"Summary of article by Marsha Richins: Social Comparison, Advertising and Consumer Discontent" in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 242-245

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> Frequent exposure to images of wealthy, beautiful, and happy people generates a false reality in which the uncommon and ideal become mundane and attainable. In our daily unconscious assessments of our lives, we continually fall short. For some, the result is a continual striving and a desire for more, accompanied by a feeling of missing out, of having less than what ought to be.
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> Striving for more may or may not be inherent in the human character, but modern advertising has been carefully designed to increase consumer desire. It does so in part by inducing social comparison with idealized images and by raising consumers' expectations about what ought to be in their own lives, particularly with respect to consumer goods. For many, the result of these processes is dissatisfaction and a desire for increased consumption. (603)

Many observers of consumer culture hold the view that consumer desires are vulnerable to the influences of advertising and marketing institutions. This paper argues that the idealized images found in advertising drive the desire for more goods by prompting frequent comparisons that leave the consumer dissatisfied and continually raising expectations for acceptable standards of living.

IDEALIZED IMAGES, SATISFACTION AND STRIVING

Social comparison theory, a widely accepted psychological view, assumes that one important way to obtain self-knowledge is through comparisons with others. Comparisons provide information about the social acceptability of one's views and physical characteristics, as well as one's standing relative to others.

Few consumers can avoid comparing themselves with the idealized images of individuals and lifestyles depicted in advertisements. However, comparisons with these images may provide misleading information about oneself, since idealized images depict affluent lifestyles and beauty standards that are unattainable by most of the population. The power of these images lies, in part, in the suggestion of fantasies as objects of aspiration, while the physical imperfections of actors and actresses are hidden, and boring details of life that inevitably accompany advertised circumstances are omitted.

Although individuals look to a variety of sources other than advertising for information about themselves, comparisons involving wealth, living standards and material possessions are especially important to individuals living in a consumer society. Self-comparison with idealized images is driven by the prevalence of such advertising; the impact of these images is to increase consumer desire for higher standards of living.

The comparisons with others can be either deliberate or unconscious. Individuals may deliberately compare themselves with persons worse-off than themselves in order to feel better about their current situations, or with persons better-off than themselves in order to generate hope and motivation. However, often people do not control or choose with whom or what they compare themselves. The most frequent comparison that individuals make is with media images that are characteristically idealized. Comparisons with idealized media images lead to feelings of inadequacy only if an individual cares about what is represented by the images. For example, a person committed to status consumption will tend to feel more inadequate than an aescetic monk when exposed to repeated images of affluence.

Individuals may attempt to attenuate or prevent these feelings of inadequacy by 1) acquiring more products, thereby reducing the discrepancy between themselves and the comparison standard, 2) diminishing the importance of the comparison domain, and/or 3) refusing to compare themselves with such images. The latter option is less appealing in practice since consumerist lifestyles are so important to the identity of individuals in a consumer society.

IDEALIZED IMAGES AND "WHAT OUGHT TO BE"

Everyone has an idea of what his or her life should be like, including views on what standard of living and lifestyle to expect given a particular set of talents, motivation, skills and job opportunities. Adults unconsciously derive their expectations from peers, aspiration groups (e.g., parents or upper-echelon fellow employees), the media, and various socializing agents (e.g., religion and family).

Information integration theory, a psychological model that explains the formation of expectations based, in part, on the processing of a set of psychological models, provides a framework for analyzing the effects of advertising and other media imagery on the formation of expectations concerning the good life. The theory implies that repeated exposure to social stimuli consistently above (or below) personal expectation levels will raise (or lower) individual expectations. "Because advertising images tend to be idealized – that is, they show people who are very well-off in terms of possessions – exposure to large amounts of advertising will raise people's expectations of what ought to be." (509)

The vividness of advertising images – with their high-tech combinations of color, music and photography – captivates viewers . Such seemingly realistic advertising blurs the distinction between commercials and real life. "MCI, as part of its ‘Gramercy Press’ serial advertising campaign, has made it possible for consumers to send internet messages to their favorite ‘Gramercy Press’ characters, who, in turn, will answer them." (600) The pervasiveness of advertising increases the likelihood that idealized images, rather than more realistic images, will influence people's perception of what ought to be.

Advertising influences perceptions of what ought to be only insofar as its imagery is considered relevant to a consumer's life. Relevant images consist of circumstances that appear possible and desirable. In their efforts to gain the widest possible audience, advertisers deliberately provide little objective information about occupation and income levels in order to allow viewers to see themselves as the characters in advertisements.

> This lack of context serves to obscure the potential irrelevance of idealized advertising images to many consumers, increases the likelihood that the images will be placed in the zone of possibility, and increases the chances that they will be integrated into perceptions of what ought to be, thus raising expectations about the level of material circumstances one deserves and might expect to obtain. (602)

CONSUMER DISCONTENT

Although advertisements with idealized images may make a cumulative long-term contribution to consumer discontent, many consumers like such advertising. From a public policy point of view, it may be possible to reduce the negative impacts of advertising can be addressed without banishing idealized imagery from advertisements. Consumers could be taught to understand the negative implications of idealized advertising images. Media programming could do more to de-emphasize buying things as a route to happiness.