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THE PROMOTIONAL WINDOW INTO SOCIETY

Advertising as indicator and influencer of socio-cultural trends

Abstract:

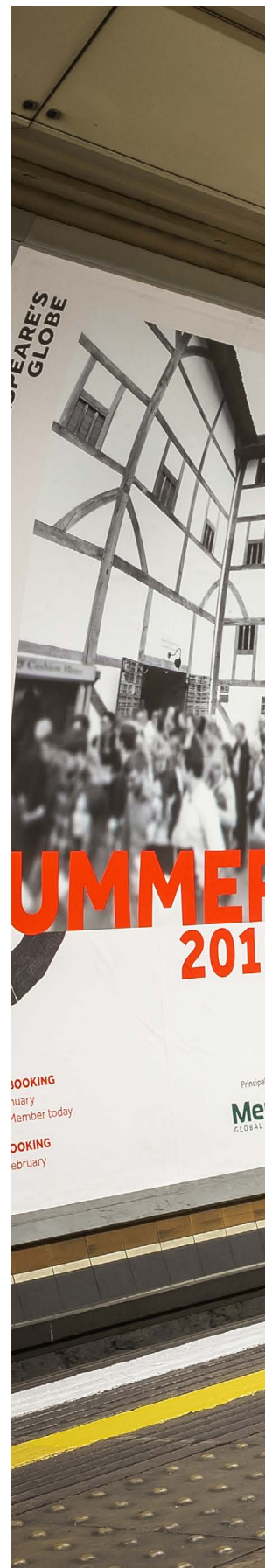
In this position paper, I argue for a structurationist understanding of advertising, exploring the current standing of advertising within western cultures, establishing advertising's nature as a 'distorting mirror' of socio-cultural trends that can provide insight into the mental images and expectations of its target audience. Outlining aspects of the reciprocal relationship between society and advertising, by showcasing how advertising can impact its audiences, the paper provides relevant takeaways of this view of advertising for both academics and brand managers

In the academic study of advertising, there is an ongoing debate as to whether: (i) advertising changes society, persuading consumers to value appearances and reputation over price and product quality; or (ii) advertising simply reflects what is already happening in society, namely transmitting information to consumers in order to help them make better choices. However, this paper takes the view that these positions are not mutually exclusive and argues for a *sociology of structuration* in terms of advertising; in other words, a reciprocal relationship between society and promotional communication output. On this basis, this paper encourages the use of advertising both as an indicator of ongoing and emerging socio-cultural trends, as well as a contributor to social change.

Advertising in society

Every aspect of our lives is permeated by the presence of material goods. The discourse on and through products, and therefore advertising, as well as the debate surrounding advertising itself, occupy important places in our lives and modern western cultures. Culture, in this context, refers to 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others' (Hofstede, 2011, p.20). It can be understood as a 'control mechanism, (...) a sort of blueprint for action, guiding social behaviors' (Tanner, 1997, p.31).

Beyond pure economic efficiency, advertising has socially relevant side-effects. Due to its omnipresence in the world in which we live, advertising has turned into a mass cultural phenomenon, communicating cultural and social developments widely, thus becoming itself an integral part of modern-day culture. Traditional opinion leaders, such as church and family elders, have largely lost their influence in industrialised societies, whereas the influence and impact of material goods and those who promote them, has risen. It is increasingly artefacts that determine the relationship between members of society, and they have taken over the role and means of interpersonal communication. Messages about one's own attitude and identity are transmitted to others by consumer goods, their use and consumption (Stöckl, 2012). In line with the concept of *symbolic consumption*, Karmasin (2020) sees one of the primary objectives of consumption as allowing people to express their own social standing, staging themselves and communicating this information to others. Regarded individually and superficially, advertisements only promote goods and services, but '[l]ooked at in depth and as a whole, the ways in which messages are presented in advertising reach deeply into our most serious concerns' (Leiss *et al.*, 2005, p.14).



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One of the roles of advertising in modern societies is therefore to formulate and reflect the possible meaning of things and facilitate the exchange of meaning in social communication. This is achieved, amongst other ways, by drawing on established cultural techniques. For example, the reading of images, and to some extent also their appreciation, is dependent on learned knowledge. Since images and their deciphering and understanding are part of a transnational cultural heritage, one can assume that advertising does function, but does not always have to (for example, in the case of radio), as communication through and with pictures. On the basis of this anthropological perspective on the purposes of goods and advertising in human cultures, advertising should be understood as a major cultural institution (Cluley, 2017; Leiss *et al.*, 2005).

This cultural foothold is also due to an undeniable, ever-advancing integration of art and commerce into production, distribution and reception. The lines between art and commerce have become increasingly blurred, with veterans from both disciplines introducing and interweaving their origin-specific aesthetics and points of view in other forms of media. A good example is the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, who decided, during the final decade of his life, also to pursue advertising—for example, in 1984, the commercials *Alta Società* for Barilla, and *Oh, che bel paesaggio!* for Campari; in 1991, *Che Brutte Notti* for the Bank of Rome. Fellini was thereafter repeatedly praised for his ability to fit the telling of big stories and to capture the atmosphere of cinema in the restricted format of advertising. Further examples include successful advertising photographers and directors Ridley Scott and David Fincher, who switched between the big screen and advertising for decades, becoming sought-after directors for both forms of media, and bringing their ‘advertesque’ style of over-designed aesthetic and concise storytelling to the silver screen. Due to the high quality of presentation and the budgets spent, many advertising campaigns are now considered by creatives, as well as by scholars, as a legitimate form of art, blurring the distinction between economy and culture. Advertising is an important cultural institution, given that the world of goods and its corresponding marketing comprise a principal channel of social communication. Accordingly, the market is a cultural system, in which people enter into a discourse with one another. Therefore, it seems legitimate to regard advertising as a creation of societal culture, and thus as a means to investigate culture-specific ideas and societal trends.

But does this mean that advertising can be understood as a mirror of society?



The distorting mirror

Interpretations of advertising often deal with the question of the relationship between advertising and society. Does advertising accurately depict ideas and cultural aspects from society, or does it impose certain ideas on society? And, if the latter, which ideologies are these ideas based on?

Considering the circumstances in which advertising acts, the relationship probably includes aspects of both. This assumption falls into a more recent school of thought, a ‘theory of structuration’. According to this theory, society can shape advertising, and advertising can shape society. Advertising, just like other forms of mass media, reflects selected ideas and characteristics of society, including a variety of aspects of everyday life, but also purposefully omitting others. It makes use of images from the storage in our minds—the desires, stereotypes or clichés that we have already internalised—and by choosing only some of these and by reintegrating them into the meaning system of the advertisement, it acts in turn on the audience and thus creates new meanings. Hence, it becomes part of our ideas, or modifies existing ones:

When confronted with the task of anchoring something in the intellectual world of potential audiences, one should assume that those thoughts have already been occupied, and that it makes the most sense to utilise certain, already existing thoughts and ideas. In this sense, advertising can provide information about the ideas of certain social groups at certain times. (Ingenkamp, 1996, p.152; original quotation in German, translation by DO).

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copy of the world, but constructs reality with the help of selected truths—a reality that tends to overemphasise positive representations (Schmidt and Spiess, 1994) and exaggerate whatever it touches upon (Willems and Kautt, 2003). Nonetheless, advertising does generally not create new topics or trends, but simply picks them up and follows them, ideally in an early stage, thus making them known to a wide audience. The ideas, desires and even fears that advertising undoubtedly plays upon are a major part of a society's culture, or at least of the sub-culture formed by the target audience. The contents of adverts are an expression of what advertisers have found in search of the addressee. Advertising is a continuum, comprising evaluations in terms of what is currently perceived as important, desirable or undesirable by members of society. It amplifies and affirms contemporary patterns of behaviour and reveals cultural standards (Goffman, 1979). Considering the effort and money devoted to exploring potential consumers, it seems very likely that advertising reflects the dominant values, norms, role expectations, prejudices, fears, dreams and needs of their target group with considerable accuracy. Therefore, whilst advertising might not fully reflect all aspects of a society, it can be assumed that it largely picks up and conveys contemporary ideas and developments, at least those relevant to the target group(s). It therefore provides insight into the mental image and expectations of its intended audience.

This line of argument seems reasonable, and does not contradict the sense of a distorting aspect to advertising as a means to proposition potential consumers. However, with this in mind, it becomes clear how crucial it is to acknowledge the target (and real) audience when interpreting advertising. Investigations into advertising work like a puzzle, where research into a variety of advertising messages for complementary target groups provides a growing number of puzzle pieces, slowly forming insights into society as a whole. Due to advertising's need for the contemporary, analyses ought to appreciate the dynamic nature of this type of media content, which may limit findings to a specific point of time. Any investigation into advertising must consider these aspects in order to position its findings adequately within the right context. All too often, it appears that arguments or decisions regarding current socio-cultural developments are erroneously based on inadequate and/or outdated advertising data.



Assuming that advertising taps into such an existing mental world, for example, by using defined target groups and their respective codes, a review of advertising materials could indicate tendencies and trends within a society.

Some researchers, however, argue that it would not be appropriate to consider advertising as a general societal or cultural indicator, for example, as evidence of the transformation of societal structures, or changes of values in society. This view is predicated on the notion that stories communicated by advertising have little reference to reality, but rather mirror the imagination of its audiences. Consumers face worlds of ideas, desires and fears in advertising messages, which largely correspond to their own, as the arguments and values in adverts are, in most cases, developed in accordance with findings from opinion research and demographic analysis. Nonetheless, this places advertising in the role of 'mirror' to and reflecting society, albeit in a different way.

Whilst not contradicting these limitations per se, I would argue that although it seems unlikely that advertising acts as a factually accurate mirror of society and its culture, due to its obligation to persuade and sell, it can still be regarded as a moderately reliable indicator of socio-cultural trends and developments, and current ideas prevailing within a society. Advertising captures the 'zeitgeist' (Basbug, 2013, p.102), hence, allowing inferences on 'collective ideals', 'social perceptions' and 'cultural patterns' (Kühne, 2007, p.78). Just like other forms of mass media, advertising does not provide a faithful



Stereotypes can do more than simply shape perceptions. They can assign a specific place within society to the stereotyped individuals and, moreover, actually create conditions that lead to their own confirmation—like a self-fulfilling prophecy



The reciprocity of it all

However, as indicated above, the influence of society on advertising is a two-way mirror. Nowadays, secondary experiences are mainly conveyed by the media, including advertising. On every occasion in which people are unable to experience something first hand—due to distance, time, effort (or pandemic!), etc.—mass media fill the gap. Prominent German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000) even claims that all we know about society and the world we live in, we know through the media. Modern means of communication can make the strange seem vivid and concrete, thereby reducing the mental distance. *Cultivation theory* addresses this idea, and posits that the more time individuals spend consuming media, the closer their views align to the ‘reality’ created by the media. In other words, a frequent and high exposure to media content impacts audience perceptions of social reality in the direction of that constructed by the media (Gerbner et al., 2002). This closely aligns with *social learning theory*, according to which behaviours can be acquired by observing and imitating others (Bandura, 1971). Advertising often comprises well-crafted short stories, featuring condensed characters within easy-to-follow storylines, inviting audiences to relate and identify with what is shown. Characters and storylines function as ‘role models’ facilitating learning in a (para-)social context. Individuals, therefore, learn about the world in terms, for example, of stereotypes and cultural paradigms derived from the media; a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in children; but is evident throughout a person’s lifetime.

Advertising is known for its frequent use of stereotypes. This particular form of media simply does not have the luxury of time, nor does it attract the level of attention, for detailed and multi-faceted representations of situations and characters that develop over time, as is possible in film or literature. People’s memories are guided by stereotypes (Welzer, 2002), which makes their use even more precious for advertisers, who are eager to achieve the highest recall results possible. Additionally, research into the effect of stereotypes on societies has shown that stereotypes have the power to shape people’s perception of others—in the long as well as the short run. They influence in many ways how people perceive and evaluate members of out-groups. But stereotypes can do more than simply shape perceptions. They can assign a specific place within society to the stereotyped individuals and, moreover, actually create conditions that lead to their own confirmation—like a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Furthermore, they can cause members of stereotyped groups to demonstrate stereotype-compliant behaviour, by the mere fact that the group members concerned are aware of the existing stereotype; this is termed *stereotype threat*. In modern industrialised societies, where advertising is omnipresent, a high contact rate between individuals and promotional media content is almost inevitable. Due to the frequent and cumulative occurrence of exposure, the opportunities to influence audiences are great. Advertising is particularly crucial, because it mediates between collective and individual experience by offering typical interpretations of supposedly typical problems. What Hall and colleagues (2013) state for mass media more generally also applies to advertising: they have a defining power and the resources to make their version of the world and events generally available to the public and to ‘offer powerful interpretations of how to understand these events and the people or groups involved in them’ (p.60).



Whilst social media might provide immediate voices and trends, advertising can provide larger market and target-audience-level insights that are more soundly based on market research and representative data sets

Concluding remarks

Considering the argument presented in this paper, it seems likely that advertising indeed follows a sociology of structuration, offering a 'distorting mirror' of socio-cultural trends that, in turn, influences audiences through what it shows, or does not. In addition to contributing to the academic debate, knowing about the nature of advertising beyond its economic function, should also be important to brands. Brands should be aware that what they put out into society as part of their promotional efforts might contribute to major socio-cultural developments. In the past, we have seen this, amongst other things, in the debates around sexism and body image triggered by campaigns such as Protein World's controversial 2015 advert *Are you beach body ready?*

Another branding takeaway is the role advertising can play in investigating socio-cultural trends. Whilst social media analysis has received plenty of attention from brands as a way of 'keeping an ear to the ground', structured monitoring and analysis of the advertising landscape is less common. Whilst social media might provide immediate voices and trends, advertising can provide larger market and target-audience-level insights that are more soundly based on market research and representative data sets.

Finally, for both academics and brand managers, it is important to keep in mind the time sensitivity when dealing with insight derived from advertising research. Advertising, as a means to access socio-cultural trends, more often than not has an expiration date. Very few brands can and will run unchanged advertising campaigns over a long period of time. Most brands need to regularly overhaul their promotional efforts to ensure that they keep tapping into current trends that are relevant to their target audience. As researchers analysing advertising, it can be difficult to determine from the outside, the prevailing point of a brand's cycle. Thus, one might want to regularly seek new data sets on which to base any decisions and/or infer trends—whether this be for academic purposes or for business decisions in the branding context.

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