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Senior Thesis: Research Paper # 1  
September 29, 2001

## The Propaganda of the Commercial Culture.

America is a commercial culture and advertising is its lifeblood. What this means exactly and how this affects you and I is less simply stated. Living within this commercial culture it is often difficult to be objective and to be aware of its affect. There is an ongoing debate about the negative and positive effects of this commercial culture on the individual, which I will only briefly touch upon. Looking at how historically we came to be a commercial culture can give some understanding in how it may affect us. Understanding that advertising is a form of propaganda, which reinforces this culture, gives us the tools to critique and better defend against it.

A commercial culture, as defined by Bogart, is when products occupy the central place in that culture<sup>1</sup>. He also stated that communication and expression have no meaning without a market value in a commercial culture. This differs markedly from other societies where the focus of the society can be to gain a higher spiritual attunement, an ideology, or simply survival.

America was founded on the beliefs of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Democracy allows choice in beliefs, lifestyles, and class mobility. America is not tied to the burden of aristocracy, class, and guilds to the same degree as the Old World. Isn't the American Dream really the rags to riches story? Anyone could become the next Gates with a little luck and hard work. Early on in American society the acquiring of material possessions was equated with success.<sup>2</sup>

This has changed little over the years; James Twitchell has even gone so far as to state "democracy is the right to buy anything you want."<sup>3</sup> He sees the freedom to buy what you want, from who, and when as one of the factors for Communism falling. America may be in the lead as the consumer culture but there are countries all over wanting that same freedom. Products also in part define who we are. The products we buy can form identity and our lifestyle is built around those products.<sup>4</sup> When we speak of yuppies, gen-Xers, and baby boomers certain cars, music, and clothes are associated with those groups.

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<sup>1</sup>Commercial Culture (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Bogart, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> "Two Cheers for Materialism." The Wilson Quarterly (Spring 1999) : 2.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Ashe Berger. Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture. (Lanham, MD:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000), p. 24-23.

This reflected a broader change in American society. Before the turn of the 20th century, wealth and value was placed in the land itself. Agriculture placed the emphasis on producing goods from the home; anything that couldn't be made at home was bartered for with travelling peddlers or general stores. As more of the population moved from rural to urban areas we see a shift of the home as producer to consumer of goods.<sup>5</sup> The new urban population was more mobile, dependent on mass-produced goods, and wage earners rather than self-sufficient.<sup>6</sup> The mass-production of goods was a result and cause of America shifting to an economy of bartering to monetary exchange.

This value shift in the early 1900s both attracted and confused new immigrants. Most immigrants were unfamiliar with the new monetary system. Many social scientists of the time spoke for the need of immigrants to join the melting pot and accept the new values of the commercial culture. "Americanization" was not just learning a new language and customs but learning to measure one's success by material possessions.<sup>7</sup>

Commercial culture has always been dependent on the consumer to buy, if not at the present rate, then at a higher rate. The economy was able to provide not only the necessities of life but luxury items once out of reach of the common people. Soon mass produced products flooded towns across the country with the advent of better transportation and distribution systems.<sup>8</sup> The development of mail order catalogs like Sears & Roebuck provided alluring text and images to the masses. This early form of advertising allowed the illiterate or those with little other material to read, a world of goods never imagined before.<sup>9</sup> In the urban areas the new phenomenon of department stores made concrete the world of the catalog. Products were not only on display, they were enshrined in palatial surroundings. Lavish construction led the consumer to associate these goods with a fantasy world.<sup>10</sup>

The abundance of products led to an increased demand for the new and innovative.<sup>11</sup> However the innovations are often superficial to the product. This is thanks in part to Earnest Elmo Calkins who, in the late 1920's, wrote about the importance of programmed obsolescence. He felt that all products needed a

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<sup>5</sup>Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen Channels of Desire : Mass Images and the shaping of American Consciousness. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ewens, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ewens, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ewens, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Ewens, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ewens, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Bogart, p. 66-67.

style makeover from time to time to encourage the consumer to buy.<sup>12</sup> Victor Papanek has long railed against the stylistic and artificial obsolescence that pervades this culture, where products are disposed of because they are no longer "cool" or made cheaply.<sup>13</sup> It's still happening today, haven't you ever watched a commercial and wondered what really makes this new version of Crest better than the last?

So how does the industry reach the consumers with their new and innovative products? How does America keep the commercial culture expanding? Advertising, of course.

Simon Pattern, who wrote "The Consumption of Wealth" in 1892, anticipated the power of mass imagery in advertising. He felt that advertising provided a means for everyone, including the poor, to have access to beauty. Advertisements, past and present, have been hung like works of art on people's walls.<sup>14</sup>

Advertising is not limited to TV ads or radio commercials. Ads can take the form of billboards, product placement in movies, infomercials, and packaging to name a few. Ads create a message to motivate the consumer to buy the product, create positive associations, or at least remember the brand. This fairly straightforward definition is well known to the public. Advertising is not just selling a product. It is promising a happier, sexier, cooler you. The ad promise is often too big to ever be realized. What kind of affect does this have on the consumer? Most people feel they are aware of advertising but that it doesn't influence them.<sup>15</sup>

However, this I find difficult to believe when you look at some statistics. The U.S. is seen as the leader in the advertising industry. In 1998 alone, the U.S. spent \$ 200.3 billion on all forms of advertising. The rest of the world, combined, only spent \$ 218.4 billion.<sup>16</sup> Advertising supports the majority of the media; nine-tenths of the media you view is ad supported.<sup>17</sup> People in the US are exposed to about 3,000 ads a day.<sup>18</sup> The overwhelmingly pervasiveness of advertising must have some sort of affect on the public.

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Heller. "Advertising : The Mother of Graphic Design." Looking Closer 2. Eds. Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller, and DK Holland. (New York : Allworth Press, 1997), p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Papanek. Design for the Real World. (Chicago : Academy Chicago Publishers, 1985), p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Pattern. The Consumption of Wealth. 1892; quoted in Ewens p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ashe Berger, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Bogart, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Mary E. Gomes, et al. "Advertising, Community, and Self." ReVision (Spring 1998), p. 1.

But is advertising a form of propaganda? First let me define propaganda, this is not easily done as there is as many definitions as there are dictionaries. There is also the problem of the negative connotations associated with propaganda, so let's set aside any moral judgements about propaganda for the moment. Many of us conjure up images of WWII posters that are overtly trying to ply your emotions. Today's propaganda attributes, methods, and styles have changed to adapt to the increasing media sophistication of the viewer and the sheer barrage of messages received everyday. Alex Edlstein's book, *Total Propaganda*, explores the evolution of propaganda from "oldprop" to the more sophisticated "newprop."<sup>19</sup> It all involves "The systematic widespread promotion of a particular doctrine or idea."<sup>20</sup> The delivery and approach have just improved.

Advertising falls under this category for several reasons as listed by Jowett and O'Donnell.<sup>21</sup> It is easiest to see when you compare the two side by side.

Propaganda	Advertising
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institution or agency with an agenda</li> <li>• Hires outside agency to create message</li> <li>• Message is created only to further agenda</li> <li>• Medium is found to transmit message to target audience</li> <li>• Message encourages audience to complete agenda</li> <li>• Audience may refuse to accept agenda, become more receptive to message, or comply with agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company wants you to buy their product/service</li> <li>• Hires ad agency or creates ads themselves</li> <li>• Ad is created only to get consumers to buy</li> <li>• Media is the method to get ad to the target consumer</li> <li>• Ad encourages audience to buy product or service</li> <li>• Consumer may not buy product, may remember the product in future, or buy the product</li> </ul>

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<sup>19</sup> Alex Edelstein. *Total Propaganda*. (Mahwah, NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Riverside Webster's II Dictionary

<sup>21</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. (Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage Publications Inc., 1999), p. 149.

This linear process of sending and receiving messages is more complex than at first glance. There are devices both rhetorical and visual that strive to influence the receiver. Some are rather obvious and others require a bit more critical thinking. In the case of advertising, Jamieson and Campbell set forth five general ways to persuade the consumer .<sup>22</sup>

1. *Recognition* through a brand, logo, or packaging.
2. *Differentiation from the competition*. Some unique selling point that lets a product stand out which may or may not have anything to do with the actual product.
3. *Favorable associations*. Ads create an association of the product with a positive experience.
4. *Participation*. Identifying with the characters and situations within the ad, use of humor, suggesting that this ad isn't manipulative.
5. *Redundancy*. Repeating the ad itself many times or repetition of elements within the ad.

The ad agencies still employ the seven major rhetorical devices first laid out in 1937 by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.<sup>23</sup>

1. Name-calling. Labeling other brands as bad, ineffective, outdated, etc.
2. Glittering generalities. Associating a product with a "virtue word" without any real evidence to support it.
3. Transfer. Associating an opinion leader or respected person with the product.
4. Testimonial.
5. Plain folks, "one of us."
6. Card Stacking. Putting the best face forward on the product by omission or misrepresentation of the facts.
7. Band Wagon. Everyone is doing it!

Visual cues reinforce these rhetorical devices and make a heady mix of meaning on several levels. Every discipline has looked to deconstructing advertising to find the underlying gender, sociological, psychological, etc. message. Using the questions below, anyone can deconstruct an ad to see how visual cues play a part in the propaganda process. Many of these questions come from Ashe Berger's book with a few of my own.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karyl Kohrs Campbell. The Interplay of Influence. (Belmont, CA : Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), chpt. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Jowett and O'Donnell, p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> Ashe Berger, p. 104-5.

1. What is the composition of the ad? Is it balanced? What mood does it convey?
2. Is there a distinct style? What demographics does this style appeal to?
3. What is given the most focus in the ad? The text, product, logo, etc.? Is the product even in the ad?
4. What angles are we looking at the ad? What emotions does this evoke?
5. What is the mood of the lighting?
6. What colors are dominate? What do you associate with these colors (culturally and emotionally)?
7. Describe the people and the environment in the ad. Is it well to do or down home? Look for any allusion to class, gender, religion, ethnicity, education, etc. How does this change the context of the ad?
8. What is the story in the ad?
9. Is there any symbols or signs in the ad? What do they say in this context?
10. Identify the product or service being advertised. What do you associate with this product? Who uses it? Where is it placed in the society?
11. Is there any beliefs or values promoted in the advertisement?
12. Do you need context to make sense of this ad? Is there a larger campaign that provides the background?
13. What assumptions are being made? Is it assumed that there is even a need for the product?

Even with all these devices at work, advertising doesn't always work. Ads generally don't follow the argument of post hoc, ergo propter hoc.<sup>25</sup> In other words, just because I see an ad for Guess jeans doesn't mean I'll buy Guess jeans next time I'm at the department store. In fact studies have shown that only 7 % of consumers could remember the brand from a commercial seen just 4 minutes before.<sup>26</sup> We are not passive viewers that will respond to every message. Advertising should be viewed as an influence in the broader cultural and social context. It may not be the sole reason for a behavior but it can play a major role.<sup>27</sup>

This influence can be felt in the murky areas of the unconscious. Jung and Freud both believed that we put too much stock in the concept of will power and the conscious mind.<sup>28</sup> They believed that many perceptions are taken in by the unconscious without our knowledge. I'm not talking about subliminal advertising but the everyday overload of ads. Several contemporary social psychologists have built upon

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<sup>25</sup> Ashe Berger, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Jamieson and Campbell, p. 224.

<sup>27</sup> Ashe Berger, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Carl G. Jung. Man and his Symbols. (New York : Dell, 1972), p. 22.

this to develop the theory of exposure learning. They found that the more times a person is exposed to a positive stimulus the more they like it. Familiarity seems to reinforce already existing positive or negative associations.<sup>29</sup> Most of us, child and adult alike, can sing the jingles ("two all beef-patties") or quote the slogan ("Just Do It"). Familiarity with the brand will probably have some affect when we try to choose between two products with the same price and quality.

Advertising has an often-unseen affect on the news and programming we receive. The public sees newspapers, TV, and radio as a medium for information and entertainment. Many of us don't think of them as a way of capturing audiences for commercial purposes. The "free" media's first customer is the advertiser that pays the bills. The media attracts advertisers with the promise of new markets and audiences. This system has given us a huge variety of channels but little variety in viewpoints. The media will often self-censor or buckle under advertiser pressure to avoid a loss of revenue.<sup>30</sup> Censorship also comes in the form of ownership. The majority of TV, newspapers, magazines, book publishers, and internet providers are owned by only 7 corporations.<sup>31</sup> These corporations also have extensive holdings in other industries like nuclear power, defense, and oil. This conflict of interest leads to subtle censorship like the placement of ads next to non-controversial stories in magazines<sup>32</sup> to the omission of newstories that may reflect badly on the parent company.

A study that interviewed forty people from divergent backgrounds about the role advertising plays in their lives reveals some of the universal needs it plays upon. Advertisements were seen as not just giving information about a product but defining social norms. The participants felt conflicted about wanting to being their "true" selves and being accepted by the consumer culture. Advertising creates the image and lifestyle for the consumer to buy with the products. The participants also wanted to see their culture, gender, and other personal traits reflected in the ads. Groups that aren't portrayed in ads or depicted stereotypically led to a sense of alienation among those in the groups.<sup>33</sup> Feminists have long criticized the way women are depicted in the advertising as victims of violence, an unattainable body, or a sex object. Different ethnic groups are excluded from mainstream ads. There is growing concern over a sense of isolation in this culture, which some critics blame on this consumer culture. There is growing debate in a wide range of disciplines about the possible negative affects of advertising.

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<sup>29</sup> Jowett and O'Donnell, p. 177.

<sup>30</sup> Jamieson and Campbell, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> Adbusters. [http://adbusters.org/campaigns/mediacarta/toolbox/who\\_owns/](http://adbusters.org/campaigns/mediacarta/toolbox/who_owns/)

<sup>32</sup> Gloria Steinam "Sex, Lies, & Advertising." *Ms.* (Sept. / Oct. 1997), p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Mary E. Gomes and et al., pg. 2.

In the current economy advertising is a necessity to keep the status quo. But the omnipresent advertising may have some serious consequences to our environment, our health, and well being. It is no longer an issue of if advertising has an effect but to what extent and the nature of that affect. The myth of passive consumers has been left in the past. As consumers in this culture we must question what we see, understand it's affect on us, and decide when to turn the tables on the advertising industry.

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