

George Monbiot and Owen Jones write about the power and pervasiveness of advertising.

- 1 We think we know who the enemies are: banks, big business, lobbyists, the politicians who exist to appease them. But somehow the advertising industry which stitches this system of hyper-capitalism together gets overlooked. That seems strange when you consider how pervasive advertising is. In fact you can probably see it right now. It is everywhere, yet we see without seeing, without understanding the role that it plays in our lives. 5
- 2 For obvious reasons, advertising is seldom confronted by either the newspapers or the broadcasters. But it should not be ignored given that it raises serious concerns. For a start, advertising claims to enhance our choice, but it offers us little choice about whether we see and hear it, and even less choice about whether we respond to it. Since Edward Bernays began to apply the findings of his uncle Sigmund Freud¹, advertisers have been developing sophisticated means of overcoming our defences. In public they insist that if we become informed consumers and school our children in media literacy we have nothing to fear from their attempts at persuasion. In private they employ neurobiologists to find ever more ingenious methods of bypassing the conscious mind. 10
- 3 Pervasiveness and repetition act like a battering ram against our minds. The first time we see an advertisement, we are likely to be aware of what it is telling us and what it is encouraging us to buy. From then on, we process it passively, absorbing its imagery and messages without contesting them, as we are no longer fully switched on. Brands and memes then become linked in ways our conscious minds fail to detect. As a report by the progressive think tank Compass explains, the messages used by advertisers are designed to trigger emotional rather than rational responses. The low attention processing model developed by Robert Heath at the University of Bath shows how, in a crowded advertising market, passive and implicit learning become the key drivers of emotional attachment. They are particularly powerful among children, as the pre-frontal cortex – which helps us to interpret and analyse what we see – is not yet fully developed. 15
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- 4 Advertising agencies build on this knowledge to minimise opportunities for the rational mind to intervene in choice. The research company TwoMinds, which has worked for Betfair, the drinks company Diageo, Mars, Nationwide and Waitrose, seeks to ‘uncover a layer of behavioural drivers that have previously remained elusive’. New developments in neurobiology have allowed it to home in on ‘intuitive judgements’ that ‘are made instantaneously and with little or no apparent conscious effort on the part of consumers – at point of purchase’. 30
- 5 Brands are also increasingly preying on customers’ social awareness. There is no shortage of examples today of profit-driven companies deploying good causes for advertising purposes. In the US, Burger King launched its #FeelYourWay campaign to mark Mental Awareness month, partly trolling its chief competitor, McDonald’s Happy Meals, by selling products such as a ‘Blue Meal’ or a ‘Pissed Meal’ (because you do not always have to be happy to eat there). But we are not just talking about the culinary world: Gillette notoriously launched an advert inspired by #MeToo’s challenge to toxic masculinity; Colin Kaepernick, a US football player and civil rights activist who sank to his knee rather than sing the national anthem to protest against police racism, became the face of a Nike campaign. You do not have to have digested Karl Marx’s Das Kapital to recognise that companies are driven by the profit motive, not changing the world. But can advertising ever have an ethical dimension? According to estimates by the New Economics Foundation think tank, the negative consequences of advertising – from promoting indebtedness to ‘social and environmental damage’ – meant that for every pound of value generated by an advertising executive, £11 worth was destroyed. When brands flash their support for just causes, are 35
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¹ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis.

they not cynically preying on your conscience so you will cough up – a phenomenon known as ‘woke-washing’?

- 6 The power and pervasiveness of advertising helps to explain the remarkable figure from the latest government spreadsheet on household spending. Households in the UK put an average of just £5.70 a week, or £296 a year, into savings and investments. Academic research suggests a link between advertising and both consumer debt and the number of hours we work. The negative impact of advertising is felt in so many ways. People who watch a lot of advertisements appear to save less, spend more and use more of their time working to meet their rising material aspirations. All three outcomes can have further terrible impacts on family life. They also change the character of the nation. Burdened by debt, without savings, we are less free, less resilient, less able to stand up to those who bully us. 50 55
- 7 Invention is the mother of necessity. To keep their markets growing, companies must keep persuading us that we have unmet needs. In other words, they must encourage us to become dissatisfied with what we have. To be sexy, beautiful, happy, relaxed, we must buy their products. They shove us onto the hedonic treadmill, on which we must run ever faster to escape a growing sense of inadequacy. The problem this causes was identified almost 300 years ago. In Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719, the hero remarks, ‘it put me to reflecting, how little repining there would be among mankind, at any condition of life, if people would rather compare their condition with those that are worse, in order to be thankful, than be always comparing them with those which are better, to assist their murmurings and complainings.’ Advertising encourages us to compare ourselves to those we perceive to be better off. It persuades us to trash our happiness and trash the biosphere to answer a craving it exists to perpetuate. 60 65 70
- 8 But perhaps the most important impact is the effect advertising has on our values. We are not born with our values: they are embedded and normalised by the messages we receive from our social environment. Most advertising appeals to and reinforces extrinsic values. People with largely extrinsic values are driven by a desire for status, wealth and power over others. It does not matter what the product is: by celebrating image, beauty, wealth, power and status, it helps create an environment which shifts our value system. Some advertisements appear to promote intrinsic values, associating their products with family life and strong communities. But they also create the impression that these intrinsic values can be purchased, which demeans and undermines them. People regard love, for example, as commingled with material aspiration, and those worthy of this love mostly conform to a narrow conception of beauty, lending greater weight to the importance of image. 75 80
- 9 As sales of print editions decline, newspapers lean even more heavily on advertising. Nor is the problem confined to the commercial media. Even those who write only for their own websites rely on search engines, platforms and programmes ultimately funded by advertising. We are hooked on a drug that is destroying society. As with all addictions, the first step is to admit to it. 85