



Effects of Advertising on Society: A Literary Review

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The first evidence of advertising was found among the ancient Babylonian Empire and dates back to the 3000s BC. The first advertisement in English went into print in 1472, in order to sell a prayer book. The profession of advertising began in the United States in 1841, and although it has been modified a great deal, is still around today (Robbs 12). There is no argument that the media has become a very present force in the American lifestyle, and with any form of “free” media will come an abundance of advertisements.

Since the late 1800’s, psychologists and scholars alike have been studying the ways in which advertisements can affect a person mentally and emotionally. The effects that advertising has on society have been a long and heated debate, with a wide array of opinions on the issue. Opinions range from the advertising executive, who believes that their company is doing society a favor by providing them with valuable information, to the market researcher, who admits to their sneaky practices. Members of society, ranging from the parent to the psychologist, all have their reasons to back up why they believe that the prominence of advertising affects some sector of society (be it children, a woman’s image, or a consumer society) in some way, negatively or positively. Whether advertising is good or bad for society, unless someone is a hermit and does not watch TV, movies, read newspapers, magazines, or journals, listen to the radio, or surf the web, they will be affected by advertisements. Some psychologists believe that we are “subliminally stimulated” which causes us to think in a way that is almost controlled by the media. Regulatory agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission have said that advertising companies prey on childrens’ vulnerability in order to make an easy buck. However, some experts who analyze the marketing business oppose this view. They believe that market researchers are merely taking a stab in the dark at trying to figure out how to best sell their products. There are two major polarities on this issue; one side believes that advertising is harmful to society, the other side believes that advertising does not affect society in a negative way.

Whether we are experts on the matter or have no

knowledge of it what-so-ever, it is important to really think about the role that advertising plays in our own lives, no matter whether it is negative or positive. Does advertising really affect us on some level, a level that influences our thinking patterns and even our actions? Or is it merely a communication channel between seller and consumer?

Despite the fact that advertising has operated successfully for many years, the prevailing stance within academic circles is that advertising is harmful to society. Insiders in the ad business even admit to the evils that come with advertising. Jay Chait, an advertising guru who revolutionized the industry in the sixties, gives his insider’s point of view in his article *Illusions Are Forever*. Since the advertising industry is now heavily regulated by the FTC and other agencies, they can not lie in their ads. However, there is a lie in the “art of advertising” (Chait 1). The methods in which situations are presented to the public through advertisements are not realistic. Companies want us to believe that we should live the life that they present to us on screen, with their products. Because we deal with advertisements on a daily basis and have become so accustomed to their messages, we often “have trouble seeing things in our own natural way” (1). Advertising substitutes our most intimate thoughts with their own ideas of what should be (Chait 1). Although the media can expose us to information that we might otherwise not receive, we pay a price for that information. In any industrialized society “there is little personal knowledge of anything in the world that is not filtered by media” (1).

Richard Pollay, author of *The Distorted Mirror: Reflection on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising*, uses the metaphor of “brain surgery” when he speaks of the influence that advertising has on society. Advertising pops up everywhere, on the street, in our communication, and even in the most intimate of spaces, our home. There is no doubt that advertising influences our culture, which in turn influences us (Pollay 18). Advertisements are designed to “attract attention, change attitudes, and to command our behavior” (Pollay 18). Advertisements present us with a set of images that idealize certain life circumstances. They present this information in a way that is easily absorbed so that we do not have to do a lot of thinking in order to take in the concept and apply it at a later time subconsciously. Of course, not all advertisements will be able to pull this off, but the majority of them “must-otherwise, advertisers are financially extravagant fools” (Pollay 18). Modern big time advertisers have at their fingertips an information pool of “applied behavioral technologies for consumer behavior and advertising research” (Pollay 18). This allows the company to perfectly tailor the ad

in a way that will get the desired response from the consumer. The advertising business is one where many great minds from fields like psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc, have made it a “full-time business to get inside the collective public mind... to manipulate, exploit, and control” (18).

The advertising industry has been criticized by social critics for bringing materialism to its height; for replacing inner happiness and intrinsic motivation with the drive to be productive in society only in order to consume and buy happiness. By playing with emotions, stereotyping and manipulating ideas of real life situations, advertising has reduced us to the role of the “irrational consumer” (Pollay 21).

In a chapter from a text book, *Psychology and Consumer Culture: the Struggle for a good life in a Materialistic World*; by Allen Kanner and Renee Soule, it is blatantly stated that “commercials manipulate people’s strongest desires and greatest fears to convince them to buy the preferred products” (56). Aside from the fact that we are manipulated into being consumers, there are additional side effects to this manipulation. Advertising promotes harmful products such as fast food, alcohol, etc. which can lead to obesity and other health problems. Advertising also upholds stereotypes regarding class, gender and race (Kanner and Soule 57). These stereotypes can affect a healthy self-image and often lead to feelings of inadequacy, especially in teen girls. People are “objectified” by the advertising industry, they are wanted for one thing: to buy the product or service. Everything that makes us human is “reduced to that of a consumer” (57).

Regulatory agencies that keep the amount of fraudulent claims to a minimum and help out a lot, but the “soul fraud” as Dinyar Godrej puts it in his article *How the Ad Industry Pins us Down*, is much worse because it is not as easy to detect. The “images, dreams, and emotions... that we are evolutionary programmed to engage with” are pasted together in a fashion that toys with our minds (125). This means that we are often times affected in ways that we do not even realize or even understand. When an audience views an advertisement they are not actively trying to get anything out of it, so it is not very influential at that moment. However, long after the viewing experience has been forgotten “the effects will show up” (126). Many advertisement critics believe that society can be sent messages that we do not even know that we are receiving. In fact, it was in 1913 that the possibilities of “subliminal stimulation was recognized” in advertising (Cutler; McConnell; McNeil). Despite this knowledge of almost a century, there is a “lack of research based data” on the exact outcomes that can occur (Pollay 31.)

The area in which there is a more visible negative affects of advertisements on humans is the way in which advertising can affect children and teen girls. In “Kid Kustomers,” Eric

Schlosser addresses the sector of advertisements that targets children. In the 1980’s, when parents started spending more time away from their children, they began spending more money on them. Experts have called the 1980’s “the decade of the child consumer” (46). Since this time, children have begun to be targeted by “phone companies, oil companies, auto companies, as well as clothing stores and restaurant chains” (46). When children are bombarded with all of this stimulation, it blurs their perception of reality because they often cannot tell the difference between TV programming and advertising. Schlosser conveys the notion that companies are driven to engrain children with their products while they are young, in order to keep the products in their lives forever. The companies hope that “nostalgic childhood memories of a brand” will provide for this, and so companies are planning their “cradle-to grave advertising strategies” (46). When producing an ad directed at children, an advertiser’s main objective is to give the child a good reason to nag the parent for the product (47). This undermines parents by filling a child’s head with ideas that they need these products, some of which may be harmful to children, such as video games. This process of directing advertisements at children socializes children at an early age to become consumers and can create schisms in parent-child relationships (Polloy 23).

Another prevailing criticism of advertising is that it distorts perceptions of healthy body image. In the majority of mainstream advertisements, whether in magazines or television, there is an “unrealistic standard of female beauty and thinness” that is projected as the norm. When a young woman sees these advertisements and realizes that her outward image does not quite match up, she will often believe that the best way to match up to the projected image is to buy that product. This is exactly what the company wants. The ability of the media to shape self-image can be a damaging one that can lead to eating disorders, depression, or dissatisfaction with one’s self (Lavine; Sweeny; Wagner, 1). Studies are now showing an effect in young men as well, with an increase in “awareness of and concerns about their...bodies and thus increase in body dissatisfaction” (Lavine; Sweeny; Wagner, 3).

The opposition to all of this falls under the belief that advertising does not effect society negatively and in fact can be beneficial. John E. Calfee, a former Trade Commission Economist, argues the point that advertising is beneficial to society. He admits that the main objective of advertising is to persuade the consumer to buy a particular product, but Calfee believes that the communication lines between sellers and buyers are useful to the consumer. He uses some specific ad campaigns as examples to demonstrate the ways in which advertisements deliver what he believes to be “useful” information for the public.

Calfee describes the ways in which companies bring certain issues to the public's attention in order to get the public to realize the benefits that a certain product possesses. An example he uses is the Kellogg All-Bran Campaign. Calfee takes us back to the 1970's when the public health experts realized that a diet consisting of more fiber could help prevent cancer. The National Cancer Institute wanted to get the word out to the public, but did not have the resources to do so. The Kellogg All-Bran Campaign quickly saw the opportunity in the situation because their cereal contained "nine grams of fiber" (117). With the information from the NCI, Kellogg began running "fiber-cancer ads" (116).

Calfee uses this particular case to demonstrate that good information can be passed to the public through advertisements. This was because the awareness of the need to add fiber to the diet went up 31% for women "who do most of the grocery shopping" (118). Calfee showcased this particular campaign because the information that consumers obtained did not necessarily cause them to go buy Kellogg All-Bran cereal, but there was "increased market shares for high-fiber non-advertised product" (118).

According to Calfee, this is evidence that advertisements do educate and bring awareness to the public on certain issues. The Kellogg Campaign was followed by many more food products, adding healthy ingredients (such as vitamins, calcium, etc) and advertising the benefits.

Calfee reiterates his opinion that advertisements help both the seller and the buyer. He also believes that there are many cases in which advertisements serve the buyers more than the sellers. Companies want to portray the good side of their products to the customers but they never advertise the bad side. However, Calfee believes that the competitive nature of comparative advertisement takes care of that for the buyers. Calfee says that "sellers are less likely to stretch the truth, whether it involves prices or subtleties about safety and performance, when they know it may arouse a merciless response from injured competitors" (121). This means that if one company advertises their product in a misleading way, another company with a similar product can be relentless with comparative advertising.

According to Calfee, all products have their problems, but there is always a similar product that is "less bad" (121). So a brand will advertise a certain advantage that they have over the similar product, such as "less fat," "less cholesterol," etc. The like-product will then strike-back, ensuing an all out ad war. According to Calfee, this is beneficial to the buyer because the "struggle brings better information, more informed choices, and improved products" for the customer (121).

Competitors will use "less-bad claims" and will spread bad information on a product because even though their product

may have some undesirable features, they are not as bad as features of a similar product. Calfee describes this procedure as giving the consumer a complete advantage in the "give and take of the marketplace" (124). There are many others who believe that advertising is more helpful to society than it is harmful.

According to Michael Schudson, a professor of sociology and communications, advertising has little power over the consumer, if any at all. In fact, companies may support our entertainment with their ads, while receiving little benefit at all. This is evident in the cases of sponsorship, in events like the Super-bowl or the Olympics. A market research firm did studies on sponsorship of these events and found that companies were paying much more and their ads were viewed much less than their ads on television (Schudson 1). Why would a company foot the bill to bring us free entertainment? Critics may say that this process benefits the company anyway because it builds their credibility. But is that really a bad thing? It seems that consumers would benefit from buying products from a credible source. Schudson believes the statement that advertising causes the consumer to think a certain way is questionable.

In fact, some in the field of marketing have stated that they do not believe that the money they spend on advertising convinces the consumer of anything. A particular market executive said that the benefit of advertising to the company comes into play when the company is giving a presentation to investors. The company needs to have a good ad campaign in order for the stockholders and investors to maintain faith in the company and keep the capital rolling in, to produce the products. Some marketers believe that their ads do not affect the consumer, but does affect the ways in which they are viewed by distributors and retailers (Schudson 2). Sales people do not want to sell products that they have not heard of before, and whether the advertisements influence consumers or not, the sales people believe that they do, which causes retailers to have that product in stock to sell. So even if the ad does not influence the consumer, as long as the ad can influence the investors, salespeople and retailers, the company will be prosperous. This produces product availability and that will shape the consumer choice.

From an economic or business standpoint, advertising has a very positive effect on society because it stimulates the economy by producing demand for products and services, which strengthens the economy (Robbs 7). Advertising can also be seen as positive in the ways it impacts society because it helps maintain mass communications media, making them much less expensive for the public. Without advertisement, many forms of mass media such as newspapers, radio, magazines, and television, might not exist as they do today (Robbs 8). Although he is a critic of advertising, Richard Pollay admits

that advertising can be beneficial in the way that it can help development of consumer skills (21).

Critics have been known to blame advertisements and other media forms for insensitivity to culture differences. However, journalism and communication specialist Brett Robbs has stated that ad campaigns have “universal appeal” (9). The overriding of cultural differences can contribute to culture in a positive way by putting us all on the same level (Robbs 9). Advertising regulations in other countries are put in position in order to protect culture and values. For instance, in Malaysia, there are restrictions on all advertisements that include nudity, disco dancing, or seductive clothing, etc; all ads must depict Malaysian culture.

The review of the literature sums up the variety of issues that constitute this subject and shows that there are many directions from which to view the matter at hand. Because many of the accusations directed at the ad industry are dealing with psychological and emotional matters, it is difficult to test or prove these accusations. And, because the majority of society is encompassed by a comprehensive and ever increasing amount of advertisements, it is important to take into consideration the ways that may affect us. Most literature found on the topic of advertising is concentrated in opposition to the abundance of advertising. Despite that, advertising remains a very prominent occurrence in our lives.

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