Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products & Images of Well Being

William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally

The authors well state the nature of human relationships in the industrial age by saying that "the consumer society brings into being a distinctive way of life based on a notion that individuals can regard their affiliation with social groups as a fluid milieu of temporary associations that are based on styles of appearance and behaviour." (p. 277)

That the speed-up caused by commercial transactions, the Industrial Revolution, and large concentrations of people in cities was creating superficial human relationships and would ultimately result in a seizing up of society, was foreseen in 18th Century England by novelists such as Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne writes:

the current of men and money towards the metropolis, upon one frivolous errand or another,—set in so strong,—as to become dangerous to our civil rights;—tho’, by the bye,—a current was not the image he took most delight in,—a distemper was here his favourite metaphor, and he run it down into a perfect allegory, by maintaining it was identically the same in the body national as in the body natural, where blood and spirits were driven up into the head faster than they could find their ways down;—a stoppage of circulation must ensue which was death in both cases.

In Sterne’s time the head of the body politic, the king, had lost power and authority, and the Industrial Revolution was turning everyone and everything topsy turvy, especially in the burgeoning and bustling cities. Sterne urged that care be taken that the “metropolis totter’d not thro’ its own weight;—that the head be no longer too big for the body”; that the city not devour the countryside.

Today, in the global village the stakes are even higher. The automobile has not only devoured the countryside and brought city traffic to a standstill, but its noxious emissions and industrial pollutants generally threaten to destroy life on this planet as we know it. It is in this context that advertising and the consumer culture must now be viewed.

Just as the increasing velocity of circulation of money, the calculating businessman, and Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* were new in 18th century England, so were the forms of human association and awareness brought about by the rapidly emerging economy. In *Social Communication in Advertising*, it is stated that,

where the division of labour, mass migrations from rural to urban areas, sustained technological innovation, and the erosion of traditional customs had rent the fabric of social collectivities, mass marketing began stitching together a new type of human association. Marketing and advertising
strategies sought with ever greater self-awareness to fill the void left by the disappearance of traditional cultures by creating a sense of social solidarity in messages about the relations between persons and things. (p.277)

Reassuring agrarian, feudal, and extended familial bonds were quickly severed by mechanical industry and its need for factory hands and for insatiable consumers.

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally claim “that around the turn of the century the realization dawned that a satisfactory end use for the industrial system’s vast productive capacities could be found in unfettered mass consumption.” (p.49) More precisely, James Beninger states in The Control Revolution (1968) that the crisis in the control of consumer demand arose in the early 1880’s when new continuous-process technologies began to be applied within a short span of years to such industries as flour milling and soap making, cigarette rolling and match manufacture, food canning and photographic film processing. He then gives the specific example of Henry P. Crowell whose oatmeal plant (Quaker Oats) began operations in 1882, one which produced twice as much oatmeal as the market could absorb, necessitating Crowell to address the crisis “with a revolutionary new technology for the control of consumption: national advertising of a brand name product to the mass household market.” However, neither Beninger nor Leiss et al. mention the waves of immigration to North America that were vital to creating and sustaining mass consumption.

Although Social Communication in Advertising contains a wealth of information on the advertising industry and a useful bibliography, it suffers from repetition and insufficient historical detail about the beginnings of the market economy and advertising in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The description given of the growth and development of advertising in the 20th century is very good. The authors also discuss critiques of the industry and outline two approaches to the study of ads—semiology and content analysis, the former approach used so effectively by Marshall McLuhan in The Mechanical Bride.

The authors outline four different stages of advertising: The Product-Oriented Approach (1890-1925), Product Symbols (1925-1945), Personalization (1945-1965), and Market Segmentation (1965-1985). During the 1920’s they point out, “advertising messages shifted from focusing on products to defining consumers as an integral part of the social meaning of goods” (p.21), a significant transition that served as the inspiration for the book’s title.

McLuhan once observed that satisfaction is now increasingly obtained not from having the product, but from the sensory and psychic effects of the ad itself. As the relationship between people, ads, and products becomes more abstract or ethereal, on the one hand, and as the physical and environmental consequences of over-consumption become readily apparent, on the other, the pursuit of ephemeral consumptive pleasures seems an even poorer way of attempting to achieve desirable states of being.

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