"Thanks for Stopping By": Gender and Virtual Community in American Shop-By-Television Discourse

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13. ‘Thanks for stopping by’: gender and virtual intimacy in American shop-by-television discourse

Mary Bucholtz

Introduction

As a cursory inspection of any shopping mall in American suburbia can confirm, consumer culture has reinvented space as spectacle. It would be premature, however, to declare that the image has superseded the word as the organizing principle of mass culture, for many forms of consumer culture rest on a solidly linguistic foundation. Nowhere is the enduring power of language more evident than in the shopping channel, a peculiarly American and highly gendered form of mass consumption that was made possible in the past decade through widespread access to cable television programming. I focus here on QVC (‘Quality Value Convenience’), the channel that holds the greatest market share.

The shopping channel is, in essence, a 24-hour commercial for a vast array of products. Although the network lacks programmes in the traditional sense, it presents a variety of shows that cater to particular consumer needs and desires, each of which addresses an element of the larger social matrix in which the consumer locates herself, and each of which mediates between the consumer and the social world by interpreting every aspect of daily life as a commercial event. This unceasing call to consumption is by no means new, but the singleness of the network’s purpose is. Whereas commercials on traditional network television are constructed in relation to a programme which ostensibly provides the primary reason for viewing, on the shopping channel the commercials have moved from the margin of the television landscape to its centre, and thus the very fact that they are advertisements is obscured.

The format of the channel likewise distracts attention from the profit motive. Professional hosts, stationed on sets designed to mimic the decor of a typical Middle American home, describe and display a constant parade of merchandise with ceaseless good cheer. Supplementing hosts’ regular sales pitch is a more conversational discourse style that invites viewers to imagine themselves as part of a friendly community. Hosts face the camera full front and seemingly address the audience members — overwhelmingly white, lower-middle-class women in suburban areas — directly and individually, a characteristic of the mass media more generally that Norman Fairclough (1989) has termed synthetic personalization. They may also engage in conversation with other network employees, such as fellow hosts, camera crew members, and others on the set.

This effect is not avoided, however, for artificiality is a central value of the shopping channel. An aesthetic of fakeness pervades the network, which celebrates the faux (and hence affordable) over the genuine (and hence unattainable, and even undesirable, for most lower-middle-class-identified viewers); shoppers use fake money — credit cards — to buy imitation merchandise from hosts who impersonate an upper-middle-class ideal. The promise of membership in this class, implicit in every sales pitch, is equally spurious. More important, so is the promise of membership in the shopping-channel community itself, although it is precisely this promise that keeps shoppers coming back for more. Through on-the-air telephone conversations with hosts, which are permitted only to those who first make a purchase, callers tap into a fictive community founded on the shared value of mass consumption. Yet the shopping channel that is the centre of this community is no place, a literal utopia. Using the methods of discourse analysis, the close examination of moment-by-moment interaction, I will demonstrate that it is this powerful sense of shared location, community, and intimacy, far more than the opportunity to buy goods over the telephone at discounted prices, that draws women to the shopping channel. As numerous other contributions to this volume show, the images of domesticity and promises of support and friendship deployed by the shopping channel are time-honoured tactics among the purveyors of consumer culture for enlisting women’s participation in consumption.

The shopping channel and the linguistic market-place

I have argued elsewhere that the on-air telephone conversations of the shopping channel offer a place for women to take up positions of discursive authority that are then destabilized and commodified as authentic testimonials by the capitalist imperative of the network (Bucholtz, 1999). Much more obviously, however, the linguistic strategies of the host are also
commodified by the network. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has suggested that the social power of language can be understood via the metaphor of the linguistic marketplace, in which speakers’ linguistic practices may be seen as symbolic capital through which they accrue profit. In the linguistic economy of the shopping channel, the host’s language use is symbolic capital that is invested in and produces a sense of community around consumption. The linguistic labour of the host reconfigures the economic exchange into one in which language and the sense of community it constructs replace material commodity as the symbolic object of consumption. At the same time, however, the shopping channel supports a literal economy in which the host’s labour is invested in the promotion of material commodities. Both economies, it is important to note, yield financial profits for the corporation, but the linguistic economy yields a symbolic profit as well. The construction of this fictive community ensures that viewers will mark their community loyalty through repeated transactions with the network, thereby producing continued profits. In such a system Bourdieu’s metaphor takes on a literal sense: symbolic capital becomes inextricably linked to corporate capital in the shopping-channel economy.

Mary Talbot’s (1992, 1995) research on the rhetoric of sisterhood in a teen magazine reveals a similar process at work in print media. Talbot demonstrates that the discourse of a feature article on lipstick locates teenage girls within a ‘text population’ of real and ideal readers whose subject positions are assigned by the text itself. As a one-way medium, advertisements necessarily offer only the most attenuated form of community. Talbot points out that although readers may easily enrol in such communities on the basis of consumption practices alone,

being a certain kind of consumer does not in itself form relationships; consumption communities cannot exist in the same way as real communities based on locality, kinship, or work relations. They can provide a sense of belonging, of group membership – no more. (1995, p. 147)

The shopping channel, however, provides not only membership but relationship by means of the interaction between host and shopper. The telephone conversation is itself the network’s pre-eminent commodity: only a tiny fraction of viewers can acquire it, and its rarity makes it desirable. In the hopes of talking on the air with a favourite host, viewers will watch for hours on end and dial in regularly. Here the linguistic exchange comes to displace the economic exchange as the source of pleasure. But it is only by purchasing products offered by the shopping channel that viewers may fully enter the shopping channel’s world. Consumers quite literally buy into the notion of community. Thus, in the newly configured transaction, linguistic exchange does not mediate economic exchange; instead, economic exchange mediates linguistic exchange.

Nevertheless, the relationship remains artificial, even in the relatively two-way medium of interactive television. Fairclough (1989, p. 217) notes that synthetic personalization may occur in both one-way and two-way interactions, for the phenomenon may be a matter of constructing fictitious individual persons, for instance as the addressee of an advertisement, or of manipulating the subject positions of, or the relationships between, actual individual persons (in the direction of equality, solidarity, intimacy, or whatever) as in interviews – or, I would add, as in the discourse of the shopping channel. In the following pages, I trace the discursive moves by which this repositioning is achieved.

Manufacturing loyal customers

Like the magazine Talbot examined, the shopping channel sets itself up as a trustworthy source of information about consumer goods. Yet the proliferation of such pseudo-information on the network, as in other media, obscures the network’s inadequacy as a consumer guide: all products are promoted at the same fever pitch and no item is ever criticized. Not surprisingly, then, callers buy readily and almost as readily return their purchases for refunds. By encouraging shopper loyalty, the network ensures that more transactions will be permanent.

One way the network enforces repeat purchases is by promoting an ideology of opposition against ‘the stores’. Callers are so well versed in this oppositional discourse that any mention of ‘the stores’ by hosts triggers a testimonial of the superiority of QVC over traditional retail establishments (transcriptions have been simplified; a key to the transcription conventions is provided at the end of the chapter):

H = host, C = caller

(1).

H Have you been (pause) had a chance to go into the stores and see any of the other Corning pieces and how they’re priced?

C We have a Corning outlet near where I live.

H Really.

C and the prices are outrageous.
I mean QVC justs beats them (pause) by a mile.

H Well, great.

That's a great price. Because (pause) individually those Corning pieces Dorothy and I—are you—I'm sure you know living by an outlet, that individually the pieces can be very expensive.

C Yes.

H Very.

Many callers volunteer such comparisons without any prompting from the host, and in fact, this oppositional consciousness is so acute that callers may apologize for their disloyalty to QVC when they are forced actually to shop in a store. Television itself is also positioned against the shopping channel.

(2)

C I—saw them I've seen them advertised at on TV

H Mhm

C You know just on commercials.

H Right.

C But I can't remember that price that they had, but I know it was nothing like the price that (pause) that that I'm getting to tonight on the air here.

H So.

C I jumped on that when I saw it come up.

H Good for you.

Callers here testify to the distinctiveness of the shopping channel's offerings and the significant savings it provides. Yet the national-brand products that constitute the bulk of the network's merchandise can be found in any shopping mall for comparable prices. The appeal of the network is not economic, then, but emotional. As suggested by hosts' reactions in (1) and (2) above, being a price-savvy shopper earns one praise in the shopping-channel world. Equally praiseworthy is generosity; gift giving is encouraged, even in the absence of a holiday or other special occasion, but in the worldview of the shopping channel, just as important as giving merchandise to others is keeping it for oneself, and this pattern seems to predominate among QVC's customers.

(3)

H Now is that—

is the double burner <i.e., exerciser</i> for you or is it for someone else?

C Mainly for me.

H Excellent.

Self-indulgence is praised as an act of well-developed self-esteem. Any occasion can be an excuse to buy. Shoppers are urged to give themselves gifts for Christmas and their birthdays and to reward their every action and mood with commodities. Even buying for another can warrant buying for oneself, as (4) illustrates. The caller has just told the host about a gift that she bought from the shopping channel.

(4)

H Now I hope you'll be able to stick around because we got some nice gold.

C Since you did such a nice thing for someone else you might be able to treat yourself tonight.

H Thanks.

C Treat yourself.

H No, thanks.

C That's wonderful.

H Thanks.

C And uh certainly (pause) treat yourself as much as you want.

H Okay.

C Okay.

H All right.

C Take care.

H Have a good day.

C Bye bye.

H Mm bye bye now.

C (pause)

H <to camera> A lot of people do like to treat themselves
21 whenever their birthday rolls around they say, (pause)
22 Good heavens I'm going to go out and just buy myself
23 something that I can uh (pause) enjoy,
24 something that will make me feel good.

Thus the network presents constant consumption of its merchandise as normal and healthy. In order to maintain this practice, however, women must also maintain the practice of constant viewing. Callers regularly assure hosts of their faithfulness, and hosts rally callers with a few well-chosen words of encouragement, such as Hang in there or Thanks for staying up. Viewing and buying form a symbiotic relationship: viewing enables shopping, and with the appropriate purchases viewing can become even more pleasant.

(6)

<discussing an exercise machine>

H The nice thing about this is, you can put it in front of your TV, watch QVC, and a half an hour will go by like <snaps fingers> that. You know?

C: (I have to do it.) If I don't have to jump off to call QVC and order something, [that'd be fine.]

H [laughter]

Well you'll just have to have your cordless phone standing by, so you can keep on pumping.

But because many of the same products are repeatedly offered for sale, viewers are not motivated to tune in simply to seize a one-time chance at a great bargain. Far more rare are the opportunities to get on the air – or even to hear one's friend or neighbour phoning in:

(7)

C: Can you say hello to my friend Lori?
H Oh I would love to!
C: What is her name?
H: Lori?
C: She and I are QVCites.
H: Uh huh.
C: And is she there with you now (pause) Janet?
H No,
1 C Yeah [<laughter>]
2 H [And those <laughter>inters.
3 C Right.
4 H [<laughter>] They both are culprits in that regard.
5 C She's kind of sweet [though.]
6 H [Oh] that's great.
7 Oh yeah.
8 It's kind of like,
9 you think,
10 <dental click> Oh she <inbreath> my earrings.
11 And then you break out in a smile,
12 right?
13 [<laughter>]
14 C [yeah.]
15 H <inbreath> Good.

Although the host's playful tone (marked by her creaky voice quality in line 10) initially elicits laughter from the caller, her continuation of the topic in lines 12 and 14 finally leads the caller to object mildly (line 15), using contrastive stress and the contrastive marker though. The host quickly emphasizes her agreement with the caller's position, narrating a hypothetical scene and soliciting the caller's approval (line 22). Her intake of breath and evaluative marker (Good, line 25) signal that the caller's hesitant agreement has brought them both back onto solid - and solidarity - ground. The host's narrative here does double duty: not only does it resolve the conflict but it also displays an idealized interaction between family members, in which mothers and grandmothers exhibit attitudes of patient fondness toward their wayward progeny.

Just as important as a sense of common values is a feeling of shared space and experience. The topics that hosts introduce in telephone interaction are crucial in bringing about this effect. At various points the host may more or less seamlessly slip out of product description and into a more intimate discourse, a discourse of community. These shifts are only apparent disjunctions, however, since the host usually incorporates them back into the larger linguistic project of commodity promotion. Such disjunctions are most obviously seen in the telephone conversations, but they are supported by other on-camera interactions as well.

Conversations that foster intimacy may draw on the shared experience of popular culture, as when a host asks a caller, Remember that plot on General Hospital? Hosts may use similar tactics in interaction with other network employees, evoking a sense of shared culture and community that envelops the viewers as well.

The introduction of topics unrelated to consumption, particularly in the telephone conversations, creates a feeling of expanded time, in contrast to the manufactured urgency generated by the timer in the corner of the television screen, counting down to zero to imply that each offer is for a limited time only (in fact, most products are regularly available for sale). The message is that the imperative to purchase must be fulfilled quickly, so that the shopper can enjoy at leisure the community feeling that is the fringe benefit of consumption. Indeed, this example shows that the topic of consumption is never far away; any subject can be linked to the buying process.

In line 9 the host recognizes and tries to bridge the physical distance between himself and the network's viewers by turning to the overhearing audience in line 7 and explaining his conversation to them. But just as often, the hosts minimize this distance by broaching topics of shared experience, such as the weather:

(10).
1 H Did you all get much snow there in West Virginia?
2 C Oh we've got um (pause) we got about three foot of snow and
3 [um ]
4 H [Whoo!] 4
5 C we've got drifts up to sixteen feet. [So ]
6 H [Wow.]
Equally important, however, is the difference between the public ‘town square’ replicated in malls and megastores and the private, domestic sets displayed on the shopping channel. Although the shopping channel is public on a scale far greater than that of any shopping mall, the intimacy of its setting licenses exchanges of equal intimacy, which bind viewers more closely to the network and its products. Thus topics seemingly outside the economic exchange may come to be associated with it, and the reverse is also true: discussions of consumption can take on other meanings, especially intimacy. This phenomenon is most evident in the narratives of self-disclosure that are crafted by hosts and viewers alike. One of the few academic treatments of teleshopping, Mimi White (1992) argues that the discourse of the shopping channel is therapeutic in that it offers viewers an opportunity to confess their personal habits of consumption to a recognized expert, the network host. White’s discussion is both incisive and wide-ranging, but I differ with her on this point. Confessional discourse necessarily invites either absolution or punishment, yet the teleshopping host’s role is not to judge the actions reported by the caller but to applaud them. Further, Robin Tolmach Lakoff (1990) has suggested that therapeutic change is enacted through the covert adversarial component of the therapeutic process. But both this adversarial stance and the goal of change are absent in the shopping channel. What is present, in abundance, is self-revelatory discourse. Self-disclosure is not, however, synonymous with confession; confession is only one of the many uses to which self-disclosure may be put. More commonly, the revelation of self is utilized as a technique for creating intimacy.

In the narratives of the shopping channel, self-revelation is most often associated with consumption. These are modelled by the host both in conversations with viewers and in presentations of merchandise. The host uses several methods to prime callers to provide self-disclosing testimonials about commodities, including hypothetical scenarios about how consumers might use a given item; unsolicited narratives of her or his own experience with a product; and invitations to viewers to share their consumption experiences. Hosts use the hypothetical scenario primarily during their descriptions of merchandise. These suggestions translate into future narratives that a buyer could share in call-in testimonials to the network. Lines 13–14 in example (9) above illustrate the use of the hypothetical scenario: *This kind of necklace reminds me of something you might wear to like a jazz concert.* Such scenarios not only present ideas for how the viewer might best put some item to use, but also evoke the ideologies of the consumption community. The hypothetical world of the consumer that is sketched by the host is one in which women have office careers, work out at health clubs,
buy gifts for their professional husbands, have children, entertain frequently, decorate their houses attractively, and stock them with up-to-date electronic equipment (see also Clarke, this volume).

The host may go a step further, however, and report her or his own use of a commodity. This type of narrative shows up both in telephone conversations and in product presentation and is frequent in banter between the host and other network employees. But self-revelatory discourse does not serve merely as a model for callers. In telephone interaction, hosts' self-disclosures follow rather than precede those of teleshoppers, an indication that hosts disclose their personal experiences not simply to elicit caller narratives but to show support when a caller volunteers a testimonial. For example, in (11), the host follows up the caller's account of why she has purchased home exercise equipment (1-11) with a similar story of her own (13-20):

(11)
1 C I know even though I have a club membership,
2 H Mhm.
3 C I still I
4 H like sometimes (I like doing I xxx)
5 C one thing a body can never get on the ones that they have
6 H at the club.
7 H Right [[xx]]
8 C [So if] I was at home (it's gonna) I'll be able to
9 H utilize this at home,
10 C better than I would trying to get on one of them
11 H at the club.
12 H That's a good point to make.
13 H Whenever I go to my health club?
14 C I always have to sign up and wait in line to use
15 H my [stuff ]
16 C [you got] a waiting list and a line to wait and uh.
17 C Can never get on it,
18 H so
19 C And who needs that,
20 H so you know?

This fact is seen in the testimonials provided by callers in response to queries from the host or occasioned by spontaneous enthusiasm for the product under discussion (see Bucholtz, 1999).

Likewise, callers and hosts are quick to point to their shared tribulations, such as the problems of body size and shape: one caller confides, 'See, I have big hips. My hips are big but my top is nothing', and a host laments his 'hazardous waist'. Lexical items also contribute to this aura of intimacy, for example in expressions of well-wishing like Take care, Good luck, Stay warm, and I hope the snow starts to melt for you. Such expressions may additionally make reference to the viewer's purchases, such as Bon appetit on your new dinnerware set, or, to the purchaser of exercise equipment. I hope you get in tip-top shape.

Callers and hosts enter each other's worlds in other ways as well. In particular, when conversation moves away from commodities, it often turns towards the topic of family and home life.

(12)
<dog barking in background>
C [Sh- oh I'd better go]
H [Oh there's the puppy.]
[What's] his name?
C [Huh? ]
H I have three puppies. <dog barking>-
C [Huh? ]
H Oh, three of them. <laughter>
H -hands clapping in background>
C <laughter>
H They sound like they're pretty excited.
C Kiko,
H Mischief,
C and Chocolate.
H Oh my goodness.
C That sounds cute.

As Example (12) illustrates, hosts seize such opportunities whenever they present themselves. Although the caller tries to end the conversation when her dog starts barking, the host's questions and comments keep the caller talking and revealing details about her pets. This show of interest on the part of the host, like most of the discourse on the shopping channel, is formulaic despite its improvised appearance: hence in Example (5) above, the host slips in her response to the news of the caller's approaching birthday, launching into a welcoming routine and then quickly correcting herself (line 6).
Likewise, the *What's your X's name?* routine is a frequently used device for manufacturing intimacy:

(13)

C You all are great I tell you,
H <low volume> Well thank you.
C What's your husband's name?
H <mock shout> Hi Michael how you doing?
C <laughter> He says hi.
H <laughter> Okay.
C Well I'm glad both of you stopped by to say hello.

The host is able to call upon this strategy because the caller has made reference to her husband earlier in the call – not explicitly, but with the pronoun *we*, which most callers use to invoke their marital relationship (see also Example 10, lines 15 and 16: We went out and tried to to take a walk earlier but we didn't get too far). And the very act of using a pronoun rather than a full noun phrase like *my husband and I* reveals the caller's own orientation towards an intimate, private discourse in which heterosexual union is taken for granted – a discourse that she (correctly) assumes the shopping channel shares.

In fact, husbands have a special cachet on the shopping channel. Men are in the minority among both hosts and viewers, but husbands are a constant topic of intimate conversation. Thus the breathless excitement of one viewer, who called in to say she had encountered the host's husband by chance, becomes understandable. This near-brush with near-fame brings the host more firmly into the viewer's world, making the fictive community of the shopping channel almost real, as suggested by the way the caller sums up her story:

(14)

C I almost felt like I knew him because I- I watch you so much.
H And and I tell you our little secrets which you won't tell.
<laughter>
C Absolutely. <laughter>

The host's response brings together the issues of community, intimacy, and artificiality that lie at the heart of the shopping channel. Playfully aligning herself in intimate friendship with an utter stranger, the host immediately calls attention to the artifice of this relationship by humorously invoking a friend's obligation to keep one's secrets. Yet by reminding viewers that they are part of a wider audience that shares in the day-to-day life of hosts, even superficially, the host manages to leave the illusion of community stronger than before. The greatest pleasure that the shopping channel offers, ultimately, is not faux diamonds but faux friendships with the network hosts.

**Conclusion**

The shopping channel both replicates and improves upon viewers' own communities. The network offers an image of the home as refuge, made self-sufficient through regular purchasing of consumer goods. The isolation of the suburban home is thus reinforced by the shopping channel's ideology, although the network also counters this sense of isolation by providing viewers with a set of appealing friends who are always ready with advice and support. Many women stay up and watch late into the night after the rest of their household has gone to bed, finding fellowship on the television screen and the phone line.

But besides providing the comfort of community, the shopping channel does make life easier for many women in other ways. Shopping by television is convenient for women whose homes are far from retail areas and for those with small children or with ailments that keep them tied to their homes. The relatively low prices of QVC's merchandise can ease the costs of holiday gift giving, and the 24-hour broadcasts make it possible for women who work the night shift to get their shopping done.

These real benefits of teleshopping, however, are eclipsed by the artificiality of the shopping-channel world. The language of loyalty, intimacy, and community that pervades the network recasts the corporate world of the shopping channel as a folksy, cozy place. Thus, in the economic system of the shopping channel, commodity fetishism is displaced by community fetishism. Language transmutes the public experience of transaction in the market-place into a private experience of pleasure in the home: callers are situated at home and make frequent references to their domestic environment, and the image of domesticity is reflected back at viewers through the setting and language of the shopping channel. At the same time, however, the private world of women's lives is displayed publicly in telephone conversations between host and caller. The blending of public and private has gendered consequences, for the illusion of community that the shopping channel fosters through the linguistic practices of its programme hosts makes women willing subjects for market research and corporate monitoring. The language of the shopping channel, then, is a