

Shaping consumer behaviour

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



How important is advertising in shaping consumer behaviour? Try and make links to different theories of consumer behaviour in your discussion

Advertising is seen in essence as a way to "sell" either a product or service or most persuasively a consumerist lifestyle or perspective. There is little doubt as to whether advertising has an affect on consumer behaviour however there are many different views as to the extent to which this occurs. In understanding the importance of advertising in shaping consumer behaviour it is crucial to look at the development of consumerism.

There is little agreement amongst sociologists as to when consumerism in its modern form began to develop, according to McKendrick (1982) it was anywhere between the eighteenth century and the 1980's. However we can say that the rise of this "consumer culture" was a result of Industrialization as production for subsistence became replaced by wage labour, people started to become consumers as well as producers. Gradually then, a new type of society developed, a society built upon the thirst for novelty- novelty, which the economic system seemed content to perpetrate. (Miles, 1998: 6)

During the 1980's the aesthetics, design and style of consumption became increasingly diverse as the market place became even more sophisticated with regard to what it knew and what it wanted to know about its consumers. (Lee 1993: 56) This in turn lead to a new more persuasive form of advertising which can be said to have an influence over consumer behaviour patterns. It is thought that the shift from traditional to modern society has entailed an increase in human needs in conjunction with their increasingly direct attachment to the values of materialism and commodities.

These needs are seen to multiply and separate in a precise correlation with the production and expansion of a product. The belief is that this process causes consumers to become confused about their wants in relation to the means that are supposed to satisfy them (Leiss et al 1986: 20) Whilst many sociological thinkers, especially those of the Frankfurt and Marxist schools of belief thought that advertisers sought to brainwash the consumer through their advertisements.

The increasingly insecure and reflexive states of marketing practices, as consumers, often unintentionally, thwart attempts to control them, show that the issue is not that clear-cut. (Edwards 2000: 74). The opinion of the members of the Frankfurt school is that adverts act as a form of escapism for the consumer and that this in turn acts to smother their critical capacities and so they are then able to be manipulated. Marcuse in particular discussed the concept of a "one dimensional man". Whereby we have been taken over by capitalism so that we feel that our lives will be incomplete without the latest gadget or lifestyle gimmick.

It is well known that consumer culture tries to "hail" the consumer by trying to make them see themselves inside the advertisements, and to actually make an impact on their opinions. (Nava: 1992: 46) The critical theorists such as Marxists believe that the producers create needs for the consumer in order to make them purchase goods to fulfil needs, which they don't actually have in order to keep the system of capitalism in place. Marxist thought is that the separation of subjects and objects then become reconnected in capitalist society through a form of commodity fetishism.

The work of Judith Williamson (1978: 13) supports this; she thought that advertising persuades consumers to buy goods against their real class interests because they are unable to escape the false meanings, which are invoked by the adverts. Advertisers play a crucial role in apparently duping the conscious and critical abilities of the general population (Packard 1957) Critical theorists are of the opinion that adverts help to promote consumption as a way of life. They educate the masses into a way of life that celebrates consumption as an end in itself.

This then results in a perpetual cycle of people purchasing goods to bring meaning to their lives, becoming disillusioned by them and thus then needing to buy more goods. Individuals get pleasure from anticipating things: modern consumer activity is not about instant gratification but instead is about 'wanting to want'. Freedom and choice in modern society is illusory because people have been pre-conditioned to make choices within a pre-determined universe that circumscribes the range of choices they actually have. (Miles 1998: 9)

Bowlby's theory of consumerism was that advertisements focus on the conscious and unconscious determinants of choice in life and love. On the one hand there is the image of the rational and calculated bargain hunter, the classical consumer, and on the other hand there is the irrational, uncontrolled and unconsciously driven pleasure seeker, the romantic consumer. These are seen to be two co-dependent sides to the same coin. Marketer's struggles to outwit the sophisticated, all knowing classical

consumer whilst pandering endless seductive routines to the day dreaming romantic.

It is through the use of advertisements that this is possible. The formal and informal investigations carried out by companies have demonstrated little correlation between sales and the amount of money spent on adverts (Mattelart 1991: Brignull 1992). Apart from the odd glaring exception advertising is not necessarily particularly effective in stimulating sales of commodities or services (Edwards 2000: 56) William Level, founder of the Lever brother's corporation said, " Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, trouble is I don't know which half".

This supports the pluralist view of advertising in that it doesn't influence people as they have the ability to choose for themselves. Adverts simply promote and reflect societies needs. Nava (1992: 45) argues that as technologies are becoming more advanced and we now have more interactive methods by which to watch television, e. g. cable, unless adverts are particularly pleasurable to the viewer they will be ignored. Nava believes that this is leading to the audience becoming more sceptical than they were in the past as they now have a choice over what they watch.

This is supported by the pluralist view, that the consumer is able to make his or her own choices. The pluralist view also states that people are people are not influenced by adverts in their decision making as adverts simply promote and reflect societies needs. Nava's argument is also supported by the view of the consumer as conspicuous, whereby people play a part in creating their own needs and wants, they construct meanings and importance to goods as

status symbols and conveyors of meanings. However they play an active role in making choices over what they consume and how they consume it.

Edwards (2000: 70) states that it is now becoming clear that adverts are being targeted towards certain status groups and markets. It is these groups, usually the working class, whom are most influenced by advertisements.

Advertising at its primary cultural consistent forms a major social control mechanism and manipulative tool for the affluent worker. (Ewen 1976)

Contrary to Marxist thoughts about the globalisation of adverts to promote single values and opinions, it seems that there is in fact no real tendency towards this within the promotion of the adverts themselves.

It also seems that advertisements are in fact polysemic as evidence indicates that the audience's responses are not at all consistent or uniform. (Nava 1992: 46) Whilst the importance of marketing and advertising remains complex and contradictory. (Edwards 2000: 53). There is no doubt that it has an effect on consumerism Just as there is no escaping the fact that advertising is not just a business expenditure but is infact an integral part of modern culture. It still remains a fact that advertising is the best tool of promotion for consumerism within capitalist society.