ABSTRACT
        A study which reviewed the research literature
analyzed the relationship between television advertisements and the
lowering of the self concept. Although television advertising has a
relatively short history, today a person can hardly escape from it.
Advertisements are specifically targeted to age-related and
demographic groups. By focusing on self-perception and by targeting a
low self-concept, advertisers create in consumers the desire to feel
good about themselves. When this can not be accomplished through the
consumption of the products themselves, a low self-concept continues
to exist for the consumer. Persuasive techniques that are used in the
advertising industry can be separated into hard (claim-oriented) and
soft (image-oriented) sell approaches. In the soft sell approach the
focus is on image, lifestyle, nonverbal and paralinguistic, social
suggestion and prestige appeals. Television advertisements frequently
portray only select segments of "reality," often through the use of
stereotypes. Researchers have found that children as young as 6 can
identify "boy" and "girl" commercials, which often tend to reinforce
stereotypical behavior, attitudes, and mores of the dominant culture,
thus influencing the self-concept formation of children. Some
educators have called for teaching critical viewing skills to
children as early as possible. The self concept regarding female
beauty and that regarding the elderly is also targeted. Research
should be undertaken in the area of minority absences from ads, and a
warning about the dangers of self-concept-lowering ads should be
sounded. (Contains 31 references.) (NKA)

Warning: This Television Advertisement may be

Hazardous to Your Self-Concept

Joan M. Bedore, Ph. D.

Human Relations Department

for the Sooner Communication Conference, 1992

University of Oklahoma

CS509311

Running head: ADS AND SELF-CONCEPT

Abstract

After much national pressure, cigarette cartons now bear a warning from the Surgeon General. This warning and warnings from research groups serve as notice that a danger may be present. Accordingly, efforts to curb smoking are at an all-time high.

In a like manner, this paper serves the same purpose. While not all television advertisements harmfully target the consumer's self-concept, many do. This study analyzes the relationship between television advertisements and the lowering of the self-concept.

By synthesizing research on this relationship, a warning is sounded, history, issues, methods and effects are examined, preventative strategies and directions for future research are discussed, and a challenge is delivered.

Warning: This Television Advertisement may be

Hazardous to Your Self-concept

It is estimated that each American will most likely spend a year

and a half in front of the television watching commercials in the

course of a lifetime (Martin, 1989). Perhaps Fromm (1968) suspects as

much when he argues that man has been changed into "Homo

consumens, the total consumer, whose only aim is to have more and

to use more" (p. 38). We are a consumer-oriented society. Indeed, we

are fast becoming a nation driven to over-consume, but by whom?

We are driven by the advertising world in general and by the

advertising that comes through the medium of television in particular.

As McLuhan (1964) so aptly points out, "Ads seem to work on the very

advanced principle that a small pellet or pattern in a noisy, redundant

barrage of repetition will gradually assert itself" (p. 202). He later likens

advertisements to brain-washing at an unconscious level (p. 202).

While not all television advertisements are successful enough

or powerful enough to produce this type of manipulation among

consumers, many are. Their strength and inherent danger lies in their

subtle transformation of the consumer's self-concept and self-worth

over time. It is thought that repetition serves this purpose quite well.

Cushman (1990) calls the late 19th. century "An advertising

executive's dream come true" (p. 606), stating, "Life-style has become a product that sells itself, and the individual has become a consumer who seeks, desperately, to buy" (p. 606). Advertising works wonderfully well. Thus, as ads present more appealing pictures of "their" lifestyles, they create the desire for matching behavior and matching self-concepts. As long as advertising is effective in creating a modelling desire, we will be a nation of homogenized consumers.

The Nature of the Problem

At the very foundation of the problem of self-concept advertising is the fundamental belief that people are not easily manipulated or controlled. Perhaps this "blind eye" turned towards reality is precisely why people do not see themselves as being manipulated. This lack of self-awareness coupled with a belief that advertisements affect others but not ourselves is dangerous. It allows us to reject awareness of the problem through disassociation.

Bagdikian (1990), posits that the strategy of programming is to attract an audience for advertising (p. 8), and that prime-time television in particular serves to put the viewer in the " buying mood" (p. 160). If awareness is rejected through disassociation, the viewer may not perceive the extent of the problem posed by constant advertising.

Indeed, the American nation is still reeling from the effects of nearly a century of powerful drug, alcohol, and cigarette advertising

aimed at "the other guy," of course.   Because the drugs themselves are physiologically addicting and contributed much to our national addiction by their very nature, it took us quite a long time to see and understand the true power of those ads. Over time, they turned out to have been very effective on a grand scale.

The definition of advertising itself, as recommended by Wright, Warren, and Winter (1962) is simple enough: "Advertising is controlled, identifiable persuasion by means of mass communication media" (p. 10). This indicates that a person knows it is persuasion. But simply knowing that persuasion exists is not the same as being aware of yourself and your self-concept as its target. It was for this reason that this paper came to be written.

History and Prevalence of Television Advertising

Television advertising has a relatively short history. As Bagdikian (1990) points out, in the beginning, after the Second World War, single sponsors produced and controlled whole programs (p. 140), but this did not last long. As soon as the first independent advertiser made the first huge profits, the world of commercial television was forever changed (p. 140). Soon, sponsors could buy six or more minutes of advertising each hour, and they began selecting "buying enviornments" to frame their messages (p. 156).

By the mid 1960's, according to Bagdikian (1990), "Calculated

imagery became the main appeal of commercials" (p. 141). Later, as public resistance to manipulation arose in the 1970's, these emotional appeals gradually came to be more sophisticated. What was added was a more insidious appeal to the self-concept of the viewer. Now, "Social science and psychological techniques have been added to television's arsenal for conditioning human behaviors" (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 185). Certainly, this new addition has not helped us.

Increasingly, in the 1980's and the 1990's, a predictable shift has occurred. Now, self-development is the newly-advertised reward. As Stern (1988) illustrates, the "be all that you can be" army campaign offers just such a promise of fufillment (p. 90). Along the same lines, another emerging trend assumes and compliments the self-esteem of viewers and urges people to treat or reward themselves for their own goodness or behavior. Examples of this are found in commercials like Budweiser's "For all you do, this Bud's for you," and MacDonald's "You deserve a break today." The reward, obviously, is whatever product that is being advertised. Though this trend seems to be developing, the older appeals to "comparison" self-concepts still prevail to a great extent (Durgee, 1986).

Today, one can hardly escape from advertising, particularly on television. In fact, as Bretl and Cantor (1988) found, there are roughly 20 commercials per hour, or 714 per week, or more than 37,000 per year

for the average viewer to absorb (p. 596). Citing Looney (1971), Bretl and Cantor (1988) add that "by the age of 17, the average viewer has seen some 350,000 commercials" (P. 579). With people gradually spending more and more time in front of the television, as has been the national trend, these numbers seem likely to increase, There is no question whatsoever that advertising is big business with handsome profit margins and rich rewards for many. If it didn't "work", it wouldn't exist. Bagdikian, (1990) points out, in fact, that advertisers generally spend roughly around $300 per television household per year (p. 147). No doubt, much of this money goes into the creation and strategic placement of successful advertising campaigns.

An interesting discovery surfaced with the research of Budd, Craig, and Steinman in 1983. They studied the commercial "pods" or segments at the six advertising breaks during one episode of "Fantasy Island", only to discover that each of the commercials clearly "solved" a problem from the corresponding time interval in the show. More research is needed in the area of flow and ad sequence, but it would seem logical to assume that the strong connection found in this random sample was not a mere coincidence. It is possible that other programming also serves individual advertisers in a similar way.

Perhaps as Key (1989) explains, the beautiful people living romantic, powerful, interesting lives on the television screen simply

reinforce the commercial messages rather than the other way around. In his words, "The implied promise of ad-generated consumption is equality, acceptance, and participation in the good life of the beautiful media people - an unfufillable promise and expectation" (p. 197).

That advertisements do not always live up to their inflated promises has been a source of criticism all along. In general, much research tends to support the notion that the average consumer is suspicious of advertising, seeing it as manipulative (Andrews, 1989). This manipulation occurs through appealing to fear, inadequacy, inferiority, and other negative emotions (Andrews, 1989), citing Fromm (1955) and Pollay (1986). It also occurs through appeals to unconscious motives (Packard, 1957), as cited in Andrews (1989).

Indeed, Mclulan (1964) voices what many Americans are beginning to suspect: that advertising aims for "programmed harmony" among the masses (p. 202). That this is a plausible assertation becomes more and more evident over time.

The Issues Involved in Self-concept Targeting

One of the surest ways to achieve this type of harmony is to create many appeals to universal needs and desires that can be satisfied through the consumption of a wide variety of products. There is, however, quite a lively debate over the issue of "creating" needs. Buttle (1989) posits that needs can be created, but others, citing the

needs hierarchy of Maslow insist that while needs exist and can be targeted in and of themselves by advertising (Makosky, 1985), only desire can be created. Regardless of their stance, though, most advertisers agree on the necessity to create a desire for their products.

Another way to achieve programmed harmony is to create a sense of fufillment or a sense of self-completion through the use of brand X or Y. Cushman (1990) makes a cogent argument for the empty self issue, wisely grounding his theory in historical perspective. The argument is that over time, as Americans experienced a lack of tradition, community and common meaning, they felt a chronic, emotional hunger that translated into the empty self (P. 600). As a result, when ads emphasize what is missing, they offer the products themselves to "fill up" the consumer, soothing and completing the emptiness with food and a varitey of disposable goods (p. 599).

Thus, the unconscious yearning to consume and collect goods is seen as a way of compensating for the empty self (p. 600) and as a way of getting something back from the world (p. 604). Sometimes, what happens, states Williamson (1978), is that advertisements sell us ourselves (p. 13). The "selves" we are offered are media-created representations of the "beautiful people" in the advertisements. We are asked to "buy into" their values and dreams.

But what sort of a self or self-concept are we getting? A quick

glance at today's popular ads indicates that we get a sense of self that can never quite "measure up." We are always somehow not as good as the Joneses, who are buying every known convience at an incredible rate. Given that self-concept is a gut-level feeling of a person's own worth (Waitley, 1979), this type of subtle undermining of our feelings of value and worth can be quite damaging.

Sirgy (1982) cites Rosenberg (1979, p. 7) in defining the self-concept as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object." In the definitions of self-esteem and self-concept, the important feature is that both are perceptions and judgements of individuals towards themselves.

This is where advertisements do their greatest damage. By focusing on self-perception and by targeting a low self-concept, advertisers create for the consumer the desire to feel good about themselves (Durgee, 1986). When this can not be accomplished through the consumption of the products themselves, a low self-concept continues to exist for the consumer.

It is no secret, asserts Durgee (1986) that "Advertising which uses consumer's feelings of self-esteem as its leverage point has been around for a long time" (p. 21). Indeed, as self-esteem is considered to be a basic human need (Maslow, 1954), it mades "good advertising sense" to target this need.

What Durgee (1986) says on this issue is that there are at least three ways self-esteem advertising might work: 1) convince the viewers that use of brand X or Y will enhance self-esteem, 2) make it easy for consumers to identify with the "winner" who uses brand X or Y, and 3) flatter the consumer in some obvious way (p. 23).

As simple as these three strategies seem, they are obviously labor-intensive and time-consuming they create. By means of illustration, one can turn to Key (1989), who lists the average cost of a television commercial at between $50,000 and $250,000 (p. 181). Much thought appears to go into this and other strategies.

The Methods Used in Self-concept Targeting

Overall, there are some standard persuasive techniques that have come to be used regularly in the advertising industry. Makosky (1985) lists these as "(a) the appeal to or the creation of needs, (b) social and prestige suggestion, (c) the use of emotionally loaded words and images" (p. 38). Snyder and DeBono (1985) further separate these strategies into hard (claim-oriented) sell and soft (image-oriented) sell approaches (p. 594). Our concern here is with the soft-sell approach, because it strays away from the presentation of the product claim and into the area of image-creation and self-concept targeting. In this approach, our attention will be focused on image, lifestyle, nonverbal and paralinguistic, social suggestion and prestige appeals.

Image targeting often features quick, emotional appeals (Bagdikian, 1990) that offer a chance for a consumer to be associated with a product (and thus equated with its worth, as with expensive cars or clothing) and its benefits (as housewives are led to see themselves as being loved by thier families for serving brand X or Y food.) Products are often able to do for people what they can not do for themselves. Beauty advertisements, in particular, work on this premise (Williamson, 1978). Thus, the right make-up and hair color may make all the difference in the world in attracting the "perfect" mate.

Lifestyle comparisons are targeted equally often. They are most effectively used when the actual differences between similar products are small, and when the products are used socially (Roman & Maas, 1976). The alluring alcohol and cigarette commercials of old are prime examples of this type of advertising appeal. We have already discussed the apparent effectiveness of these campaigns. The advertising created the initial desire until the physiological desire was in place and fully operating. No doubt it will take us decades to recover from these chemical "solutions" that were glamorized through the use of strong lifestyle appeals.

Paralanguage, or the vocal cues presented with the message (Gamble & Gamble, 1990) and nonverbal appeals are of primary concern to television advertisers. Through rigorous research,

Mehrabian (1966), as cited in McCroskey (1986) states that 55% of a communicated message is stimulated or transmitted to the receiver by nonverbal behavior, 38% by paralanguage, and only 7% by the actual spoken word (p. 109). So it is easy to understand why these messages are so important. Thus, it is not unusual to see beautiful females seductively, and handsome males masterfully stating their claims.

The last two soft-sell advertising appeals are closely linked together. While social suggestion gives the consumer the idea that "eyerybody's doing it" and is more of a bandwagon approach, prestige appeals tend to get consumers to buy because some famous person suggests that they should (Makosky, 1985). Both clearly target a person's self-concept in relation to some "other", such as a large group in which to belong or a celebrity after whom to pattern behavior. Frequently, the viewer can easily identify with the qualities of the personality on the screen, particularly if complimented (Durgee, 1986).

The Possible Effects of Self-concept Targeting

Chulay and Frances (1974), as cited in Geis, Brown, Jennings (Wolstadt), and Porter (1984), estimate that children in the United States see from 22,000 to 24,000 commercials a year (p. 515). Wober (1984), as cited in Bryant and Zillman (1986), comments on the influence this barrage of messages can have, suggesting that television is a prime purveyor of culture, contributing much to the personality

development of chilren (p. 22). As television advertisements frequently portray only select segments of "reality", and often through the use of stereotypes, it is reasonable to examine these segments in terms of the stereotypical images they convey.

Gamble and Gamble (1990) define a stereotype as "a generalization about people, places, or events that is held by many members of society" (p. 67), and McLulan (1964) clearly sees stereotypes as the foundation or bedrock of any expensive advertisment. Thus, at an early age, children see advertisements that are laced with stereotypes. Beauty or facial make-up ads, for example, while aimed at older females, may lead younger ones to believe that the use of beauty products X or Y will make them as irresistable as the models in the commercials, though even half as irresistable may be acceptable. Thus, young females learn that they must strive to be attractive for males.

Calvert and Huston (1987) found that children as young as six years old could identify the differences between "boy" and "girl" commericals, in that boy commercials were action-packed and fast-paced, while girl commercials were slower, quieter, and less intense (p. 80). These differences displayed on over time tend to reinforce the stereotypical behavior, attitudes, and mores of the dominant culture, thus influencing the self-concept formation of children. Perhaps this is why Desmond and Jeffries-Fox (1983) call for the teaching of critical

viewing skills to children as early as possible (p.107).

The self-concept of adults is also quite heavily targeted by television advertisements. Given that the average American will see well over a million commercials by the age of 40 (Postman, 1985), this amounts to a rather steady barrage. Two specific areas of attack are stereotypical reinforcement and "lookist" or beauty messages. Both are quite pervasive and potentially very damaging over time.

Bretl and Cantor (1988) studied a 15-year sample of recent television advertisements and found that males and females now appear equally often in prime-time commercials as main characters, but that 90% of all the narrators or "experts" are male (p. 605). Further, they discovered that while only 70% of the females in the commercials offered arguments or evidence for their claims, a full 94% of the males backed their claims authoritatively (p. 604). Clearly, the "experts" are males in the world of television advertising.

This leaves females with "beauty" as their main characteristic, and it is apparent that this beauty helps sell all sorts of products. In fact, Downs and Harrison (1985), citing Alder and Faber (1980), state that viewers see over 5,260 attractiveness messages a year, and beauty as good, important, or valuable appears once in every 10.8 commercials (p. 16). Thus, they say, "With only few exceptions in the literature, attractive persons are credited with positive attributes while

unattractive persons are assigned negative attributes" (p. 9). Indeed, it is difficult to think of even a few commercials featuring "ugly" people as either experts, positive personalities, or admirable figures. With the help of our advertising industry, then, we have become a lookist society, given the constant barrage of the messages we have received.

Cushman (1990) points to the problem of these types of lookist-oriented messages when he asserts that "Ads seem to criticize and condemn the average consumer while glorifying the model, extolling a standard of beauty and mastery impossible to achieve" (p. 605).

Indeed, as Postman (1985) points out, advertisement is "not at all about the character of the product to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of the products" (p. 128). He goes on to capture the essence of the problem of self-concept targeting when he explains "What the advertisers need to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer" (p. 128).

In both the appeal to the stereotype as the norm and the appeal to beauty as the desirable, what is wrong is that the average consumer simply can not "measure up." Thus, the self-concept stays low, the consumer stays unfulilled, and the advertisement stays on the air as the cycle repeats itself unerringly over time.

The self-concepts of elderly citizens are likewise targeted. Given that advertising can play a key role in the attitudes people form about

the aging process and of the socialization of the elderly in general

(Swayne & Greco, 1987), it serves our purpose to look at the presence or

absence of the elderly in television advertisements.

Swayne and Greco (1987) found three facts of interest to our

analysis. First, while 12% of Americans are over 65, only seven percent

of all television commericals include elderly characters (p. 47), many of

them appearing as part of a larger, heterogeneous crowd or group.

Second, of all the people in the 814 advertisements they studied,

only 3.2% of the people on screen were elderly. Finally, citing Kubey

(1980), they state that television viewing is the single-most time-

consuming leisure activity of the elderly (p. 51). One can only guess

how unnoticed and underrepresented our elderly citizens must feel in

the face of such rejection from the world they see on the screen.

People of color, of foreign culture, or of a different sexual

orientation are even less likely to be included in the world of

mainstream television advertisement. At this time it doesn't make

"good sense" to increase the visibility of these specific groups.

Greenberg (1984), as cited in Bryant and Zillman (1986),

mentions a study by Weigel et al. (1980), which found that whites were

visible in 97% of the television advertisements they studied, and that

cross-racial interactions in these ads happened less than 2% of the time

(p. 174). Greenberg goes on to summarize these findings, stating that

there are more black faces than in recent years, "but they get less time, are less visible, may be burried in a sea of faces, and rarely interact with whites" (p. 175). Clearly, some form of social snobbery is in force in the perfect, white, stereotypical world of mainstream advertising.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis is based on the supposition that most people feel it is the "other guy" who is affected by advertisements. Because of this consumers are suseptible to manipulation.

Fortunately, there are several actions an aware viewer can take to prevent or neutralize this manipulation. Critical viewing is an obvious place to start. By being wary of claims and by taking the time to analyze their appeals, a person can learn to "see through" the guise of advertisements. Also, breaking ads into smaller parts or trying to re-write the ads with a different appeal is another helpful strategy. Another method would to imagine role reversals, such as an elderly citizen in place of a younger spokesperson or a woman in place of a man. This new view could raise awareness of stereotyping in ads. In these ways, viewers avoid taking any commercial at face value.

These strategies call for critical viewing through active visual participation in the message presentation. Other forms of action are also suggested. One could write to the producer of a particularly

offensive ad, put a sign in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that reads "ADS = FANTASY", run short errands during the time span of the commercial, or simply MUTE the volume on all commercials.

The purpose of this paper all along has been to sound a warning, like the warning on a cigarette carton, that a danger may be present. Indeed, in the words of Postman (1985), "The television commercial is the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication to issue forth from the electric plug" (p.126).

This warning, then, is directed to those viewers who are not aware of themselves as targets of this peculiar form of communication.

As researchers, considerably more study is needed in the area of minority absences, particularly for people of color, of foreign cultures, and of a different sexual orientation. These, along with portrayals of our elderly citizens, are quite conspicuous in their absence.

As Bagdikian (1990) points out, we are as emotionally and intellectually affected by our experience with television commercials as a soldier on the battlefield is by the the combat itself (p. 186). Thus, it seems logical for us to concur with Dennis (1989) that "the media are more important than we have heretofore thought" (p. 10).

Let us examine the danger of self-concept lowering ads in our research and sound the warning. Perhaps we can begin to take action to reverse this alarming practice.

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