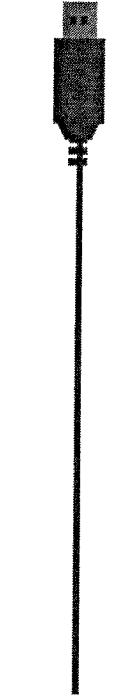


# ADVERTISING



## FACTS TO REMEMBER:

- Advertising pays for the media we consume.
- Advertising caters to our emotions by attaching feelings to products.
- Advertising promotes an aspirational lifestyle.

Crass, loud, and ubiquitous, advertising is easy to criticize. It encourages materialism and overconsumption and entices us to buy products we don't need. (At least I didn't need that pink Venus razor until the commercial told me I couldn't live without it.) Advertising constantly reminds us that whiter teeth, shinier hair, or Uncle Ben's rice are the key to romance—which is why I tell my students that advertisers must think all consumers are superficial and silly.

In the previous chapter, we talked about how magazines evolved from content delivery devices to ad delivery devices. One can look at all media products, including television, radio, film, and Internet that way. Media is less about creating a product that will appeal to the market and more about creating a product that delivers the right market to advertisers. That said, much of the mass media we enjoy would not exist without the help of advertising dollars. Advertising makes magazines, radio stations, newspapers, and television channels possible and affordable. So, as much as we love to hate it, we need advertising.

### **“Advertising is the art of convincing someone to spend money they don’t have on something they don’t need.” —Will Rogers**

As irritating as marketing interruptions can be, I would argue that some of the most creative and talented people in the world work in advertising. Think of it this way: a film director has two hours to tell a story to a captive audience. A television writer has at least a few minutes to hook the viewer. An ad writer, however, must grab her target’s attention within *seconds*. Not only is the ad writer working against the clock, but it takes something truly creative and clever to cut through the advertising clutter that inundates us daily.

It’s fascinating that, although most people agree that advertising affects society, very few admit that advertising actually affects *them*. This *third-person effect* is quite a stumbling block to media literacy. Why should anyone study advertising, for example, if he doesn’t think it affects him personally? Learning about advertising and how it works, though, is one of the most interesting aspects of becoming media literate.

## **A Targeted Approach**

The first advertising agencies in the United States were nothing more than brokers who bought newspaper ad space in bulk at a discounted rate and then sold the space to businesses. It wasn’t until brands became popular and marketers began to study demographics that agencies got involved in the creation of the ads. Demographics are the basic facts about consumers: gender, race, marital status, income, education level, zip code, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Demographics change throughout a person’s life, and companies know this and have learned to adjust their advertising placement accordingly.

What’s even more important to advertisers than demographics is a person’s *psychographics*—his or her fears and desires. Psychographics help advertisers understand what make people tick. Once advertisers know their target market’s demographics, they can surmise its psychographics and create ads that engage and influence a specific buyer.

Once advertisers determine the target market for an ad, psychographics come into play. Marketers ask questions such as:

- What’s the best way to sell this product to this group?
- What is this group afraid of?
- What problem will this product solve for them?
- And, most importantly, what *feeling* can be attached to the use of this product?

The feelings associated with advertised products are called *appeals*, and the appeals make all the difference in how a product is viewed. Effective ads don’t sell products; they sell *feelings*. For

example, a razor—normally associated with daily drudgery—is presented as something *fun* to use. Need confidence? Make sure you apply the right deodorant. Afraid of not having enough money to retire? Choose the right money manager to help secure your financial future. Want to feel successful? Buy a certain type of car. Look no further than the perfume counter at a department store, and you'll be convinced that feelings play a role in branding and advertising. You'll see Clinique's *Happy*, Ralph Lauren's *Romance*, Estée Lauder's *Beautiful* and *Spellbound*, and Calvin Klein's *Euphoria* and *Endless Euphoria*. Who wouldn't want to experience these feelings? Great advertisers know how to appeal to our desires.

Fear, success, novelty, guilt, accomplishment, and, occasionally, humor, are the most common appeals used in advertising. And just like the media placement varies to reach specific demographics and psychographics, advertisers know they have to use different appeals to influence their potential buyers.

Most of my students who become advertising majors initially assume all ad campaigns for a particular product are identical. That is absolutely not the case. Depending on the target demographic group, ads for a single product are changed. For example, military recruiting ad aimed at parents might be very stark with basic information and appear in *TIME* or another general news magazine. An ad aimed at potential military recruits might emphasize adventure or danger and appear in *Rolling Stone*. While the product is the same, the techniques used in advertising it are not. Different types of ads work for different groups. The "bandwagon appeal"—everyone else has one—works much better with teenagers than it does for middle-agers who aren't as affected by peer pressure. The "plain

folks pitch" might work for senior citizens, but it wouldn't work for middle schoolers. Celebrity spokespeople are much more effective with middle schoolers than with senior citizens, unless the celebrity was Andy Griffith, who could sell my parents anything!

**"Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising."**

—Mark Twain

Using intense market analysis and research, advertisers constantly work to ensure their ads stay current with the desires and fears of their target markets. Once an ad campaign is developed, it's presented to a focus group. A focus group, made up of the same demographic as the target market, provides feedback to the ad agency. I encourage my students to participate in focus groups every chance they get. The process can be an excellent learning experience, and they'll get paid for their time and opinions!

Ad agencies use focus group results to tweak the campaign and may test it again before the media buyer takes over. The media buyer's job—which I think would be such fun—is to analyze media options and then spend other people's money to buy space in those outlets! When I show my students ads that they've never seen because they're targeted at demographic groups other than college students, I explain they have the media buyer to thank. Media buyers are the reason truck ads are placed in *Sports Illustrated* but not aired during *The Bachelor*, and why Mountain Dew advertises on MTV but not during *Jeopardy!*. Of course, narrowcasted cable channels have made media buying much easier!

Media buyers have thousands of choices on the Internet. Website cookies can tell marketers exactly what type of consumer you are and where you spend your time online. Media buyers pay more for ad space on “sticky” sites, meaning a web user is likely to stay on that site for a long time. They will also pay extra for sites with “clicks,” which signify loads of web traffic. Since the Web is narrowcasted more than any other medium, advertisers can be extremely specific when buying time on sites. Not only is this good for advertisers, but it also increases the chance that a consumer will encounter an ad relevant to her.

### Sex and Stereotypes in Advertising

While I have loads of criticisms about ads, I hate a cliché *about* advertising more than any ad itself. “Sex sells” unhinges me because people constantly repeat the phrase without really thinking about what it means. *Why* exactly does sex sell, and why is sex so often used to get our attention? The reason is because human beings are sexual by nature. Sex is the one thing that transcends every demographic and psychographic. And with consumers bombarded with ads—some say, on average, more than three thousand per day— isn’t it wise for advertisers to cut through the clutter with something that everyone, regardless of age or income, will notice?

Nevertheless, sex in advertising can indeed have negative effects, leading to the objectification of women, the continuation of gender stereotypes, or the trivialization of relationships. Many ads feature women as objects: robots, mannequins, ice cream cones, or a pair of scissors. While it may sound ridiculous, once you notice, it’s impossible to stop noticing. Media critic Jean Kilbourne claims

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this objectification of women’s bodies—seeing them as things rather than as people—can lead to sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup> When I mention Kilbourne’s work in class, I get some eye-rolls. Honestly, that was my initial reaction to her claims as well. However, when you consider that people see an enormous number of ads—every day, every year—perhaps Kilbourne’s suggestion isn’t unreasonable. After all, while seeing one ad objectifying women may not make a difference in someone’s opinion of women, the cumulative, long-term effect of seeing millions of these types of ads could have a lasting and negative impact.<sup>2</sup>

### “Advertising is fundamentally persuasion, and persuasion happens to not be science but an art.” —William Bernbach

Gender stereotypes can appear in advertising in the form of dismemberment. For example, in most cases, men’s bodies pictured in ads are shown as complete bodies. Women’s bodies, however, are shown in pieces: lips, hair, feet, nails, legs, or teeth. What difference does this make? It suggests that the female form is irrelevant as a whole; it is merely the sum of its parts. While Kilbourne would claim this as another dimension of objectification, I see it more as a marketing ploy. Advertisers are smart to present women’s bodies as pieces of a whole so that women always have some part that needs improvement. Do you think you have nice hair? Great! But your teeth need to be white as well! Do you have nice legs? Good, but better make sure your breasts are large enough and your skin is flawless! And once advertisers have focused our attention on our flaws, they offer us the perfect remedy. *Aren’t we lucky?*

The most important thing media consumers can do is simply be aware of how female body image is portrayed in the media, specifically in advertising, and realize that the standard of beauty presented is unrealistic and unattainable. Advertising photos are almost always doctored for the best effect—even the models don't really look like their photos. Do a quick online search for before-and-after photographs of supposedly *perfect* models. You'll discover loads of photos that show these women (and men) aren't so perfect after all. Sharing these photos with others is a great way to start a conversation about the difference between *perfect* and *real*.

### “Advertising is the greatest art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” —Marshall McLuhan

Stereotypes are also seen in how genders are represented when compared to each other. This is one of the most interesting aspects of ad analysis. I challenge you to find a fashion magazine that does *not* contain an ad featuring a solitary man, photographed in black and white, and looking extremely thoughtful or serious. Not an easy exercise. Then look for a full-color ad where women are featured in a group doing something silly. This is a very easy exercise. What difference does this make? It's cumulative effect again. What are thousands of these images teaching us about how genders behave? Men are independent and without emotion. And girls? Well, they just want to have fun. While it's easy to dismiss these as superficial examples, we must remember that we see over three thousand ads a day—most of them visual images. While flipping through a single fashion magazine likely won't impair gender perception, the sheer pervasiveness of these images deserves awareness and analysis.

### Is It Real?

The “snob effect” is another popular advertising technique. Think of it this way: does a designer purse do anything that a plastic sandwich bag does not? No. Yet our brand-obsessed culture encourages us to spend hundreds of dollars for the purse, when a sandwich bag would hold all our personal items for a fraction of the cost. Branding is significant in advertising and in our culture in general. My students willingly admit they are irrationally devoted to particular brands and acknowledge they can't explain why. This is the power of branding and advertising.

Branding contributes to the idea that advertising creates an “aspirational lifestyle.” Fashion magazines are often criticized for representing a lifestyle that is unattainable to most because of economic level or body type. Alexandra Shulman, editor of the British edition of *Vogue* since 1992, said in a BBC interview, “nobody wants to see a real person looking like a real person” in her magazine.<sup>3</sup> Magazines are brilliant at presenting a fantasy of perfection and wealth and then including ads for products or brands that make us feel like part of the fantasy. In his book *Present Shock*, Douglas Rushkoff analyzes this idea and writes of the aspirational lifestyle, “The consumer must never be allowed to reach his goal, for then his consumption would cease. Since consumption makes up about half of all economic activity in America, a happy consumer would spell disaster. Fashion must change, and products must be upgraded and updated.”<sup>4</sup> If we can encourage students to realize this never-ending, unattainable pattern of more, bigger, and better, they will become critical consumers of the ads that surround them.

Brands are so pervasive in our society that many logos and even colors of logos are recognizable—even without the text or brand name attached. Scientists have determined that using certain colors in logos and brand packaging can actually influence consumers. Blue implies strength and dependability. Red means excitement! Yellow demonstrates optimism, clarity, and warmth. Green suggests peacefulness and health. Think about brand logos that you know. Do the colors used match the desired appeal of the brand?

Brand loyalty isn't necessarily a bad thing. We all have our favorite brands—mine's Diet Coke! But taking a step back to evaluate *why* we feel loyal to brands is one step toward media literacy.

### Is It Love?

Intense brand loyalty leads to another criticism of advertising: It encourages us to have relationships with products rather than with people. We are told to love a Chevy or fall in love with a new product. A lipstick is described as “love at first swipe” (Revlon), and a gum flavor lasts so long it's our new “best friend” (Extra). A biscotti ad describes a cookie as “rugged, Italian, and easy to undress” (Nonni's Biscotti), while an overly excited woman holds a large version of the cookie. Another ad shows a woman eating Shredded Wheat next to her sleeping husband because “only the Shredded Wheat knows how to satisfy.” Even a paint ad suggests you “fall in love with your walls” (Icynene) and features a photograph of a woman caressing her walls with her back arched. That must be some sexy paint! Once you start noticing these suggestive ads, you can't *stop* noticing. They are everywhere—and it's brilliant advertising. Ads like this play on our deepest emotional need—to love and be loved.

### “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half.” —John Wanamaker

Much is being written today about how digitally connected—yet lonely—we are, how personal relationships are being replaced with digital ones, and how this reality affects us mentally and emotionally. Advertisers play on our disconnected, dissatisfying relationships by suggesting, “Well then, how about a product on which you can always rely?” Ads promise that their product won't let you down like a silly human might. For example, a television ad for Kia Motors portrays a showroom as a dating website. Viewers are encouraged to log on, say what kind of relationship they want, and find their “love companion.” The word “car” is never mentioned. My students typically make fun of this ad for being over the top, but then we step back to take another look. Don't we all have relationships with our cars? Some people even name them. In fact, as a joke one semester, I set up a Facebook page for my van, complete with profile name (Pearl Smith), hobbies (carpools), and an identifying statement (“Typically filled with empty Diet Coke cans and 80s music”). Once Pearl Smith's page reached a thousand views, I deleted it because it just seemed too ridiculous. However, the idea that we have relationships with products is valid.

We “love” our cars almost as much as our smartphones. An ad for an LG phone encourages the reader to “hold me, stroke me, touch me—you can't be without me.” Seems outlandish, right? However, my students are *never* without their phones. Many sleep with their phones, and some can even text without taking their phones out of

their pockets. Their phones are touching a part of their bodies at all times. So is it really unreasonable to say their primary relationship is with their phones? Smart advertisers know (and try to exploit the fact) that people love their phones.

**“The secret of all effective advertising is not the creation of new and tricky words and pictures, but one of putting familiar words and pictures into new relationships.”**

—Leo Burnett

Advertisers encourage us to have relationships with products and, at the same time, urge us to trivialize real relationships. Look no further than the commercial for Carvel ice cream cakes, in which a dad tells his daughter to make a wish. As she blows out each birthday candle, the people at the table fall over and die one by one: Dad, Mom, Grandma, Little Brother. Satisfied, the young girl pulls the cake to herself while the tagline reads, “You won’t want to share.” JOOP! Jeans has an ad that claims, “A child is the ultimate pet.” An ad for a jewelry company pictures a woman sitting with her legs closely held together—until a diamond ring is placed in front of her, and then her legs open. One ad for the JC Penney wedding registry says, “Marriage is about commitment. Marriage is about companionship. Marriage is about toaster ovens.” These ads imply we are superficial and desperate for *things* instead of *people*—that we are lonely and only *stuff* can satisfy our loneliness. While it’s an powerful marketing tactic, hopefully as you and your students begin to notice the fallacy of these ads, they will lose their efficacy.

The same personification tactic exists in branding as well. For

example, many liquor brands have the names of *people*: Jose Cuervo, Jim Beam, Gentleman Jack, Johnnie Walker, Captain Morgan, and Jack Daniels. By presenting liquor to us as *friends*, companies communicate the message that we never have to drink alone. These *friends* are always available and ready to spend time with us.

Another way advertisers connect with buyers is by using the association principle. Companies associate their brands with things already valued in our culture, giving the brand instant credibility. The association principle is frequently used in ads for alcohol. For example, these ads usually feature gorgeous models having a wonderful time in fantastic, exotic locations. Additionally, one interesting campaign for Bacardi implied that the liquor would change your personality. You may be a banker by day, the ads claim, but you’re “Bacardi by night.” Bacardi’s claim is sadly ironic, considering that liquor does indeed change people’s personalities and not necessarily for the better.

No one uses the association principle better than the Budweiser brands of AB InBev, formerly Anheuser-Busch. During a past Super Bowl, they ran an ad featuring soldiers arriving in an airport. Other passengers slowly begin to clap for them, and close-ups of some of the soldiers show they are close to tears. This thirty-second ad spotlights American heroes and support of our military and ends with the Budweiser logo. The latent message—*Love our country, love Budweiser*—connects the brand with patriotism.

### Targeting Minors

Alcohol companies are restricted from specifically advertising to minors. Nevertheless, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

reported that, in 2014, nearly thirty percent of the alcohol industry's advertising dollars went to traditional media, like television, print, and radio—media that draw a high percentage of underage viewers. The FTC requires that at least 71.6 percent of the traditional media audience of an alcohol advertisement be over twenty-one years old, but how is that condition monitored or quantified? Likewise, expenditures for online alcohol ads have tripled.<sup>5</sup> To comply with restrictions about advertising to underage viewers, the websites containing these ads are “age gated,” meaning one must enter her age before she can access the entire site. However, does your keyboard know how old *you* are? The “age gate” defense seems risky at best.

**“It is advertising and the logic of consumerism that governs the depiction of reality in the mass media.”**

—Christopher Lasch

In a more recent Super Bowl ad, Budweiser once again used the association principle. What does everyone love? *Puppies*—and the Budweiser Clydesdales! Their latest ads involve a story with *both*. When I show this commercial during alcohol/tobacco advertising workshops for high school students, as soon as the puppy comes on, half of the students say, “*Awwwwwww*,” taking the bait—hook, line, and sinker! They watch a cute story about a puppy without realizing they’re actually watching an advertisement for a product that accounted for nearly one-third of traffic related deaths in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Tobacco advertisers are also prevented by law from targeting

teens. But, since more than 1,300 smokers die daily,<sup>7</sup> the tobacco industry desperately needs replacement smokers. Their challenge, however, is that someone who reaches the age of eighteen without smoking is unlikely to ever smoke. Consequently, teens comprise the future market for tobacco companies.

To get around the law, tobacco companies place huge displays at convenience stores, implement direct mail campaigns, sponsor sporting events, and advertise in youth-oriented magazines. R. J. Reynolds actually put ads in the classroom editions of *TIME* magazine in 2003! Tobacco companies also have a large online presence, which they claim is acceptable because they also use age gates. Additionally, they use merchandise giveaways, including lip gloss and cell phone case stickers, which don’t seem like giveaways that would appeal to women over eighteen.

Studying magazine ads for cigarettes is almost like participating in a sociology course in which issues such as class struggle, government intervention, and even conflicts between the genders come to light. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control reports that a person is more likely to be a smoker if he or she is uneducated and poor. Advertisers know this and present cigarettes as something to soothe job stress. For example, an ad for Capri cigarettes shows a woman relaxing with a cigarette and states, “She’s gone to Capri, and she’s not coming back.” Or tobacco is shown as a power tool: a maid, who clearly dislikes her job, appears ready to flick the ashes of her Camel cigarette into her boss’s food. A few years ago, the Virginia Slims campaign encouraged women to “find your voice,” implying that cigarettes made that possible. That’s ironic, since throat cancer robs people of their voices.



Cigarettes are also shown as tools of independence. Winston's ad challenged smoking restrictions by stating, "At least you can still smoke in your car." The Virginia Slims slogan, "You've come a long way, baby," celebrates women's choices and independence. Ironically, the ads mention nothing about how the smoker becomes addicted to nicotine. And nothing says independence like the classic Marlboro Man—the quintessential American cowboy—rugged, cocky, and masculine. Sadly, four of the original Marlboro men died from smoking-related illnesses.

Ever notice how some cigarette brands are called *slims* or *super slims*? That's not accidental. For years tobacco has been pitched to users as an appetite suppressant. Hungry? Have a "slim" instead of a snack. Typically *slim* cigarettes are even manufactured to be skinnier and longer than a normal cigarette.

Media literacy expert Art Silverblatt states that tobacco advertisers are the most talented in the industry. "How else could they encourage us to do something that no one actually enjoys the first time they try it?" he frequently asks.

Class discussions about tobacco and liquor advertisements are usually pretty lively. One or two students usually insist that all of these ads should be illegal because "the product is bad for us." Another student will invariably say, "Then McDonald's ads should be outlawed too." It's a slippery slope with some significant First Amendment considerations. After all, smoking and drinking *are* legal activities as long as you're a certain age.

Media literacy can play a huge role in these issues. We can teach teens to be smarter than the ads and teach them the tricks and techniques the advertisers are using to make these activities more exciting

and glamorous than they really are. We can also help them evaluate the appeals being used by the companies. Some say peer pressure—not tobacco advertising—plays the major role in a teen's decision to begin smoking. Perhaps so, but advertising must be somewhat effective for the industry to spend over \$8.2 billion on it annually.

Advertising is a huge part of our culture, and most of our media would not exist without it. Because it is so pervasive, powerful, and emotive, we need to analyze it. Awareness is the first step, followed by criticism and evaluation. Media literacy can even increase our appreciation of fantastic ad campaigns. But awareness must come first. While we can't outlaw advertising and we can't avoid it, we can *outsmart* it.