depending on its context. It's not the price or utility of the object that matters, it's its symbolic relationship to other objects and to the body that carries it.

Capitalism is a system that produces behavior: chasing trends, distinguishing ourselves through consumption, and aligning with curated personas. The bag is not just a product; it is a node in a network of economic, cultural, and emotional flows. Through design choices, labels, and juxtapositions, this work seeks to reveal those interconnections and the illusion of autonomy they create.

My inquiry unfolds through photography, projection, collage, and written interventions. It explores how visual communication can expose the mechanics behind object-based identity performance. Rather than showing pictures of people, it concentrates on their bags, the items they carry, and the emotional, social, and economic burden that comes with them. This approach is especially essential for designers, cultural theorists, and visual communicators operating in a society where branding is associated with identity and objects frequently speak louder than words.

At its core, this work asks: What happens when the object becomes the portrait? What truths, illusions, or contradictions are revealed when we label the thing that labels us? What can we learn when we closely examine the visual cues of branding and the power of a handbag?

Projected contribution:

This enquiry is relevant to graphic communication design because it interrogates the systems of meaning that designers both construct and disrupt. It challenges the designer's role as a neutral communicator and instead positions design as a tool in shaping self-image, desire, and social perception. By unpacking how visual language (logos, slogans, image curation) constructs illusions of individuality through consumer goods, my project critiques the very tools graphic design often uses to sell these identities. Theoretically, it positions branding as a performance, design becomes an agent in the commercialization of the self by drawing on semiotics, systems thinking, and cultural theory.

It also brings up ethical issues, asking how designers might stop promoting capitalist mythology and instead make room for introspection, defiance, or complexity.

By exposing how objects like handbags become vehicles for performing class, taste, and aspiration, it challenges the visual strategies designers use to sell illusions. It's made me more conscious of my role as a designer within these systems, pushing me to reflect on the ethics of visual communication. Coming from a branding background in my BA, I was trained to craft persuasive advertising campaigns and appeal to target audiences, skills I now find myself actively questioning through this project. Instead of reinforcing those strategies, I'm using this work to critique them, aiming to develop a more critical, research-led practice that doesn't just create desire but interrogates it, using design to expose, rather than mask, the social codes we engage with every day.

References:

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