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THINK OF ME AS EVIL?
OPENING THE
ETHICAL DEBATES
IN ADVERTISING

October 2011.

This report was written by:

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WWF believes in a future where people and nature thrive. Best known as the world's leading conservation body, we've seen first-hand how wildlife, the environment and human activity are all interlinked. That's why our passion for safeguarding the natural world has to be backed up by other environmental action—tackling the global threat of climate change and helping people to change the way they live to ease pressure on natural resources.

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THINK OF ME AS EVIL? OPENING THE ETHICAL DEBATES IN ADVERTISING

Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC)
WWF-UK

The truth is that marketing raises enormous ethical questions every day—at least it does if you’re doing it right. If this were not the case, the only possible explanations are either that you believe marketers are too ineffectual to make any difference, or you believe that marketing activities only affect people at the level of conscious argument.

Neither of these possibilities appeals to me. I would rather be thought of as evil than useless.”

Rory Sutherland¹

Written in his former capacity as President of the
Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA)

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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS REPORT

Clive Hamilton

Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Canberra, and author of *Growth Fetish* and *Requiem for a Species*

“Today’s best and brightest graduates in psychology and cognitive science are snapped up by the advertising industry because they want to know how best to manipulate us. The truth none of us wants to admit is that the advertisers know our minds better than we do. This report should serve as a kind of prophylactic to help stop the advertisers planting desires in our heads.”

Martin Kirk

Head of UK Campaigns, Oxfam GB

“This report is tapping into deep and critically important cultural truths. Anyone interested in understanding or influencing the path into the future should take note. It is hard to overstate the incredible reach of commercial advertising into our lives today—we are wrapped in it from cradle to grave—and yet we have traditionally paid precious little heed to its influence when looking at how to bring about positive social change. This report turns, finally, an eloquent, authoritative and forensic eye on this vastly influential activity. NGOs, policy makers and, most importantly, the producers and advertisers themselves, should read it. Now.”

Neal Lawson

Chair, Compass

“This is a cool, calm and balanced analysis of the possible effects of advertising. Because the authors have been so reasonable and level-headed, this report should be read and digested by all who care about the quality of our lives in a world driven by consumerist imperatives.”

Justin Lewis

Head of Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

“Our cultural environment is increasingly dominated—and paid for—by advertising, and yet for too long we have been unwilling to acknowledge the broad social impact of this dominance. This excellent report foregrounds a series of questions about why our daily diet of hundreds of commercial messages might *not* be good for us. Drawing on relevant research, the report makes a compelling case that advertising messages, *en masse*, constrain our ability to solve social and environmental problems and imagine a better world. In short, greater limits on advertising may be both popular and in the public interest.”

Peter Lipman

Chair, Transition Network

“The Transition movement, in seeking to address issues such as climate change and the end of cheap energy, has had to explore the full range of influences on all of our actions and decisions. Advertising and marketing certainly is one of those influences, playing as it does such a significant role in shaping the cultural stories which underpin our lives, and this report brings great and welcome clarity on the very real and negative impact which it has.”

Caroline Lucas

MP for Brighton Pavilion and leader of the Green Party of England and Wales

“This report shines a light onto a seldom scrutinised sector—the advertising industry. Advertising, it suggests, harms society and the planet by increasing consumerism, manipulating cultural values, and intruding into all aspects of our lives. Yet where are the civil society campaigns against it? This report, it’s to be hoped, will inspire campaigners to take up the cause as their own.”

Ed Mayo

Secretary-general, Co-operatives UK

“The advertising sector is among the last to be touched by the ideas of corporate responsibility. The pharmaceutical industry accepted decades ago that they are responsible for the impact of the drugs they produce, while the advertising sector rarely accepts any responsibility for its product other than its own freedom to advertise. It is high time for the sector to get to grips with its ethics.”

Alastair McIntosh

Centre for Human Ecology and author of *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*

“For many decades marketeers have countered ethical objections by saying they do not increase consumption: they simply rearrange the deckchairs by offering consumer choice. This report lays bare such mendacity. In a world faced by burning social and environmental issues that are driven in large measure by consumerism, it challenges and invites the industry to a deeper ethical engagement and also contributes a research foundation for legislation.”

George Monbiot

Journalist, author and campaigner

“This is a fascinating, clear-headed and critically important report. Reading it, I’m struck by the fact that nothing quite like it has been written before. Why not, I wonder, when this issue looms so large in our lives, and the ethical questions involved so obviously require investigation? I’m delighted that it’s been done at last, and that an urgently-needed debate can now begin.”

Agnes Nairn

Professor of Marketing and co-author of *Consumer Kids*

“This clear and compelling report provides a cogent point of departure for a much overdue open, public debate on the role of advertising in contemporary society. Coming in the wake of mounting concern over the impact of consumerism on the well-being of children and adults alike, it highlights as much what we don’t know as what we do. I sincerely hope that the advertising industry will accept the invitation to engage in a full, frank and mature debate over the very important issues raised.”

Avner Offer

Chichele Professor of Economic History, All Souls College, Oxford, and author of *The Challenge of Affluence*

“Despite its alarmist title, this is a careful evaluation of the costs and benefits of advertising. It makes a good case, on economic, social, and cultural grounds, for respite from the all-pervasive advocacy of consumerism.”

Gus Speth

Sara Shallenberger Brown Professor in the Practice of Environmental Policy, Yale University; Founder of the World Resources Institute; Co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council

“Today’s environmentalism is too narrow in vision, too restricted in approach. For too long, it has sidestepped the challenge of building deeper approaches to tackling the problems that it addresses. But there are signs that this is beginning to change. *Think of me as Evil?* offers one such cause for hope.

This is not a sensationalist report. It represents a careful sifting of the evidence on the cultural impacts of advertising. It is candid about the gaps in the research base. Yet it still serves, compellingly, to level profound challenges at both the advertising industry and the environmental movement. Of the former, it demands: demonstrate that you have a positive cultural impact—that you’re not serving to spur rampant consumerism, and to erode those very values upon which widespread public concern about the environmental crisis must come to be built. And of the latter, it demands: demonstrate that the interventions you make are a credible and proportional response to the scale of challenges that you seek to tackle.”

Stewart Wallis

Executive Director, the new economics foundation (nef)

“There is increasing awareness that (a) we are running out of planetary resources, with over-consumption by the most fortunate being the biggest contributing factor and (b) that for many, this increased consumption does not even lead to increased well-being—yet we carry on with business as usual! Understanding the role of advertising in leading to over-consumption and to the creation of values and attitudes that may prevent us tackling our key environmental and social problems is therefore vital. This report brilliantly sets out the issues and arguments and points the way to both necessary actions and crucial further research.”

FOREWORD

David Norman
Director of Campaigns
WWF-UK

Guy Shrubsole
Director
Public Interest Research Centre

Earlier this year, PIRC and WWF-UK worked together, as part of a wider group of third sector organisations, to publish *The Common Cause Handbook*. As this *Handbook* showed, particular cultural values motivate public appetite and demand for serious political engagement to tackle today's profound social and environmental challenges. Other, opposing values serve to undermine such responses and operate to close down political space for implementing the ambitious policies that will be needed if these challenges are to be tackled. The *Handbook* presented evidence that cultural values are likely to be shaped by a range of influences—including, importantly, people's exposure to commercial advertising.

Think of me as Evil? reviews the evidence for the cultural impacts of advertising in more depth. It concludes that the potential impacts of advertising should be of pressing concern to a wide range of third sector organisations—irrespective of whether they are working on poverty, climate change, child deprivation and neglect, abuse of human rights, ecological degradation, physical and mental ill health, or failure to place proper value on non-human life.

It is incumbent on the advertising industry to demonstrate that the cultural impacts of advertising are benign. We know that many people within the industry, including several who have contributed to putting this report together, care deeply about the impacts of advertising. We hope that this report will be used by such employees to bolster arguments for precautionary measures, and to press for investment in the research necessary to explore these concerns more deeply.

But, crucially, this report also builds the case that civil society organisations should develop a far more rigorous and concerted approach to press these arguments harder, and to join together—irrespective of the issues upon which they work—to campaign for appropriate changes in policy and practice. The time is ripe to do so. Rising public disquiet about the creeping commercialisation of childhood has led to a string of enquiries by successive UK governments and, most recently, by UNICEF. But we believe this is not only an issue of influence over children. It is about the shaping of our entire culture, and there is a need for a deeper debate about the impacts of advertising on that culture.

We hope this report will contribute to that discussion. If you too are interested in participating in this conversation, we would be delighted if you were to get in touch—whether you work inside or outside the advertising industry.

1

INTRODUCTION

The opening quote to this report is taken from an article by Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman of Ogilvy UK and then President of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). He concluded his article in *Market Leader* last year by inviting a serious-minded debate about the role of advertising and marketing in society: "I am much keener that we should accept the vast moral implications of what we all do and debate them openly rather than fudge the issue."²

It is to Sutherland's invitation that this report responds. Too often, the debate for which he calls has been held back by shrill and poorly-evidenced arguments on both sides. On the one hand, advertising's detractors have sometimes been quick to level accusations that are poorly supported by the empirical evidence. On the other hand, the industry's supporters have often been overly dismissive of opposing viewpoints: perhaps happy that the unsteady opposition which they encounter allows them to rely upon an incomplete evidence base, and arguments that are at times inconsistent. The Advertising Association has itself stated that "the stock of research, analysis and academic study to support, justify, buttress and prove [advertising's] worth is at rock bottom."³

The public debate about advertising—such as it exists—has also been curiously unfocused and sporadic. Civil society organisations have almost always used the products advertised as their point of departure—attacking the advertising of a harmful product like tobacco, or alcohol, for instance—rather than developing a deeper critical appraisal of advertising in the round. The inconsistencies contained within the Code of the Committee of Advertising Practice (the CAP Code) are symptomatic of an industry that has seldom been challenged to reconsider its fundamental assumptions.⁴

This report argues that modern advertising's impact on British culture is likely to be detrimental to our wellbeing, and may well exacerbate the social and environmental problems that we collectively confront. The balance of evidence points clearly in this direction.

The standard defences of the advertising industry can be summarised in three assertions, which, taken together, reflect the main industry response to critics of advertising:

- 1: Advertising merely redistributes consumption
- 2: Advertising is simply a mirror of cultural values
- 3: Advertising is about the promotion of choice

This report addresses each assertion in turn. It finds that, while there is material to support each claim, there is also substantial evidence to the contrary. We present evidence that advertising increases overall consumption; that it promotes and normalises a whole host of behaviours, attitudes and values, many of which are socially and environmentally damaging; that it manipulates individuals on a subconscious level, both children and adults; and that it is so pervasive in modern society as to make the choice of opting-out from exposure virtually impossible.

In constructing these arguments, this report also strives to be clear about where the evidence base does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the impacts of advertising. But it is not good enough for the industry to be content with such areas of uncertainty: there are clearly important grounds for concern about the impacts of advertising, and research to clarify these concerns is urgently needed. Responsible advertising agencies and their clients should begin to find ways to support such research—while preserving the independence of the investigators. The advertising industry should also take precautionary action to reduce its probable negative impacts in ways we recommend in our concluding chapter. Civil society organisations, meanwhile, need to give much greater attention to the impacts that advertising has on British society, culture, and the global environment.

2

DOES ADVERTISING
MERELY REDISTRIBUTE
CONSUMPTION?

One frequent critique of advertising is typified in a recent report by Hazel Henderson and Fritjof Capra:

*“The goal of most national economies is to achieve unlimited growth of their GDP through the continuing accumulation of material goods and expansion of services... Since human needs are finite, but human greed is not, economic growth can usually be maintained through **the artificial creation of needs through advertising**. The goods that are produced and sold in this way are often unneeded, and therefore are essentially waste. Moreover, the pollution and depletion of natural resources generated by this enormous waste of unnecessary goods is exacerbated by this waste of energy and materials in inefficient production processes” (emphasis added).⁵*

This is an important critique. If advertising does, in fact, increase aggregate material consumption, it can be pinpointed as an engine of the least sustainable aspects of an economy that is currently using up resources, destroying ecosystems and creating pollution at an unsustainable rate. Such trends, in turn, threaten to exacerbate global poverty and pose grave challenges for just and equitable development. Even if the world economy proves capable of decarbonising swiftly enough to avert climate change, and dematerialising production in time to avert various peak resource crises, advertising will have made the uphill struggle that much harder.

Assertions such as those levelled by Henderson and Capra are, however, inevitably controversial. The controversy that they generate revolves around the disputed evidence as to whether advertising tends to *increase aggregate* consumption (through the “creation of artificial needs”), or whether it simply serves to *redistribute* consumption from one product to another. To put it in the language of business—does advertising in aggregate increase the size of the market, or does it redistribute the share of different products within the market?

The idea that advertising increases an overall desire to consume is usually attributed to J.K. Galbraith.⁶ He argued, in *The Affluent Society*, that human wants must be contrived in order to achieve on-going demand for things, once basic needs have been adequately met. He called this the dependence effect:

“As a society becomes increasingly affluent, wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied. This may operate passively. Increases in consumption, the counterpart of increases in production, act by suggestion or emulation to create wants. Expectation rises with attainment. Or producers may proceed actively to create wants through advertising and salesmanship.”⁷

The advertising industry, however, tends to dismiss this argument, advocating the ‘spread-it-around’ perspective, according to which advertising is held to redistribute consumption, rather than expand it. For example, Tim Ambler, Simon Broadbent and Paul Feldwick review over 150 papers from *Advertising Works*, scrutinising these for reports of impacts on market size. They conclude that such effects are only significant in a minority of cases.⁸ Some academic studies support this view. Statisticians R. Ashley, C.W.J. Granger and R. Schmalensee, who conducted early work in this field, concluded their study by stating that “no significant statistics suggesting that advertising changes affect consumption were encountered.”⁹

But the sum of evidence from social science research on this issue is inconclusive. While some early approaches to investigating the nature of this relationship rejected the idea that advertising affects aggregate consumption, others have supported it.¹⁰ In their 1994 review of earlier studies, Chulho Jung and Barry Seldon set out to address some of the shortcomings they identified in previous work: shortcomings that relate particularly to the statistical methods upon which these earlier studies rely. In their own study, they detected a two-way causality:

“[O]ur results suggest that consumption not only affects advertising, as previous research has shown, but that the converse is also true: aggregate advertising affects aggregate consumption.”¹¹

This area of research has been largely dormant since Jung and Seldon published their conclusions, although the more recent work that does exist also seems to corroborate Galbraith’s original assertions. Thus, Benedetto Molinari and Francesco Turino conclude their recent study on the macroeconomic impacts of advertising as follows: “[We tested] the spread-it-around against market enhancing [or ‘dependence effect’] hypotheses as originally stated... by Galbraith. Our main finding is that the second hypothesis is preferred by the data.”¹²

Nor do all advertisers believe the dominant arguments of their own industry. As Guy Murphy, formerly Vice President of the advertising agency BBH and now Global Strategy Director at JWT, has written: "Some academic studies, especially about advertising, can encourage a view that market growth is too ambitious. They claim advertising increases market share but not market size. (A theory vociferously used by the cigarette industry.)... [But] it is simply not true to say that advertising does not influence market size." Rather, argues Murphy, advertisers can and should try to grow the size of markets, not simply engage in a war with other brands. He calls on advertisers to "see themselves as trying to manipulate culture; being social engineers, not brand managers; manipulating cultural forces, not brand impressions."¹³

Indeed, the academic evidence on tobacco advertising suggests that advertisers have historically been major engineers of cultural change. A recent meta-study by the US Department of Health finds that: "The total weight of evidence—from multiple types of studies, conducted by investigators from different disciplines, and using data from many countries—demonstrates a causal relationship between tobacco advertising and promotion and increased tobacco use."¹⁴ Tobacco advertising, it seems, has not simply redistributed consumption between brands, but increased the overall size of the market. Still, whether the tobacco market has expanded at the expense of other consumer goods can only be answered by looking at the relationship between advertising and consumption in aggregate.

Given the importance of the issue, it is surprising that there is so little recent and relevant empirical research. Francesco Turino, an economist at the Universitat d'Alacant in Spain, and one of the authors of the most recent study on advertising and aggregate consumption, suggests that there are two reasons for this lack of research—one ideological, one practical:

"(1) [A]dvertising is typically studied in microeconomics while the relationship between advertising and aggregate consumption involves issues related with macroeconomic theory. Macroeconomists believe that advertising just redistributes demand across firms without affecting the total market size. As a result, many of them are not ideologically interested in this topic.

*(2) [The necessary] data are not really available. In fact, while you could find for free data on advertising expenditures at annual frequency, it is almost impossible to find data at quarterly frequency."*¹⁵

Yet from a macro-economic perspective, it is perfectly conceivable that advertising could increase overall consumption, in at least two ways. In the first case, advertising can be theorised to shift household income from savings and investments towards spending and borrowing—with individuals persuaded to use earnings or take out loans to buy the latest consumer products, rather than put money aside for later. In fact, there is some empirical evidence that this happens; one recent study finds that, historically, "exposure to television advertising increases the tendency to borrow for household goods and the tendency to carry debt."¹⁶

Secondly, advertising may lead to individuals seeking higher incomes—trading in their leisure time for longer working hours in order to receive higher pay. Once again, there is emerging evidence for this. Several researchers suggest the existence of a work-spend cycle whereby advertising heightens expectations about the acceptable material standard of living, leading people to work longer hours in order to attain a disposable income that allows them to meet those expectations.¹⁷ Keith Cowling and Rattanasuda Poolsombat at the University of Warwick, for example, find that "advertising may raise the desired amount of marketed goods and services for which workers find it necessary to work long hours."¹⁸ Stuart Fraser and David Paton, from the Universities of Warwick and Nottingham respectively, point out that, although working hours in the UK declined substantially between 1850 and 1950, the average Briton's working hours have stabilised at around 42–43 hours per week over the past forty years. Meanwhile, UK advertising expenditure increased from £3.8bn in 1970 to £10.5bn by 1997. Using statistical methods to explore the relationship between advertising spend and working hours, they suggest that: "Advertising seems to have a significant impact in both the identified male and female long run labour supply relations... Based on the present results, the increase in hours worked, associated with the change in *per capita* real advertising between 1952 and 1997, is estimated to be between 21% and 46%... for male weekly hours... The corresponding estimates for female weekly hours suggest an increase of between 20% and 45%."¹⁹ In other words, "an increase in advertising is associated with an increase in hours worked... causality runs unidirectionally from advertising to hours."²⁰

While the evidence is not conclusive, it seems that advertising may be encouraging society to save less, borrow more, work harder and consume greater quantities of material goods.

Certainly there is a need for further, sustained empirical research, carried out transparently. Until now there has been sufficient uncertainty in the evidence base for both sides to adopt unhelpfully dogmatic stances. This seems to be one important reason why discussion about the cultural impacts of advertising has reached an impasse.

Yet this is only just the beginning of the debate. As the following sections discuss, advertising may also have major implications for cultural values, and for freedom of choice.

3

IS ADVERTISING SIMPLY
A MIRROR OF CULTURAL
VALUES?

For some within the industry, advertising simply presents a reflection of ourselves—holding up a mirror to society, warts and all. If we don't like it, it's ourselves we need to change, not advertising. Critics of advertising often assert advertising is, by contrast, a 'manipulator of the masses', seeking to shape society in its own image.

The distinction between 'manipulator' and 'mirror' seems contrived. Irrespective of the extent to which advertising moulds cultural values, it must also hold a mirror to them. This is because the advertising industry is inevitably constrained by the need to reflect—albeit imperfectly—cultural values. As Stephen Fox writes:

"To stay effective advertising couldn't depart too far from established public tastes and habits; consumers must be nudged but still balk at being shoved."²¹

But there is also evidence that advertising will further embed and reinforce the values that it reflects. In the language of psychology, it 'models', or 'normalises', particular values socially. Advertising—in common with other communications—will tend inevitably to establish social norms which condition us to accept certain values, and which will suppress expressions of alternative values. As Rory Sutherland says, with reference to smoking:

"While I can accept that the purpose of tobacco advertising was not to encourage people to smoke, I find it astounding that anyone could barefacedly suggest that cigarette posters seen everywhere did not serve to normalise the habit."²²

Cigarette posters may not be seen everywhere any more, but advertising as a whole has proliferated. One recent advertising textbook estimates that the average American is exposed to between 500 and 1000 adverts every day and higher numbers are often quoted.²³ Indeed, in his basic training in the industry, one of the authors of this report was taught always to remember that his prospective audience would be seeing 3000 messages a day—something that was presented as problematic only because of the challenge it posed for designing effective new advertisements.

As a direct result of this pervasiveness, advertising seems set to be an important factor in normalising particular cultural behaviours, attitudes, and most fundamentally, values.

3.1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURAL VALUES?

Cultural values have been shown, through extensive research, to be of critical importance in determining our attitudes and behaviour towards social and environmental issues. Building on pioneering work by social psychologist Shalom Schwartz in the 1990s, and since testing this in dozens of academic studies, researchers have identified a number of values which occur and recur consistently across different countries and cultures.²⁴

A recent model, based on Schwartz's work and developed by Frederick Grouzet and Tim Kasser, highlights an important split between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' values. Intrinsic values refer to those things which are more inherently rewarding to pursue—a sense of community, affiliation to friends and family, and self-development, for example. Extrinsic values, on the other hand, are values that are contingent upon the perceptions of others—they relate to envy of 'higher' social strata, admiration of material wealth, or power. **(For more examples, see Table 1).**

The link between values and behaviours is well documented for a range of concerns. Placing greater importance on extrinsic values is associated with higher levels of prejudice, less concern about the environment and lower motivation to engage in corresponding behaviours, and weak (or absent) concern about human rights.²⁵ People who attach greater importance to extrinsic values are also likely to report lower levels of personal wellbeing.²⁶

Taking the evidence as it relates to the environment as an example:

- Studies in the US and the UK show that adolescents who more strongly endorse extrinsic values report themselves as being less likely to turn off lights in unused rooms, to recycle, to reuse paper and to engage in other positive environmental behaviours.²⁷
- Similar findings have been reported for American adults, among whom extrinsic values are found to be negatively correlated with the frequency of pro-environmental behaviours such as riding a bicycle, reusing paper, buying second-hand, and recycling.²⁸
- The ecological footprints of 400 North American adults were also found to be associated with their values. A relatively high focus on extrinsic values was related to a higher ecological footprint, arising from lifestyle choices regarding transportation, housing and diet.²⁹

Similar results are found for a range of social concerns.

Experiments show that extrinsic and intrinsic values act in opposition—placing importance on extrinsic values, for example, diminishes a person’s regard for intrinsic values, and reduces his or her motivation to engage in environmentally or socially helpful behaviour. This is not to say that extrinsic values should be viewed as ‘evil’, or that we ought seek to expunge them. Rather, they are an inherent part of human nature; all people can hold all values at all times, but with differing levels of emphasis. However, the evidence strongly suggests that where extrinsic values are accorded particular importance, pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours will be undermined.³⁰

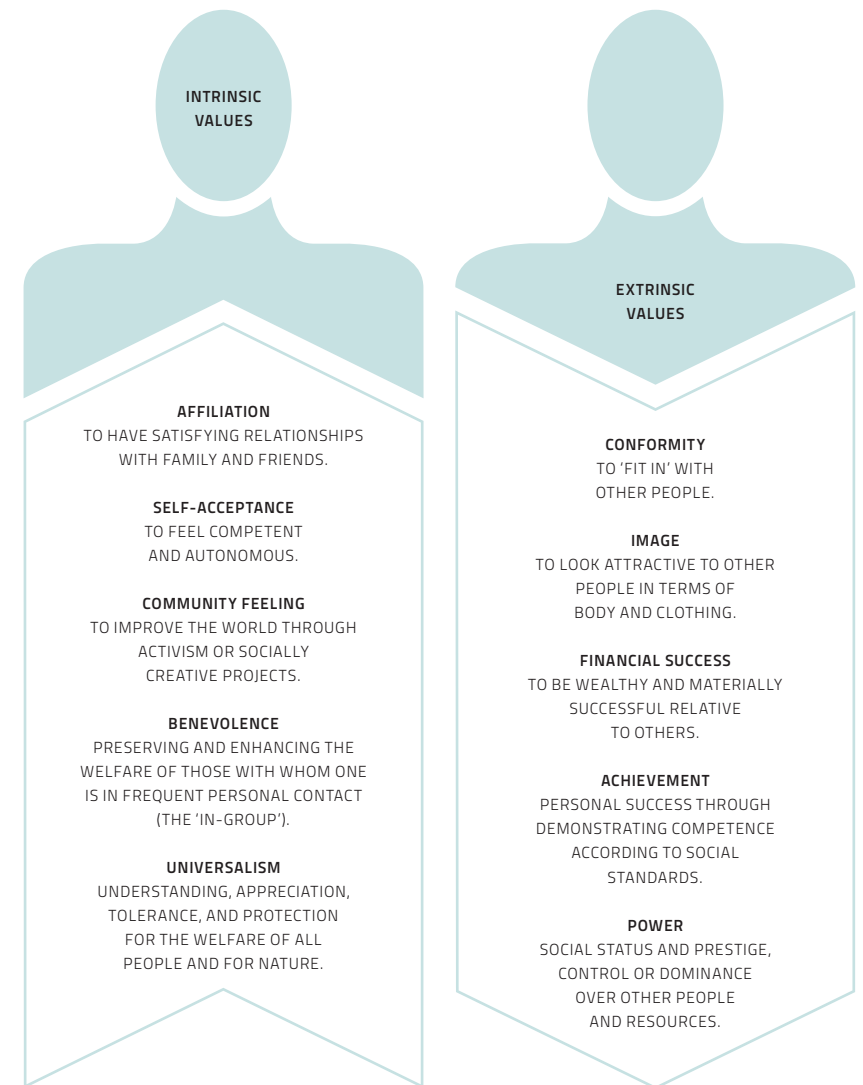


Table 1: Examples of opposing pairs of intrinsic and extrinsic values.³¹

3.2 ADVERTISING APPEALS IMPORTANTLY TO EXTRINSIC VALUES

The great majority of advertising money is spent in ways that appeal to extrinsic values—that is, values associated with lower motivation to address social or environmental problems. This is to be expected: the behaviour sought as an output of almost all advertising is an act of consumption. It seems clear that acts of consumption are more likely to fulfil extrinsic value motivations than intrinsic ones. Buying a Lexus car or a Sony TV can really make people jealous of you. It seems far less likely that buying a particular brand of processed food will improve the quality of one's family life.

As the marketing academic Terence Shimp notes in reviewing Schwartz's original values model:

*"All 10 values are **not** equally important to consumers and thus not equally applicable to advertisers in their campaign-development efforts... the first six values [which broadly correspond to the extrinsic set]... apply to many advertising and consumption situations, whereas the last four [which broadly correspond to the intrinsic set] are less typical drivers of much consumer behaviour."*

Shimp concludes that these first six values "drive the bulk of consumer behaviour and are thus the goals to which advertisers must appeal."³²

3.3 ADVERTISING IS LIKELY TO STRENGTHEN THE VALUES TO WHICH IT APPEALS

There is evidence from a range of diverse studies that repeated activation of particular values serves to strengthen these.³³ Given this, one would predict that increased exposure to advertising would lead a person to attach greater importance to extrinsic values, and to display a reduced concern about environmental and social issues. It is important to stress that this effect will have nothing to do with the *product* being advertised. Thus, it is possible to advertise 'green' products through appeal to extrinsic values: that is, values which are likely to undermine a person's concern about environmental issues. For instance, selling a hybrid car by advertising that it is driven by a film star may sell more vehicles, but is likely, at the same time, to promote extrinsic values by encouraging status competition and social comparison.

It is also important to recognise that this effect will not require a product purchase. As discussed above, there are persuasive arguments that advertising drives increased consumption, and therefore increases a society's aggregate environmental footprint. But the effect of advertising operating at the level of *values* does not relate directly to the amount of 'stuff' that is sold. For example, many thousands of people may be exposed to an advertisement that appeals to extrinsic values. Irrespective of whether this advertisement drives up sales of the product that is being advertised, the vast majority of people who see the advertisement will not buy the product. Yet exposure to the advertisement is nonetheless likely to have affected these people. In particular, where the advertisement appeals to extrinsic values, it will probably have contributed to the social modelling of these values, and therefore, incrementally, to eroding a person's motivation to help address environmental problems.

Anat Bardi is a Senior Lecturer in social psychology at Royal Holloway College, University of London, whose expertise is cultural values, and the ways in which these change. We asked her about the likely impact of repeatedly presenting a person with messages that suggest the importance of status, image, money, and achievement in life. She identified two ways in which this is likely to lead to these extrinsic values becoming held more strongly—through 'automatic' (or unconscious) and 'effortful' (or conscious) routes. She writes:

"As these values are primed repeatedly, they are likely to be strengthened. This is likely to happen through an automatic route as well as an effortful route of cognitive processing. Through the automatic route, priming values strengthens links between environmental cues and these values in the way that information is stored in our memory (i.e., our schemas). This serves to strengthen these values automatically, even without awareness on the part of the person. In addition, through the effortful route, messages that strengthen existing values provide people with further proof that the values are indeed important and worth pursuing. Hence, through effortful cognitive processing of the person actively thinking about these values and their importance, these values are strengthened and the environmental cues provide evidence and reasons for the importance of these values."³⁴

If Bardi is right, then one might expect that people who watch more commercial television will hold extrinsic values to be more important. There is evidence for this.

For example, one study, conducted by Bradley Greenberg and Jeffrey Brand, researchers at Michigan State University, examined the impact of the use of Channel One in US schools.³⁵ Channel One is a daily 10-minute news bulletin with two minutes of advertisements. Viewing is incorporated into some school timetables in return for donations of telecommunications equipment. The study compared the importance attached to extrinsic values in large samples of teenagers from two neighbouring schools—one with Channel One, the other without. The demographics of the two samples of children were otherwise comparable: for example, they had similar levels of parental income, similar levels of access to TV at home, and similar class sizes. Teenagers enrolled at the school that used Channel One were found to hold extrinsic values to be significantly more important.

Other work has looked at the impacts of television viewing on attitudes to the environment. There is good evidence for a correlation between television viewing and a sense of apathy regarding environmental issues, including less concern about environmental problems, a lower sense of agency in addressing these problems, and lower levels of active engagement to help tackle them.³⁶ On the basis of the evidence we have presented here, this is to be predicted—if heavier television viewing is correlated with increased prevalence of extrinsic values, and extrinsic values are negatively correlated with environmental concern. Jennifer Good at Brock University in the US investigated the relationship between television viewing and apathy about environmental problems. Her study corroborated earlier work in identifying a positive relationship between television viewing and extrinsic values—or, in the case of her study, the closely related concept of 'materialism'. She also, as expected, found a negative relationship between materialism and environmental values. But, importantly, analysis of her results established that materialism mediated the relationship between television viewing and attitudes about the natural environment.³⁷

Of course, this effect may not be attributable exclusively to the advertising content of commercial television broadcasts: a great deal of editorial content on television is also likely to reinforce extrinsic values. Indeed, the boundaries between content and advertising are ever more difficult to define—particularly with increasing use of product-placement strategies. Nonetheless, as Jennifer Good notes:

“Advertising content is the most obvious way in which messages about materialism reach television viewers and, not surprisingly, researchers—using both qualitative... and quantitative... approaches—have found positive relationships between exposure to television advertising and favourable attitudes about materialism.”³⁸

3.4 ADVERTISING AND INTRINSIC VALUES

Not all advertising appeals to extrinsic values. Indeed, a significant—and perhaps increasing—quantity endorses intrinsic values. Advertising campaigns for brands such as the telecommunications network Orange, which focus on concepts of community and togetherness, spring immediately to mind.

However, even advertisements that appeal to intrinsic values may do more harm than good. Advertising that seeks to sell a product through appeals to intrinsic values—for example, promoting a fast-food chain by claiming that it will improve the quality of family life—risks reinforcing the perception that intrinsic values can be meaningfully pursued through the purchase of particular products. Where a customer feels, on purchasing this product, that it falls short in expressing these values, this experience may serve to erode a person's future commitment to pursuing these intrinsic values.

Moreover, some appeals to intrinsic values, particularly where these are self-evidently used opportunistically, may actually serve to undermine a person's belief in the integrity with which others express these values, thereby diminishing the importance that they attach to these values when they encounter them elsewhere. Such use of intrinsic values is particularly stark where the same company uses both extrinsic and intrinsic appeals to engage different audience segments. Comparison of the advertising campaigns of the Unilever brands Dove and Lynx provides a useful case in point. Dove is marketed through campaigns for 'real beauty' that have been praised by feminists; Lynx is sold using pictures of near-naked women who conform to the stereotypes of 'unreal beauty' that advertisements for Dove set out to challenge. The fact that the same parent company is responsible for both campaigns risks eroding an audience's belief in the sincerity of appeals to intrinsic values. This may lead them to devalue expressions of intrinsic values when they encounter these elsewhere.³⁹

We cannot state, with confidence, that these effects arise. While such arguments are advanced by some psychologists, current research does not allow us to draw firm conclusions. Nonetheless, it is clear that we cannot simply assume that, because advertising which makes appeal to extrinsic values is likely to erode concern about social and environmental issues, then advertising which makes appeal to intrinsic values will serve to strengthen an audience's concern about these issues.

Finally, we note that creative advertising can be effectively deployed by charities and governments to promote public information campaigns and social and environmental causes, in line with intrinsic values. Where these advertisements accurately reflect the intrinsic values expressed in supporting these organisations or campaigns—for example, where a conservation organisation promotes visits to a nature reserve on the grounds that this will improve a visitor's sense of connection to nature—it seems likely that the problems outlined in this section will be avoided.

3.5 THE NET EFFECT OF ADVERTISING ON CULTURAL VALUES

All this suggests that to see advertising as an innocent mirror of cultural values is naïve at best. Rather, every advert must be considered to have a potential impact on cultural values. As Sutherland asserts with reference to tobacco, advertising normalises what it endorses: something that is likely to be as true of values and identities as it is of a behaviour like smoking. If we know that certain cultural values are environmentally and socially damaging then responsible companies—including marketing agencies—must respond to this understanding in their communications, and especially in their advertising.

Many marketing agencies, like their clients, are now working to reduce their internal ecological footprints. Some, like Starcom Mediavest Group's CarbonTrack, are even constructing elaborate and impressive carbon footprint calculation tools.⁴⁰ Yet the negative social and environmental impacts of the advertisements that an agency produces—as mediated by the values that these advertisements serve to strengthen—are likely to far outweigh the positive steps that an agency may be taking to address the more immediate impacts of its business activities. Indeed, to produce advertisements with potentially negative impacts on values, at the same time as attempting to address more immediate environmental impacts, may be analogous to poisoning the roots of a tree while watering its leaves.

4

IS ADVERTISING PURELY
ABOUT THE PROMOTION
OF CHOICE?

In his *Campaign* magazine column 'On the couch', Jeremy Bullmore from the advertising group WPP regularly links advertising to the promotion of choice, in turn positioning choice as one of the key tenets of democracy. His central thesis is that the key role of advertising is to provide information that enables people to make better choices.⁴¹

There is, however, a crucial problem with this argument. It ignores the case that people are influenced, in part, through unconscious responses to an advertisement about which they are unaware. Such unconscious responses serve to remove—rather than extend—choice. This may be particularly true for advertising targeted at children. It is a problem that is further compounded by the fact that it is difficult to remove ourselves from the unconscious influence of advertisements—because these are so pervasive.

4.1 THE IMPLICIT IMPACTS OF ADVERTISING

Many understand that advertising impacts on individuals without their being aware of this—that is, it impacts at an 'implicit' level. As a recent survey sponsored by the advertising industry found:

*"Awareness of advertising may be conscious or not—surprisingly many people understand that advertising may work below the radar of attention (e.g. tube, press and posters); this is referred to as soft, subtle or 'subliminal' advertising."*⁴²

This suspicion is increasingly supported by both academia and the industry. As Robert Heath, lecturer at the University of Bath's School of Management, and Paul Feldwick, former Executive Planning Director of major London agency BMP DDB, wrote in 2007:

*"Most advertising influences behaviour not through the conscious processing of verbal or factual messages, but by mediating relationships between the consumer and the brand—and it does this using types of communication that are not necessarily processed with conscious attention."*⁴³

Their words echo, with striking similarity, those of Vance Packard, who fifty years ago famously set out one of the first critiques of subconscious advertising in *The Hidden Persuaders*. As Packard wrote:

*"Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences."*⁴⁴

Others since Packard—both within the advertising industry and outside it—have come to similar conclusions. Brand consultants Wendy Gordon and Peter Langmaid wrote back in 1986:

*"There is irrefutable proof of the presence in the consumer's mind of advertising messages... that are inaccessible to conscious recall."*⁴⁵

This perspective is supported by experimental evidence for the effectiveness of advertising in influencing people's choices without their conscious awareness. For example, one recent study associated Coke and Pepsi logos with positive or negative words and images. This was found to effect a change in people's implicit attitude towards each brand, but to leave their explicit attitudes unchanged.⁴⁶

Academics Agnes Nairn and Cordelia Fine, meanwhile, have argued that much advertising "operates darkly, beyond the light of consciousness. This poses a significant challenge that will become more demanding."⁴⁷ They recount how once-orthodox theories of mind, which emphasised how audiences consciously and rationally evaluate the persuasive intent of each advert they are exposed to, have now been supplanted by a more subtle 'dual process model'. In this explanation, the mind first responds automatically—or implicitly—to stimuli like advertising, with conscious cognitive defences only kicking in if the viewer realises that he or she is being targeted with explicit efforts at persuasion. Nairn and Fine have been particularly concerned with the development of *new* stealth marketing techniques and their effects on children. However, implicit advertising is not new, nor has its use ever been confined to children. As Tim Ambler of the London Business School has written, "The relatively recent recognition of 'implicit' (i.e. non-conscious) processing of advertising does not imply that the advertising industry has only recently employed implicit appeals."⁴⁸

Indeed, while some within the advertising industry resist the notion that much advertising relies upon implicit appeals, others have sought to actively champion such strategies. After World War One, marketer Edward Bernays sought to deploy the findings of his uncle, Sigmund Freud—the pioneer of psychoanalysis—to encourage customers to buy his clients' products through the use of subconscious association.⁴⁹ Where psychoanalysis was cutting-edge in the 1920s, today marketers look to the latest neuroscience to glean new ways to appeal to potential consumers. Erik du Plessis, chairman of market research agency Milward Brown South Africa, extols the usefulness of “how brain science can contribute to marketing” in his books *The Advertised Mind* and *The Branded Mind*.⁵⁰

Meanwhile Robin Wight, President of communications agency Engine, recently launched an initiative to 'Save Advertising'. He called for the advertising industry to start using brain-scanning as a standard process in development research, as opposed to traditional focus groups. Such approaches, he argued, could begin to tailor responses to a proper understanding of the implicit impacts of advertising, and could therefore help to justify financial expenditure on marketing—especially during economic recession. Concerns were raised within the advertising industry: it was feared that Wight's initiative could harm reputations, and the website containing his recommendations has since been taken down.⁵¹

The research agency TwoMinds, however, is already positioned to take advantage of techniques that assess implicit responses to advertisements:

“Intuitive brand judgments are made instantaneously and with little or no apparent conscious effort on the part of consumers—at point of purchase (or at any other brand touchpoint). Intuition is now well accepted as a powerful driver of brand choice and brand affiliation, but it has largely been ignored, because in the past we lacked the ability to really understand and leverage it.

Our techniques are based on the fact that the unconscious mind acts to either help or hinder our speed of decision making.”⁵²

So it seems that we may have little choice about whether or not we respond to advertising. If we see it or hear it—even if we are not consciously aware that we have seen or heard it—we process it, and there are limits to the extent to which we can choose whether it affects us or not. Implicit attitudes can be changed without changing explicit attitudes—that is, without a person being aware that his or her feeling towards something has changed—and this change in attitude, in turn, is likely to have an impact on behaviour.

The standard rejoinder is to recommend the public be schooled in media literacy. Responding to the debate about the commercialisation of childhood, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned a report in 2009, led by media education academic Professor David Buckingham. The report appears initially sanguine in its assessment:

“The commercial world is not going to disappear. Children and parents need to understand it and deal with it. Consumer and media literacy, both at home and in schools, offers one important strategy here...”⁵³

Yet the implicit influence of advertising will inevitably limit the effectiveness of greater 'media literacy', as the conscious brain simply cannot process and filter all marketing. To its credit, the DCSF report clearly acknowledges this later on, concluding:

“Finally, it is important to emphasize that education is not an alternative to regulation, as it is sometimes implied. As we have noted... people (adults or children) who are more media literate are not necessarily immune to media influence.”⁵⁴

Education alone, in other words, cannot equip individuals with all the defences needed to resist advertising's arsenal. This poses a conundrum for anyone wishing to promote real freedom of choice.

4.2 ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

Children are often seen as being particularly susceptible to advertising's powers of persuasion.⁵⁵ At the same time, there is growing concern that children are increasingly exposed to marketing which deploys sexual images, and are being prematurely sexualised as a result.

David Cameron, the UK prime minister, has spoken out strongly against this trend:

*"Premature sexualisation is like pollution. It's in the air that our children breathe. All the time. Every day... some businesses are dumping a waste that is toxic on our children. Products and marketing that can warp their minds and their bodies and harm their future. ... More and more today, sexually-provocative images are invading public space—space shared by children... Enough is enough."*⁵⁶

But if we are concerned about marketing's capacity to sexualise children, what about its likely effect in promoting extrinsic values—associated with lower wellbeing, and less concern about social and environmental problems? As John Richard Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, has pointed out:

*"Sexualisation of childhood is only one part of a wider problem. There is a danger that our society's obsession with sex ignores the wider problems of the impact of commercialisation on childhood. Advertising aimed at children can affect their physical health (food and drink marketing), mental health (low self-esteem, obsessive concern with appearance), and values. Consumerism, materialism and commercialisation are closely linked..."*⁵⁷

To give him credit, David Cameron seems to recognise this, going on to refer to "our shared responsibility to protect children from aggressive commercialism", as well as "giving kids a respite from the consumer culture."⁵⁸ The Conservative Party's 2010 manifesto included a set of proposals for cracking down on advertising aimed at children, including giving headteachers and governors the right to ban advertising in schools;⁵⁹ and upon taking office, Cameron commissioned Reg Bailey to further investigate the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.⁶⁰

News coverage of the Bailey Review's publication in June 2011 focused mostly upon its recommendations to tackle premature sexualisation, but its pronouncements on children and consumerism were also noteworthy. "Children are undoubtedly under a great deal of pressure to consume," it concluded. Its recommendations included ensuring advertisers better reflect parents' and childrens' views, through more frequent ASA consultations; prohibiting the employment of children as brand ambassadors and peer-to-peer marketers; and raising parental awareness of marketing and advertising techniques. As with the Buckingham Report, the Bailey Review also stated it was "unconvinced that simply improving the media and commercial literacy skills of children provides a sufficient response or protection."⁶¹

Large segments of the public remain concerned about the impacts of advertising on children. A YouGov poll in 2010 found 77% of people agreed that advertising to children under the age of 12 should be banned.⁶² A parent quoted in the Bailey Review wondered, pointedly, "if the advertising industry are comfortable spending millions of pounds targeting children direct and then saying it's down to Mum and Dad to stand up to them?"⁶³

But it would be wrong to think that children are uniquely susceptible to advertising. As the Buckingham Report noted, the young people it surveyed "did not see themselves as particularly vulnerable in this regard. All recognised that adverts could create desires for things they might want but did not necessarily need—but, as one boy said, 'the same could be said of my parents'."⁶⁴

Similarly, Reg Bailey concluded that a healthy society "would not need to erect barriers between age groups to shield the young: it would, instead, uphold and reinforce healthy norms for adults and children alike, so that excess is recognised for what it is and there is transparency about its consequences."⁶⁵ Other researchers agree. A recent UNICEF study found that materialism isn't just detrimental to children's wellbeing: "materialism appears to be problematic for UK adults as well as children",⁶⁶ it suggests that "in the UK parents and children seemed to be locked into a compulsive consumption cycle."⁶⁷

4.3 THE PERVASIVENESS OF ADVERTISING

In accepting the evidence that they are influenced by advertising in implicit ways, people may seek to exercise their free will by removing themselves from situations in which they are exposed to advertisements. But that is far from straightforward. With advertising in its various forms now so pervasive, the choice not to be exposed to it at all—and therefore not be influenced by it—seems to have been removed.

There are certain media in which advertising is at some level a conscious 'opt-in' communication. Viewers of commercial television channels know that there will be advertising in the breaks. Buyers of magazines, or readers of online newspapers know that the cost of these media has been subsidised by advertising. To some extent, in consuming these sources of media, one is accepting that one will encounter advertisements—and therefore accepting the impacts that these advertisements are likely to have upon one's attitudes and behaviour.

But, as recent research has confirmed, the public is growing increasingly irritated by the pervasiveness of advertising, and some businesses have started to recognise this.⁶⁸ Recent developments in recording technology allow viewers to strip out the advertising breaks from programmes they have recorded from commercial TV channels. Similarly, the 'Do Good' application allows internet users to blank out online adverts and replace them with alternative messages—encouraging the user, for instance, to recycle more.⁶⁹ Other business models, meanwhile, are being developed to finance media and entertainment outlets without recourse to advertising at all, such as the subscription-fee version of Spotify, which removes the advertising used to fund its free version, or Ongo.com, an online news service that offers a monthly subscription in return for a clean, ad-free read.⁷⁰ Such innovations seem to attest to a growing public desire for the freedom to avoid advertising—an emerging 'right to opt-out', if you will.

But for every innovation seeking to empower the individual to opt-out of advertising, there are many more which seem set to extend advertising's pervasiveness. Product placement in television programming is—by its very nature, and as a basis for its effectiveness—difficult to recognise. Regulations formerly banning product placement have recently been liberalised in the UK. Online search engine technologies and the information stored by social networking sites and webmail services are opening up huge markets for advertisers seeking to tailor adverts to specific individuals; while the Office of Fair Trading has recently begun investigating celebrities' use of Twitter to surreptitiously endorse brands that they have been paid to promote.⁷¹

Yet while new technologies often challenge pre-existing social boundaries, it is an old form of advertising that seems most egregious in its infringement of our liberty to opt-out. Advertising in public spaces—known variously as 'outdoor' or 'ambient' advertising—is particularly difficult for an individual to voluntarily avoid. Is it right that a person cannot even step outside her house without encountering attempts to persuade her, at an unconscious level, that she should—for example—feel envious of the owners of a particular make of car?

When promoted by advertisers, 'choice' invariably means a choice between different brands. But real choice goes beyond merely commercial decisions. True freedom of choice, in the context of advertising, means having the choice of not being advertised to. It should be made open to us.

5

EVIL, USELESS, OR JUST
OUT OF CONTROL?

Rory Sutherland—a leading voice in the advertising industry, whose words were quoted at the start of this report—uses extraordinarily candid language to describe his outlook: “I would rather be thought of as evil than useless.”

Can we offer Sutherland the reassurance that he should indeed be thought of as more evil than useless? There is evidence that advertising may have significant negative cultural impacts: increasing our ecological footprint by boosting consumption; influencing our values and identities in ways that undermine our concern about social and environmental challenges; and eroding wellbeing and freedom of choice.

While this evidence base does not allow us to draw unequivocal conclusions about the impact of advertising, it warrants a clear and practical response from the industry.

It is incumbent, therefore, upon the advertising industry to demonstrate that its net impact is positive. Specifically, responsible companies—both clients and agencies—should integrate an assessment of the possible impacts of their advertising into their sustainability strategies. Increasingly, failure to scrutinise advertising’s effects will be seen by the public as indicating a lack of commitment to drive through meaningful corporate responsibility strategies.

But equally, it is incumbent upon civil society to hold the industry to account. Civil society organisations should pay much greater attention to the impacts of advertising. To date, they have tended to critique advertising at a superficial level, failing to engage it in the round.

NGOs that work on international development and environment issues need to take a keen interest in whether advertising is exacerbating greenhouse gas emissions and unsustainable resource use by promoting increased aggregate consumption. Groups seeking to tackle a wide range of social and environmental issues need to understand how advertising may be undermining public concern about these problems by promoting extrinsic values at a cultural level. Charities devoted to safeguarding childhood or protecting civil liberties need to consider carefully whether advertising damages their aims.

It is the role of civil society organisations to increase public awareness and concern about these possible impacts, to hold the industry to account, and where necessary, to press for government intervention. This report therefore makes two overarching recommendations:

- We must seek to reduce the negative impact that advertising has on cultural values.
- We must reduce the pervasiveness of advertising, reversing the trend to communicate with us as consumers in every facet of our lives.

Details of these recommendations are explored below.

1. We must seek to reduce the negative impact that advertising has on cultural values

As has been discussed, there are two qualitative problems with current advertising. First, the great majority of advertisements seem to appeal to extrinsic values. Second, the use of appeals to intrinsic values is usually spurious and is often inconsistent.

Crucially, **responsible companies need to examine the values that their advertisements invoke, and therefore strengthen, in society.** Unilever, with its impressive Sustainable Living Plan, for example, must look very closely at how it advertises products like Lynx; an agency like Wieden+Kennedy must do the same with their work for brands like Nike. From a values perspective, to do otherwise will risk undermining other steps that these companies may be taking to reduce their social and environmental impact.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) already has powers to regulate the promotion of socially-damaging extrinsic values in certain circumstances. In particular, the CAP Code rules against advertising to children in ways that would make them feel unpopular for not buying the advertised product.⁷² The Portman Group, meanwhile—a voluntary grouping of businesses that sell alcoholic products—undertakes not to use appeals to social success or popularity in order to sell alcohol.⁷³ These examples establish the principle that there are grounds for avoiding appeals to certain extrinsic values, although this is not a principle that has been generally applied. **Civil society organisations should be pressing for such principles to be adopted on a wider basis.**

Spurious and unjustified appeals to intrinsic values could also, in principle, be policed by the ASA. However, agencies are currently required to provide only scant evidence to justify such claims for the brands they promote. Again, civil society organisations could give this issue greater attention.

Going further, **the CAP Code should be amended**, in order to take better account of advertising's effects on cultural values, recognising that advertising's impacts are often implicit, rather than conscious.

As this report acknowledges, the evidence base does not permit a categorical assessment of the impacts of advertising. Nonetheless, this mustn't become an excuse for procrastination. Precautionary action should be taken now.

More research, however, is undoubtedly needed.

The recent creation of Credos, a think tank whose mission is to “understand advertising” and to conduct studies into its impacts, is one response to this need.⁷⁴ But it is not a response that fills us with confidence. The new research that is needed, while funded by the industry, must nonetheless be conducted with a level of independence that is beyond dispute. Whilst Credos claims to be independent and objective,⁷⁵ it forms part of the Advertising Association's strategy of ‘selling advertising’ to an increasingly doubtful public. “Our aim is immodest,” the Association stated in setting up Credos. “We want to create a world class faculty to provide the soundest possible intellectual and academic basis for the advocacy of advertising in all its forms. Nothing more. Nothing less.”⁷⁶ Given such aims, it seems unlikely that Credos will prove capable of a dispassionate examination of the impacts of advertising. We recommend that responsible advertisers, and companies which invest in advertising, should support independent research into the impacts of their marketing—not simply on how effective it is in increasing sales, but into its potentially damaging social and environmental impacts. Arrangements should be developed to enable responsible agencies to provide financial support for this research, while safeguarding against any possible agency involvement in directing this work, or in influencing the results of such studies.

2. We must reduce the pervasiveness of advertising

If, as we have argued is likely, advertising exacerbates social and environmental challenges, then the pervasiveness of advertising seems set to magnify this effect. Yet, far from seeking to restrain the reach of advertising, public policy often serves to actively extend it. The recent relaxation of legislation on product placement in commercial television—a technique popular with advertisers precisely because it is not explicitly recognisable as advertising—is just one example.

Rather, **the choice to avoid advertising must be made open to us.** As a principle, we should aim for a world where, at some level, people consciously ‘opt-in’ for exposure to advertising. This principle has several consequences.

First, in contrast to the example of product placement, **we should always be made explicitly aware of advertisements.**

Second, **we should be able to move in public spaces without being exposed to advertising.** There are many precedents for bans on advertising in public spaces—including the city of São Paulo, which has banned adverts from its central district; and the US states of Alaska, Hawaii, Maine and Vermont, which have banned billboards. Metropolitan authorities in Paris have pledged to reduce the amount of advertising on the city's streets by 30% by 2013.⁷⁷ Still, the lines here will require some skill to draw. Advertising on public transport networks (for example, on the London Underground) would be a more difficult issue, since the advertising revenue often significantly subsidises the cost of use. Decisions to stop advertising in these spaces would therefore require the deliberation of the users of these services.

Third, **we should extend provisions for opt-out from exposure to advertising**—such as the development of software to block out online adverts.

Fourth, **alternative methods of subsidising news and entertainment media which remove the need for large advertising revenues, should be protected and promoted.** Examples of such methods include the BBC's licence fee, Spotify's ad-free Unlimited service, or Ongo.com's ad-free news subscription service.

Fifth, reducing advertising's pervasiveness also means **there should be tighter restrictions on advertising to children.** There is already widespread acceptance that advertising to children is likely to incur social costs. We have presented evidence that it is also likely to lead to environmental costs, impacting upon the likelihood of children becoming environmentally-conscious citizens as they grow up.

As we've seen, one frequent response to this awareness is to call for improvements in media literacy skills. But an understanding of the unconscious impact of advertising raises questions about whether such skills offer children sufficient protection from the impacts of advertising. A conscious understanding of the strategies that advertisers deploy may offer little protection from the influence that they exert unconsciously. Teaching of media literacy skills is perhaps akin to building a fence to stop a mole.

Advertising to children has been banned in some countries. This is not a perfect response, by any means. Increasingly, the advertising to which children are exposed is received through the internet—which would probably be unaffected by any national ban. Moreover, children are exposed to—and influenced by—a large volume of advertising that is (at least purportedly) targeted at adults. Yet, imperfect as this response may be, **a ban on advertising to children would at least reduce children's exposure to adverts,** and send a signal that there are areas that should be off-limits to marketers.

Finally, **measures should be taken to make the public more aware of advertising's implicit impacts.** Whilst media literacy training programmes must warn adults and children of the implicit impacts of advertising, this—as previously discussed—will clearly not be sufficient alone. The advertising industry should also formally acknowledge that advertising has effects below the level of conscious recall, engage in wider public debate about the implications of this, and consider the industry's responsibility for such implications. **One proposal is for the inclusion of a disclaimer on every billboard.** This could read:

This advertisement may influence you in ways of which you are not consciously aware. Buying consumer goods is unlikely to improve your wellbeing and borrowing to buy consumer goods may be unwise; debt can enslave.

Conclusion

This is an ambitious set of proposals. *Think of me as Evil?* is a contribution to the start, not the culmination, of a debate. Undoubtedly, more work is needed in thinking through the detail of these proposals, and in developing further responses.

All those concerned about social and environmental challenges—whether they work in business, government or the third sector—can find common cause in contributing to this work. Yet responsibility for developing this debate further must fall particularly upon the third sector. It seems unsustainable for civil society organisations—almost irrespective of the issues upon which they focus—to continue to largely disregard the cultural impacts of advertising.

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Tom Crompton is Change Strategist at WWF-UK. He leads WWF-UK's Strategies for Change Project, and is author of *Weathercocks and Signposts: The Environment Movement at a Crossroads* (WWF, 2008) and (with Tim Kasser) *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity* (WWF, 2009). His recent report *Common Cause: The Case for Working with Our Cultural Values* was published by a group of NGOs in September 2010. It has led to extensive debate across the third sector in the UK, and its recommendations are now being incorporated into the strategies of many NGOs.

Guy Shrubsole is Director of Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC), an independent charity whose work is aimed towards building a sustainable society. He helped coordinate the *Offshore Valuation* report (2010) and wrote PIRC's analysis of green investment in the UK, *The Green Investment Gap* (2011). He previously worked for the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and New Zealand's Ministry of Agriculture.

ABOUT COMMON CAUSE

Common Cause: The Case for Working With Our Cultural Values was published in September 2010 by a group of NGOs: Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN), Friends of the Earth (FOE), Oxfam and WWF-UK. The report makes the case that civil society organisations can find common cause in working to activate and strengthen a set of helpful 'intrinsic' values, while working to diminish the importance of unhelpful 'extrinsic' values. The report highlights some of the ways in which communications, campaigns, and government policy, inevitably serve to activate and strengthen some values rather than others.

Common Cause has inspired a number of follow-up pieces of work, including *Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty*, published by BOND, and *The Common Cause Handbook*, published by PIRC.

Become involved in this debate

Visit: valuesandframes.org/initiative/advertising

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