On the Value of Reflections on the Values in `The Distorted Mirror'

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On the Value of Reflections on the Values in "The Distorted Mirror"

Responding to Holbrook's questioning of "what's unfair" in "The Distorted Mirror," the author extends the discussion of advertising's cultural impact on values. He examines the validity of the model Holbrook assumes to be implicit and provides a more explicit statement of the essential argument. He accepts some but refutes many aspects of the critique and suggests a research agenda.

HOLBROOK (1987a) finds the assertions about cultural impacts of advertising in "The Distorted Mirror" (Pollay 1986a) implausible and seeks more discussion and theory. Fair enough, so far.

He argues that we (1) reject the metaphor of mold in favor of a "passive" mirror because I or other authors reviewed allegedly display (2) rhetorical excess, (3) bias against popular culture, (4) a political agenda to "smash the mirror," (5) "religious rectitude," (6) selection bias in the delineation of only negative effects, and (7) a "thin thread of theory." He constructs (8) the implicit argument he senses in the conventional wisdom, projecting assumptions of (9) a monolithic ad industry swaying a mass audience (10) by using emotions (11) to manipulate values.

These assumptions seem simplistic to him, and to me also. Concerns 6 and 7 are particularly serious for they challenge both the character and very existence of the identified cultural consequences. Note, too, that 9 and 10 are not necessary to the basic argument, but

the last point is truly a bottom-line concern. I comment seriatim.

1. There's more than molds and mirrors. Neither metaphor brings a fully adequate analog to mind. I used "mirror" because it is commonplace among apologists and "distorted" to call attention to its selective feedback. Many variations (e.g., soft molds) and other metaphors may add insight. An acoustic metaphor abides in trade terms like "noise." Both Heilbroner (1985) and Marchand (1985) profitably use the visual metaphor of lenses with focusing, magnifying, and refracting properties. To make a point hereafter I liken ads to raindrops. Which metaphor is best depends on the aspects being discussed and what we eventually learn (Arndt 1985).

2. Let's not be antisemantic! Some of my best friends are words, so to the charge of being rhetorical I plead guilty. Many other scholars choose their words carefully for precision and persuasion, ideally accomplishing both (McClosky 1985). Holbrook's own comments contain much provocative prose, but both of us display less rhetorical flair and risk less distortion than do the professional poets of puffery, copywriters.

3. Aesthetic elitism? Some disdain for popular culture is seen in the literature reviewed. My own hobbies and habits as an advertising archivist have me

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voluntarily immersed in it on and off the job (Pollay 1987). In general, however, the critique is not on the form of advertising as aesthetically tacky or trite, despite easy evidence. The focus is on the substance of advertising as cultural communication, questioning it as values education.

4. *It's not a smashing view.* Even those most appalled rarely manifest the desire "to smash the mirror." Such an attitude is as rare as calls to industrial sabotage among academic ecologists. It would take someone both radical and naive to propose and think likely the elimination of advertising. Most authors offer analyses without political or policy proposals, descriptions not prescriptions. Few suggest specific regulations despite the obvious parallels between the cultural impacts of commercialization and the ecological impacts of industrialization. None are as brazen as a vice president of the N.W. Ayer agency who in 1932 suggested four monthly awards for those ads most disgusting, asinine, mendacious, and harmful (Anselmino 1986, p. 105–6).

5. *Biblical bias?* The biblical quotation and the reference to the nonbiblical seven deadly sins (Fairlie 1978) were offered as benchmarks, not the final arbiters of truth. The allegations also can be judged as vices or virtues against "new and improved" criteria, for those with them. Admittedly, religious or theological thought plays a minor role in much contemporary scholarship, including ours. Our work is dominated by the much larger literature of the secular humanists. Both were reviewed and reported, in proportion.

6. *The power of positive thinking.* The assessment of bias or balance in "The Distorted Mirror" turns on both whether its ideas seem plausible or preposterous and whether they are virtues or vices. Seeing a majority of vices prompts the charge of bias, but seeing vices is unavoidably a value judgment. The consequences listed seem problematic to Holbrook, and to me also. From other value perspectives (e.g., Kirkpatrick 1986) there is virtue in such traits as selfishness or cynicism. The current inventory of presumed effects, however negative it seems, will be known to be biased only when actual effects are known. There is no a priori reason to expect a "balance" between desirable and undesirable effects of commercialization any more than for the unintended ecological impacts of industrialization. Holbrook contributes constructively toward the correction of the bias he sees by presenting counterexamples of positive values manifest in current television ads. Empirical elaboration is a necessary and worthy task.

7. *One thin thread is sheer projection.* Holbrook states, repeatedly for effect, that a thin thread of theory carries the plausibility of the argument. There is no reason, however, to suppose that only a single model exists. I reviewed a diverse set of literature, drawing upon authors from diverse fields, intellectual styles, and research experience. (For many more authors and quotes, see Pollay 1986b). One supposes that there are many models, both implicit and explicit, that led these scholars to their various conclusions. The convergence of this disciplinary diversity, with surprisingly little cross-contradiction, suggests robustness, not frailty, of the hypotheses. What results seems like an interwoven whole—a rope, if you will, rather than a thread. It may not unravel or snap even if some strands are strained.

8. *Straw men bear no weight.* Holbrook criticizes his own model, not mine nor any I reviewed. This is a "straw man" argument, rhetoric needing little direct reply. I will correct some misreading between the lines of the conventional wisdom, discussing pluralism, affect, information, values, and salience, and then provide an explicit model, obviating the implicit one assumed.

9. *There's pluralism aplenty.* Pluralistic diversity of consumers is obvious on our streets. Academics of other disciplines recognize it. It was their valuing of this diversity that led some to fear homogenization impacts from mass media, particularly when television was emergent and markets and media seemed less segmented. This concern is shown in the perspective of but one of several points, each contingent on the nature of the appeal used (Pollay 1986a, Fig. 2, Section III).

Critics of advertising make frequent reference to the system, industry, or technologies of advertising, but their use of collective nouns does not imply they assume a totally monolithic "party line of synchronized unison" on the part of advertisers. We do not assume invariant conformity when we use such collective nouns as "private enterprise," "multinationals," or "national brands." Collusive or conspiracy models are rare among scholars. However, one can expect similar organizations to display similar behaviors due to common goals, concerns, and decision processes.

*Chaos or chorus?* Holbrook argues that competitive pluralism produces an "informational chaos," a "communicational random walk" offering "checks and balances," but is advertising truly chaotic and random, producing a kind of white noise where all is cancelled and nothing is distinguishable in the din? Given the common products, goals, and cultural premises of clients and agencies, some notes and themes are echoed by multiple voices. Many ads echo basic behavioral suggestions on who (You!), what (Indulge!), how (Buy!), when (Now!), and where (Here!). The why's (e.g., Pretty, Durable, and Cheap!) vary, but repeat a short list of ideas. Other messages (Fancy and Practical!) provide harmonious counterpoints to

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augment rather than cancel other messages. Between redundancies and variations, the result may be more a chorus than chaos—noisy, no doubt, but still with intelligible melody and meaning.

10. The affect is the effect. The critique of advertising often assumes that advertising's persuasiveness results from its psychological sophistication, modeling of attitudes, and use of emotions. It does not see advertising as totally uninformative, but ponderers the source of its potency, just as we do. The poor performance of cognitive predictors of ad effectiveness for low involvement products has precipitated much recent research on affect (Batra and Ray 1986), warmth (Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty 1986), "peipheral" paths to persuasion (Pettit, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), the levels of emotional responses (Stout and Leckenby 1986), and Holbrook's own research (1986a; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1984; Holbrook and Batra 1987; Holbrook and Westwood 1987; Halvena and Holbrook 1986).

"Advertising = information" is oxymoronic. Magazine ads grew dramatically more psychological and less technological in the first half of this century. In a "subsiding sizzle" since WWII, a decreasing proportion of magazine ads use emotive rhetorical styles, push benefits, or show human users, but such ads are still in the majority (Pollay 1985a). Ads in electronic media appear to be even more evocative and less informative. The economists' conception that "advertising is (only) information" is surely simplistic, especially for the large budget, mass media campaigns to which citizens and critics refer. By design, advertising offers selective information only as deemed persuasive. Many national ads contain very limited information (Pollay, Zaichowsky, and Fryer 1980) even when unconstrained by format, ad size, rhetorical style, or product (Pollay 1984). To argue that this advertising is information because it selectively contains some is tantamount to claiming that war is peace because of interludes between battles. Unqualified, it is an oxymoronic assertion that recalls 1984 (Orwell 1961). Like propaganda, its credibility rests on repetition without reflection.

With reflection, the effective import of aesthetics and emotion in ads is difficult to deny. Few consumers have an academic's inclination for pedantic prose or deductive didactics. Practitioners have known this for a century. (For the early history, needing updating, of the trade's model of man, the schemers' schema, see Curti 1967, McMahon 1972, and Marchand 1985). Lear (1984, p. 376) quotes a 19th century Printer's Ink contributor assessing consumers as "grown up children... full of emotion; easily excited through the eye and ear, the aesthetic sensibilities and the affections; slow to respond to cold logic; easily tired and bored by too much argument, by diagrams and prosaic common sense." A Printer's Ink (1891, p. 809) editorial advised copywriters to "write to impress fools... not ministers and college professors, but for ignoramuses, and you will be just as likely to catch college professors."

Advertising is myth information. Even if sparse in specific product information, ads do contain information of a general nature (e.g., that a brand/product is available, or what behaviors get what rewards, or that a certain type of person is portrayed as a content user). From it we also can learn what product use appears appropriate and about fashion, social trends, lifestyles, norms, etc. The bias of advertisers to disclose only positive product information is understood even by children in our culture, so perhaps such "data" are appropriately discounted. Do we counterargue internally and discount the other lessons, largely visual and nonverbal, that are intrinsic to the litany of advertising? Probably less so, for we are less aware of source bias along these deeper dimensions. If lessons for living are learned from advertising, among other sources, then condensed TV spots are the mythic tales for modern times and the problem/solution format is a miniature morality play (Hall 1984; Price 1978). Multiple advertisers repeat common mythic structures and social tableaux (Marchand 1985). With little contradiction, either internally or from other ads, it is as myths and morals that ads may most durably inform and educate.

11. Values are desirable, by all definitions. Formal definitions, elaboration, and the start of an axiology of advertising are in Pollay (1983). Popular use of "values" is often loose, as though some people have values and others do not. "Values" should refer to those criteria and standards of judgment that govern both goals and behavior. We all have values, just as we all have motives, needs, or personality traits. We can be described or measured along common dimensions. Values are deemed among the dimensions of the deep structure of personality, influencing perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. Specific value dimensions, such as maturity, practicality, modesty, courtesy, dignity, health, popularity, freedom, pride, and security, are often "motherhood" criteria endorsed by most people. Cultural values are inevitably largely shared values. What distinguishes individuals, then, is not the list of values they endorse but the relative importance of those values. This value hierarchy influences thoughts, feelings, and behavior when competing value considerations conflict, as they do in all but trivial decision situations. People, like politicians seeking election, often sound alike when listing their values, but differ markedly when push comes to shove. Charity, for example, is a widely endorsed
value, but there are major differences between individuals on when it is salient, for whom it is appropriate, its importance in relation to other value considerations, and the magnitude of its behavioral impact.

Salience is valuable, and values are salient. Any and all messages modifying salience communicate what is or is not important, what should be valued. Adapting the work of Boyd, Ray, and Strong (1972), invoking a multiattribute product preference model, Holbrook outlines three strategic options available to the advertiser. Of these, only one is identified as an influence on values. This is a critical misunderstanding, reflective of our modest and nearly dormant literature on values (Pitts and Woodside 1984). The strategy of altering salience, the relevance and relative importance of decision criteria, is an operational altering of values. Holbrook says this strategy "leaves the value intact while only shifting its priority." I do not understand this notion, finding it self-contradictory. What are priorities if not manifest values?

Individual advertisers have little hope for an appreciable effect on value systems that result from socialization since birth. Thus their intent and, it is argued, their impact is only to change value salience in a specific product context. However, if many messages tell a consumer about the importance of economy, for example, why assume that consumers conclude it best to be economical and prudent for just those products so advertised? Why not consider and study salience generalization across products or situations?

Advertising may have many effects, such as the modeling of sex roles, but the issue of values transcends all such specific concerns. Of all the aspects of advertising that might be studied, values have the most profound implications and are the most meaningful to the larger academic community and the community at large.

Is advertising impotent? Can advertising influence fundamentals such as a person's values? Advertising is clearly not an omnipotent master, nor is the consumer a helpless puppet. Despite the wealth of resources and research tools available to major advertisers, and their ability to avoid most major mistakes through analysis, pretesting, and campaign monitoring, competitive success is by no means guaranteed. Despite elaborate methods of consumer and advertising research focusing and validating the creative effort, the creation of successful ads is still an artful, craftsman's activity without total predictability or control.

We must not leap to the opposite position that advertising is ignorant or impotent, like some licensed pantaloons (Hoggart 1968, p. 52), modern society's court jester tolerated by the gentry because it is perceived as entertaining, but powerless. Industry spokespersons often claim ineffectiveness when faced with criticism and effectiveness when selling their services to clients, talking their skills up or down to suit their self-interest. Thus, the impotence idea is often just evasive equivocation. More significantly, the impotence defense misses the point and fails to contain the criticism by confusing levels of analysis. No matter what the problems facing the individual advertiser, one cannot conclude that there are no effects whatsoever from relentless, intrusive repetitions of diverse exhortations to consume.

"When it rains, its pours!" Consider an analogy of ads to raindrops. Individually raindrops are benign and have little noticeable impact. People can readily avoid most drops by their behavior and clothing, like experiencing ads with selective attention and protective cynical attitudes. Nonetheless, when raindrops abound, people are increasingly likely to get wet and are subjected to attendant risks of discomfort and disease. Moreover, the protective effort, whether or not successful, requires defensive gear that itself restricts behavior. In heavy rain individuals become preoccupied, and in extreme conditions overwhelmed, despite the fact that each raindrop by itself is inconsequential. Such is the micro/macro difference between isolated and aggregated phenomena.

The Missing Links?

A fully developed theory of advertising acculturation could well include linkages to personality, family dynamics, peer influences, ethnicity, religion, and other factors and draw upon research and thought from many social sciences and humanities. Our marketing and consumer behavior perspective, though partial, gives us some insights into the managerial intentions of advertising, the processes of its creation, and its comprehension by consumers that can inform the discussion.

Reality exists, even if theory does not. Our current failure to have an explicit theory of advertising acculturation does not imply that advertising has no such influence, or that the views of others are mistaken. Theory can provide a logic for inference, guide the research effort and, as requested in this case, codify an argument to offer premises for debate and (hopefully) advance its plausibility. Let us now examine the essential argument that substantiates the expectation of cultural consequences from advertising. It is this logic that should be discredited before dismissing all the specific hypotheses in "The Distorted Mirror" without research.

Advertising has impact, because of any or all of
the following factors. Advertising is (1) persuasive by intent and design, (2) pervasive, encountered with repetition in multiple media and contexts, and (3) professionally conceived, developed, and deployed. The experience of dedicated professionals is involved in consumer research, writing, pretesting, production, media buying, campaign monitoring, and so on. Large budgets of major accounts cover these costs and produce (4) artful ads with attention to fine detail. These crafted communications (5) display, celebrate, and endorse the products and related values, attitudes, and behaviors and (6) all aspects are made commonplace and legitimated by virtue of being public without protest.

Advertising communicates values. The values that are the core of these messages are made manifest and publicly applauded. That they are both reminded and reinforced potentially affects both their salience and strength. The communication of values lies at the heart of advertising (Pollay 1983) as is already recognized from a managerial perspective (e.g., Olson and Reynolds 1983). Communication that induces perception of objects or services as "goods" is always an expression of values. The "reason why" the offering is desirable is because of something valued. The copy argument is on the rhetorical frontier where writer and reader share the asserted values and further argument goes without saying.

Advertising is a distorted mirror. It reflects only certain values and lifestyles. More operationally, the value hierarchy of aggregate advertising is not well correlated with that of its host culture. This hypothesis is the common social perception of advertising as an unreal picture of reality. It is also derivable from recognizing that not all values are equally likely to be commercialized and employed in advertising because some values are (1) more readily attached to existing products, (2) easier to make visual or dramatic, or (3) provoke more reliable or potent consumer response. (This is not isomorphic to importance. A knee's reliable and manifest reflex does not make it the most important part of anatomy.) The value hierarchy of ads might also be independent from the host culture because (4) professional marketing and advertising personnel are a particular corporate subculture (Bensman 1967; Marchand 1985; Norris 1983).

Advertising is a distorting mirror. This is a corollary to all the above, as reinforcement of some values strengthens them or expands their domains of salience. With selective reinforcement of values by advertising feedback into the culture, cultural evolution can be expected toward the values seen in commercial communication.

Is that bad? Only research, and then value judgments, will tell. Research will someday portray the cultural character of advertising. How good or bad it seems will depend on the specific findings and the value bases for judging them.

Recap and Research Recommendations

Holbrook recognizes the need for serious discussion, theory that is more than a "sociological wave of the hand," and empirical research. He calls our attention to the risks of elitist views of advertising. He constructively adds counterexamples of positive dimensions in contemporary TV ads. Unfortunately, his inferences and discussion sometimes misrepresent the literature.

He joins the evil queen from the Grimm fairy tale in addressing the "mirror, mirror on the wall," perhaps forgetting that this mirror was always truthful. The queen's vanity and intolerance of this truthfulness made her intent to deny the fairness of others. This tale reminds us how careful we must be not to let our desire to see ourselves as virtuous blind us to the truth. The truth about advertising's cultural role, like the truth about ourselves, is likely to reveal both virtue and fault, wherever we draw those distinctions. None of us is either evil incarnate or Snow White. We must tolerate our imperfections and not sweep aside the indictment of "The Distorted Mirror" to avoid its dissonance.

Research is clearly called for. Without research how are we to judge whether the indictment in "The Distorted Mirror" is accurate or overwrought? Are the contentions only the analytic distortions of the academic community or actual distortions that result from the mirroring process? Our theories, methods, and perspectives can address many interesting research questions.

- Are any of the many specific concerns of "The Distorted Mirror" realistic? What, for example, is the history of the materialistic "buy-ological" urge (Pollay 1985b)? How does the marginal propensity to consume reflect affluence and advertising?
- Is the indictment of "The Distorted Mirror" biased? Inventory the cultural dimensions of samples of ads, adding "positive" dimensions to those suggested.
- What is the axiology of advertising? What is the role of values in ads, and the role of ads in value transmission?
- How do consumers decode visual versus verbal messages? What is their relative effect on attitudes (Mitchell 1986)? Is there counterarguing about the visual or covert content as there is for overt verbal messages? Is there a sleeper effect, etc.?

- Is the mirror of advertising distorted? Does the value hierarchy of advertising correlate with society’s? Or segments’?
- Is the mirror of advertising distorting? Is there cultural drift toward the values endorsed by advertising?
- What is the impact of advertising in other cultures? For example, what will be the cultural and political effects of China’s recent embracing of advertising?

The CEO of a major New York ad agency (McCabe 1985, p. 629) recently called for finding “a different kind of yardstick to take the measure of advertising. Unless we do, no amount of self-regulation, self-adulation, or self-righteous denials of our culpability will significantly increase our stature in the public’s eyes.” We can all help create and deploy such yardsticks. There is work enough for generations to come, and generations to come can profit from the work.

REFERENCES


——— and Mark W. Grayson (1986), “Cinematic Con-


Printers Ink (1991), Editorial, 5 (December 30), 809.
