

The impact of electronic media advertising on consumerism and cultural values

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WH08ELEC06

SOC105 – Introduction to Popular American Culture

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July 17, 2008

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In his book *The Media Monopoly*, Ben H. Bagdikian quoted Chuck Blore as saying, “advertising is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it (Bagdikian, 2000).” The first known means of advertising is believed to have been used around 3000 BC, where Babylonians used store signs and street barkers to Promote their wares and businesses (Zoubkov, Johnson, Young, Fletcher & Thomas, 2004). Mass media has further introduced advertising into our daily lives, and electronic mass media has virtually inundated the populous with a constant barrage of advertising. As advertising techniques continue to grow more sophisticated with each passing year, advertising has created consumerism. Sophisticated psychologically based advertising has turned luxuries into needs and created needs where there never was one before (Shah, 2008). A sad trend of this constant barrage of advertising and the consumerism it creates is that much of the world has lost significant amounts of traditional culture, only to be replaced by what the mass media says should be cultural thereby creating a global culture with less diversity each passing year.

“For the majority of people, exposure to advertising is as normal as breathing, eating or sleeping. It is a bit like living near a main road, eventually you learn to block out the noise. The same applies to advertising, except that it is not only noise, but a constant visual reminder of how we should look, feel and live. For example, we are now exposed to an estimated 3500 advertising images a day. We tend to block out the majority of images because they become background noise – but they still have an impact on us (Zoubkov, et al, 2004).”

This constant barrage of advertising affects every aspect of life. Job preference and work ethic is glamorized by movies and television, where the characters are used to portray what kinds

of jobs are desirable, and what kinds of jobs are better left to the dregs of society. Social responsibility, justice, and the concepts of law and order are promoted, twisted, and abused in movies, television and radio broadcasts. News programs tell the public how to vote, why they should vote, when to love the law enforcement and when to hate them, and even what officials to like or dislike.

On the surface the happiness of consumers, and especially their outlook of the human body, is of major concern to these mass electronic media outlets. Conversely, these very media outlets themselves are telling the consumer conflicting views of what the consumer needs to be happy and how they should look, and completely discards the consumer's individual self worth. Mass media has created a set of molds for all consumers to fit into culturally, economically and physically, and if the consumer does not fit one of these predetermined molds, they are deemed unfit or abnormal.

Exponential growth of advertising through use of electronic media, especially the Internet, has steadily increased the growth of consumerism as a major cultural way of living. As developed countries become more entrenched in consumerism, the under-acknowledged trend of pollution becomes a major issue. The more the population is driven by desire rather than need, the more consumption and waste of unnecessary items becomes an issue. "One child born in New York City, Paris or London will consume, waste and pollute more in a lifetime than as many as 50 children born in the average developing country (Zoubkov, et al, 2004)." This desire-based consumption affects pollution of all kinds, including water pollution, air pollution, landfill waste, noise pollution and visual pollution.

Under the hurricane of constantly changing values of what the media has declared as fashionable, healthy, and even what is needed or not, the human mind begins to lose sense of

individual worth. Another destructive trend of sophisticated advertising propagated by the electronic media in quantities unparalleled in history, is the trend of the rise depression. Under this media driven storm of epic proportions, the human mind begins to by into what the media tells it; nothing matters but how much something is worth and how much is owned. This concept devalues personal feelings and self worth, as these have no real value in consumerism.

Individuals begin to question their relationships with spouses, friends, and even parents. They begin to ask themselves, “do I mean anything to them? Do I really matter?” Quickly, individuals succumb to low self-esteem and often, to depression (Bhattacharya, 2003).

Bhattacharya quotes the World Health Report 2001 regarding the alarming rise in depression. The World Health Report 2001 said,

“Major depression is now the leading cause of disability globally and ranks fourth in the ten leading causes of the global burden of disease. If projections are correct, within the next 20 years, depression will have the dubious distinction of becoming the second cause of the global disease burden. Globally, 70 million people suffer from alcohol dependence. About 50 million have epilepsy; another 24 million have schizophrenia. A million people commit suicide every year. Between ten and 20 million people attempt it. Rare is the family that will be free from an encounter with mental disorders. One person in every four will be affected by a mental disorder at some stage of life (Bhattacharya, 2003).”

The rise of depression in developed countries is alarming. The number of cases doubles approximately every ten percent of Americans have some form of clinical anxiety disorder, and the rates of mental illness in urban populations is nearly double in percentage than those in rural areas (Bhattacharya, 2003). These statistics may show that the exponential increase in advertising in urban areas, combined with the fast paced over-stimulated lifestyle common to

these areas, may be at fault for the drastic rise in mental and physical health issues in today's society.

Electronic media has catapulted advertising and consumerism to new levels, and the explosion of the Internet brings a threat of further advertisement over-exposure. From pollution, to loss of local culture, to a surge in mental health issues, advertisements and consumerism have laid a path of destruction for humankind. Business and the mass media will not stop using sophisticated psychological advertising; the question is, will humankind be able to survive the horrors it brings?

References

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