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"Perpetuating Consumer Culture: Media, Advertising, and Wants Creation" by David Kiron

On any given day, 18 billion display ads appear in magazines and daily newspapers across the United States.[1] In consumer cultures like the U.S. the urge to buy is sanctioned, reinforced, and exaggerated in ways so numerous, so enticing, so subtle, that ignoring them is not an easy option. The sales message is perhaps nowhere more vivid and insistent than on television. And with credit more widely available, buying is easy, its consequences distant. The cumulative impact on the psyche of all this urging and buying is never fixed. Dissatisfaction recurs with each reminder that the goods we have are not good enough. In part, this section addresses the cycle of dissatisfaction-satisfaction promoted by the media and advertising. At a deeper level, there is a focus on what happens in a market-oriented society when visions of the good life are structured by commercial images.

When broadcast advertising, television, and modern forms of consumer credit were introduced, each could claim to be services that would further the public good. In the mid-1920s, commercial sponsorship of entire radio programs was widely accepted as a public service. During this period even the advertising industry argued that the dignity of the radio medium should not be debased by advertisements for specific products.[2] In 1940 David Sarnoff, president of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA, then owner of NBC, the National Broadcasting Company), predicted that mass distribution of commercial television would unify the nation and contribute to the greater development of the individual. In the late 1950s Bank of America promoted credit cards as a service that would permit upstanding middle-class citizens to achieve the American Dream.[3] Today, however, the voices extolling the public virtues of credit and commercial broadcasting are difficult to hear above the din of their critics.

Part of the explanation for this transition is that broadcasting, advertising and credit have become crucial elements of consumer culture, more than just goods and services within it. Instead of merely facilitating cultural goals, they have become cultural entities themselves. For instance, the sheer scale of advertising makes it a cultural force. The 148 billion dollars spent on advertising in the United States in 1994 was greater than the GDP of all but the top twenty economies in the world in 1990. Per capita advertising expenditures in 1994 were four times what they were in 1935.[4] In the United States there are more shopping centers than high schools.[5] The content of advertising also legitimizes consumerist tendencies by associating images of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with consumption. It links success and well-being to consumer behavior, embodies aspirations, and models materialistic ways of appearing and being in the world.

ADVERTISING AND TELEVISION

The development of marketing strategies takes place within the intersection of cultural trends and technological improvements. Advertising practice, for example, has incorporated commercialized images from a long list of cultural trends including the desire for status within a growing middle class, social movements like feminism, and the agenda of environmentalists. With respect to technology, changes in video and graphics production have altered the medium of advertising. Mass marketing, in particular, has flourished with the evolution of computers and a variety of information technologies. The annual mailing of 14 billion catalogs across the United States would not be possible without the technical ability to track consumers.[6] Sophistication in marketing technique has led advertisers to target the sales message to consumer emotions and beliefs at least as much as to the uses of goods.

If advertising plays such a large role in connecting consumption with happiness, is it possible to be satisfied with the view of economic theory that advertising is simply a cost in the circulation of goods and that it provides information to consumers about the uses of a good or service? Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold (in work summarized here) reject these interpretations, pointing out that economic approaches to advertising fail to appreciate the connections between types of advertising, kinds of goods, and methods of production. They argue that advertising is part of a system of provision, in which production, distribution, and retailing all impact on advertising strategies and techniques.

The extent to which advertising shapes consumerist tendencies and culture is the subject of a debate that has traditionally centered on the issue of whether advertising merely reflects or actively creates wants. In an important respect, this debate has ignored the possibility that the two points of view are compatible. As Richard Pollay suggests in the next article summarized, the themes of advertising emphasize and exaggerate certain values and, in doing so, marginalize others. Pollay is not the first to make this point; indeed his article is based on a survey of the writings of numerous cultural critics of advertising. However, his critique illuminates an important reason for why this debate has appeared so intractable. Consider for example, the oft-cited claim that 90 percent of all new products fail. This shows, critics say, that producers are not responsive to consumer desires; defenders of advertising, on the other hand, argue that it shows that advertising has little influence in shaping tastes.

Just as advertising can simultaneously mirror and distort cultural trends, so too can the content of television programs. For instance, some television programs such as family sitcoms and talk shows are successful because they reflect familiar aspects of culture in an entertaining way. As a result of competitive pressures to be distinctive, there is a tendency for programs of the same format to dramatize extremes, which tends to drive away viewer interest as the content of shows cease to be familiar. These pressures stem from market forces that make attempts at developing innovative new genres into unacceptable financial risks. The operative principle seems to be that it is better to carve a slice from a successful pie than try to make a different dessert. One result is less program diversity, which may explain why between 1953 and 1988 the top rated network television programs drew smaller and smaller audiences.[7]

Interest in network television as a whole has declined with the rise of cable television and video cassette recorders. Nielson surveys found that time spent viewing network television has decreased since 1950, from 4.5 hours to 4.2 hours a day in 1991.[8] With more options, viewers can now see more of what they want when they want. J. Fred MacDonald, in a historical analysis of the decline of interest in network television, argues that its early and continued dependence on sponsors who demand access to the largest possible audiences guaranteed that programs would focus on what was most acceptable to, rather than what was most preferred by, individual viewers. He extends the debate over consumer sovereignty from the domain of advertising to the area of media content. Lack of program diversity implies lack of choice, not in the number of available shows but in the quality of available choices.

The centrality of television viewing in daily living is suggested by the fact that "more time is spent watching television than doing anything else besides working and sleeping."[9] In an article summarized below, Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi found that the average individual watches television four hours a day. A huge literature has struggled to identify the effects of television viewing. Our research indicates that the most interesting and credible observations come from studies that look at differences between heavy and light viewers. George Gerbner found that people who watch more television than the average exaggerate the amount of wealth and luxuries that others have. Kubey and Csikzentmihalyi found that excessive and indiscriminate television viewing induces a passive state of mind that endures even after the viewing experience. The appeal of this kind of experience is suggested by Schor in Part II: After long hours at draining jobs there may be little energy left over for activities that require more mental effort than television viewing. Others, more recently Robert Putnam, have found evidence that television is responsible for civic disengagement and an erosion of social connections.[10] Whether or not passivity, distorted perceptions of social reality, and civic disengagement all derive from excess television viewing, it is cause for concern that these characteristics are consistently found together.

From the standpoint of economic theory, televisions, like other media technologies that are sold in the market, are no different than appliances. This view was captured by Mark Fowler, one of the chairmen of the Federal Communications Commission during the Reagan administration, who once described televisions as “toasters with pictures”. Unlike toasters, however, televisions offer a window into as well as direct access to the market. Recent innovations in communication and information technologies are transforming and strengthening the bonds that tie consumer behavior to consumer culture. The linkages between the home, where most television viewing occurs, and the marketplace have become strengthened in recent years with the introduction of instant credit and instant market access through programs that sell directly to audiences. Increasingly the home is becoming yet another extension of the marketplace. David Morley's article extends the view that the media promotes consumer culture through its institutions, content, and advertising, adding that innovations in communication technologies permit a wider range of expression of gendered power relations within the home. These relations may be strengthened as leisure, consumption, household management, and work are brought together in the high-technology home of the future.

The linkages between television viewing and consumerism can be direct or indirect, through content that sells or through content that reinforces consumerist imagery. The content of an increasing number of television shows are advertisements themselves, for example, infomercials and home shopping networks. Video news releases, which are advertisements that resemble actual news releases, sometimes employ real anchorpersons. Product placement (the commercial sponsorship of brand name goods that appear in films and television programs) is a budding multimillion dollar business. More indirect is the role that regular television programs play in displaying wealth and legitimizing consumerist lifestyles.

LIMITLESS DESIRE AND THE GOOD LIFE

Consumer culture has evolved along with the neoclassical assumption that wants are limitless, desire insatiable. This view of human nature is crucial to a vision of the good life that, over the course of the twentieth century, has been increasingly formulated by the media and advertising. The vision of the good life that is elaborated by the themes of advertising has become increasingly oriented toward more luxurious and comfortable lifestyles.[11] The assumed limitlessness of desire has traditionally been analyzed in terms of the ephemeral satisfactions that are generated by contemporary goods and promoted by marketing practices. However, recent analyses have focused on the possibility that insatiability follows from problems with satisfying particular desires. Colin Campbell, Marsha Richins, and William Leiss contribute important additions to this discourse, each arguing that the pursuit of wants that are difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy creates the appearance of insatiability.

Campbell views much of modern consumption as directed toward the construction of day-dreams: Individuals build in their imaginations a product-filled world informed by the images and stories of both media and advertising. Consumers revel in anticipation of consuming their constructions, but are inevitably disappointed when their actual consumption experiences fail to meet expectations. Marsha Richins identifies the psychological mechanism behind comparisons with unattainable media and advertising images, and outlines the dangers of continuous and frequent exposure to them. For many, increasing consumption to achieve the idealized image or compensate for the feelings of inadequacy conjured by these images appears to be the best response, especially when the media and advertising persistently inform you that it is the right thing to do. In a point begun in Part II of this book and explored more thoroughly in the summarized article in this part, William Leiss contends that in a high-intensity market setting it is difficult to make judgments of how best to satisfy needs with goods, since it is not always clear which desires are to be satisfied by a given commodity.

The article by Leiss, Kline, and Jhally is perhaps the clearest discussion of how modern consumer culture imbues goods with meaning and the reasons why consumers so avidly consume. Instead of targeting the goods themselves, the strategy is to create a brand image with which consumers identify . Images, icons and symbols have become essential to contemporary advertising practices. By associating mass produced goods with a continuous flow of ambiguous displays of happiness, advertising encourages people with diverse preferences to be interested in the same group of goods without having to cater to the lowest common denominator of tastes.

Every one of the authors who focus on advertising in this section points to the environmental impact of economic growth as a reason for his or her critique. Jackson Lears, in a provocative cultural history of advertising, develops an interpretation of advertising that differs from his earlier work, summarized in Part IV. In this part, Lears argues that advertising, beyond stirring hedonistic desires, cultivates an indifference to nature with its commercial fables of how to realize self through market participation. With few exceptions, goods are presented to the consumer without reference to their origins in nature, nor is attention drawn to the environmental consequences of consumption. Even when such concerns are raised, they are co-opted by advertisers, sometimes when representing the worst offenders.

CREDIT

"The rise of the consumer society, in particular, would not have been possible without a widespread willingness to take on personal debt."[12] And personal debt would not have become as easy and appealing as it is today without the development of the credit card. Until the late 1950s, the ability to acquire consumer debt was determined primarily by bank fiat.[13] Consumers had to prove that they were good risks in face to face confrontations with loan officers, and were forced to wait for banks to process their applications each time they wanted a loan. After World War II, sporadic efforts were undertaken to introduce credit cards, which would allow consumers to have more control over the lending process. The first major initiative, which was a major financial fiasco, was undertaken in 1958 by the Bank of America in Fresno, California before the bank was technically equipped to monitor credit use and avoid abuses. The ultimate success of the credit card, as an institution, awaited successful adaptation of technological innovations such as the computer to the specific requirements of credit card banking.

Between 1958 and 1970, 100 million credit cards were dispersed across the United States.[14] With its mass distribution, the feel of the card and the spontaneity of credit transactions have become commonplace. As consumption levels have risen, so has the number of personal bankruptcies, which tripled between 1985 and 1994 in the United States. Greater accessibility to credit is certainly a factor in this trend. It is easy to confuse the use of credit with greater purchasing power; flexibility in payback schedules offers the illusion of immediate ownership. Compulsive consumption and ignorance concerning the implications of finance charges have resulted in many instances of poor debt management.

In traditional economic explanations, credit becomes a problem when a debt burden is exacerbated by economic downturns, catastrophes, or poor planning. A novel alternative analysis is offered by Samuel Cameron in the final article of this part. He argues that there are structural economic constraints that explain household debt problems, and that these problems may lead toward national and international problems. His basic point is that when consumption is tied to self-esteem, as it is in affluent societies, people are less responsive to borrowing costs and can become problem debtors if they pursue unrealistic images of their comparison group.[15] (The international implications of this perspective will be explored in Part IX.)

As Martin Davidson suggests, consumerism is a phenomenon that has worked itself into the very core of society. Its replacement will require an alternative that is no less central to the modern way of life;[16] consumer culture will continue to reproduce itself until the motivations for consuming more and more are dislodged. We have seen that the multiplication of desires is as much a function of unrequited desire as of ephemeral satisfactions. Both the media and advertising prompt the individual to ask: Is what I have good enough? Unfortunately the answers returned by many consumers prompts environmentalists and other critics to ask: How much is enough? That question is discussed in more detail in the Part VIII.

Notes

1. Michael Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur, *Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 18.
2. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.
3. Joseph Nocera, *A Piece of the Action: How the Middle class joined the Money class*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
4. Marketing Madness, 15 (adjusted for inflation, 1994 dollars).
5. Alan Thein Durning, *How Much is Enough*, (New York: Norton, 1992).
6. Durning, op. cit.
7 Study cited in J. Fred MacDonald's *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV*, See book for full explanation.
8. Margaret S. Andreasen, “Patterns of Family Life and Television Consumption: From 1945 to the 1990s” in *Media, Children, and the Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives.* Edited by Dolf Zillmann, Jennings Bryant and Aletha C. Huston, (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 19-36.
9. Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, “Cultivation Analysis: Conceptualization and Methodology” in *Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research.* Edited by Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan, (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), 14.
10. See Section 3.
11. Russell Belk and Richard Pollay, “Images of Ourselves: The Good Life in Twentieth Century Advertising” *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 11, March 1985, 887-897.
12. Nocera, ibid, 20.
13. Of course, many purchases were and continue to be available through other forms of financing, such as installment loans from institititutions other than banks, including manufacturers, money lenders, families, and friends.
14. Nocera, op. cit.
15. An interesting connection between media and credit is made by O'Guinn and Faber, (1987) "Mass Mediated Compulsive Consumption: Non-Utilitarian and Dysfunctional Outcomes." In: M. Wallendorf & P. Anderson (Eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research* (Vol. 14), 473-477. They combined Gerbner's research discussed earlier with their finding that compulsive consumers are envious of others and hypothesized that certain of these individuals will become credit abusers over time given excessive exposure to idealized images in the mass media.
16. Martin Davidson, *The Consumerist Manifesto: Advertising in Postmodern Times*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).