

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE & MANAGEMENT

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ADVERTISING: A SUBVERSION OF MEANINGFUL LIVING

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era of globalisation and market economy, the most common methodology adopted by the corporate houses is to foster consumption among people and, thereby, to maximise the profits through increased demand. This process is conveniently called marketing. Today advertising appears to be everywhere: on television, on billboards, in newspapers and magazines. Corporations pay enormous sums for "naming rights" of public facilities so that their brand is kept in people's minds. Marketing research devises ever more sophisticated means of reaching the public and shaping people's preferences. But most of the time this process is nothing else but propaganda and a bundle of concealed lies aimed at luring the people into a trap. This kind of commercial practice intended to cultivate a new kind of hyper consumerist culture is ecologically unsustainable, culturally hollow, socially unviable and economically lopsided. It subverts everything that human beings cherish so dearly – democracy, freedom, equality, fairness and individuality. It pollutes their sensibility and imagination. So the dirty culture of consumerism driven by the paddles of advertising, which thrives on selling lies and fraud to the innocent people need to be checked or regulated, if not eliminated completely. My research paper makes an attempt to look at the various cultural fall outs of this culture of consumerism propelled by advertising, and tries to underline an urgent need for a counter culture based on needs instead of a culture of greed. Only a need based culture can ensure peace, happiness and sustainability.

KEYWORDS

advertising, marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The present historical juncture, with its nearly total acceptance and ascendancy of the culture of corporate capitalism riding on the unholy wings of advertising as its support mechanism, suggests a definitive dangerous shift. Whereas on the one hand this unholy alliance of corporatisation and advertising threatens the very substance of democracy as a political philosophy or instrument fundamental to the most cherished ideals of freedom, equality and justice; on the other it subverts the very meaning and purpose of life. With the neo-liberal culture and values assisted by the Western sponsored agencies of WTO, IMF and World Bank gaining a monstrous hold over all the instruments and institutions of social, cultural and economic change, the neo-liberal capitalism has completely substituted market relations for the rule of justice and law, substantially deflating the power of nation states, civil society or individuals for any kind of ethical intervention. In such a situation it becomes more difficult for educators, students, and citizens to address the social and moral issues in dialogic and political terms in the face of loud claims and counter claims of advertising Gurus. Underlying such a discourse is the need to interrogate the ever-growing influence of advertising, feeding the insatiable greed of the neo-liberalism, corporate power, and corporate politics, and thus alters the basic ethics of living.

OBJECTIVES

This article tries to examine the fundamental shift in society as a consequence of the inter-connections between corporate culture and advertising. The paper argues that the ways in which we are currently being asked to reimagine the concept and meaning of life can well be one of the most important indicators of a dangerous shift in public discourse. The paper also underlines the view that the struggle to reclaim an authentic meaning of life in its true spirit must be seen as part of a broader contest over the defence of democratic ideals of equality, individual freedom and justice. Today when the entire youth is in the horrible grip of advertising as the only viable mode of education for living, there is an urgent need to relook at the sad shift in the directionality of life in general and the sensibilities of the people at large as a result of advertising on human imagination.

DISCUSSION

Today what we confront today is a different kind of reality. It is called a 'Brave New World' of globalisation. It is driven, more or less, by a singular ideology. This ideology is called free market or market economy. It has created a new mythology, a new religion. This religion is worshipped at the altar of consumerism. India too has adopted this ideology and liberalised its economy for global market. The main aim of this market economy is the promotion of a new "culture of materiality", "culture of greed" (Shiva, The Hindu). This ideology thrives on the increasing demand and sale of its products, and to maximise the profits. To achieve this aim of creating demand and making profits, the big companies and production houses try to control the behaviour of the consumers, by whatever means possible, exploiting the potential weakness that exists in human imagination. This process is today hailed as advertising. It is our imaginations that advertising exploits by telling stories and suggesting morals to be learnt. This ideology of consumerism uses advertising to serve its contrived sermons so as to control the minds and imagination of its potential consumers.

But I don't think that the advertising serves any useful or meaningful purpose in the process of life. The world of advertising is an artificial and fake world. People generally earn their livelihood by doing some useful work to fulfil their material needs. They also engage themselves in the societal pursuits for a more meaningful existence on the face of the earth in their spare hours. However the advertising deflects the attention of the people from these noble pursuits and confines their causes and cares to the material existence alone. Madonna's lyrical voice gives a true reflection to this new age *Mantra* in a song:

Each possession you possess helps your spirits soar
 Something's better than nothing, yes!

But nothing's better than more, more, more

Advertising people create demand for the product where it is not even needed at all. They concoct and create want where want does not exist. The more useless and undesirable the thing, the greater is the effort in advertising to push it down the throats of people. The poor consumers have to share the cost of advertising as well. In fact we do not find anyone promoting the things which are urgently needed for essential living. Tobacco and cosmetics are the biggest markets for advertising. It is nothing else but a mischief played on the minds of the simple people.

Advertising also corrupts our sensibilities and sensitivities. When everything in life has been reduced to a commercial commodity, all beautiful things of life like love, nature, art, painting, literature and language lose their meaning and relevance. The entire world of aesthetics is also corrupted by the people in advertising to lure and entice people to their nefarious designs. Even instinctuality and spirituality, the two cherished emotions, lose their value and are reduced to serve some utilitarian cause. Twitchell has rightly put it like: "Consumerism is wasteful, it is devoid of otherworldly concerns, and it lives for today and celebrates the body. It encourages recklessness, living beyond one's means, gambling (Twitchell 4)." In Brave New World, a great work of fiction written by Aldous Huxley, the present is regarded higher than any spiritual state of mind. When John asks, "Is there any hope? (Huxley 89)" in referring to his dying mother, the nurse is confused and asks, "Do you mean of her not dying. No, of course there isn't. When somebody sent here, there's no... (Huxley 89)" she is stopped by John's expression of distress and nonchalantly asks, "Why, whatever is the matter (Huxley 89)." This shows a complete disregard even for death in the brave new world

and how it is overtaken by materialistic things for the good of society. Instead of holding services and a proper burial for people who die, death is looked at as an industry, in which phosphorus is returned to the soil. This is the only way to give some meaning and purpose to one's death in this brave new world.

Today on the entire landscape, roads and trees we find a vulgar display of advertising billboards glaring at us all the time. The whole beauty of nature and space has been marred by these ugly lies. The famous and celebrated people are hired by the advertising agencies to sponsor their products. These big people change their brands like their clothes. One day we find a famous celebrity sponsoring one product, a drink, in exchange for a huge pay package. We should not be alarmed to find the same celebrity appearing on our television screens holding another product of a rival company and flaunting it as the best one without any shame or compunction. The beautiful faces and the beautiful art of language are shamelessly used to spread lies and to create false images in the minds of the people. Even the gifted intellectuals and artists have been lured into the world of advertisement to coin new clichés and images for the false propaganda of the corporate houses. The noble aim of 'art for art sake' has been totally shunned or side-lined in the unholy quest to make a few bucks. The famous phrase "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going" is conveniently reshaped and re-coined as "When the going get tough, the tough go shopping. And sometimes even get happy (Twitchell 1)." Advertising has hired the best of minds to befool the masses. As a consequence what we find is a crazy youth preferring goods above religion, family, and education; visiting malls and cafeteria over temples.

When the advertising world has taken over the modern youth, especially the ones with an easy access to the information technology, in its fold; women are the worst victims. The advertising agencies funded and financed by cosmetic industry hold beauty contests and fashion shows. The beautiful girls are attracted to the modelling profession. These beauty queens are employed to advertise and promote the sale of certain products. But this entire process of defining beauty and glamour has polluted the minds of the people. The little do these people realise what effect it has on the impressionable young minds who are not blessed with a beautiful face or body. The notion of beauty propagated by these beauty product companies leave behind a trail of woes and a sense of shame in the minds of the less fortunate young girls. The standard that the media sets is impossible to reach (Richins 71). But this falsification of reality leaves behind a trail of inadequacy. The difference between the images flashed on our TV screens and the actual reality of one's physical sometimes results in creating a sense of lower self-esteem, (Tiggemann 23). Often these images lead to unhappiness and neuroticism (Richins 71). It is this ugly craze to look beautiful that has made so many young ladies line up before the surgery saloons for a plastic surgery on their faces. This violence on human body to acquire a certain standard of beauty propagated through advertising images is nothing but a criminal act. In addition to this there are so many young girls who are lured into this glamorous world of fashion and beauty. When they fail to make a mark, they are left into a dark world of dejection and frustration. Just to sell a few soaps and creams, and of course to earn crores, so many young lives are ruined.

There is a substantial amount of research available today to show the horrible consequences of the objectification of women in advertising. This objectification of women in advertising clearly creates stereotypes about women's status and roles in society. Much of what appears in the advertisement promotes the idea of a domesticated woman painted in a "decorative" manner, focusing on the female figure and sex appeal, (Reichert, Issues, 171). This type of advertising has both long-term and short-term effects on people (Reichert, Issues 172). Impressionable minds of the children view these images on media and absorb the roles of different genders in society through exposure to media (Reichert, Issues 173). In addition to this, these sexist or objectifying images of women, when consistently viewed in advertisements, can change how people view themselves, sometimes affecting ambition and worthiness (Reichert, Issues 173). Since sex has always fascinated people's behaviour, young smart women are often used or misused to lure the people to a certain product through sex appeal. At the psychological level these visuals create a negative effect on man woman relationship. Research has also proved that by presenting women as both sex objects and victims, society is desensitized to violence against women (Bessenoff 580). Some of the scholars of sociology attribute the recent spurt in violence and rapes against women to this tendency of the media to show women as a symbol of sexual objectification.

The most devastating effect of advertising is on the young innocent children. 'Catch them young' is a common grammar of the advertising industry. Influenced by the beautiful imagery of the ads, the children tend to create their own world view which views happiness as a direct consequence of the material gratification. This negative mind set, which refuses to acknowledge anything higher in life and reduces it to a mere material fulfilment, is the biggest threat to an authentic living. Children tend to take everything as it appears through the 'rich world' of images and messages unfolding before them. Children are not aware of hidden agenda or strategy of marketing. Impelled by this surreal world they start making all kinds of demands on their parents. Lucy Hughes, the director of strategy for the large communications management company, Initiative Media, has done extensive research developing advertising strategies to exploit what she calls the "Nag Factor" (Hughes, 122)." In an interview, Hughes reports that "anywhere from 20 percent to 40 percent of purchases would not have occurred unless the children had nagged the parents (121)" Greater demand for junk food among children is a dangerous offshoot of this demon of food ads. One of the main reasons for the rise in obesity among children these days is the excessive consumption of junk food and fast food. Indian children may not be aware of "Lassi" which has a greater nutritious value, but they all are well acquainted with all the brands of cold drinks, MacDonald Pizzas and K C F products available in the markets. Since innocent children today in general are more susceptible to the ad world of images, in such a situation it becomes the responsibility of the parents to guide them through this wild maze of false dreams. Nowadays, with so much easy access and exposure to all shades of media, the parents need to be constantly watchful about what their children are watching. Some of the countries have prohibited the marketing and advertising companies from targeting children below the age of twelve.

Advertising industry perpetuates and thrives on the myth that the ultimate gratification and fulfilment can be obtained through consumption. This is a dangerous hypothesis which is not only anti-nature but anti-social and anti-culture as well. This falsification has the potential to pollute everything from our imagination to our simple pleasures achieved through the warmth of human emotions. This tendency ultimately affects our entire edifice of human relationships, camaraderie and socio-cultural bonds. The traditional cultural values of our society today are already under duress in the face of this onslaught of the power of corporate politics and the impact of mass media. These materialistic and consumerist tendencies have reduced us only to a number striving hard to live up to an image projected in media through advertising. In this crazy world man has been reduced to what he wears, what he eats and what he drives. What he thinks has become absolutely irrelevant. We have almost lost the sense of self-awareness and self-esteem. There is always a feeling that we are not good enough because we do not adequately fit into the model perpetuated by the advertising world. We are either too fat, too thin, too tall, too short, too smart, too dumb, too poor, or too unlucky. Uneasiness has become our fate.

Our society is finding itself in complete bondage of an oppressive power structure of media generated images and illusions. Holding the credit cards inside their deep pockets, the modern generation goes out to locate a perennial theme of happy living in Malls and Big Bazars. Little do they realise that it is a deep pit of consumerism in which we have been trapped by the commercial advertisements and their 'pleasant' dreams. Most people do not realize that consumerism offers only short-term ego-gratification for those who can afford the luxury. In actuality it is nothing but an incomplete system of false values, and a poor substitute for our rich cultural heritage, music, literature and art.

CONCLUSION

Consumerism perpetuated through advertising has created a strange stranglehold in every walk of our life. It has affected every layer of life, be it economy, be it society, be it aesthetics or be it environment. The biggest problem with advertising is that much of what is said or flashed across is false and misleading. Not only do people become deceived by the images they visualise on screen, but in the process their moral and cultural values degenerate as well. Women and children are the worst sufferers. However the fact is that no society can sustain itself feeding itself on the false images created by the agents of greed for profit. Man does not live around material possessions alone. Today there is an urgent need to look for an alternate model of living which can ensure a more sustainable and more authentic mode of life for the global citizens. This also means that we will have to learn to shun the path of falsity and imagery and try to refocus our energies on the real existential issues. Advertising is certainly a myth making which must be properly controlled and regulated, if not eliminated completely, by removing the veils of falsehood from its 'beautiful' face.

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