

More Consumption, More Benefits: How Does Consumerism Affect the World Through Advertising

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Abstract: Currently, there are followers and defenders of consumerism all over the globe. During the worldwide spread of consumerism, it is doubtless that commercial advertising plays an inevitable role. This article, in order to clarify the principle of the spread of consumerism and demonstrate measures to avoid being affected by the negative side of consumerism, will analyze the approaches, harm, and solutions of ads that promote consumerism. The nature of consumerism is to prefer symbolic value to practical value, to correspond consumption with a perfect life, and to form an illusion for consumers. Consumerism can get a growing number of people stuck in a financial crisis, and it can also make society lack personal styles, diversity, and morality. This paper concludes that solutions include strengthening the construction of regulations and their execution, enhancing media literacy education, and persuading the public to pay attention to self-awareness, self-recognition, and self-improvement, to name but a few.

Keywords: Consumerism, Advertising, Propaganda, Consumer behaviors.

1. Introduction

In 2020, a Chinese financial application called Huabei was caught in controversy due to controversial advertising. It was believed that the advertisements of Huabei attempted to benefit by promoting excessive consumption and consumerism, but ignored the actual consumption ability and financial burden of the public. Meanwhile, the public considered that the advertisements tried to induce more consumption in a seemingly parental style and redefine and restrict emotions with money. This event aroused a heated debate about consumerism in China again.

Since the rapid development of capitalism in the Western world, the expansion of the market, and capitalists' need to accumulate capital gains in the 19th century, consumerism has appeared in capitalist society[1]. At the same time, modern media, such as newspapers, television, and modern advertising, started to evolve as well, affecting the information acquirement of the public. When consumerism, which is aimed at selling production, combines itself with commercial advertising, which is aimed at promoting production, consumerism achieved its spread across the globe. The advertising motivates consumers to purchase more goods and fulfill the process from which capitalists earn economic benefits and in which consumerism is propagandized in several complex and clever approaches. The research will analyze how commercial advertising publicizes consumerism, explain how harmful the propaganda of consumerism can be, and provide related solutions.

2. The Methods that Are Utilized by Advertising when Promoting Consumerism

2.1. Building symbolic value and abandoning practical value

Normally, consumers are expected to focus on the practical value of goods. Commodities that attract customers should be outstanding due to their practical value. In most cases, consumers consume to satisfy their demands. People do not live for consumption but live through consumption. For example, a purchaser would give priority to the necessity of owning a handbag and the quality and capacity of it. The customer would probably purchase the handbag if he/she considers that the handbag makes it more convenient to carry daily supplies and enhances life quality. In this condition, consumers prefer practical value to symbolic value, which seems useless and fabricated.

However, commercial advertising tries to alter the relationship between consumers and consumption. Advertising relates productions to the symbol of wealth and the upper class, making the public think that once they can acquire those objects, they can boost social dignity and gain a unique sense of satisfaction. Moreover, advertising takes advantage of people's preference for beauty and displays and promotes goods artistically. Under the propaganda of advertising, items are covered with attractive and fraudulent masks. The practical value of goods has been hidden, while the symbolic value has taken its place[2]. Nowadays, consumers purchase productions from Chanel, Dior, or Lancôme not because productions from those brands carry advanced quality, but because those productions are empowered by advertising with symbolic value. The ultimate goal of consumers is to transform from satisfying themselves to purchasing goods, especially luxuries, so that they can show off their seemingly gorgeous life.

2.2. Abruptly relating productions to pleasing concepts to construct consumption illusion

In the first method, it is evident that commercial advertising illustrates consumption as the key to higher social status. Also, advertising links goods to concepts that can arouse desire, such as romance, elegance, and happiness. Advertising places commodities in the symbolic illusion, in which commodities are not viewed as objects, but as symbols. Marcuse wrote in his work *One-Dimensional Man*, "People are supposed to live for goods." [3] which, in today's world, should be: "People are supposed to live for symbols." Consumers, immersed in the illusion built by advertising, select products that are empowered by symbolic value and try to connect with the meanings behind those products and obtain identity recognition [4]. Consumers, in the illusion, generate boundless and abstract demands of consumption, which are less possible to achieve in reality. It is those demands that expand the possibilities to earn more interest.

Meanwhile, when consumers find out that consumption will bring them pleasing things, they are more willing to enter the fantasy. This consent, on the other hand, meets the need for advertising and brands, strengthening the restraint of the virtual environment, in which consumers are lost and of which it is tricky to get out.

Gustave Le Bon wrote in his book *The Crowd*: "In a crowd, an individual is lost, and people become like mindless sheep." The crowd is easily swayed by the power of suggestion." [5] As social creatures that struggled to survive in the form of community in the primitive era, humans continually chase recognition and acceptance from the community, for such a sense of belonging can offer a sense of safety and erase instability in their minds.

Once the power of the group overwhelms, people tend to desert independent thinking and critical thinking capability, and they prefer to obey the mindset and behavior of the crowd. When advertising influences most people's opinions on consumption, the rest of the public, even though they are levelheaded, would be transformed into consumption enthusiasts under the effect of a common

passion for purchasing all the time. The control of consumerism over the public, at this point, has been accomplished.

3. The Drawbacks of Consumerism

3.1. The decline of advertisement quality

Advertising was once honored as “the eighth art” due to its splendid competence in beautification and promotion. There is nowhere that lacks creative and humorous advertisements. Despite this, some unqualified advertisements have been harming the public and the mass culture in recent years.

In today’s highly advanced industrial era, commercial corporations are in huge need of advertisements as a consequence of the massive scale of manufacturing. Corporations expect that a large number of advertisements will be designed in the short term, in which case their productions will be propagandized rapidly, and it is, in their opinion, more likely to gain more benefits. But advertisement designation, on the one hand, is a complicated project that depends on the skilled master of comprehensive subject knowledge and techniques of photography (and the uniqueness of the plot as well, if the advertisement narratively promotes its item); on the other hand, with the wide coverage of education, the appreciation ability of the general public is escalating, and so is their standard of so-called “good advertisement,” especially in terms of uniqueness. A task that should have taken a long time is taking less and less time. As a result, the quality fails.

Some advertisements are in a hurry, in which the lines are merely the repetition of the production name. They frequently make the audience bored and full. Some are deeply homogenized, in which the arrangement of plots and images is much the same. They usually fail to be impressive. And some ignore social morality and ethics, which will be discussed in detail in the fourth part.

These advertisements do not shoulder the responsibility to promote goods effectively and efficiently. Such cases make it challenging to produce qualified advertisements and are harmful to the further development of advertising and, to some extent, mass culture.

3.2. The risk to individual safety

When winning symbolic values and consuming goods become people’s final goals, they will quit their originally rational character and make decisions that are harmful to themselves, only in order to become able to buy commodities. Such behaviors can easily damage individual security.

The 21st century is a profoundly industrial period, in which the productive force is remarkable and is continually enlarging, and material life is rich. As we mentioned in Chapter 2, consumerism prioritizes symbolic value and creates a consumption illusion with mainly “identical recognition”. Citizens, who are affected by advertising propagandizing consumerism, start to excessively consume without thinking twice for the sake of “identical recognition”. The prosperous world stimulates varied senses of the public and, in particular, the youth. These people get confused in the fabricated purchase environment, and their demand for items reaches a level at which their willpower cannot be managed and controlled anymore. The youth’s desire to purchase, due to consumerism, becomes more drastic[6]. At this moment, consumers are no longer individuals with independent mindsets. Rather, they are transferred into performers of consumerism, whose wallets are shrinking and debts are boosting. Eventually, those who cannot make ends meet will usually be stuck in a financial crisis, hence not being able to meet basic needs and life quality lowering. After the ruin of a glorious life, they either cannot command their enlarging desire of consumption, although that is a false one made by consumerism, and satisfy themselves illegally, or are heavily beaten, feeling low-spirited and depressed, and even taking their own lives.

The tragedies above represent the dark side of consumerism. The consequences threaten personal safety and, further, social stability.

3.3. The spread of abnormal social values

The effect above contains two perspectives: the ruin of personal styles and the provocation of social morality.

From the ideological perspective, after getting rid of the independence of geography and patriarchal clans in the pre-industrial era, the self-awareness of modern people began to come out[7]. From a material perspective, the further the industrial process goes, the richer material life becomes and the more people's rights to material choice are respected. Both lead to the outcome that people focus more on building a unique self-image. Nowadays, there should be numerous differences and diversity in people's outfits. However, the defenders of consumerism found that if everyone consumes in the same way—specifically, the way of the middle class—then the market is more straightforward to unify and manage, the risk will diminish, and the mode of benefit will be more stable. Guided by this feature, consumerism prefers to consolidate the way of living in front of the public through advertising. Consumerism regards the owning of objects as everything in life and judges consumers with material logic. To go after nature, which is chasing success, happiness, and perfect life, people surrender actively and are changed into unified actors/actresses made by consumerism on a large scale as if they are products made by humans themselves on a large scale. The public achieves self-objectification and loses self-styles, too. Furthermore, when people chase defined personalities solely to display defined social status by design, personalities, and styles will be deprived of their original meanings, being altered into the tools to discriminate, divide, and harm each other.

Meanwhile, social morality and ethics are facing the emergency of being eroded. As the competition in the advertising field turns fierce, the way of promotion grows into an extreme version only for the sake of chasing creativity and breaking common cases.

Some advertisements constrain consumers on a moral level. For example, the advertisement for Huabei, which is mentioned in the introduction, forces the public to consume by borrowing from the perspective of parenting, announcing the mindset that “you can only be a good parent when taking possession of a rich material life.” Not only did this advertisement reach the commercial target, but it also aroused wide dissatisfaction; some advertisements please certain groups, mostly males, by using stereotypes of females. The 3B principle, created by David MacKenzie Ogilvy, contains “beauty. Unfortunately, some backward works distort women's images. They exaggerate women's sexual features with no bottom line, confine women to a housewife identity with no independent mind, or illustrate women as “the symbol of hysteria, mindlessness, and vanity.”

These advertisements either reject those who are not suitable for the consumerism standards and unify the society that should be diverse, or release backward opinions that are not beneficial to the build of company image and are damaging to the benign construction of social recognition and atmosphere. They are definitely not the best way of achieving capital accumulation.

4. Solution

4.1. Strengthen the legislation and the execution

For the government, if it has an urge to ban fancy tricks of advertising and command advertising to concentrate on introducing the item itself, then harsh regulations are necessary. However, harsh regulations should appear with harsh execution forever, with which the foxy propaganda of ads may shift to appropriate descriptions of goods with no deception.

4.2. Bolster media literacy education

For society, the education of media literacy should begin from an early age, since people have exposed themselves to the world of consumerism, advertising, and marketing. Media literacy, which is the

ability to use and interpret mass media, including advertising, effectively and efficiently, is one of the best approaches to preserve children and teenagers, which will be the adult labor in the future, from the hostile influence of consumerism and commercialism. With skilled media literacy, consumers will be capable of recognizing the commercial logic behind advertising and falling into the baits of consumerism.

4.3. Focus on self-awareness, self-identity and self-improvement

For individuals, one of the reasons for diving into the illusion of consumerism is that they excessively depend on external standards to judge their lives while never establishing self-awareness. Once they turn their concentration on "themselves," it is easier to generate self-awareness, which means that external voices, including advertising, are less likely to influence their images of themselves. Moreover, when they realize that the best way to enhance their lives is to enhance themselves rather than engage in nonstop consumption, it is less possible for them to crack into the fantasy of consumerism.

5. Conclusion

In today's high-speed developing world, it is normal for most people to have an ambition to win wealth and success, which is also the key to the success of consumerism. Consumerism takes advantage of people's winning minds, building a convenient way to gain self-esteem and a sense of pride immediately. All of this, at first glance, seems precious. Nonetheless, the price is to sacrifice our independent personalities. If we cannot defend the attractive temptations of consumerism, our lives, in other words, will be totally under the control of consumerism. To prevent such a chilling circumstance, society should equip itself with complete legislation and execution, while individuals should equip themselves with media literacy skills and the focus from the internal perspective. We should always believe that once we truly trust ourselves and improve ourselves, we can obtain continuous energy and self-improvement from the internal world with no need to waste any wealth on the external world.

Although this research cites some theories to strengthen arguments, it lacks statistics from reality surveys due to the time limit. If data from real life is gathered, this research will be more accurate and meaningful to reality. The author might do more research on the freedom of the media in the future.

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