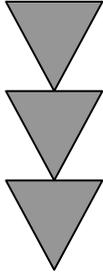


THE MANUFACTURING OF DESIRE  
IN CONSUMER CULTURE



Carmen-Cristina CATARGIU

---

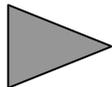
---

***Abstract***

---

---

*The article presents the main features of advertising in the modern consumer society. Does advertising shape our desires and promise eternal bliss? Does it force us into buying things we don't really need? Is it a fierce business or mere entertainment? Is advertising the cause or rather the effect of consumerism? These are some of the questions the article tries to answer through the analyses of both classic and new adverts.*



---

---

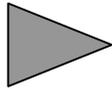
***Introduction***

---

---

From its unsophisticated beginnings, advertising has turned into a world-wide industry. In the U.S alone, in the late 1980s, approximately \$120 billion was spent in a single year on advertising to influence the purchase of commodities and services. The growth of the radio and television broadcasting as advertising media entailed the creation of new departments devoted to the purchase of network and local station time.

Big-budget advertising as an industry brought along the appearance of advertising agencies. Such agencies spend most of their time planning, creating, and producing the advertising for their clients. They employ a variety of specialists: marketing experts, designers, writers, artists, economists, psychologists, researchers, media analysts, product testers, librarians, accountants and mathematicians. The completed product is delivered at the end of the creative line.



---

---

### *Features of advertising*

---

---

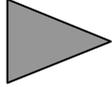
Advertising began as a source of information in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century its purpose came to be increasingly that of persuading and appealing rather than educating or informing.

According to Plato, one of the tendencies of democracy is the temptation to allow the problem of persuasion to outshine the problem of knowledge. Thus, democratic societies are prone to become more concerned with what people believe than to what is true, to become more concerned with credibility than truth.

Several major features characterising modern advertising as a form of rhetoric have been identified. The most obvious trait would be *repetition*. A second trait is *the development of an advertising style*. But one of the characteristics we often tend to overlook is *ubiquity*. Advertising abhors a vacuum and fills one with every passing day. Good examples are the highway billboards, bus and underground advertising, skywriting, radio and television commercials. This feature of advertising leads to the democratic idea of information to everybody everywhere.

But the most effective advertising is the '*self-liquidating*' one. The most successful advertising self-destructs because it becomes cliché. Thus, Kodak becomes a synonym for cameras, Kleenex a synonym for face tissue, when both begin with a small k and Xerox (now, too, with a small x) is used to describe all processes of copying. These are prototypes of the problem. If you are successful enough, you will make the message and the name so familiar that people will not notice them and then they will cease to distinguish your product from everybody else's.

As a consequence, there is yet another role which is assigned to advertising: *erasure*. Insofar as advertising is competitive or innovation is widespread, erasure is required in order to persuade consumers that this year's model is superior to last year's. For instance, consumers learn that they might be risking their lives if they went out on a highway with those very devices that were last year's lifesavers but without whatever special kind of brakes or seat belt is on this year's model. Erasure is seen in advertising pages and on television screens everyday.



---

---

***The relationship between consumerism and advertising***

---

---

However, besides advertising products, what advertising appears to promote is consumption as a way of life. It 'educates' the masses into an unappeasable appetite not only for goods but also for new experiences and fulfilment. It upholds consumption as the answer to loneliness, sickness or weariness and at the same time, it creates new forms of discontent typical of the modern age.

In the modern consumer society we consume not only goods but also human services and thus human relationships. What is being consumed in consumer society is consumption itself. This point can be exemplified by advertising, because in watching or reading advertisements, people are consuming them. Baudrillard seeks to extend consumption from goods and services to virtually everything else. In his view, 'everything can be a consumer object' (Baudrillard, 1998: 15). Consumption has been extended to all culture, and we are witnessing in fact a commodification of culture.

Baudrillard argues that the mass media have greatly enhanced and generalized the simulation process. In his opinion, modern society is characterized not only by simulated objects, but also by simulated relationships. For example, advertisers are seen as imitating intimate, personal modes of communication in an effort to produce a sense of intimacy where, in fact, there is none. A simulated intimacy is created between people doing the advertising and potential customers, as well as between the latter and the products being advertised. This is part of the game that Baudrillard sees as a 'generalized game of human relations. Instead of the reciprocity characteristic of primitive societies and symbolic exchange, in modern

society we have a gigantic simulation model of such reciprocal human relations' (1998:13).

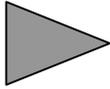
Consumption is an active, collective behaviour; it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. The consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption.

Consumption pledges to fill the void in people's lives, hence the attempt to surround commodities with an aura of romance, with allusions to exotic places and vivid experiences. The assumption is that the tired worker, possibly unsatisfied with his working condition, instead of attempting to make changes in his professional life, will prefer to brighten his immediate surroundings with new goods and services.

Advertising also promises to palliate all problems, but even more dangerously, tends to exacerbate new problems, such as personal insecurity or status anxiety. Do you own a car inferior to your neighbour's? Advertising appears to institutionalize envy and ensuing anxieties, as a result of constant exposure to better and more appealing products.

Advertising flatters and glorifies youth in the hope of elevating young people to the status of full-fledged consumers in their own right, each with a telephone, a TV set and a hi-fi in their own room. Youth are considered to be more vulnerable, more gullible and more inclined to be persuaded to buy totally useless things. No other generation has been so imbued with the meanings produced by quick edits, long shots, zooms, by particular lightning codes and combinations of sound. The young have a unique mastery of the grammar of the commercial.

The 'education' of the masses has altered the balance of forces within the family, weakening the authority of the husband in relation to the wife, and parents in relation to the children. It emancipates women and children from patriarchal authority, however, only to subject them to the new paternalism of the advertising industry, the industrial corporation state.



---

---

*Cultural perspectives on advertising*

---

---

Du Gay, Hall et al. suggest that at the heart of the processes of advertising and design is a concern not only to associate the product with particular cultural meanings, but also to address these values to prospective buyers. In other words, advertising and design attempt to create an identification between the consumer and the product to be consumed. They argue that, by doing this, the practices of advertising and design play a key role in the cultural circuit, linking the world of engineers and technicians with that of consumers ( Du Gay, 1997:179-180).

Paul du Gay has identified as a familiar theme in work on ‘consumer revolutions’: a sharp distinction between pre-modern consumption, in which people were ‘users of things’ and modern consumption in which they are the ‘consumers of commodities’ (Glennie, 1995:187).

Images are not free, they play a vital role in the commerce of contemporary societies through advertisements. This means that images are a central aspect of commodity culture and of consumer societies dependent upon the constant production and consumption of goods in order to function. Such advertising images are central to the construction of cultural ideas about lifestyle, self-image, self-improvement, and glamour.

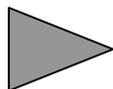
Advertising often presents an image of things to be desired, people to be envied, and life as it should be. And thus, it necessarily presents social values and ideologies about what the ‘good life’ is. A central strategy of advertising is to invite consumers to imagine themselves within the world of the advertisement. This is a world that works by abstraction, a potential place or state of being situated not in the present but in the imagined future with the promise of things you will have, or a lifestyle you can take part in.

We are confronted with advertising images constantly through the course of our daily lives, in newspapers and magazines, on television, in movie theatres, on billboards, on public transportation, on clothing, on the World Wide Web, and in many other contexts in which we may not even notice them. Ads speak to us in a broad range of voices and through an array of strategies.

As viewers, we have a range of tactics with which to interpret and respond to the images of advertising, to negotiate meaning through them, or to ignore them. One strategy to deal with the potentially resistant viewer of contemporary advertising is to present itself as an art that no longer speaks to the viewer directly as a consumer, but takes on many different voices and many modes of address. In the world of advertising, images can be presented as art, science, documentary evidence, or personal memories. Our understanding of advertising is thus influenced by our experience of image in many different social roles and in diverse modes of presentation.

In today's complex media environment, the people who produce advertisements are compelled to constantly reinvent the ways in which they address and hold the attention of increasingly jaded consumers, who are always on the verge of turning the page or hitting the remote control.

In a consumer society, there is a constant demand for new products and the need to constantly repackage and sell old products with new slogans and ad campaigns. In Marxist theory this is understood as the way that capitalism is dependent upon the overproduction of goods and the need for workers to be consumers and spend large sums on mass-produced goods. A capitalist society produces more goods than are necessary for it to function, hence the need to consume goods is an important part of its ideology (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001:191). In a consumer society, a large segment of the population must have unrestricted income and leisure time, which means that they must be able to afford goods that are not absolutely necessary to daily life but which they may want for an array of reasons, such as style or status.



---

---

*The shaping of identity*

---

---

In this modern context, another important aspect is that the source of the concept of the self and identity are constituted in a larger realm than the family. In the modern city, many people are subject for the first time to many influences beyond those of their families. It has been argued that people derived their sense of place in the world and their self-image at least in part through their purchase and use of commodities which seemed to give meaning to their lives in absence of the

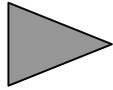
meaning derived from a closer-knit community. Indeed, some theorists have gone so far as to say that advertising replaced what had previously been the social fabric of communities, becoming in effect, a source of cultural values. This is why, perhaps, people jokingly refer to shopping as a form of 'retail therapy' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 193).

One of the fundamental changes in turn of the century Euro-American societies that was integral to the rise of consumer culture was the emergence of what historian T.J. Jackson Lears calls the 'therapeutic ethos' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 193). These societies shifted over a period of time valorizing a Protestant work ethic, civic responsibility, and self-denial to legitimating ideas of leisure, spending, and individual fulfilment. An older concern for saving gave way to a new emphasis on spending and on imagining that the path to betterment was through the acquisition of goods. In this changing culture, the feeling that life was often troubling and overwhelming prevailed. As a result, the idea that everyone was potentially inadequate and in need of improvement took hold. This resulted in a rise of commodities that were intended to aid in self-improvement.

This therapeutic discourse is an essential element of consumer culture. Modern advertisements are increasingly speaking to anxiety and identity crises, and offering harmony, vitality, and the prospect of self-realization. 'Today, consumption continues to be thought of as both a form of leisure and pleasure and as a form of therapy. The paradox is that those needs are never truly fulfilled, as the market forces lure us into wanting different and more commodities – the newest, the latest, and the best. This is a fundamental aspect of contemporary consumer culture, that it gives us pleasure and reassurance while tapping into our anxieties and insecurities' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001:196-197).

Advertising encourages consumers to think of commodities as central means through which to convey their personalities. For instance, for many years Dewar's Scotch Whiskey had a well-known campaign, the 'Dewar's Profile', in which various well-accomplished individuals are profiled according to their profession, interests, hobbies, favourite book, and of course, their favourite drink. This campaign suggests that if one wants to acquire the qualities of creativity and achievement of these individuals, one should drink Dewar's. It speaks to the concept of a commodity self, making the assertion that this commodity will

become a part of one's self-identity and how one projects that self in the world (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 198).



---

---

### *Theories of interpreting advertisements*

---

---

One of the most important concepts in the Marxist analysis of advertising is the idea of '*commodity fetishism*' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001:200). This refers to the process by which mass-produced goods are emptied of the meaning of their production (the context in which they are produced and the labour that created them) and then filled with new meanings in ways that both mystify the product and turn it into a fetish object.

It is often easy to understand commodity by looking at moments when it fails. For instance, in the early 1990s Nike shoes for women were promoted as signifiers of self-empowerment, athletic women, feminism, and hip social politics. Public outcry later in the decade about the dire working conditions in Nike's factories led to an ironic revelation. These symbols of female empowerment were produced by low-paid women who laboured under terrible conditions in Indonesian factories. As these conditions were exposed, the process of commodity fetishism was momentarily ruptured. The shoes could no longer be dissociated from their conditions of production and 'filled' with the signifiers of feminism (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001:200). The company had to respond to this criticism and change some of its practices.

Commodity fetishism operates through *reification*, a process by which abstract ideas are assumed to be real and concrete. In advertising this means that objects acquire human qualities (are perceived as sexy, romantic, or cool) and human relations can become increasingly objectified and devoid of emotional meaning. This is most obvious in products that are so clearly initially devoid of meaning, such as perfume. We could ask, what is perfume but scented water? Yet, various perfumes are awarded heightened meanings that consumers then supposedly acquire when wearing them. A perfume like Channel no.5 carries connotations of wealth, class status, and tradition, whereas Calvin Klein's CK signifies not only hipness but androgynous sexual status. Ads for these products attach these specific qualities to them which consumers are then encouraged to feel that they can subsequently acquire through purchasing and using the product.

It could be said that advertisements set up particular relationships between *signified* (the product) and *signifier* (its meaning) to create signs in order to sell products as well as cultural meanings and connotations to attach to those products. When we consume commodities, we thus consume them as *commodity-signs*, that is we aim to acquire, through purchasing a product, the meaning with which it is encoded. Baudrillard (1998) theorizes the logic of the commodity sign to point to the way in which under capitalism the commodity has become a sign in the Saussurean sense with its meaning arbitrarily determined by its position in a self-referential system of signifiers.

Advertising uses particular codes and conventions to convey messages quickly and succinctly to viewers. While some ads intend to shock us or capture our attention through their difference, most advertising provides information through the shorthand language of visual and textual conventions. Therefore, most ads speak a mixture of familiarity and newness.

Companies place a lot of stress on differentiating their products from their competitors. While this often happens by implication, it has become increasingly common since the 1970s for advertisements to name their competitor and to position themselves in opposition to it. Hence, 7-UP produced a successful campaign by calling itself the 'Uncola' and Avis car rentals became a well-known brand by selling themselves as the No.2 competitor behind Hertz, with the now legendary slogan "We try harder".

Coke and Pepsi have spent decades differentiating their products from each other either directly or indirectly in their campaigns. Differentiation is important because many products are quite similar. Certainly, one could argue that Coca-Cola and Pepsi have spent millions differentiating their products in ads precisely because there is actually little difference between their kinds of cola. The difference between them is ultimately taste, not flavour, but the class and cultural aesthetics associated with the respective colas.

All advertisements speak the language of *transformation*. They tell consumers that their products will change their lives for the better if they buy a particular product. This relates to the therapeutic ideology that ads participate in when they promise to improve our lives. In speaking to viewers about changing themselves, they are

always interpellating consumers as in some way dissatisfied with their lifestyles, appearances, jobs, relationships.

*Interpellating* is the process by which we come to recognize ourselves in the subject position offered in a particular representation or product. Ads speak to us through particular modes of address, and ask us to see ourselves within them. This is often done with written text that specifically speaks to the viewer as 'you'. Interestingly, the 'you' that advertising addresses, either specifically through text or by constructing viewer positions through interpellation, is always spoken to or implied to be an individual. The implication is that the product being sold will make the consumer unique, special, and highly individual (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001:203). In other words, ads perform the very contradictory work of convincing many different consumers that a mass-produced product will make them unique and different from others. In Frankfurt School theory, this concept is known as *pseudoindividuality*, a false idea of individuality.

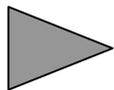
Many ads imply that their product can ease the state of dissatisfaction. They often do this by presenting figures of glamour that consumers can envy and wish to emulate, people who are presented as already transformed, and bodies that appear perfect and yet somehow attainable. John Berger has written, "The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour" (Du Gay, 1997: 206). The idea of glamour is central to advertising, both in the use of well-known celebrities to sell products and in the depiction of models who appear to be happy, without flaws and satisfied.

The enviable world of advertising is thus presented to viewers as a fantasy of what their lives could be, and it entices consumers to believe that this life is attainable through the act of consumption. Ads thus entreat us to construct commodities selves and to work to acquire the attributes attached to certain products through their use. Sometimes this means that ads speak to consumers as if their bodies existed in separate parts. Since the 1970s, ads have increasingly represented women's bodies in fetishized parts – legs, lips, breast, etc. Detached from the rest of the bodies and the people of whom they are part, these body parts represent ideals to consumers. The bodies that are represented in these advertisements have been rendered to perfection through the sophisticated imaging techniques of air-brushing, colour enhancement, and digital manipulation. These images retain in the photograph the idea that they represent real people, while they are actually constructed images which bear little or no relationship to the codes of documentary

realism. This is part of the paradox of what these ads sell – an attainable highly constructed world which is held out as an attainable ideal.

Jean Baudrillard (1998) has suggested that the late twentieth century saw the emergence of a commodity culture in which the distinction between objects and images eroded. Instead, of a real world of objects to which advertisements refer, we see the emergence of a culture in which the image itself is what we live through and consume. Identity is no longer the signifier of a product. Rather, identity is the pure product that we consume, either as information or as image. Advertisements are not the only means through which we experience the images and signs of commodity culture. They are lived through the logos assigned to the clothes we wear, the products we use, and the food we eat. One manifestation of this function is the generic use of trademarks. If you were to say that you might “xerox” pages from a book, you would be using language that takes the global brand name Xerox for the generic activity of photocopying.

The way in which a trademark becomes part of public culture is called ‘*genericide*’, according to Rosemary Coombe, professor of law and anthropology (Du Gay, 1997: 208). The owner of the mark loses rights to the product as it takes on a meaning for the generic type in the market, rather than for the particular brand of the product. Manufacturers of Coke<sup>®</sup> and Kleenex<sup>®</sup> are eager to get us to identify their products with quality, but are not eager to have us kill off their product’s difference by using its name for the generic type. To remain profitable, even those brands that go global have to retain their distinguishing features, their identity in the marketplace. When the mark of a product gains true universality, it is no longer owned by the company and loses its ability to function as a profit-generating commodity.



---

---

### *Conclusion*

---

---

Consumer culture is the context in which individuals learn to escape from their problems and frustrations through a shopping session, and where advertising offers the easiest way out into a world of perfection, of beautiful, successful people and new, fashionable goods.

Through a mere spot, advertising can turn a luxury into a necessity in the consumer's mind, it can create the desire to solve emotional problems through purchasing material items. Advertising is not simply an abstract noun, it represents an entire industry, ready to create every day new and refined ways of touching on the viewer's personal insecurities. It creates an image of how good life should be, and then it kindly, yet compellingly, invites consumers to step in. And how many of us resist the temptation to take a trip into wonderland, even though it is not for real?

---

---

### *References and bibliography*

---

---

- Baudrillard, J.** 1998. *The Consumer Society, Myths and Structures*, London: Sage Publications
- Du Gay, P.** (ed.) 1997. *Production of Culture, Culture of Production*, London, The Open University: Sage Publications.
- Giddens, A.** 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*, in Hugh MacKay (ed.) *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 1997, London: Sage Publications.
- Glennie, P.** 1995. *Consumption within Historical Studies*, in Paul du Gay (ed.) *Production of Culture, Cultures of Production*, 1997, London, The Open University: Sage Publications.
- MacKay, H.** (ed.) 1997. *Consumption and Everyday Life*, London, The Open University: Sage Publications.
- Miller, D.** 1997. *Consumption and Its Consequences* in Hugh Mackay (ed.) *Consumption and Everyday Life*, London: Sage Publications.
- Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L.** 2001. *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London: Sage Publications.
- Wernick, A.** 1991. *Promotional Culture: advertising, ideology and symbolic expression*, in Paul du Gay (ed.) *Production of Culture, Culture of Production*, 1997, London, The Open University: Sage Publications.

**The author**

**Carmen-Cristina Catargiu** is a graduate of The Faculty of Arts of the University of Cluj-Napoca, and holds a Master's degree in British Cultural Studies with the University of Bucharest. She is a co-author of *Improve your Business English Vocabulary* (Editura Universitară, București, 2006). She is currently teaching Business English at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, while doing a second MA in English Language Education and Research Communication in Economics.