



“Summary of article by William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally: Goods as Satisfiers” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 248-251

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

### **“Summary of article by William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally: Goods as Satisfiers”**

For a consumer society the key question is, To what extent are the types of wants generated in a market-oriented context satisfied by the types of goods produced there? (251)

In pre-industrial societies, traditional norms provided guidance in how to use scarce goods to satisfy a limited set of wants. In modern industrialized countries, advertising institutions suggest meanings for an abundance of products, relating goods to images of personal success and happiness. This paper argues that in a consumer society, consumption activity is less about satisfying wants than about interpreting the meaning of satisfaction in the lives of individuals.

### **IMAGE AND METAPHOR**

The social function of goods has been transformed "from being primarily satisfiers of wants to being primarily communicators of meanings." (238) This transformation is the result of several factors including 1) the identification of consumption as a valid means for personal self-realization, 2) the realization by the marketing and advertising professions that the individual and social realms of the consumer, rather than the actual characteristics of goods, are at the root of merchandising, and 3) the rapid introduction of mass communication technologies that have given rise to the visual or iconic imagery of advertising formats.

This social transformation acknowledges that consumption can be a means to personal and social success; that the consumer is not bound by traditional norms but instead can respond to social cues that encourage experimentation in achieving satisfaction; and that television offers guidance in relating commercial goods to the achievement of happiness and success. Satisfaction and well-being are not functions of the accumulation of goods, but rather are determined by where an individual stands in society in relation to others and the importance he or she attaches to specific values.

Modern advertising relies on the metaphorical power of images, symbols and icons to induce new wants and suggest interpretations of how best to satisfy them.

The consumer society does not set up its own fixed models of behavior to replace traditional ones but rather constructs through marketing and advertising successive waves of associations between persons, products and images of well-

being in an endless series of suggestions about the possible routes to happiness and success. (239)

These associations create a market-oriented reconstruction of reality by connecting non-market elements of daily life with products. The individual and firm both contribute to the production of these associations. Business targets the interpretative predilections of consumers with a vast array of symbols, images and icons, while consumers develop preferences for certain images from a variety of social cues.

## **ICONS OF THE MARKETPLACE**

Modern advertising focuses primarily on the consumer mindset, rather than the characteristics of a given product. Contemporary advertising produces symbolic connections between products and psychological states, targeting consumer expectations and feelings about status, peer group pressures, roles, social mobility, and lifestyles. Advertising provides more than functional information about a product, it envelops a product with images that lend themselves to diverse preferences.

Advertisers appeal to human psychological processes either by constructing these images and symbols for mass markets or by catering to specific types of individuals. A single product type (e.g., shampoo) may be associated with an array of images, depending on the targeted market. For instance, one shampoo may be associated with images of youth and excitement, while a different shampoo may be linked with symbols of nature. Consumers can choose among shampoos based on their preferences for the associated symbols.

Goods represent a way in which people can communicate and place themselves within social structures, transforming the personal meaning of the everyday use of products as a whole. On the surface, advertising may influence specific consumer decisions through attention-getting icons, but a deeper consequence is that the marketplace immerses the realm of needing in a domain of social communication that is strongly influenced by the mass media, marketers and advertising.

The importance of icons to modern advertising is difficult to overstate. In a consumer society, vast arrays of goods are bundled with symbols and images through product design, packaging, store displays, and fashion trend changes. Advertising images have three essential characteristics: 1) most important, they redescribe reality, selling happiness by associating scenes from everyday life with the purchase of goods; 2) they convey a level of ambiguity which allows various interests to be linked with them; and 3) they are fluid, constantly shifting the paths to contentment.

## **RELATIVE STANDING**

Comparative judgment, a key element in individual consumer decisions, is also important to perceptions of well-being and success that derive from comparisons with some reference group. Unlike traditional societies, a hallmark of the consumer society is that there are no fixed or stable standards of success. Advertising ensures that most tangible forms of wealth represent

ephemeral signs of success. Thorstein Veblen, Tibor Scitovsky and Fred Hirsch have all pointed out the importance and perils of the social context of consumption.

For Veblen, creating social distance through wealth accumulation inevitably leads to dissatisfaction. As soon as a person rises to a new material standard, it ceases to provide any more satisfaction than earlier, lower standards did. Those who are below average for their reference groups are chronically dissatisfied until they catch up; but once the average is reached, a restless striving to exceed and distinguish oneself from the average takes over.

Scitovsky critiques the mainstream economic view that people become more satisfied as their real income increases. He argues that the social forces that influence tastes also change the ability to be satisfied by the things that cater to our tastes. He points out that elevating real income levels fails to achieve higher levels of satisfaction because: 1) much of the satisfaction derived at all income levels is from status; 2) satisfaction is also related to the nature of work; 3) satisfaction is strongly associated with "genuine novelty" -- something that is missing in consumer societies; and 4) we quickly adapt to and take for granted the comforts of greater material advantage.

Fred Hirsch distinguishes between goods that meet our material needs and positional goods, those that have value because others do not have them. Hirsch argues that as the wealth of a society increases, the proportion of positional goods in the economy also rises. However, since high status goods are inherently scarce (e.g., fame is for the few), competition for them is ever increasing, absorbing greater material resources with little net benefit.

Both Scitovsky and Hirsch recognize the importance of status consumption, but they differ in their views on the importance of advertising. For Scitovsky, advertising is of little importance, merely influencing the selection of goods that satisfy mass tastes. Alternatively, Hirsch argues that advertising plays an important role by exaggerating the desirability of positional goods and concealing their negative social effects.

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

Research on the sources of overall life satisfaction (e.g., Robert Lane, Hadley Cantril, Richard Easterlin, and Ed Diener) suggest relative standing, interpersonal relations and non-material goods (such as love, friendship, a sense of autonomy, and self-esteem) as the most significant. These studies raise important questions concerning the large role of the marketplace in our daily lives.

If what happens in the marketplace itself has little direct bearing on the deep sources of life satisfaction, too great an emphasis on the ambiguous associations between products and images of contentment may mislead consumers and actually diminish the possibilities for satisfaction. (252)

In a consumer society, are wants satisfied by the goods that society produces? How is satisfaction defined in a consumer society and what is the correlation between satisfaction and

the purchase of goods? Is the link between goods and happiness in a consumer society decreasing rather than increasing a sense of satisfaction, even as social wealth rises?