Advertising and the Public Sphere

Ozlem Sandikci, Bilkent University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Critics have blamed advertising for manipulating people, creating and instilling false needs and values, promoting materialism, perpetuating stereotypes, and presenting a personal world of consumption sheltered from social problems (e.g., Haug 1986; Kellner 1990; Lasch 1979; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986; Pollay 1986; Schiller 1989; Schudson 1984; Williamson 1978). Many have condemned the advertising institution for its contribution to the development and reinforcement of an undemocratic social order by fostering concentration of enormous economic and cultural power in the hands of a few corporations (e.g., Jhally 1987; Kellner 1989; Schiller 1989). Although there might be some validity in these criticisms, developments during the 1990s, among which is the relocation of advertising to an explicitly political forum by companies, such as Benetton, Diesel, FCUK and Body shop, call for rethinking the role of advertising as something more than a hegemonic tool of the capitalist ideology.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8877/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Advertising and the Public Sphere
Ozlem Sandikci, Bilkent University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Critics have blamed advertising for manipulating people, creating and instilling false needs and values, promoting materialism, perpetuating stereotypes, and presenting a personal world of consumption sheltered from social problems (e.g., Haug 1986; Kellner 1990; Lasch 1979; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986; Pollay 1986; Schiller 1989; Schudson 1984; Williamson 1978). Many have condemned the advertising institution for its contribution to the development and reinforcement of an undemocratic social order by fostering concentration of enormous economic and cultural power in the hands of a few corporations (e.g., Jhally 1987; Kellner 1989; Schiller 1989). Although there might be some validity in these criticisms, developments during the 1990s, among which is the relocation of advertising to an explicitly political forum by companies, such as Benetton, Diesel, FCUK and Body shop, call for rethinking the role of advertising as something more than a hegemonic tool of the capitalist ideology.

In the past decade, a handful of companies began producing advertisements that carried explicit political and social messages. Pioneering this move was the Italian clothing company, Benetton, whose advertising featured, instead of product pictures, images of AIDS, wars, environmental disasters, racism, and convicts on death row. Benetton ads quickly entered into the public discourse, provoking heated discussions. So far, the discussions concerning Benetton style advertising have included two opposite views. Some blame the company for emotional manipulation and commercialization of serious social issues; others praise it for highlighting the very same issues. Whether one likes or hates them, however, they generate academic and popular debate. In this paper, I am interested in neither finding the true intent of Benetton nor judging its ethics. Rather, I explore the implications of this advertising style for the advertising institution and democracy. Given these concerns, the objectives of this study are twofold. First, I explore what makes these advertisements so controversial. Second, I discuss the possibility of a performative function for advertising, which in addition to selling products can incite public debate and dialogue on social and political issues, and foster positive notions of identity and citizenship.

Unlike ads that promote social causes, Benetton advertisements challenge representational and ideological norms of advertising. Traditionally, advertisements, given their commercial goal of creating a positive image for the brand, show the pleasurable and happy experiences associated with the product. In many campaigns of Benetton, however, the iconic images of human suffering and distress replace the images of fantasy and happiness. This conscious attempt to replace the fantasy of consumption by social and political commentary not only violates the structural norms of advertising but also problematizes the cultural codes that distinguish genres in terms of whether they represent the “reality” or the “unreality.” Furthermore, these advertisements upset the assumption that advertising is confined to the personal world of consumption by invading that realm through the incorporation of political and social issues into their message.

While we can easily condemn these advertisements by arguing that they commercialize important issues to create publicity and sell products, we can also explore whether such advertisements point to a transformation of the advertising discourse in late-capitalist societies. Years of research have taught us that advertising performs several functions in addition to selling goods. It provides symbolic information about products and consumption activity; it helps people in constructing their identities through providing lifestyle and role models; it operates as a significant site of popular cultural production. If advertising is capable of performing all of these roles, perceived as positive or negative depending on the ideological position of the researcher, then can it undertake a new role that reconciles capitalist aims and critical consciousness, however perplexing it may appear? Critical studies often consider advertising and citizenship as a contradiction, arguing that advertisements obscure the real issues of society and erode the critical abilities of people to think and act as politically and socially conscious individuals. However, by addressing highly charged social and political issues and shocking middle class values and sensibilities, these ads transform advertising to a language of conflict instead of consensus, incite debate and dialogue about social and political issues, and create almost a Habermasian public sphere (Falk 1997; Meijer 1998).

When we think of advertising as a potential site of the public sphere, three questions emerge. First, to what extent advertisements induce public debate and dialogue around issues of general interest? Second, who are the agents participating in this communicative action? Third, what effects does such public communication generate? The fame of Benetton ads stems from their ability to enter into the public discourse. These advertisements stimulate two different types of discussion. On the one hand, they incite debates around the social and political issues they portray, i.e., Benetto’s “Looking At Death in the Face” campaign and the discussions it generated about death penalty. On the other hand, they incite debates about the appropriateness of advertising as a medium to voice political and social commentary. Multiple “publics” including consumers, retailers, company officials, intellectuals, interest groups, civil organizations, advertising professionals and industry organizations participate into the debate. These publics possess different levels of economic, political, and legal power, represent different interests, and voice conflicting views. The form of their participation ranges from outcry, complaint, criticism, approval and appreciation. The effects of these advertisements appear to be at two different levels: opinion formation and action taking. By inciting debate about the social/political issues they communicate and the functions of advertising institution, these advertisements motivate various publics to form opinion, be it in favor or in opposition. Second, they induce different publics to take action toward the company. The actions can range from writing complaint/appraisal letters, boycotting (by both consumers and retailers) or purchasing of the company products, and ultimately banning the advertisements.

Conceptualizing advertising as a potential site of the public sphere opens up several future research avenues. First, how do different groups of consumers read and respond to these advertisements? Second, how does social dialogue stimulated by advertisements shape identities of individuals and foster virtual communities of consumers, or “neo-tribes” (Maffesoli 1996; also see Cova 1997). Third, while these advertisements create awareness about the brands they promote, to what extent does increased brand awareness influence recall, attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand image?

References


Lasch, Christopher (1979), The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in Age of Diminishing Expectations, New York: W. W. Norton.


