

# Advertising and Society

by

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The saturation of the world in advertisements is fairly easy to see. It seems all one has to do is open their eyes to witness the ever increasing prevalence of commercial messages in our everyday lives. Similarly, a change in societal mores over time seems to be obvious and unquestionable—what was once taboo is now passé. However, what remains unclear is how the two are related. Is advertising changing our society or merely reflecting societal changes resulting from some other catalyst? Advertisers submit that the effects of advertising, if advertising has any effect on a society at all, are entirely positive. Meanwhile critics of advertising argue advertising has enormous, widespread, and potentially catastrophic societal effects that cannot be ignored. Perhaps the reality is that both are true. Just maybe, advertising is not the sideline observer that the advertisers would have you believe. Yet, it is also not the societal plague as portrayed by the critics.

One of the most convincing arguments that advertising merely reflects those societal values prevalent in a particular culture is that the advertisers themselves are part of that culture. It is easy to forget that behind every ad is at least one person. Ad agencies are not staffed by robots; nor, do the people in those agencies exist in a bubble. They are normal people living normal lives and observing the same normal world that everyone else does. It is these people

who use their understanding of society to construct advertisements that both appeal to the consumer and further the agenda of the client. (It is also important to remember that the client is also a member of society.) Any value, prejudice, bias, or preconceived notion portrayed in advertising is based on what the advertiser sees in society. (Giaccardi 111)

Stating that advertising merely reflects the norms of a society in its portrayals of typical life does not summarily discard the question of the effects of advertising. In fact, some proponents of advertising do readily admit that advertising does have a great effect on society. Browsing the pages of most advertising textbooks today, one will find abundant evidence of the constructive effects of advertising on society. Included in these will most likely be the positive influence advertising has on “prices, the free press, overall standard of living, and freedom of choice.” (Grove 23) It must be assumed that the claim these influences are positive are based on the values of a capitalist society, as it is only in capitalism that these values are collectively considered good. That being said, it is the claim of the advertisers that their product (i.e. advertisements) support and improve the society in which they operate by fostering economic growth. This is done by enlightening consumers to new products, convincing them to purchase those products, and adding additional value to a product. All of these actions combined increase economic growth by promoting consumption, thereby increasing demand, and expanding production. (Grove 22)

Critics argue that advertising is no longer a reflection on culture but actually an influence on it. To them, if advertising does reflect images in society,

it reflects them in an unrealistic and often untrue manner. Much like the funhouse mirrors at carnivals; advertisements take in what is true, but bends and shapes them to produce an entirely unrealistic image. In advertising this contortion of reality is done entirely to promote sales with little consideration of the consequences. (Giaccardi 110) Contrary to the positive effects listed by proponents, the critics of advertising believe the images projected back by ads show “behaviors and or attitudes [that] can be described as materialistic, cynical, irrational, selfishness, anxiety, social competitiveness, sexual preoccupation, powerlessness, and loss of self-respect.” (Grove 25)

Advertising takes what people want, even yearn for, and associate it with a product. (Jhally 2) Consumers are led to believe that they can achieve what is portrayed in the ad through having what is advertised. It is the notion that “true freedom and transcendence” can only be achieved through the marketplace. (Grove 25)

However, it isn't though the consumer is consciously defrauded into believing what is in the ad will make them better. Rather, the consumer sees both a product and a life they want to live in the ad. These two images combine to instill the belief in the subconscious that the life can be obtained through (and implied exclusively through) the purchase or use of a particular brand of a specific product. Sut Jhally describes this in his essay entitled “Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture. As Jhally puts it “advertising promotes images of what the audience conceives of as “the good life” and then associate that life with the product. (Jhally 2) The modern day “reality” as portrayed by

advertising is that people need to “become more than they are” and that can only be done through the marketplace. (Grove 25) Ergo, having becomes being. Who one is now is associated with what one has. It is a deep psychological association. (Grove 24) Advertising drives us to the marketplace as a means to satisfaction and a satisfactory life. (Kilbourne 68)

Just because advertisers say it, doesn't make it true—or does it? People accept images. If you can see it, it must be real. Therefore, the difference between what is real and what the advertisers construct as reality eventually becomes blurred. (Jhally 6) Jhally quotes Stewart Ewen who believes there are two different worlds. The first he calls the “world of ‘substance’... where people live their real lives.” According to Ewen the second world is “the world of ‘style’ and appearance”. The problem, according to Ewen, is people have given up on the world of reality and become consumed in the world of style. We have simply come to accept the ads and the messages they put forth. An ad doesn't just promote a product, it sells a lifestyle. Consequently, people are unconsciously led to believe that they can achieve the desired effect on their life through the purchase of products (Kilbourne 67). People are led to believe they can change who they are or the lives they live entirely and exclusively through the marketplace. (Jhally 3)

The two arguments discussed thus far represent the extreme “left and right wing” arguments in the advertising debate. A third viewpoint falls in the middle ground between the extremes. If the point is conceded that advertising does not truly mirror society but also does not portray an entirely

unrealistic “reality,” the question remains “what does advertising really do?”

Advertising may not be a true mirror of society but it does tell something about the society for which it is developed.

Generally, advertising has “structural constraints” based on the media in which the ads are presented (i.e., 30 seconds for a TV ad). This forces the advertisers to construct what can be described as hyperrealism. (Giaccardi 111) As such, complex life issues are boiled down into what the advertisers believe will offend the smallest number of people. (Munro 1) Take, for example, the views on alcohol in two markets—Britain and Italy. Alcohol is completely absent in British ads while it is a common occurrence in their Italian counterparts. If one is to take this at face value, one may be inclined to assume that the British ads reflect the “teetotal” society of Britain. Conversely, the opposite assumption may be made about Italy. However, taking into consideration the restrictions on the advertisers and the desire to refrain from alienating the audience, the reverse may be (and most likely is) true. The lack of alcohol in British ads more accurately is an indication that alcoholism is a primary social concern. (Giaccardi 111) Advertisers draw on true reality in the composition of ads when it is necessary to further their agenda. Therefore, what is seen may not be a completely accurate truth, but it is also not a blatant lie. (Giaccardi 113) In “Television Advertising and the Representation of Social Reality: A Comparative Study” Chiara Giaccardi states that, “The analysis suggests that advertisements provide a sort of tellability index (and, as its correlate, some indications about taboo themes) of the social reality they represent and address.” (Giaccardi 112)

Advertisements can often hold a wealth of information about a society not in what is said, but rather in what is left out.

Advertisers and the consumers of the ads both exist in the same reality. Therefore, they both draw upon the same reality and assumptions when constructing and viewing the ads. However, it can be argued that this mutual reference may act to reinforce cultural prejudices and perceptions that might otherwise be weakened without the action of the advertisers. (Giaccardi 113) For example, the lack of representation of homosexuals in advertisements may reflect a society's aversion to that lifestyle but it also does not further the acceptance of homosexuality in the community. Actually, it may serve to set back the inroads made in that area by other forms of media (i.e. television and film). (Minor 1)

At face value, it often seems that advertisements are actually more fictional than they actually are. Generally speaking, the reality portrayed in advertisements is "neither true nor false". Rather it is a representation of a social interaction that is based in reality but constructed in a fictional environment. Advertising does not mirror society but it does represent it. (Giaccardi 113) It is the lead actor in the biopic of society. In order to be understood by the consumer the ad must contain reference elements of truth; however, in order to keep the attention of the viewer through entertainment some artistic license is utilized. Consequently, the end product is an ad that is representative of society but not entirely free of unintended consequences based on the viewers' interpretation of the societal portrayal depicted in the ad. Therefore, it seems that there is some

truth to the arguments of the advertisers and to the claims their critics.

Advertising does reflect some aspects of our society; however, it is not a true mirror image.

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