Value Criticism of Aesthetics in Advertising

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Abstract

Advertising not only conveys superficial information but also exerts an ideological influence so independent aesthetics may bring about a lot of profits lastingly. However, problems such as the high cost of constructing aesthetics, the independence paradox of human consciousness and the myths of freedom and individuality prevent aesthetics in advertising from influencing the market as expected. This paper believes aesthetics in advertising cannot influence consumers independently of other factors in the consumer society, so the independence of aesthetics doesn't exist.

Keywords

Advertising; Ideology; Aesthetics; Information Environment.

1. Introduction

Advertisements as important information products have many functions, such as helping information flow between producers and consumers, stimulating market competition and satisfying consumers' material and spiritual needs, and facilitating social construction of morality and culture. Advertisements have transformed from the vehicle for information flow into a cultural form with an influence on deep social ideology. Advertising contains not only information but also metaphysical culture, such as ideas, beliefs and values, with an influence on deeper dimensions.

Judging from the relationship between advertisements and consumption, advertising seems to dominate social aesthetics, control aesthetic values held by the public by guiding consumers and constructing aesthetics and bring about countless profit opportunities for businesses while consumers have no resistance to the ubiquitous advertisements. Some scholars even believe that values constructed by advertising can not only effectively influence consumers' beliefs, attitudes and actions but, as an independent and real force, propel them to consistently act in a predetermined way.

Thanks to new technologies, media create profit explosion for the advertising industry and possess new characteristics, such as high spatial and temporal coverage, diverse presentation, abundant information, wide influence and three-dimensional environment for advertising. The intense infiltration of advertisements into people's lives regardless of time and place exerts a more profound and comprehensive influence on consumers. Since multidimensional and multi-perspective analysis of advertising as a communication form has become an important focus in the business world and academia, underneath the high profits attributable to aesthetic values in advertising, the weaknesses and problems of the real-world impact of advertisements are gradually revealed.

2. The High Cost of Constructing Beliefs

As part of people's abstract beliefs, aesthetics include perceptions of the laws, experiences, and standards related to beauty. The construction of aesthetics can't break away from the

existing framework of individual's subjectivity and exist in a vacuum. Therefore, aesthetics in advertising need to pay attention to and align with people's fundamental belief systems. Creating a brand-new aesthetic concept and forcing it upon people tactlessly won't yield any result. It's necessary to understand target audience's preferences, criteria and way of thinking based on their belief systems and look for elements—such as images or sounds—familiar to them and tailor the aesthetics of the advertisements to be consistent with or close to the target audience's aesthetic values so that the aesthetics in advertising would be accepted and recognized.

Besides utilizing these elements to complete the necessary transition in the construction of new aesthetics, it's also useful to mobilize the existing aesthetic values to make up for the weaknesses of inconsistent, abstract or imbalanced aesthetic activities of imparting new information, ways of thinking, or aesthetic values so that the target audience will have a full understanding of the aesthetic logic behind the advertisements and the aesthetics in advertising will seem complete and logical. To fulfill the constructive role of existing aesthetic values and familiar elements, it's not enough to simply rely on reasonable imagination. Advertisers should adjust timely to customers' aesthetics based on market research. However, in view of a huge target market with diverse consumers, it's practically impossible for advertisers to construct universal aesthetics with which all consumers' fundamental aesthetic beliefs are consistent. Moreover, even though target audience's existing aesthetics are taken into consideration during content creation, combining shallow information with deep aesthetics can't be done overnight. It's a process of knowing, understanding, familiarization and internalization.

The construction of aesthetics in advertising requires at least three steps—understanding the physical features of media forms, explaining the information in advertisements, and aligning with the target audience in ideology and deep beliefs. First, media forms with different physical features appeal to consumers' different senses, stimulate their different central nervous systems, and elicit different responses, for example, text of textual expression and static presentation focuses on understanding and propels audience to think reasonably while audio and video of expressive symbols strive to be memorable and stimulate audience's senses to get conditioned reflexes. To achieve the expected goals of the aesthetics in advertising requires combining the strengths of text, audio and video. After different response processes are started by a variety of physical forms, consumers are exposed to the information in advertising. However, consumers are not passive receivers of information, according to the transformation from the Magic Bullet theory to the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory suggested by Dewey. Such cognitive and behavioral transformation abandons mind-body dualism of the earlier theory and sees interpretation as an important part of human behavior. Consumers will reach an objective and appropriate interpretation of the information they receive from a perspective they choose based on how valuable, interesting they think the information is and what opinion or stance the information expresses. At last, consumers form an understanding of the deeper aesthetic beliefs in advertising and if the aesthetics are inconsistent with their existing beliefs, then they will not be influenced. If consistent, aesthetic content in advertising may be accepted by consumers.

As conscious beings, consumers intentionally or unintentionally involve their personal beliefs in their social practices, such as learning and working, and abstract thinking. No matter how basic their activity is, personal beliefs still play a role in it. In a fast-growing industrialized modern society where basic needs of life are continually met, consumption for the sake of physical needs and safety is elevated to a higher level of spirituality, and consumers' consciousness and personal aesthetic beliefs play a bigger role in their consumption. New production technologies and media technologies provide more choices for consumers so

consumers' interpretations of advertising may be very varied, which creates unprecedented challenges for cultivating consumers' aesthetics.

To convey aesthetics-related information to construct consumers' aesthetics and attract their attention based on mental models of processing information within a certain amount of time and space requires conducting large-scale social surveys and accurately evaluating audience's feedback. Every step of this process is very important, directly linked to the success of the next step and the achievement of the ultimate goal. Any mistake in any step may lead to a costly failure and an aesthetic backlash. In today's society, aesthetics can have a profound and enduring effect on consumption and may lessen the cost of future advertising. The general rule of high risk high return also applies to the construction of aesthetic consciousness. To ensure every step of the construction of aesthetic beliefs works out, advertisers need to pay a high price for every step of the consciousness construction process.

3. Independence Paradox of Consciousness

Consciousness as a mixture of abstract meanings beyond physical reality stems from social practices. However, created but not dominated by practices, after consciousness originating from social reality becomes independent, it will have a positive, negative or neutral effect on the reality. So will the aesthetics in advertising. Aesthetics in advertising are a subjective creation based on objective reality, promoted by technologies and capitals to gain independence. After getting rid of its passiveness, aesthetics in advertising start to independently and systematically influence consumers' understandings of products, labor and beliefs, their consumption behaviors and judgement of whether their needs are satisfied, and lastly, consumers' or the whole society's aesthetic beliefs. Theoretically, it's natural that aesthetics in advertising gain independence and in turn, have an effect on the reality. However, in practice, its independence is challenged by the information environment and the content and form of advertisements, such as the vulgarity crisis in the information environment. Only in a healthy information environment can consciousness form and gain independence through steps of intentional exposure, rational thinking, and internal adjustments of logic. Every step requires a healthy information environment while superficiality, sentimentality and instrumentality in a vulgar information environment only leads to people's obsession or infatuation with certain persons or objects instead of independent consciousness. Consciousness burgeons, develops and stabilizes only in a healthy information environment, so does the independence of aesthetics in advertising.

Advertisers may have a positive effect on mass communication or bring about positive communication, but their intention is not to shoulder social responsibilities but to establish an effective mechanism for relaying their information to the consumers[1]. Therefore, advertisements exist in an information environment created by media, exert an influence on people's consciousness in an information environment that imitates the reality, and highly rely on the conditions and characteristics of the information environment. However, advertisements don't maintain or promote the development of a healthy information environment. All they do is gaining profits and defending advertisers' interests.

Meanwhile, media organizations trade audience's attention won by their certain content with advertisers' advantage in capital to gain profits[2], which means that part of the operation of mass media will be under control of capitalists to satisfy media organizations' needs to make a profit. Media organizations may lower their qualification standards for advertisers and loosen their control over the tendency, content, expression and presentation of the advertisements, leading to vulgarization of media content and the information environment.

When immersed in a vulgar information environment for long, consumers may develop two extreme reactions. In one situation, they are deeply influenced by the vulgar information

environment which continually weakens their ability to think critically and logically to increase the communication effectiveness of aesthetic ideologies expressed by advertisements. In the other situation, consumers establish mental resistance to vulgar information. They automatically block such information and tag it as deceptive and untrustworthy, resulting in resistance from their existing aesthetic consciousness and failure of constructing new aesthetic consciousness. The existing aesthetic consciousness possessed by consumers are out of the control of advertisers who are keen to influence consumers with vulgar information because consumers do not live in a vacuum created by mass media and they are influenced by information about critical and logical thinking communicated to them by other information systems. Therefore, as mental resistance is a situation more likely to appear, establishment and survival of new aesthetics expressed by advertisements require a healthy information environment. However, in reality, the important role mass media plays in a society's information environment inevitably confront aesthetic consciousness with the vulgarity crisis.

Moreover, the physical form of advertisements is relatively fixed so the influence of advertising is limited by not only the information environment, but also the advertisement form. The features of advertisements' presentation will influence the beliefs advertisements try to construct, for example, time-biased media have a different social influence that that of a space-biased media. Advertisements that try to construct consciousness require a stable form to complete logical expression so that the beliefs they construct will be independent, complete and lasting.

Compared to selling information products for profits, advertising revenue is an important source of capital for media organizations and to some extent, dominates the operation and management of the whole media organization. Sometimes, time and space allocated to information products are encroached or deeply damaged by advertisements and the balance and coherence in content arranged according to intrinsic value and narrative order are broken by the insertion of advertisements. For example, in a movie where a couple conquers all sorts of obstacles and hugs together to enjoy their love, one character says to the other with cold medicine in hands, "Thanks to … cold medicine, my heart is warm and I am able to kiss my baby again." The sudden appearance of the advertisement breaks the coherence of the movie and ruins the atmosphere, and the emotional responses triggered in audience vanish, too. Conflicted and messy plots with awkward product placements inevitably lead to a sense of unrealistic absurdity.

Moreover, when the audience are absorbed in a coherent plot, they will guess and predict what happens next. Misplaced advertisements and intrusive commercial elements will interrupt audience's thinking, cause disapproval, leave an enduring negative impression of the product on the audience who will criticize advertisements unrelated to the plot and forced upon the movie as incoherent, unreal and not credible. Not only are audience's attitudes towards the advertisement affected negatively, but also audience's aesthetic consciousness clashes with the aesthetic ideas in advertising which are not comprehensible to the audience. Since audience will judge the aesthetic content based on their existing aesthetic consciousness, how balanced the aesthetic content is determines its effectiveness in constructing new aesthetic consciousness and the construction of aesthetic consciousness is influenced by how the content is presented. The audience are unlikely to have a positive aesthetic experience with a presentation that leaves them a negative impression and when the expected completeness of content consumption is compromised, the resulting aesthetic experience and consciousness are doomed to be disoriented and chaotic[3].

4. The Myths of Freedom and Individuality

Advertisements as a way of communicating information and part of the social information systems continually give out information related to all sorts of human consciousness and compete with other information for audience's attention in terms of space and time. Moreover, advertisements, unlike documentaries, are not a faithful representation of the reality. Taking advantage of all sorts of rhetorical devices, lighting, framing, and editing techniques for videos and pictures, advertisements present information about products or services as attractive and unrealistically perfect artworks. All sorts of products are involved in advertising and together create consumer fantasies with the help of advertisements, trying to bedazzle every customer in the society. Unable to run away from the ubiquitous influence, consumers have to align themselves with the ideas advocated in advertisements and compromise their independent thinking, which means advertisements have control over and an influence on people's consciousness. Whether the above-mentioned assumption is true or not is not the focus here. The following section will discuss the issue of freedom and individuality advocated by aesthetics in advertising.

Consumerism stems from capitalism and the fundamentals of capital include stimulating desires for commodities whether consumers need them or not and convincing them that they have such needs so that capital can be set in motion faster. As suggested in Baudrillard's The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures, the aim of consumer behavior is not necessarily to meet real needs, but is likely to satisfy the needs created by the outside world and stimulated by various factors[4]. Advertising controlled by consumerism also shows the trend of persistently stimulating consumption desires and transforming desires into behaviors, which means that consumers are lost and alienated in the paradise of needs created by advertising, symbolic values are emphasized and exaggerated and the use-value of commodities is not the priority any more. Meaningful spiritual and psychological needs lose their standing in and initial influences on a society worshiping materials and physical enjoyment, and may decrease and even vanish.

Advertisers advocate consumption in a variety of ways and stimulate consumers' senses in the process. Their deceptive logic is that through purchase of the product, consumers will obtain freedom and individuality symbolized by the product. There lie three problems in this logic: first, it's unclear whether the product truly represents freedom and individuality; second, there's no authority to judge whether freedom and individuality shown in the advertisements convey their true meanings and third, if consumers all fall for the advertisements and complete their consumption to gain freedom and individuality, freedom and individuality are so universal that the two values shown in the advertisements will lose their significance. Consumers try to find out commonly held standards for gender identity, social role, group belongingness, aesthetic quality and individuality from the external world. However, seeking freedom and individuality from mass media advertising is doomed to fail.

Despite the differences in purchasing power and wealth distribution between social classes, creating a myth of purchasers' identity when advocating freedom and individuality helps set the circle of consumption and capital in motion, The middle class has an advantage of population over the upper class and an advantage of wealth over the lower class. Moreover, the majority of the lower class aspire to become the middle class, which is not as impractical as becoming the upper class. Therefore, advertisements portray the consumption behavior of the middle class who play an important role in the social information environment as the norm and equate the aesthetic consciousness of the middle class as the social default. The features of middle-class consumers are viewed so universal that the consumption behavior of other classes and the meaning behind their behavior are overlooked. The template of middle-class consumption is set as the goal for other classes who are pressured socially to follow the

herd and seek freedom and individuality on the path planned by the logic of capital and consumerism.

Consumerist culture tries to envelop every aspect of consumption in the society with the myths of freedom and individuality. All sorts of tools and strategies with strong sensory stimulation are used in advertising and extremely provocative advertisements endlessly stimulate the extant consumers and convince prospective consumers to join. The myths easily turn people into slaves of their consumption desires who are swayed by personalized and consumerism-oriented advertisements to align themselves with the aesthetic standards decided by capital. Advertisements in the form of information environment pressure groups and with the help of the groups, pressure every individual, which means consumers' legitimate personal needs are replaced by consumption desires created and promoted by the logic of capital. Because of advertisements, consumers view these curated desires as their own creation while their own real needs are neglected.

According to David Ogilvy, advertising tycoon, advertisers hope their brands are loved by everybody regardless of their gender, age, occupation or class, which causes their brands to have no personality at all. To justify the unreal consumption needs created by capitalists, independence and autonomy possessed by people in an unaltered environment are compromised quietly and turned into sacrifices for the ridiculous consumerism. Though advertisements always highlight uniqueness and personality and promise or hint that consumer behavior depicted in advertisements will help consumers gain freedom and individuality, more and more consumers realize that in an information environment where undifferentiated, large-scale duplication of product information is very common, personalized consumption is a myth created by the logic of capital and consumerism. What is portrayed in advertisements is only the product of undifferentiated consumerism in an industrial society. In the myths of freedom and individuality, consumers may risk losing their personality and uniqueness.

5. Conclusion

As the influence of advertisements on audience is expanded beyond superficial product information to deeper aesthetic ideology, aesthetic consciousness cultivated by advertising starts to form, gain independence, bring momentum to the consumer market and increase the possibility of reaching profit targets. To seek profits brought about by aesthetic consciousness, advertisers will intentionally add and create all sorts of aesthetic ideas to provide opportunities for aesthetic consciousness to become independent in order to release its huge potential of long-term profitability. However, as suggested above, aesthetics in advertising have many influencing factors and constructing new aesthetic ideas is very costly. Aesthetic consciousness does not exist independently. Moreover, in conflict with consumers' freedom and desire to be original, aesthetics in advertising are very likely to cause mental resistance and boycott from consumers, so a critical and dialectical perspective on aesthetics in advertising has its practical implications.

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