



“Summary of article by Richard Pollay: The Distorted Mirror: Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 236-238

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Advertising selects from society's palate of values those which are believed to be most effective in promoting sales. The nature of this selection process has raised concern among leading scholars over the social effects of advertising. This paper presents a critique of advertising that is based on a survey of the writings of significant scholars in the humanities and social sciences, including "all North American authors known to have written on the cultural character of advertising."(19)

The great power of advertising to infiltrate modes of thought, values, social roles, language, and human goals, is both overt and subtle. Overtly, advertising helps articulate a vision of the good life, fostering connections between the search for happiness and the pursuit of goods and services through its omnipresent imagery. More subtle is the scientific nature of its messages: research methods and visual technologies are used by advertisers to design the most marketable message as possible. Perhaps, most hidden is the way in which advertising obscures the environmental impact of its incentives to buy. Inducing higher levels of consumption requires increasing production levels, however, advertising rarely discusses the consequences of greater production on water, land, and air pollution.

Advertising's power also consists in its pervasiveness and contact with all aspects of culture. It reinforces stereotypes and produces idealized images that cultivate a sense of dissatisfaction and lack. Advertising sells its goods by modelling unattainable images and fostering insecurities, anxieties, fears, ambitions, greed and lust that ultimately generate self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. These effects are particularly acute with respect to women and the elderly. For women, advertising idealizes and promotes the desirability of unrealistic body images that focus attention on "deficiencies" in their appearance. Similarly, advertising corrodes the self-esteem of the elderly when it repeatedly equates happiness with youthfulness. Of course, not all advertising has these effects, much advertising associates images with goods to suggest obtainable pleasures; however, its overall purpose is less to promote goods as satisfiers of needs than to create feelings of dissatisfaction and needs for goods.

Advertising's most profound effect is that it "induces people to keep productive in order to keep consuming, to work in order to buy."(25) Advertising perpetuates the need to consume by constantly suggesting and reinforcing the values of buying behavior. However, by romanticizing goods advertising exaggerates the value of consumption at the expense of social relations. The more emotionally involved with objects, the less individuals are involved with each other, thus

diminishing the quality of human relations. In addition, advertising's encouragement of self-interest contributes to a political climate in which individual priorities seem to reflect private economic goals rather than a greater concern for economic justice. Ostensibly positive aspects of advertising, such as facilitating marketplace efficiencies, do not compensate for its high cost in terms of displacing affect from social relations among individuals to the asocial relation between persons and goods.

Advertising has also precipitated certain social problems. In the home, advertising has created a new role for parents as intermediaries between their children and the market, sometimes instigating parent/child conflict when a child's demand for goods is in opposition to parental interests. Children are especially susceptible to exhortations and jingles that extol the values of immediate gratification and self-indulgence. Advertising messages that validate conspicuous consumption may contribute to violent behavior by those who are shown the need for goods as a means to respectability but are too poor to buy them.

Advertising's vision of how life ought to be led competes with the views of other socializing agents, including families and religions. In a culture increasingly bereft of traditional authority, advertising wields its influence over a populace susceptible to images of purchasable solutions to life's problems. When cultural or religious symbols (e.g. Jesus) are extensively connected to brand name goods (e.g. Christmas items), their meanings are distorted, leading to a general cynicism toward cultural leaders who can no longer rely on unadulterated or uncommercialized icons.

Taken together, these observations constitute a serious indictment of advertising's social effects. One defense against such criticism is to claim that successful advertising must reflect cultural values and behaviors that are understood and accepted by consumers, otherwise it would fail. This response ignores the fact that advertising picks out just a few of the many values that constitute culture and, in virtue of its frequent, repetitive, and limited selections, disregards others. It would be interesting to examine the value profile of advertising and compare the extent to which it promotes the seven deadly sins of greed, lust, sloth, pride, envy, gluttony and anger with its promotion of the seven cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love.