The Distorted Mirror: Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising

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This article reviews the work of significant humanities and social science scholars for their thoughts and theories about advertising's social and cultural consequences. In brief, they view advertising as intrusive and environmental and its effects as inescapable and profound. They see it as reinforcing materialism, cynicism, irrationality, selfishness, anxiety, social competitiveness, sexual preoccupation, powerlessness, and/or a loss of self-respect. Drawing heavily on original sources, these ideas are synthesized into a framework that structures advertising's supposed effects and causalities. Also discussed are the problems and prospects for needed research and the moral imperative for this research.

It is worth recognizing that the advertising man in some respects is as much a brain alterer as is the brain surgeon, but his tools and instruments are different. Advertising Age (1957).

While the metaphor of brain surgery may be hyperbole, the inflated rhetoric so characteristic of advertising, it still contains an element of truth. Advertising is without doubt a formative influence within our culture, even though we do not yet know its exact effects. Given its pervasive and persuasive character, it is hard to argue otherwise. The proliferation and the intrusion of various media into the everyday lives of the citizenry make advertising environmental in nature, persistently encountered, and involuntarily experienced by the entire population. It surrounds us no matter where we turn, intruding into our communication media, our streets, and our very homes. It is designed to attract attention, to be readily intelligible, to change attitudes, and to command our behavior. Clearly not every advertisement accomplishes all of these aims, but just as clearly, much of it must—otherwise, advertisers are financially extravagant fools.

The applied behavioral technologies for consumer behavior and advertising research, like most technologies today, have grown increasingly sophisticated and elaborate. This gives at least the major advertiser a large arsenal of information and the technique with which to finetune a message, aided by an army of experienced professionals running market research surveys, focus groups, copy testing procedures, recall and awareness tests, and test markets. As Marshall McLuhan (1951, p. v) once commented: “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best trained minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind . . . to get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, and control.” Even if individual efforts often fail, the indirect effects of the overall system deserve careful consideration.

This consideration is all too rarely given to advertising by those most sophisticated in their knowledge of the processes of advertising strategy formation and advertisement creation. These scholars and practitioners, including those of us trained in the more
general fields of consumer behavior and marketing, are by tradition focused on the study of advertising's practical consequence, sales promotion: everything that stimulates the purchase act or the intermediary steps toward that objective. Knowledge of the unintended social consequences of advertising, the social byproducts of the exhortations to "buy products," is less helpful in professional school teaching or consulting. It is also potentially far more challenging. Advertising's unintended consequences are seen by many as a pollution of our psychological and social ecology, which raises moral alarm and tempts a defensive reaction from those of us whose expertise and sense of personal worth is drawn from our knowledge of, and at least implicit assistance in, the processes of persuasion. Thus, the concerns of nonbusiness academics and the general public are too often dismissed with a wave of the ideological wand. Commonly we appeal to some alternative value, as in the claim that unregulated advertising is a freedom of speech or essential to the efficient functioning of the economy, hardly perceiving that this is distracting argumentation.

Not all scholars assume that mass advertising of the character and scale we now experience is either inevitable or benign. Indeed, those from a wide range of disciplines have given the matter thought, including a surprising number of individuals whose fame and influence extend beyond their academic boundaries. This article reviews this scholarly thought. A priori such a review has the potential for setting a research agenda, for suggesting public policy, and for revising our ideas about the interplay between advertising and the social system in which it operates. This revised perspective may in turn lead to an increased sense of moral duty or social responsibility for individuals and organizations, professional and academic.

Who Are These People?

This survey of the literature encompasses all North American authors known to have written on the cultural character of advertising. While this study excludes the European Marxist tradition, the research process is otherwise a survey rather than a sampling, with no authors knowingly excluded. Those whose writings have been reviewed represent academic fields with diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives. While few of these authors have in-depth knowledge of advertising or marketing, they are far from ignorant observers. Generally, they are scholars of stature and include many who have already influenced our culture's intellectual history far more than anyone in the professional disciplines. Although the ideas reported here are echoed in multiple sources, the passages selected are primarily from those writers who are more famous, articulate, and influential.

A particularly strong example is historian Daniel Boorstin. His prolific and often profound output has propelled him from a distinguished chaired professorship at the University of Chicago, to serving as Librarian of Congress. Author of the trilogy, The Americans (1973), he has won the Bancroft prize and the Pulitzer Prize and, at last count, has garnered 18 honorary degrees. Some, like John Kenneth Galbraith, Margaret Mead, and Marshall McLuhan, have been honored with public attention and have had broad influence, while the fame and following of others, like Erich Fromm, George Katona, Clyde Kluckhohn, or Henry Steele Commager, lie mainly in their own and closely allied fields.

This review includes (1) psychologists who view advertising as a source of learning or conditioning, with cognitive and affective results, (2) sociologists who emphasize the role modeling aspects of advertising and its impact on social behaviors, (3) anthropologists who see advertising in terms of rituals and symbols—incantations to give meaning to material objects and artifacts, (4) educators who question the influence of advertising on child development, and (5) communications specialists who view ads as propaganda and question their role within and influence upon mass media. Also represented is the work of linguists, semioticians, philosophers, theologians, political scientists, economists, and, perhaps the most integrative of the social scientists, historians. Information regarding the areas and distinctions of some of those surveyed appears in Figure 1, while the names and works of others appear only in the references and consulted sources listings.

Most of the criticism of advertising comes from those who focus on advertising's social role, whereas most of its defense comes from those who emphasize its economic functions. Still, not all economists are sanguine about advertising, nor are all other social scientists alarmed. This disparity of perspectives prevents an effective exchange of ideas, as the two sides (if there are but two sides) talk past one another, raising wholly different issues and reaching judgments on wholly different criteria. It will be of no surprise, then, that raising serious questions about advertising's social role is an inherently critical process. To ponder what advertising as an institution is doing to us as individuals or as a community; to wonder if it aids or impedes rational thought; to ask how it redirects our aspirations, or channels and prompts our emotions; to assess how it may alter our values and morality; to question any of these things is to cast doubt on the social value of advertising. Thus, we should fully expect this inquiry to illuminate those ways in which advertising might be a less than ideal cultural influence. What may be shocking, however, is the veritable absence of perceived positive influence.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Distinctions*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnouw, Erik</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Professional advertising experience Editor, Columbia University Press Chief, Broadcasting Division, Library of Congress George Polk Award; Frank Luther Mott Award; Bancroft Prize in American History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, Daniel</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Professor, Harvard University Editor, <em>The Public Interest, Daedalus</em> Fellow, Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences Honorary degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berman, Ronald</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities Chair, Federal Council on Arts and Humanities Gold Medal (Phi Beta Kappa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boorstin, Daniel</td>
<td>American History</td>
<td>Distinguished Professor of American History, University of Chicago Librarian of Congress Chair of American History, Sorbonne Presidential Task Force of Arts and Humanities Pulitzer Prize; Dexter Prize; Bancroft Prize; Frances Parkman Prize Honorary degrees (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commandos, Henry Steele</td>
<td>American History</td>
<td>Bullitt Professor, University of Washington Gold Medal, American Academy of Arts and Letters Herbert B. Adams Prize (AHA) Honorary degrees (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galbraith, John Kenneth</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Paul M. Warburg Professor, Harvard University Fellow, Social Science Research Council Fellow, Academy of Arts and Sciences President, American Economic Association Ambassador to India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayakawa, S. I.</td>
<td>Semantics</td>
<td>President, San Francisco State College U.S. Senator Honorary degrees (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heilbroner, Robert</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Norman Thomas Professor, New School for Social Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horney, Karen</td>
<td>Psychoanalysis</td>
<td>Dean, American Institute for Psychoanalysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krutch, Joseph Wood</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>National Book Award Editor, <em>The Nation</em> Founder, The Literary Guild of America Honorary degrees (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasch, Christopher</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Watson Professor, University of Rochester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacBride, Sean</td>
<td>Law, Politics</td>
<td>Chair, UNESCO, Communications Problems Nobel Peace Prize Lenin Peace Prize American Medal of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLuhan, Marshall</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities, Fordham University Chairman, Ford Foundation, Culture and Communications Governor General Award (Canada) Honorary degrees (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mead, Margaret</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Curator Emeritus, American Museum of Natural History Numerous awards and prizes Honorary degrees (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potter, David</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Coe Professor of American History, Stanford University President, American Historical Association President, Organization of American Historians Pulitzer Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silber, John Robert</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Wilbur Lucas Cross Medal, Yale University Executive Board, National Humanities Institute President, Boston University</td>
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</table>

*As of 1984. All have terminal academic degrees, and those still active continue to accumulate distinctions. Sources: *American Men and Women of Science; Social and Behavioral Sciences; Contemporary Authors; Directory of American Scholars; International Who's Who; National Cyclopedia of American Biography; Who's Who in America.*
What Are They Saying About Advertising?

It is difficult to summarize the overall critique of advertising's social role without occasionally simplifying the arguments of the original authors. Further, while this summary requires a broad examination of proposed consequences, it should be clear that every author would not fully subscribe to each effect. Also, the relative importance of some issues may have changed. These caveats notwithstanding, the current nonbusiness scholarly views about advertising's role in society are synthesized in Figure 2. It need not be repeated here, beyond a summary provided by UNESCO:

Regarded as a form of communication, it (advertising) has been criticized for playing on emotions, simplifying real human situations into stereotypes, exploiting anxieties, and employing techniques of intensive persuasion that amount to manipulation. Many social critics have stated that advertising is essentially concerned with exalting the materialistic virtues of consumption by exploiting achievement drives and emotive anxieties, employing tactics of hidden manipulation, playing on emotions, maximizing appeal and minimizing information, trivializing, eliminating objective considerations, contriving illogical situations, and generally reducing men, women, and children to the role of irrational consumer. Criticism expressed in such a way may be overstated but it cannot be entirely brushed aside (MacBride 1980, p. 154).

These allegations are not very different in character from the listing of unintended consequences of advertising in a major review of advertising's effects on children (National Science Foundation 1978, pp. 145-146). This report listed, among others, the "possible outcomes" of encouragement of unsafe behavior, confused assessment of products, encouragement of inappropriate standards for choice, promotion of parent-child conflict, modeling of hazardous behavior (especially malnutrition and drug abuse), and reinforcement of sex role stereotypes, cynicism, and selfishness. The only positive effect suggested was the development of consumer skills, but this tautologically presumes the desirability of socializing citizens as consumers.

The review of the evidence and arguments submitted to the FTC (Howard and Hubert 1973) say very little in response to these charges. Despite the volume of submissions reviewed, some 105 pages of annotated bibliography, the report looked only at influences directly related to buying behavior. Submissions pertaining to broader social effects were systematically excluded, even though these effects were held to be "of obvious importance." The criterion of importance, however, gave way to the criteria of manageability and measurability, a reflection of the prevailing scientific bias. But clearly it is not acceptable for our entire discipline to avoid addressing questions merely because certain constructs are difficult to measure. Many of the most important aspects of life elude simple measurement. Indeed, measurability may be highly correlated with triviality.

Discussion of the broader social impact of advertising certainly continues with some vigor in allied disciplines. In order to flesh out the arguments outlined in Figure 2 and to more faithfully capture the tone of the original works, excerpts will be extensively used. The positions advocated by those cited do not necessarily represent the opinion of the author, other academics, or the marketing profession generally. It is, however, the prevailing opinion in wider circles having no vested interest in advertising.

The Subtleties of Seduction

Advertising is seen as having profound consequences, despite the fact that its intent is clearly the pedestrian one of effecting sales, and despite the fact that many of the forms of advertising are transparent in intent to even quite unsophisticated subjects. The intent of advertising, especially in the aggregate, is to preoccupy society with material concerns, seeing commercially available goods or services as the path to happiness and the solution to virtually all problems and needs. In so doing, advertising makes consumption a top-of-mind behavior. This state of mind seems natural or rational because this persuasion also provides a world view with a value scheme that rationalizes such behavior and presents itself as commonplace. Commercial persuasion appears to program not only our shopping and product use behavior but also the larger domain of our social roles, language, goals, values, and the sources of meaning in our culture.

The potential for advertising to penetrate our consciousness and channel our very modes of thinking is seen as highly likely, if not for individual ads, then at least for advertising in the aggregate. Several reasons are offered to explain advertising's effect: It is (1) pervasive, appearing in many modes and media; (2) repetitive, reinforcing the same or similar ideas relentlessly; (3) professionally developed, with all of the attendant research sophistications to improve the probabilities of attention, comprehension, retention, and/or behavioral impact; and (4) delivered to an audience that is increasingly detached from traditional sources of cultural influence like families, churches, or schools.

It is further argued that the more profound impacts of an intensely commercialized culture may be readily underestimated because, viewing the culture from within, we cannot see the forest for the trees. As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) noted, "Environments are invisible. Their ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception." In addition,
**FIGURE 2**
Reflections on “The Distorted Mirror”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. BECAUSE ADVERTISING WORKS:</th>
<th>IT IS A PROCESS OF:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. To persuade and introduce</td>
<td>A. Change for cognitions, attitudes, behaviors, and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Within a cultural context</td>
<td>B. Selective reinforcement of those styles, roles, and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—readily commercialized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—easily linked to products</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—dramatically visualized</td>
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<td></td>
<td>—reliably responded to</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>II. BECAUSE ADVERTISING IS CHARACTERISTICALLY:</th>
<th>ITS PRESUMED UNINTENDED EFFECTS ARE:</th>
<th>REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Pervasive and persuasive</td>
<td>A.1 Profound</td>
<td>A.1 Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—in proliferated media</td>
<td>—social, political, cultural</td>
<td>Berman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—penetrating everyday life</td>
<td>—moral and spiritual</td>
<td>Potter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—relentless over time</td>
<td>—not just personal, practical</td>
<td>Toronto School of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—professionally executed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.2 Environmental</td>
<td></td>
<td>A.2 Barnouw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—hard to detect and measure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kuhns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—impossible to avoid</td>
<td></td>
<td>McLuhan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—affecting all (despite myth of personal immunity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.3 Intrusive and dominating</td>
<td></td>
<td>A.3 Commandeur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—setting agenda and goals</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hayakawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—specifying alternatives</td>
<td></td>
<td>McLuhan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—specifying criteria for choice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Schiller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—prompting passivity, “copy-shock”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Promoting of goods (objects)</td>
<td>B. Materialistic</td>
<td>B. Fromm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—belief that consumption is the route to happiness, meaning, and the solution to most personal problems</td>
<td></td>
<td>Galbraith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—reification; displacement of feeling from people to objects</td>
<td></td>
<td>Krutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—displacing spiritual development with secular hedonism</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leiss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—distorted political priorities; private goods vs. public goods; gross economic goals vs. justice, peace, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Skolimowski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—ecological wastefulness and damage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| C. Advocative                                | C.1 Cynical                          | C.1 Hellbroner           |
| .1—incomplete information, half truths, or careful deceptions | —distrust of authority              | Henry                    |
|                                                | —anomie; disbelief of received cultural wisdom and norms | Skornia                  |
| .2—insistent, exhortative, emphatic           | C.2 Irrational                        | C.2 Fromm                |
|                                                | —hypnoid, neurotic                    | McLuhan                 |
|                                                | compulsiveness to consume             | Schiller                 |
|                                                | —indulgence vs. deferral of gratification | Skolimowski             |
|                                                | —shortsighted here and now attitudes, with reduced perceived responsibility for consequences |                         |

| D. Appealing to the individual               | D. Greedy and selfish                 | D. Berman               |
| D. Greedy and selfish                        | —loss of community ethic, cooperation, charity, and compassion | Lasch                   |
| D. Appealing to the individual               | D. Greedy and selfish                 | Toronto School of Theology |
we like to think of ourselves as personally immune to advertising’s inducements. This is clearly a delusion for some or perhaps many or even most of the public. This myth of personal immunity gets generalized into an attitude that advertising is of little import to anyone, a view that seems roughly consistent with the obvious banalities of some advertising. Advertising operates successfully despite the cynics, virtually all of whom feel sufficiently sophisticated so as to be immune.

The creators of advertising can claim that no one takes it all very seriously; it is all more or less in fun. The viewer can adopt a similar attitude. The viewer’s self-respect requires a rejection of most commercials on the conscious level, along with some ridicule. Beneath the ridicule the commercial does its work (Bar- new 1978, p. 83).

The myth of immunity from persuasion may do more to protect self-respect than accurately comprehend the subtleties and implications of influence.

... advertising begins to play a more subtle role in changing habits than merely stimulating wants. ... Though at first the changes were primarily in manners, dress, taste, and food habits, sooner or later they began to affect more basic patterns: the structure of authority in the family, the role of children and young adults as independent consumers in the soci-
ety, the pattern of morals, and the different meanings of achievement in the society (Bell 1976, p. 69).

This cultural role of advertising may have profound, pervasive dimensions, and while this might be overestimated, it is more commonly underestimated. As Galbraith (1967) noted, it is hard for solemn social scientists to take seriously anything so patently self-serving as commercials. But as Daniel Boorstin notes, the attitude of critical but callous disregard by some scholars limits their perception of the often very fundamental impact of advertising in providing us with the concepts and criteria with which we view our experience.

Our frenetic earnestness to attack advertising, our fear of advertising, and our inability to fit advertising into old-time familiar cubbyholes of our experience—all these prevent us from seeing its all-encompassing significance as a touchstone of our changing concept of knowledge and of reality (Boorstin 1962, p. 211).

Advertising utilizes both modes effectively—the informational and the mythic—as a socializing agent structuring assumptions, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs in the internal consciousness of contemporary individuals. . . . As a system, advertising cumulatively conveys an integrated value structure determining individual and group living (Real 1977, p. 29).

It is ironic that it is advertising's very omnipresence that contributes to its being taken for granted. Like all environments, its impact may be profound—certainly beyond the obvious.

To think that the effects of advertising, such a potent environment in any industrialized country, could be limited to economics, is as absurd as assuming that the effects of a hot climate upon a culture could be limited to tropical diseases (Kuhns 1970).

Giving symbolic significance to prosaic products is what anthropologists describe as the magic of ritual. In this sense, ads are rituals, incantations to make inert objects meaningful, to convert products into "goods" and, occasionally, to convert the needs into "taboos," elevating their social significance.

. . . we see advertising actually creating and naming taboos. The most famous, B.O. and Halitosis, are archaeological specimens from an age which we might fix as either Late Iron Tonic or Early Soap. . . . Bad breath and body odor have always existed, of course, but as individual matters. To transfer them from personal idiosyncrasies into tribal taboos is a magically trick indeed (Gossage 1967, p. 366).

. . . it is clear that we have a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available. The short description of the pattern we have is magic: a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology (Williams 1960, p. 27).

Advertising has influence in part because it normally addresses many of life's common issues, while other institutions seem to fade in relevance.

The institutions of family, religion, and education have grown noticeably weaker over each of the past three generations. The world itself seems to have grown more complex. In the absence of traditional authority, advertising has become a kind of social guide. It depicts us in all the myriad situations possible to a life of free choice. It provides ideas about style, morality, behavior (Berman 1981, p. 13).

It reiterates the essential problems of life—good and evil, life and death, happiness and misery, etc—and simultaneously solves them. To the constant anxieties of life, advertising gives a simple answer. In consuming certain products, one buys not only a "thing" but also an image, an image which invokes the belief and the hope of having the good rather than the bad, happiness rather than misery, success rather than failure, life rather than death. And the more anxious, confused, uncertain, and bewildered modern society gets, the stronger will be the role played by advertising (Leymore 1975, p. x).

Since its impact on culture may be penetrating, we need to question the selective influence pattern of ads.

. . . I don't think the advertisers have any real idea of their power not only to reflect but to mold society. . . . And if you reflect us incorrectly, as I believe you are doing, you are raising a generation of children with cock-eyed values as to what men and women and life and family really mean. You may be training them as consumers, but you are certainly not educating them as people (Mannes 1964, p. 32).

Consequences of Commercialism

Given the position that advertising, a propaganda for products, might have penetrating consequences, much of the discussion attempts to identify just what these consequences might be. Many authors, including the UNESCO Commission concerned with advertising's impact in the Third World, readily admit that some of these consequences are potentially beneficial, such as facilitating marketplace efficiencies and helping media to be autonomous from politics, even if not autonomous from commerce. But when considering the impact on the cultural character or the modal personality, it is less clear to most observers that the effects of a highly commercialized culture are beneficial. There is no reason to presume a virtuous cultural impact, critics argue, because the institutions of advertising are inherently amoral, serving their self-interests and with no ennobling social purpose. Just as it seems unwise to assume that advertising has no long-term effects whatsoever, the UNESCO report holds that it would be unwise to assume that such effects are wholly beneficial (MacBride 1980, p. 154).

Advertising undoubtedly has positive features. It is used to promote desirable social aims, like savings and investment, family planning, purchases of fertilizer to improve agricultural output, etc. It provides the consumer with information about possible pat-
terns of expenditure... and equips him to make choices; this could not be done, or would be done in a much more limited way, without advertising. Finally, since the advertising revenue of a newspaper or a broadcaster comes from multiple sources, it fosters economic health and independence, enabling the enterprise to defy pressure from any single economic interest or from political authorities (ibid., p.110).

At the least, advertising is seen as inducing us to keep working in order to be able to keep spending, keeping us on a treadmill, chasing new and improved carrots with no less vigor, even though our basic needs may be well met. This impact was manifest in an unusual personal admission by a famous Yale psychologist (Dollard 1960, p. 307) that “advertising makes me miserable” by an intensified pursuit of goals that would not have been imagined save for advertising. Thus, advertising’s most fundamental impact may be that it induces people to keep productive in order to keep consuming, to work in order to buy.

Advertising and its related arts thus help develop the kind of man the goals of the industrial system require—one that reliably spends his income and works reliably because he is always in need of more... In the absence of the massive and artful persuasion that accompanies the management of demand, increasing abundance might well have reduced the interest of people in acquiring more goods... Being not pressed by the need for these things, they would have spent less reliably of their income and worked less reliably to get more. The consequence—a lower and less reliable propensity to consume—would have been awkward for the industrial system (Galbraith 1967, p. 219).

This maintenance of our propensity to consume is accomplished, in part, by channeling our psychological needs and ambitions into consumption behaviors by romanticizing goods. But this romantic attitude toward objects is seen as having serious side effects for our personalities; a social effect of displacing affect from people to objects and an alienating effect where the self is perceived not as a child of God or as an element in community, but as an exchange commodity. Whatever advertising’s economic contributions, these do not invalidate concern for its influence on our personalities and values.

For material things cannot in themselves achieve anything. They count only where there is a will to use them, and whether they count for weal or woe depends upon the way that they are used. What is, in the end, of decisive importance are the intangible factors that we call character:... the ideals that are held up to children and the pattern of conduct that is fixed for them, the moral standards that are accepted and the moral values that are cherished (Commander 1947, p. vii).

There is a reluctance to simply presume innocence of influence on our character. This is rooted in a view of advertising as inherently amoral, acting only for its own ends and without more ennobling goals. A late

Stanford historian, highly influential in his discipline, expressed it as follows:

... though it wields an immense social influence, comparable to the influence of religion and learning, it has no social goals and no social responsibility for what it does with its influence, so long as it refrains from palpable violations of truth and decency. It is this lack of institutional responsibility, this lack of inherent social purpose to balance social power, which, I would argue, is a basic cause for concern about the role of advertising (Potter 1954, p. 177).

A simple materialistic orientation without compensating values is seen as problematic, for a romantic attitude toward goods comes at some cost. As most thoroughly discussed by Leiss (1976), the transfer of feeling toward goods and away from people, the reification of abstract meaning into objects, and the simultaneous objectification of personal relations, are manifestations of this materialism.

I should like to suggest that perhaps a transfer of attitudes through the change of the semantic environment has taken place. Previously, highly emotional expressions were applied to humans. Nowadays, they are constantly and massively applied by the admen to objects... It is quite natural that when we become more and more emotionally involved with objects, we tend to be less and less involved with people... In love, in friendship, and in the multitude of other human relations, detachment, lack of interest, and coldness seem to prevail. Human beings are treated like objects (Skolimowski 1977, p. 97).

The objectification of self has been explicitly described in personality theory as a “marketing orientation,” where a person is mannered for mercenary motivations and has a detached view of self as a commodity.

In this orientation, man experiences himself as a thing to be employed successfully on the market. He does not experience himself as an active agent, as the bearer of human powers. He is alienated from these powers. His aim is to sell himself successfully on the market... His body, his mind, and his soul are his capital, and his task in life is to invest it favorably, to make a profit of himself. Human qualities like friendliness, courtesy, kindness, are transformed into commodities, into assets of the “personality package,” conducive to a higher price on the personality market (Fromm 1955, pp. 140, 142).

**Intrusion and Irrationality**

Advertising is designed to be intrusive. Indeed, intrusiveness is one of the concepts currently in vogue in pre-testing the effectiveness of television commercials. This successful command of attention makes the attempt to concentrate on the remaining content of media “like trying to do your algebra homework in Times Square on New Year’s Eve” (Hayakawa 1964, p. 265). Such intrusion, first into our consciousness and then into our inner voices, distracts us from the serenity of solitude and thereby inhibits self-aware-
ness. Preoccupied with commercial blandishments, what passes for common culture in our affluent society are sets of jingles, slogans, and selling phrases which are perhaps more uniformly known than any other creed, ideology, or set of myths.

The repetitive, fantastic, one-sided, and often exhortative rhetorical styles of advertising combine, it is felt, to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy, producing hypnotic states of uncritical consciousness wherein the subject is reduced to passivity and a relative sense of powerlessness. Being inundated with propaganda for products, only "an exceptional degree of awareness and an especial heroism of effort" can free the individual from becoming the "supine consumer of processed goods" (McLuhan 1951, p. 211). In this view, such autonomous awareness is unlikely, not only because of the monopolizing presence of commercial coercions but because their character is "anti-rational" or precipitates irrationalities. Thus, intellectual submission seems almost inescapable, given the omnipresence of advertising and the success with which its ideas, phrases, and melodies are implanted in our minds.

And so we are denied chances to discover the value of silence and nothingness, an environment conducive to contemplation. Advertising has taken quiet away from us, has made the choice impossible. Our minds become jammed with bits and pieces of jingles, buzz words, products, ad images, brand names, and slogans so there is no room for meditation and little room for self-confrontation (Schrank 1977, p. 90).

The one-sided rhetorical styles of advertising seem to inhibit rationality and common sense, as does the repetitive nature of claims and encouragements.

The nature of any communication in which the actual information conveyed is less significant than the manner of its presentation is, to say the least, illogical. The illogical man is what advertising is after. This is why advertising is so anti-rational; this is why it aims at uprooting not only the rationality of man but his common sense (Skolimowski 1977, p. 95).

We have become so groggy, so passive, so helpless amidst the endless barrage of appeals that "we go about our business," as we say. But the business of the advertiser is to see that we go about our business with some magic spell or tune or slogan throbbing quietly in the background of our minds. . . . Today our whole society is reeling from copy-writer's shock as much as any soldier ever felt battle-shock (McLuhan 1953, p. 557).

A vast sector of modern advertising . . . does not appeal to reason but to emotion: like any other kind of hypnotic suggestion, it tries to impress its objects emotionally and then make them submit intellectually. This type of advertising impresses the customer by all sorts of means: by repetition, . . . by the influence of an authoritative image, . . . by attracting the customer and at the same time weakening his critical abilities by the sex appeal of a pretty girl: . . . by terrorizing him with (a) threat; . . . or yet again by stimulating daydreams about a sudden change in one's whole course of life. All these methods are essentially irrational; they have nothing to do with the qualities of the merchandise, and they smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer like an opiate or outright hypnosis. They give him a certain satisfaction by their daydreaming qualities just as the movies do, but at the same time they increase his feeling of smallness and powerlessness (Fromm 1976, p. 110).

Mirroring and Modeling

Advertising models a pattern of behavior that is held out to be "the good life," with the props, of course, for sale, and this is shown to be the ideal for all to strive toward. Indeed, the lifestyles displayed are ideal from a consumption perspective, and they probably provide a fair portrayal of a materialist's hedonic conception of utopia or heaven. Such conceptions may be increasingly common and unquestioned. As Potter (1954) notes, the stimulation and rehearsal of materialistic drives and emotive anxieties inevitably involve processes of validation, sanctioning, and standardization of the drives as accepted criteria of social value.

But the behaviors displayed often appear less than ideal judged from other perspectives. To most observers, the image presented in the cultural mirror of advertising is not unambiguously worth imitating. Even if it were, imitation requires some effort, perhaps frustrating, and the prior acceptance of an unworthiness of one's own life experiences.

Strictly considered, however, modern advertising seeks to promote not so much self-indulgence as self-doubt. It seeks to create needs, not to fulfill them; to generate new anxieties instead of allaying old ones. By surrounding the consumer with images of the good life, . . . the propaganda of commodities simultaneously makes him acutely unhappy with his lot. By fostering grandiose aspirations, it also fosters self-denigration and self-contempt (Lasch 1978, p. 180).

It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate all the old unhappiness to which flesh is heir; it creates or exacerbates new forms of unhappiness—personal insecurity, status anxiety, anxiety in parents. . . . Advertising institutionalizes envy and its attendant anxieties (ibid, p.73).

Whether or not people are very successful in pursuing the ideals offered, they may more easily suffer self-denigration and doubt. By constantly showing us that the grass seems greener elsewhere, we're led to look askance at our immediate environment and experience. We may not be sure where the action is, but we suspect it's almost always somewhere else.

This fear that advertising instills a sense of inadequacy has been particularly expressed with respect to women's self-concepts.

Advertisers in general bear a large part of the responsibility for the deep feelings of inadequacy that drive women to psychiatrists, pills, or the bottle. You
keep telling us over and over that if we could use that or have this or look like that, we would be forever desirable, forever happy. So we spend our time wondering over the grey streak or the extra pound or the dry skin instead of our minds, our hearts, and our fellow men (Mannes 1964, p. 31).

Women are not the only segment that feels stress when confronted by advertising imagery. The elderly, like other minorities not glamorized in advertising, have self-concepts threatened by the gospel of advertising.

The exploitation of age, fear, and social acceptance are so closely interwoven that it is difficult to separate them for purposes of examination. But exploited they are, ruthlessly and continually wearing away at this image we have of ourselves. Our society's values are being corrupted by advertising's insistence on the equation: Youth equals popularity, popularity equals success, success equals happiness (Fisher 1968, p. 117).

We are all potential victims of the invidious comparisons of reality to the world seen in advertising. Once convinced that the grass is greener elsewhere, one's own life pales in comparison and seems a life half-lived.

So people do worry, feel inferior, inadequate, guilty. They sense that they live without living, that life runs through their hands like sand (Fromm 1955, p. 166).

Advertising, using "ideal types," can lead the receiver to be dissatisfied with the realities of his everyday world—his wife, his friends, his job, even his life itself. Fantasies are a loaded gun. They may sweeten life and advance culture; they may also destroy life in a reckless pursuit of impossible accomplishments (Toronto School of Theology 1972, p. 22).

Simplistic, symbolic stereotypes, chosen for their clarity and conciseness, serve as poor models and inhibit sympathetic understanding of individual differences. This position has been articulated in detail regarding the portrayal of women, but the problem is universal, as ads can reinforce stereotypes for not just the sexes, but also for races, ages, occupations, family relations, etc. To the extent that these images are disrespectful or unworthy of emulation, they are socially divisive.

Advertisers should be made much more sensitive to the fall-out from their ads (using strong stereotypes).

. . . Such advertising is disseminating offensive and deleterious images which cannot be laughed off as mere harmless buffoonery (Ibid, p.17).

Few would argue that advertising faithfully mirrors reality. What are the supposed consequences of confronting the imagery in the mirror of advertising? What strains are felt facing the distortions inherent in selective feedback? While some worry about mass persuasion creating conformity, more worry more about the nature of norms that we may be conforming to. One fear is that the advertising system will create the kind of consumer citizen it seems to assume or prefer.

[These would be] insatiably desiring, infinitely plastic, totally passive, and always a little bit sleepy; unpredictably fickle and disloyal (to products); basically wooly-minded (Henry 1963, p. 79).

American society, as popular advertisements portrayed it, was a nightmare of fear and jealousy, gossip and slander, envy and ambition, greed and lust. . . . The typical American, as they pictured him, lived in a torment of anxiety and Cupidity and regulated his conduct entirely by ulterior considerations. . . . To the advertisers nothing was sacred and nothing private; they levied impartially upon filial devotion, marriage, religion, health, and cleanliness. . . . Love, as they portrayed it, was purely competitive. . . . Friendshop, too, was for sale . . . (Commanger 1950, pp. 416–417).

Social Change and Social Problems

The education to abundance by advertising has already, it is claimed, induced cultural change.

Commercials have worked—with success—toward revision of many traditional tenets of our society. As we have seen, reverence for nature has been replaced by a determination to process it. Thrift has been replaced by the duty to buy. The work ethic has been replaced by the consumption ethic. . . . Modesty has been exercised with help from the sexual sell. Restraint of ego has lost standing (Barnouw 1978, p. 98).

Ironically, commercials often romanticize the life being lost, just as museums encapsulate ways of life no longer possible.

This background texture is often composed of traditional images of well-being drawn from social situations which have largely disappeared from everyday life: a slower pace of life, quiet and serenity, open space, and closeness to the natural environment (images of rural life); contributing to the happiness of loved ones (images of family life); attainment of goals set in accordance with personal rather than institutional demands (images of success in noninstitutional settings); a sense of familiarity and security in purchasing goods (images of craft skills); a concern for quality and good judgment (images of discerning tastes) (Leiss 1976, p. 89).

In most western cultures, families are nearly sacred and seen as the basic social unit. Yet, family composition and character are changing for many social reasons. Nowhere may interpersonal relations be more affected by advertising than in the home, as the roles of both women and children as consumers get expanded and redefined.

The advertising industry thus encourages the pseudo-emancipation of women, flaunting them with its insinuating reminder, "You've come a long way, baby," and disguising the freedom to consume as genuine autonomy. Similarly it flatters and glorifies youth in the hope of elevating young people to the status of full-fledged consumers in their own right (Lasch 1978, p. 74).

If advertising has invaded the judgment of children, it has also forced its way into the family, an insolent usurper of parental function, degrading parents to mere intermediaries between their children and the market.
This indeed is a social revolution in our time! (Henry 1963, p. 76).

Relations with neighbors, the proverbial Joneses we strive to keep up with, are increasingly based on envy, emulation, and competition (Krutich 1959, p. 34). But social competition can turn asocial and precipitate violence and theft.

Two processes could be involved in this type of response. First, the inaccessibility of the products being offered may create in some viewers feelings of frustration sufficient to make them engage in antisocial acts. Second, the arousal process associated with the ad itself may have behavioral consequences about which very little is known. Much advertising is designed to gain attention and build positive attitudes to brands essentially by a tension-arousal and tension-reduction process. . . . If, for a number of reasons, frustration is an outcome of such a process, it is possible . . . that aggressive acts of one kind or another may follow (Myers 1978, p. 176).

Other social problems that have been linked to advertising are those of ecology and pornography. Since there is rarely consumption without waste and unintended by-products, promotion of consumption also promotes pollution.

The squandering of resources only begins the problem. The consumption binge which television has done so much to push has been fouling air, water, roads, streets, fields, and forests—a trend we failed or declined to recognize until almost irreversible. It has given us garbage statistics as staggering as our consumption statistics, and closely related to them (Barnouw 1978, p. 156).

Advertising, for almost as long as it has existed, has used some sort of sexual sell, sometimes promising seductive capacities, sometimes more simply attracting our attention with sexual stimuli, even if irrelevant to the product or the selling point. This provocation, while less graphic than more extreme pornography, is far more public in exposure. The difficulty seems to be that these sexual stimuli are frequent, very hard to avoid, and employed for a broad range of products. This makes them inevitably offensive to some and potentially jading. To all, advertising is more of a tease than a whore, for sexual stimulation is moderated and channeled. As Slater (1970) discusses, a modest arousal commands our attention and can be harnessed for instrumental purposes, while too strong an arousal might not. For at least some of the public, however, sexual ads represent a challenge to standards of decency and are in a real sense pornographic. Not everyone enjoys confronting near nudes on their streets' billboards or seeing things that flaunt conventional propriety on their living room TV. Certainly conventions of intimacy are frequently violated. Barnouw (1978, p. 98) notes as an example that we now see women caressing their bodies in showers with a frequency and reverence of attention that makes "self-love a consecrated ritual." This would have been unheard of only a few years ago. So too with the TV selling of women's sanitary products. Standards of public decency have changed much in the twentieth century, and advertising has been one of the elements contributing to changed norms.

It is also argued that our capacities for political responsiveness to social problems like these may be reduced by virtue of living in a commercial culture, as consumers grow indifferent to other communications generally or the plight of others in their communities.

Exhortations to buy assail everyone from every possible direction. Subways, highways, the airwaves, the mail, and the sky itself (sky-writing) are vehicles for advertising's unrelenting offensives. The total indifference with which advertising treats any political or social event, insisting on intruding no matter what else is being presented, reduces all social phenomena to bizarre and meaningless happenings. . . . the result is individual passivity, a state of inertia that precludes action (Schiller 1973, p. 25).

Encouraged in our inclination to self-centeredness, our personal political priorities seem to reflect private economic goals with diminished counterbalancing social consciences. Our collective political priorities shift to economic goals more exclusively, despite our lip service that doing so is simplistic. We tolerate higher and higher levels of unemployment and welfare needs as long as sales and profits are maintained by aggregate consumer demand. We maximize GNP, with little concern for economic justice.

Every feature and facet of every product having been studied for selling points, these are then described with talent, gravity, and an aspect of profound concern as the source of health, happiness, social achievement, or improved community standing. Even minor qualities of unimportant commodities are enlarged upon with solemnity which would not be unbecoming in an announcement of the combined return of Christ and all the apostles. . . . The consequence is that while goods become ever more abundant, they do not seem to be any less important. On the contrary, it requires an act of will to imagine that anything else is so important. Morally, we agree that the supply of goods is not a measure of human achievement; in fact, we take for granted that it will be so regarded (Galbraith 1967, p. 219).

Of course, if propaganda for products is a concern to the cultures within which it has gradually evolved, it is even more threatening as a cultural intervention in economically less developed societies.

Advertising is seen by many as a threat to the cultural identity and self-realization of many developing countries: it brings to many people alien ethical values; it may deviate consumer demands in developing countries to areas which can inhibit development priorities; it affects and can often deform ways of life and lifestyles (MacBride 1980, p. 111).
Credibility, Cynicism, and Community

Language is of vital cultural significance. The ability to trust in the validity of what is comprehended verbally is a cornerstone of one’s mode of acting in the world—the ability to accumulate knowledge, build community, and establish a relationship with God. These are possible only with faith in words. Words can be poetry for everyone; the richness of language can, with inspiration, express our passions, politics, praise, and prayers.

Our language is potentially affected by advertising in two ways. Advertising provides us with vocabulary: a set of words and the concepts they express with which we structure our perceptions and judgments, defining in large measure how “reality” is conceived. All language does this. What advertising does is give some words and concepts greater emphasis. But it also affects the credibility of language, and so simultaneously cheapens its own currency.

Poetic language is used so constantly and relentlessly for the purposes of salesmanship that it has become almost impossible to say anything with enthusiasm or joy or conviction without running into the danger of sounding as if you were selling something. . . .

To repeat, advertising is a symbol-manipulating occupation. The symbols of fashion and elegance are used to glamorize clothing and cosmetics. The symbols of youthful gaiety sell soft drinks and candy bars. The symbols of adventure and sportsmanship are used to promote cigarettes and liquor. . . . Advertising is a tremendous creator and devourer of symbols. Even the symbols of patriotism are used for the purposes of salesmanship. . . . Not even the symbols of religion are off limits—Christmas and Easter are so strenuously exploited commercially that they almost lose their religious significance (Hayakawa 1964, pp. 268–269).

Now we pay intellectual talent a high price to amplify ambiguities, distort thought, and bury reality. All languages are deductive systems with a vast truth-telling potential imbedded in vocabulary, syntax, and morphology, yet no language is so perfect that men may not use it for the opposite purpose. One of the discoveries of the twentieth century is the enormous variety of ways of compelling language to lie (Henry 1963, p. 91).

Because virtually all citizens seem to recognize this tendency of ad language to distort, advertising seems to turn us into a community of cynics, and we doubt advertisers, the media, and authority in all its forms. Thus, we may also distrust other received wisdoms from political authorities, community elders, religious leaders, and teachers of all kinds. As Heilbroner (1976, p. 113) wondered: “How strong, deep, or sustaining can be the values generated by a civilization that generates a ceaseless flow of half-truths and careful deceptions?”

In fact, perhaps one of the most powerful effects of television has been to teach a national tolerance of falsehood, exaggeration, and distortion. Parents who ask their children to tell the truth must explain that of course a certain cereal will not transform them into great athletes, as the highly paid announcer says, nor will the drug mentioned really cure hemorrhoids, or cancer, or arthritis. The announcer is really lying. . . . Somehow the parent must explain that truth is to be expected of the child individually, but that a huge industry can be based on falsity, exaggeration, and distortion (Skornia 1965, p. 158).

Reisman, Glazier, and Denny (1950, p. 294) once asked: “Isn’t it possible that advertising as a whole is a fantastic fraud, presenting an image of America taken seriously by no one?” It may be possible, despite industry attempts to attain credibility, but even frauds have serious consequences. The consequence of extreme cynicism, the rejection or doubt of all offered values, is the normlessness known as anomie. This faithless position trusts no one and no word. Without a reliance on words and a faith in truth, we lack the mortar for social cohesion. Without trustworthy communication, there is no communion, no community, only an aggregation of increasingly isolated individuals, alone in the mass.

There was a time not too long ago without radios and televisions, . . . signs, bumper stickers, and the ever-present announcements indicating price increases or special sales. There was a time without the advertisements which now cover whole cities with words. . . . The result is that the main function of the word, communication, is no longer realized. The word no longer communicates, no longer fosters communion, no longer creates community, and therefore no longer gives life. The word no longer offers trustworthy ground on which people can meet each other and build society (Nouwen 1980, p. 22).

Ironically, the anomic isolation of the individual creates some needs that well-advertised goods might meet. Identification with society, or at least the appropriation of lifestyle roles therein, is easily affected. It requires only the wit to buy recognized brands with symbolic value. Today, such brands, badges providing identity, are proudly displayed on shoes and shirts, on pants and hats—from tip to toe, from fronts to backs.

To use a brand of car, drink, smoke, or food that is nationally advertised gives a man the feeling that he belongs to something bigger than himself. He is part of a process or a culture that contains and nourishes him. And the irrational basis of the appeals made to him by the ads reinforces his sense of mystic communion (McLuhan 1953, p. 555).

Rites, Religion, and Morality

The criticism of advertising on moral grounds, seeing it often as a social force opposed to the values of religion, is not new. Indeed, such observations were probably more frequent and came from more varied sources at the turn of the century. The emergence of the more secular, urban, and mediated society stood in some contrast to the preceding gilded age. Here,
for example, is the thought on vulgar advertising by a copywriter/poet writing in a magazine of the old style, a literary journal for the “gentle reader.”

On the moral side, it is thoroughly false and harmful. It breeds vulgarity, hypnotizes the imagination and the will, fosters covetousness, envy, hatred, and underhand competition (Logan 1907, p. 333).

Spiritually based observations are probably less frequent in today’s more secular society, but commentary is still very evident in major places, as witness those below by presidents of colleges, major theologians, schools of theology, etc. Their concerns have intensified because of two features of advertising in the postwar era. Seeing advertising promoting not only goods but a whole lifestyle and accompanying rationalizing attitudes, they see it as moral (or immoral) instruction that contains injunctions about how life should be led. Because they also witness this instruction being aimed and delivered to children, primarily through television, they see this secular conditioning as directly competitive with the instruction and ideals of religious teachings. Hence, they see the prideful self-interest of the commercial creed as impeding spiritual development. Faith in litanies such as, “Me, I’m the one. I deserve a break today! I’ll go for the gusto, and taste the good life,” is hardly conducive to reverence, humility, or grace.

It shouldn’t surprise us that the temptations to which the flesh is heir are seen as problematic. Nor then should we be surprised when the persistent, emphatic presentation of these temptations is seen as seductive to the soul, the promising of immediate pleasures in lieu of the rewards of a spiritual life, which seem more remote, even if potentially far richer and enduring. “Love things above all else, learn to want more and more, waste rather than conserve, spend what you do not have” is a repugnant injunction, but, as Krutch (1959, p. 37) notes, it is repugnant in part because we realize just how vulnerable we are to responding to it.

We are called in this way at an early age. Our commercial education begins early with jingles, slogans, and catch phrases, the total commercial catechism, so that children learn the “rite words in rote order.”

The slogans, catchwords, values, mottoes, and other lessons tattooed on young minds even before young people learn to read are not educational but commercial. They displace, contradict, and cancel, in many cases, in advance, those lessons and values which education seeks and will seek at public expense to teach and inculcate (Skornia 1965, p. 158).

Advertising commonly employs direct exhortations, literally a series of commandments, a secular litany that Barzun (1946, p. 53) identified as the “revealed religion of the twentieth century.”

(This is) usurpation of moral instruction by cynical television advertisers. . . . Schlitz, a firm with license to brew but none to preach, intones, “You only go around once in life; therefore, get all the gusto you can!” These are not statements about beer, but a theological claim and moral injunction (Silber 1982, p. 203).

Much of modern advertising offers a display of lifestyle attitudes as its focal point, so this is one of several possible examples of such exhortation toward unconflicted self-indulgence. Of course, the temptations are rarely presented in a way that would make their moral character too obvious.

Lust, sloth, greed and pride. . . . In the advertising community these words are frowned upon. They have a bad connotation, so they must be changed. Lust becomes the desire to be sexually attractive. Certainly no one can complain if a woman desires to be sexually attractive; it is her birthright. Sloth becomes the desire for leisure—for rest and recreation—and certainly all of us are entitled to that. Greed becomes the desire to enjoy the good things of this world. Why were they put here if not for us to enjoy? Pride, of course, becomes the desire for social status (Mayer 1961, p. 128).

The common use of these four of the seven deadly sins makes the effective morality of materialism, the gospel of goods, suspect in the eyes of those faithful to almost any spiritual creed. The Christian perspective on materialism has its roots in Biblical warnings about the spiritual bankruptcy of self-indulgence, and the socially corruptive consequences of its practice.

Self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit. . . . When self-indulgence is at work, the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency, and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper, and quarrels; disagreements, factions, envy; drunkenness, orgies, and similar things . . . . What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . . if he sows in the field of self-indulgence, he will get a harvest of corruption (Gal. 5: 17–23; 6: 8).

Advertising also seems subversive of morality when judged from the perspective of a secular liberal humanism.

If I were asked to name the deadliest subversive force within capitalism, the single greatest source of its waning morality—I would without hesitation name advertising. How else should one identify a force that debases language, drains thought, and undoes dignity? (Heilbroner 1981, p. 40)

What Research Is in Order?
It is not clear now how to separate cause and effect when discussing the relation between advertising and social character. Historians recognize the complexities of our evolution as a society and point out that our culture had materialistic leanings long before the emergence of modern advertising. As modern adver-
tising emerged around the turn of the century, many other aspects of society were also in flux—most notably urbanization, industrial expansion, geographic and status mobility, splintering of the extended family, increases in literacy and education, etc. See Boorstin (1973) for a particularly broad perspective, or any of several excellent treatments more focused on advertising by Fox (1984), Pope (1983), Potter (1954), or Schudson (1984).

None of the critics cited would argue that advertising alone is responsible for the conditions discussed, corrupting an otherwise innocent and perfect culture and precipitating a condition previously non-existent. Even the neo-Marxist historian of advertising (Ewen 1976), in an otherwise flawed work, recognized this. Whatever their focus or theoretical bent, even the most critical historians would allow that there were many preconditions to the emergence of advertising and that advertising has evolved coincident with other social changes which make it impossible to determine causality unambiguously. Advertising is also clearly not alone in its attempts to influence our thinking and behavior.

Recognition of this historical complexity does not invalidate our concern about advertising’s continuing cultural role. While we may not be able to untangle the historical fabric to trace the threads of influence, we can still question the extent to which today’s advertising perpetuates and/or exacerbates the alleged effects. More rooted in the present, such research is less likely to dwell on recriminations and remorse and is more readily directed toward proactive policy.

**The Need for Research**

If one can justifiably say that advertising has joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society, . . . then it becomes necessary to consider with special care the extent and nature of its influence—how far it extends and in what way it makes itself felt (Potter 1954, p. 177).

There is a real need for an independent, comprehensive, and systematic comparative inquiry into advertising in all its many aspects. Such an enquiry, which is long overdue, should ascertain both the direct and indirect, the intended and the unintended effects, and should provide the base for decisions that are found to be required and any new policies that may result from them (MacBride 1980, p. 155).

It is clearly appropriate for us to take these assertions about advertising’s unintended consequences seriously. Despite the relative lack of data based research to date, despite the occasional naiveté of some authors with respect to the processes of strategy formation and advertising execution, and despite the challenge this indictment represents to our own vested interests and ideologies, the charges are much too serious to dismiss cavalierly. The convergence of thought among intellectual leaders of so many diverse disciplines demands our attention and research as allied academics.

These ideas also deserve consideration because of their sobering and substantial nature. Taken as a whole, they constitute a major indictment of advertising. It should be acknowledged, however, that while this indictment is the result of the reflective ruminations of senior, highly respected scholars, the conclusions are typically arrived at deductively. While their insights are sometimes self-evident and their rhetoric is often very persuasive, few of the alleged effects are directly observed, nor is the causal role of advertising certain. Thus, the ideas constitute the conventional wisdom of nonbusiness academics and are better thought of as hypotheses than conclusions.

**Potential Research Approaches**

It is all too easy to let suspicions or defensiveness preclude more definitive research on these hypotheses. Doing nothing, however, accepts ideology in lieu of academic inquiry and information. Polemic stands on all sides of this issue are potentially tempered by research findings, which should illuminate our understanding of both the institution of advertising and the character of its target, the consumer. But how many of the consequences are readily researched, especially with traditional consumer research methodologies? The traditional research methods of consumer behavior are drawn from psychology, and, to a far lesser degree, from other social science disciplines. Viewed from the perspective of psychology, the research agenda suggested by the views reported involves study of both the stimulus materials and the responses, i.e., the ads and the behaviors to which they might be causally linked.

Content analysis of systematically drawn samples of ads can provide insight into the nature of the stimuli. Such a sample could be measured for its value content (Pollay 1983), and these results correlated with the findings of Rokeach (1973) or others to test the idea that advertising replicates the value hierarchy of the population. Data on cultural change might be examined for movement toward reinforced values. Content analysis can also identify the relative frequencies of tactics in order to establish some measure of the relative import of the various concerns listed in Figure 2 and to establish subsequent research priorities (Pollay 1985). Behaviors most commonly role modeled and encouraged can also be identified and their frequencies observed. While this, of course, is not equivalent to researching behaviors that might actually result from the exhortations of advertising, it would nonetheless identify the patterning of behaviors attempted. Systematically selected advertising copy is excellent grist for the historian’s mill, and there is no reason why it would not also prove valuable for con-
temporary studies by marketing scholars.

Traditional experiments can more directly test the questions of effects produced by examining the extent to which various types of advertising stimuli produce various kinds of responses. For example, we could verify the supposed tendencies of status appeals, fear appeals, or sexual sells to produce envy and social competitiveness, anxieties and insecurities, and sexual preoccupations and dissatisfaction, respectively. There is no shortage of measures for dependent variables, and treatments and experimental designs should be quite straightforward. Our experimental paradigms, however, look to short-term impacts of specific stimuli rather than the longer-term results of repeated treatments. Thus, while internal validity can be highly controlled, some issue of external validity will remain.

Experimental paradigms can also be used to examine the extent to which ads work to set agendas, chanelling behavior by specifying the "evoked set" of alternatives and providing the criteria employed to choose from that evoked set. Nutritionists, for example, worry that our response to thirst is increasingly imagery of packaged goods and that, as a consequence, the "market share" for water is declining. (One once suggested to me in jest that maybe we needed to package water and brand it in order to compete with drinks of sugar, alcohol, or caffeine, ironically presaging the bottled water successes of recent years.) Protocol measures, unaiced recall, or other free response methods are probably the best tools for validating the general issue of agenda setting, but forced choice techniques could identify the perceived relative importance of criteria after exposure.

At first glance it might seem that survey methods and other cross-sectional descriptive data about the population, such as that used in segmentation studies, might be helpful. Unfortunately, while these might prove descriptive of the current status of the American character and, hence, be valuable as a base line for future measures of change, this sort of data is of limited value in addressing the issues of causality and social change. It often lacks historical reference points and contains weak evidence, if any, regarding attribution for any phenomena noticed. Even direct questions which ask individuals the "why" questions are likely to fall far short of the mark, for individuals are probably unable to specify the reasons for cultural evolution of attitudes, norms of behavior, or relative values. We know full well how much difficulty respondents have reconstructing the determinants of even an isolated major consumer purchase of recent occurrence.

Even more unfortunately, it would seem that our research paradigms are at quite a loss in dealing with fundamental questions in the macro market's evolu-

tion, only partially due to the hypotheses and their specification. Most of the variables in question are potentially measurable with existing or creative metric tools which social science has recently produced in such abundance. A less tractable problem is our inability to effectively research environmental issues from within the environment. No major longitudinal experiments are possible, as all individuals are already very heavily "treated." The few "unexposed" individuals are those with major differences on a wide variety of other significant dimensions—like those in total institutions, remote geographic locations, foreign cultures, primitive economies, or in some combination of these conditions. Hence, natural or quasi experiments aren't possible, as significant variation in advertising exposure isn't likely without naturally occurring covariation in other major variables, and it would seem quite difficult to sort the covariance in order to isolate relative determination.

But the shortcomings of our traditional techniques only suggest again that we need to broaden our concept of consumer behavior. Perhaps we should be drawing on a far broader base of research tools, employing techniques of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or psycholinguists, and encouraging our students in these directions. It might also mean abandoning the academic concept of the consumer as a complex information processor, however dignified and morally reassuring that image. Instead of our current focus on short-term responses of individual consumers to specific configurations of stimuli, we need methods which deal with the long-term effects of aggregated stimuli. We need to supplement our focus on microphenomena with macro concerns, and our methods must expand accordingly.

Values and Research Objectivity

A common defense of advertising against criticisms of its cultural role is that it must, of necessity, be in harmony with its culture; messages must employ symbols and cultural values that are readily understood and accepted by the intended audience. In this view, advertising is seen as a mirror that only reflects and exposes existing cultural values and behaviors. It is argued from this perspective that to find fault with advertising is simply to display a cultural alienation. But this argument typically ignores several key points: (1) any culture is a mosaic of multiple values, (2) a culture is characterized in substantial measure by the relative importance of these values, and (3) not all cultural values are employed and echoed in advertising.

Not all values are equally suited for use in commercials. Some are more plausibly linked to the products in current production, some are more dramatically visualized, and some are more reliably responded
to by the consuming public. Thus, in the aggregate, some of our cultural values are reinforced far more frequently than others. Hence, while it may be true that advertising reflects cultural values, it does so on a very selective basis, echoing and reinforcing certain attitudes, behaviors, and values far more frequently than others. Thus, it becomes a serious research question, which values are subjected to this selective reinforcement and which suffer from neglect, however benign?

The possible distortion of the relative importance of various values may have far-reaching consequences. Most serious social decisions involve conflict between competing value premises, and it is the relative importance of the competing values that tips the balance and precipitates wholly different patterns of behavior and paths of history. Political processes, for example, are typically the weighing of the relative importance of a series of values, each one of which in isolation would be endorsed by virtually all citizens. But it is the balancing of these valued considerations (like democracy, prosperity, the sanctity of family life, religious freedom, civil rights, national security, etc.) that leads to critical decisions and separates the various political parties and policies. The same can be said for individuals and their balancing of values when confronted with nontrivial decisions and moral quandaries. Thus, identifying the value profile of advertising seems a research priority and is allowed by recent methodological developments (Pollay 1983, 1984).

Many contentions about advertising’s impact and the defensive responses to them are inherently ideological in nature (Greyser 1972). Authors note critically those ways in which they feel advertising leads to deviations from their concept of an improved or ideal society, and this unavoidably involves value judgments. But having said as much, it is not adequate, as so often seems to be implied, therefore to disregard the allegations and to accept the conservative tautology that “what is, is good.” While it may be difficult to conduct a value-free inquiry into the effects of advertising, in large measure because advertising is itself so value laden, such an inquiry should be attempted. When that inquiry reaches its limits of providing information and insight, its data and conclusions must then form the basis of a better informed judgment. In the end, however, both research and moral judgment seem necessary. The issues are too important to tolerate uninformed or amoral attitudes.

Greed, lust, sloth, and pride were identified earlier as common ad themes. One might also consider the extent to which advertising encourages envy and gluttony. If anger were added to this list, we would have what are popularly known as the seven deadly sins. We could do far worse in our research agenda, as in our moral reflections, than to consider the extent to which advertising fosters these, or, in balance, encourages the seven cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love. This criterion set at least transcends personal value preferences of different researchers.

A Last Call to Research

The need for this research, even at the risk of embarrassing discoveries, has been recognized by famous professionals, including a copywriter chief executive and an advertising researcher who is a frequent industry spokesman.

Criticism is much more welcome, because much more helpful, than praise. Criticism stimulates the nerve ends; praise merely hardens with cholesterol the mental arteries... In my opinion, we in advertising should be more concerned with those in our profession, or outside it, who lack the interest to criticize, who lack the urge to improve (Weir 1963, pp. 179–180).

We should be enlisting the support of cultural critics and historians, as well as psychiatrists, to study the influence of advertising on the fantasy life of the public, on its conscious aspirations and unconscious motives. We should be probing the symbolism evoked by the models and scenes depicted in advertising to see what impact they have had on the national character (Bogart 1969, p. 10).

Despite calls for this sort of research from professionals and despite nearly four decades of prodding from parallel social science paradigms, to date our discipline has produced shamefully little in response. Perhaps this reflects the immaturity of marketing and consumer behavior as autonomous academic disciplines. We have been quite preoccupied with either professional practicalities and/or mimicking the established sciences, afraid, it would seem, of alienating either constituency. Yet, this inhibition often precipitates the most pedestrian and pedantic of research, ignoring questions meaningful to the larger communities of scholars and citizens. Hopefully, as we mature into a more truly scholarly tradition, our scope and courage will enlarge.

This is entirely possible for individuals as their careers mature and as their concerns and perspective also mature. As the methodologies of the discipline evolve, it also becomes more feasible to undertake research with the promise of its being satisfying. The meaningfulness of the questions increases the satisfactions to the researcher, and improved methods make the research product more satisfying to others. While research on these topics is hardly simple, it is potentially significant.

Critical inquiry does not require researchers to believe that advertising will be absolved of all charges as much as it requires having faith that the institutions of advertising have some potential for self-correction and a capacity for moral action in the light of new
knowledge. Let us hope that marketing and advertising scholars have this faith and carry out the needed research. Let us also hope that such faith is well-founded.

Failure to initiate this research would suggest that academics are servants to marketing practice rather than scholars of it. Intellectual detachment suggests that we should study the consumer in the marketing environment as the biologist studies the fish. As suggested by Tucker (1974), all too often our perspective has been exclusively that of the fisherman.

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“I hope you’re not looking for a deep meaningful conversation because I can only talk about the ad game.”