Advertising and Materialism

Does Advertising Encourage Materialism in Society and Individuals?

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Considering the ubiquity of advertising in modern society, the immense interest it has drawn should come as no surprise. Central to this interest is the notion that advertising can transform not only the purchasing behavior of consumers but also the values that form the bedrock of society. The vast majority of this interest has been negative, and one of the most persistent criticisms is that advertising leads to more materialistic individuals and societies. This essay will explore some of the issues around which the debate revolves; firstly by examining what psychological effects advertising may have on individuals and secondly by investigating what sociological effects it can have on societies. What is apparent is that most people would paint a significantly darker picture of advertising-fuelled materialism than is justified by the evidence and literature, and that indeed advertising may even produce some positive effects (beyond its economic uses, on which virtually everyone agrees). Most importantly, this essay will argue that advertising only encourages materialism in those individuals or societies that already hold materialistic views, while encouraging other values already held by advertising’s target audiences.

While the word materialism is often used in everyday language, its definition is somewhat more elusive than would initially appear, and it is imperative to establish a clear one before undertaking this study. After examining much of the available literature, Richins and Dawson (1992) argue that materialism “is appropriately conceptualized as a consumer value” – “a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life” (p. 303). They identify three components to materialism: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success.

Acquisition centrality refers to the fact that, for materialists, the pursuit of possessions becomes central in structuring their lives and orienting their behaviors (Bredemeier and Toby, 1972). Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness means “possessions assume a central place in a person’s life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction” (Belk, 1984; p. 291). In fact, high consumption levels are often substitutes for relationships, experiences, or achievements as the means to pleasure or self-satisfaction (Campbell, 1987; Wachtel, 1983). Possession-defined success means materialists tend to judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated (Richins and Dawson, 1992).

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Some argue that there are two different types of materialism, instrumental and terminal. In terminal materialism the mere possession of objects is the ultimate goal, while in instrumental materialism the possession of objects is simply a means to the achievement of other goals, such as self-actualization or establishing strong personal relationships (Rochberg-Halton, 1986). It is generally argued that while instrumental materialism does not pose serious problems to individuals or society, terminal materialism can become a psychological disorder and degrade a society's values (Richins and Dawson, 1992). It is also often maintained that “advertisers have flourished by
promoting terminal materialism” (Zinkhan, 1992; p. 4).

While this distinction is appealing (and comforting!) at first, it breaks down when examined closely and logically. Because there are extremely few people who actually seek to accumulate possessions truly for their own sake, the term terminal materialism is regularly used to describe those who seek possessions to increase their social standing or generate envy and admiration from others (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Intuitively, those types of goals seem more materialistic than goals for self-actualization, for example. Yet a person obsessed with accumulating objects to increase social standing could also be described as instrumentally materialistic – the possession of objects becomes the instrument to increased social standing. Thus as appealing as this distinction may seem, it necessarily requires value judgments to be made about the relative merits of various goals, and for the purposes of this essay we will not make the distinction.

Before delving into the psychological and sociological intricacies of advertising’s effects it is first necessary to explode some common myths about advertising – myths that are often held by intellectuals, executives, and lay people alike. Tellis (2004) reviews the most troubling of these, among which are the belief that advertising is a very powerful force, that it strongly influences minds and desires, that its effects persist for decades, that firms often use subliminal advertising, and that even only a few exposures to advertising are necessary for it to be effective. Tellis’ review of the evidence portrays a very different reality. Most importantly, advertising is a subtle force – while price elasticity is, on average, -1.7%, advertising elasticity is merely 0.1% (a 1% change in price leads a 1.7% decrease in sales; a 1% increase in advertising spending leads to a 0.1% increase in sales), signifying that while it has some influence on consumer behavior, the effect is nowhere near as dramatic as a simple change in price (Tellis, 2004).

The belief that advertising must be extremely effective is often seen to logically follow from the undeniable fact that it is omnipresent in society: would advertisers really spend so much if it weren’t effective? The research, however, suggests that firms tend to over-advertise, and that constant repetition of ineffective advertising campaigns is useless (Tellis, 2004). Addressing the issue of subliminal advertising, Tellis points out that there have been virtually no studies documenting its success, and that no one in the industry recommends it or believes it works. This initial examination of advertising’s effects should make it apparent that fears about advertising having serious, all-pervasive psychological and sociological effects are likely highly overstated. If advertising is much less effective at generating sales, its stated goal, than is commonly believed, it seems unlikely that its side effects could be so serious. What critics of advertising often forget is that even more ubiquitous than advertisements are the love, advice, and support of our family and friends – that generally provide a strong counterbalance to materialism.

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Exactly how materialism is defined also depends largely on what it is defined against. Is the opposite of materialism frugality or simply not being materialistic? Some have proposed that it is voluntary simplicity, a lifestyle of moral responsibility, spiritual growth, and self-actualization that is often an expression of deliberately denied materialism (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996). However, simply because it is an act of deliberately denied materialism shouldn’t necessarily make it the opposite. Furthermore, because values such as frugality and voluntary simplicity are often responses to other social issues (environmentalism, for example), it makes more sense to assume that materialism is on a spectrum from not materialistic, or ‘normal’, to materialistic.
It should be briefly noted that while most of the research into advertising and materialism has focused on either the psychological (individual) or sociological (societal) aspect, this essay aims to cover both. While it is clear that each topic requires immense attention, it is precisely for this reason that the vast majority of the research has focused on one or the other, and the conclusions drawn have been highly dependent on the framework through which authors conducted their study (Pollay, 2000). Thus, by aiming for breadth rather than depth, this essay will attempt to merge the two strands of thought and reach more holistic conclusions – hopefully this approach will prove useful and informative to the reader.

As previously mentioned, consumer attitudes towards advertising are that it is economically necessary and beneficial, but that it has extremely negative consequences on culture (Pollay and Mittel, 1993). Interestingly, no one believes to be themselves influenced by advertising, while nonetheless maintaining that huge swathes of society are affected by it.

Some have highlighted the fact that the United States, like many other countries, is confronting rising levels of insecurity (Vail, 1999). Some authors have argued that advertising increases insecurity in individuals (Rindfleisch et al., 2008), while brand connections provide consumers with a feeling of security (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Sprott et al., 2009). In this way, advertising could be inadvertently causing materialism by increasingly pushing people to purchase products to address their insecurity. Others, however, believe that consumers form strong brand connections as a means of dealing with the fear of death (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Since this is unlikely to be the kind of insecurity created by advertising, these findings suggest that advertising may not be the most important culprit in increased materialism caused by insecurity.

Another interesting aspect for investigation is whether the level of consumer involvement can affect the degree to which consumers are influenced by advertising. Since Zaichowsky’s seminal study in 1985, there has been a great deal of interest in the different levels of consumer involvement in individual purchases. What has become very clear is that for high involvement purchases, consumers will invest time to think about potential products and compare them with alternatives, while for low involvement purchases consumers tend to use peripheral routes, such as rules of thumb, to make decisions (Zaichowsky, 1985). The evidence suggests that advertisements for low involvement purchases are successful based on the values or associations they evoke, while those for high involvement purchases have to rely more on the cogency of information to be successful (Petty et al., 1983). These findings indicate that while advertising for mundane products may be promoting certain values in individuals (one of which could be materialism), advertising for the most important purchases consumers will make in their lifetimes is unlikely to be a serious producer of materialistic values.

Some of the most fascinating research concerns how priming (subconscious exposure to certain images or ideas) can affect actual behavior. In one famous example, participants of a study primed with the elderly actually walked more slowly than they normally would (Bargh et al., 1996). It is believed that priming activates those mental constructs associated with the traits of the primed representation, guiding behavior through a direct perception-behavior link. Another body of research emphasizes the role of activated motivational constructs in producing similar effects – because goals are represented mentally as other cognitive constructs, they can be activated by situational cues (such as primes) and then operate automatically to shape behavior (Fitzimons et al., 2008). To some extent, people exposed to primes begin to mirror the behavior of the perceived construct.

Knowing this, Fitzimons et al. (2008) constructed a study with the aim of understanding whether brands could act as primes. Because much of brand equity and successful advertising stems from the successful association of brands to desirable traits or goals, it seemed likely that brands could act as
primes. However, brands are also much less important than social schemata, and are generally less influential in our lives than people. Furthermore, it is thought that automatic behavioral priming responses develop only under highly specific conditions, resulting from the pairings of constructs and behavior that are “frequent, consistent, and positively rewarded” (p. 23). While these conditions are usually met for responses to people (parents, the elderly, etc.), automatic responses to brands “possess very little functional value” (p. 23). Another reason why brands might not be as effective primes as other social cues is the fact that consumers are known to be concerned about the effects of advertising on their behavior, which may lead them to attempt to control their responses to brand exposure (Friestad and Wright, 1995).

Despite some theoretical misgivings, Fitzimons et al.’s study found some remarkable results. Participants that had been subliminally exposed to the Apple brand outperformed IBM-primed participants on a creativity test, and those primed to Disney rather than El Channel behaved more honestly. To test whether priming was activating trait-based or goal-based constructs, they tested subjects over a period of time, and found that Apple-primed creativity increased over time – a “hallmark of goal-directed behavior” (p. 27). Perhaps brands exert similar effects to other, more established, primes, due to the fact that they are often personified - both in advertisements and in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1997), and may therefore take a similar place in our cognitive constructs as role models, celebrities, and family members.

One key finding of Fitzimons et al.’s study was that participants who did not “value the goal ‘to be a creative person’ were unaffected by the brand primes” (p. 32), indicating that brand primes are only effective when they are associated with goals that subjects are already working towards. Their study has serious implications for charges that advertising encourages materialism. Because hardly anyone believes that advertising overtly and rationally attempts to make consumers materialistic, those charges are generally backed by the claim that advertising works subconsciously to influences our values. However, the results of Fitzimons’ experiment appear to demonstrate that advertising may only make us more motivated to pursue whatever goals we already have.

That advertising may simply activate existing goals is certainly bolstered by the fact that marketers continually conduct market research to understand the values, goals, and motivations of their target audience, with which they then infuse their advertisements. Furthermore, thanks to technological developments, our advertising experience is increasingly tailored to our own personalities, making us much more likely to be exposed to advertising that caters specifically to our personalities. Thus, while those who already hold materialistic values may be exposed to more materialistic advertising and thereby become even more materialistic, those who watch a large amount of sports videos on YouTube may be exposed to many of Nike’s advertisements and be constantly motivated to go out and exercise (anecdotally, this is exactly the case with the author of this essay). While such advertisements will also make viewers more inclined to buy their products (the author of this essay surely would if he could afford to), it appears likely that they will do so only as a result of the goals they choose to pursue, but that acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success (the three factors by which we defined materialism) are not present.

Having delved into the influence advertising may have on individuals, we will now turn to sociological accounts of advertising’s effects on materialism in society, which tend to be considerably more negative. Pollay (2000) undertakes a review of a large number of studies and finds that most authors examining advertising’s sociological effects view “advertising as intrusive” and “its effects as inescapable and profound”, as well as “reinforcing materialism”. Considering the positive effects on creativity and honesty that being primed to Apply and Disney respectively produced, perhaps the studies reviewed by Pollay established those
correlations because they were only specifically searching for how advertising causes materialism (and other negative traits). After all, it would be expected that those with underlying materialistic goals would become even more materialistic after being primed with materialistic advertisements.

It is, however, clear that there are serious issues to consider when examining societies that are constantly bombarded with advertisements. Increased consumption is accomplished, at least partially, by directing our psychological needs and ambitions into the purchase of goods (Pollay, 2000) – perhaps slowly morphing our goals into more materialistic ones. It can hardly be denied that “the intent of advertising, especially in the aggregate, is to preoccupy society with material concerns”. In fact, advertising may make us more materialistic simply by taking up individuals’ attention, which is a scarce resource that social institutions must compete for (Schudson, 2013). Advertising directs that attention towards consumption and therefore away from other social institutions such as social work or cultural or political activities that promote more positive values.

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However, there are some considerations that should make us doubt the accuracy of Pollay’s account (and the myriad authors whose studies he relied on for his paper). Firstly, in one of his first paragraphs, he falls back on a common myth: that while not all advertising accomplishes its aims, “much of it must – otherwise, advertisers are financially extravagant fools” (Pollay, 2000). Yet there is a large body of research that would indicate precisely that a significant portion of firms over-advertise and spend huge sums of money on campaigns that are ineffective (Tellis, 2004). Second is his belief that one of the reasons for advertising’s strong effects on materialism is its constant repetition (Pollay, 2000) – although much of the research shows that repetitive advertising is ineffective, and completely useless if it was unsuccessful the first time (Tellis, 2000). While it is possible that repetition may not affect sales but have profound consequences on the human psyche, it seems unlikely that advertisements that fail at increasing sales can have serious secondary effects. This conflict highlights the differences in the conclusions reached by sociological accounts and individual or economical accounts of the same facts.

One study found that advertising causes materialism by proposing solutions to social problems – over time, it’s possible that people come to believe they can buy happiness, success, or love (Torlak & Koc, 2007). Advertisements tell the world who we are and which groups we belong to, and influence people to judge and categorize the personalities of others based on their material possessions. This is certainly reinforced by the fact that their findings demonstrated that there are negative correlations between all dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior and materialism (Torlak & Koc, 2007). However, it is a basic fact of human nature that we exhibit a vast array of differing personalities and preferences. Shouldn’t it be a given that different people will enjoy different material goods, and that advertisers will seek to cater to those personalities?

Others have argued that advertising isn’t the cause of increased levels of materialism in society, but rather capitalism. There is evidence as early as the 1830s of writers noting the widespread materialism of the colonies (Phillips, 1997). Production and consumption are in fact the most important activities in a capitalist economy, and it appears likely that the increased abundance of material goods would make materialistic values more salient in society. However, it is important to remember that before the rise of capitalism, the vast majority of people toiled the lands their whole lives and generally had almost no disposable income or leisure time – making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to be materialistic.

Furthermore, “while there is no denying that advertising is one tool that capitalism uses to keep
consumers’ attention focused on goods”, “advertising, as a tool, can be used to focus attention on any social value” (p. 113), and, indeed, has been. Furthermore, capitalism also seems to make countries more charitable: with four exceptions, all of the countries that were ranked in the top 20 of the CATO Institute’s Economic Freedom of the World Index 2014 (a reliable measure of capitalism) (Gwarney et al., 2014) also ranked in the top 50 of the World Giving Index (measured by money donations, time spent volunteering, and willingness to help a stranger); 12 are in the top 25, and 7 are in the top 10.

While many authors have claimed that there is a “veritable absence of perceived positive influence” from advertising (Pollay, 2000), Rory Sutherland, known as the “ad man” (Sutherland, 2009), begs to differ. He points out that in a world of scarce resources, and in which much of value is perceived, marketing has enormous potential to increase the amount of utility we derive from material goods. By making advertising about increasing perceived value and not functional utility, consumers can derive more utility from fewer resources (Sutherland, 2009).

This brings us to the age-old question, what constitutes value? Answers to this question have differed wildly, yet by far the most logical and consistent are found in the work of Austrian school economists studying praxeology. In brief, they contend that all value is subjective, since there can be no objective way to weigh the importance of functional utility with perceptual satisfaction (Bohm-Bawerk, 1894). Thus, “if a man spends five dollars on a shirt we deduce that he preferred purchasing the shirt to any other uses he could have found for the money” – a “concept of preference” “rooted in real choices” (Rothbard, 1977). If advertisements motivate someone to make a purchase, then that advertisement must have acted in such a way as to change the subject’s perception about the object and increase its perceived value. While this may heighten materialism in those already predisposed to it, materialistic advertising would not increase an object’s value to those that are not materialistic – the successful advertisement must have increased, or made more salient, other values they held.

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It is clear that advertising may influence behavior – however, it is far from clear that it would make individuals and societies more materialistic. Modern advertising is successful by associating brands with values and traits, linking them in consumers’ minds. To elicit positive responses they must appeal to the personalities and desires of their target consumers. Thus, when successful in influencing our behavior and encouraging spending, they should also be successful in activating cognitive representations of positive traits or motivational constructs. Furthermore, considering that we’re much more likely to be continually exposed to the types of advertisement that complement our personalities, advertising may simply be encouraging consumers to pursue values, goals, and traits that they already hold. Logical analysis of sociological accounts fit well with the individual-level analysis, allowing this essay to conclude that while advertising may increase materialism in individuals and society, it will do so only to the extent that it increases other values to which advertising appeals.
References


