Because you’re worthless?
- How corporate outdoor advertising makes us feel bad, to sell us stuff we don’t need

Themes: corporate outdoor advertising, mental health, body image, debt, materialism

Whether it’s the myth of a perfect body, a perfect family Christmas or a perfect holiday, advertisers are on hand with the promise of a perfect lifestyle. The message: if we would just buy their product, then we too could reach that perfection.

But it’s a deliberately unattainable vision. The common reality is that imperfections have been airbrushed away or photoshopped out. No matter how much we buy and try to keep up, we’ll never get there. The false promises of advertising can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction when we do buy their products, trapping us in a cycle of purchases and disappointment.

In this pamphlet, we’ll look at how corporate advertising works, how it encourages and thrives on our insecurities, body dissatisfaction, debt and unhappiness; and why we would be happier and healthier if our city streets were ad-free.

The origins of modern advertising:

It can be tempting to think we’re not influenced by advertising and can ignore its unwanted messages. But how much control do we really have?

Edward Bernays, the “father of public relations”, was a nephew of Sigmund Freud. He applied his uncle’s ground-breaking work on understanding the human mind – not to helping people overcome emotional difficulties, but to selling them products through manipulation. He was the brains behind the campaign to get women smoking by branding it as a defiant, independent and fashionable act.

Bernays admired political propaganda and saw that these techniques of controlling and coercing the population could be used to sell consumer products too, although he rebranded ‘propaganda’ with the more acceptable label of “public relations”.

Under the influence

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” - Edward Bernays

www.spellingmistakescostlives.com
Advertisers do not want to engage with us rationally, they want to manipulate our feelings.

Which is why adverts look less like this

- Holds up to 200 staples
- Effective to up to 5cm of card
- Available in 3 colours

and more like this

Offices are sexy

The feel good factor

In the post-war period, adverts were simpler: they would give us information about a product. But that’s rarely how it works today. Advertisers now are not looking to inform us about a product as much as they are trying to shape our feelings about what it means to be successful, trendy, accepted, beautiful, happy and how we should enjoy ourselves.

Our human tendency to choose things which make us feel good is hijacked by advertisers and used to make us buy products, often without us realising it is happening. It might even lead us to choose a product which we know we don’t really want.

Research from the University of Bath shows that we do not need to pay conscious attention to an advertisement in order to be influenced by it. The ‘Low Attention Processing Model’ argues that because we are very accustomed to seeing adverts on a daily basis our minds stop processing them consciously and leave them to the subconscious to deal with. Advertisers know this: some of the most creative people in the world are currently employed to create a slick repetition of brand images to create familiarity. With familiarity comes trust. Trust in a brand means we’re more likely to purchase them. All this can happen at a subconscious level.

In the case of outdoor advertising like billboards, we rarely have a choice about whether we want to see these adverts or be influenced by them. Compared to radio or TV, street advertising is “the one medium you can’t switch off” - as the industry likes to boast.

A cycle of unhappiness

Advertising often presents us with an unrealistic picture of happiness, sometimes tied to notions of glamour, money, power and possessions. As we struggle to live up to this we can feel that we’ve failed no matter how much we spend. In The High Price of Materialism, Tim Kasser argues that the search for fulfillment through cultural values typically associated with advertising (money, possessions, image and social status) is undermining our wellbeing. The proliferation of corporate advertising in our public spaces means we are constantly exposed to messages which promote and reinforce these materialistic values.

“Contemporary marketing techniques that link products with positive stimuli can elicit a preference for or choice of that product by non-conscious, non-rational means, and may even undermine consciously held attitudes.” (Nairn and Fine 2008)

“La vie est belle”

“‘It often seems to me that a person who feels happy and secure isn’t going to be a very good consumer, because that person isn’t going to be looking for products to shore up the self-image or to feel better about oneself’” - Jean Kilbourne, speaking in The Illusionists (2015)
The beauty myth

Advertising is less about satisfying existing needs than about creating new desires. Advertising convinces us that we are lacking in some way and then presents a purchase as the remedy. We even have a name for it: ‘retail therapy’.

Impossible beauty ideals are used regularly in advertising which can result in anxieties about our body image and lower our self-esteem.

“Women see the Face and the Body all around them now... because advertisers need to sell products in a free-for-all of imagery bombardment intent on lowering women’s self-esteem.” – Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth

The writer Naomi Wolf argues that advertisers have created a whole series of problems for women to feel anxious and self-hating about,

from weight problems to wrinkles. The solution we are offered, of course, is a barrage of beauty products.⁵

As Elena Rossini’s 2015 documentary The illusionists puts it, our bodies have become the ultimate consumer product. But the ‘perfect look’ depends on what marketers want to sell you – and it differs around the world. Advertisers persuade white women that they need tanning products, while promoting skin whitening creams in Asia and Africa.

The American Psychological Association found that the sexualisation of women and girls in advertising and other media is harmful to girls’ self-image and is linked to eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.⁷

Increasingly, it is not only women who are targeted with these marketing tactics; similar pressures are being placed on men and children.

“The evidence from decades of body image research and scholarship is clear. The promotion of unrealistic beauty standards by media and advertising is one of the most potent predictors of poor body image at a population level. Notably, studies indicate that just a few minutes exposure to

images of idealised models can have an immediate adverse effect on body image, psychological wellbeing, and self-worth.” – Nadia Craddock, Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England, Bristol

Spend, spend, spend

How do we pay for all these things we’re told we need? Two options: work harder and longer, or borrow. UK society has been doing both. In July 2018, UK consumer debt from personal loans, credit cards and car finance stood at £200 billion, making British households the most indebted in major Western countries according to the Office of National Statistics.

“Driven by the pressure placed on us to continue spending and the desires created through advertising many of us have chosen to borrow to supplement our wages, which despite working longer hours for many have decreased in real terms.” ‘The Advertising Effect’ by Compass (2009)

With many families already struggling to meet basic needs from stagnant wages, high rents and benefit cuts, the added pressure of consumer marketing places extra stresses on us. These messages are ramped up at the biggest annual festival of consumption, Christmas.
Still from the movie 'They Live' (1988)

Families in particular feel increasingly pressured to create the ‘perfect’ Christmas promoted by advertisers and other mass media and this puts us under greater financial stress as we borrow, delay paying bills and make other sacrifices in pursuit of this impossible dream.²

The recently established ‘Black Friday’ shopping bonanza in November has added another media moment to the retail calendar. Frenzied scenes of shoppers fighting to access stores and highly primed marketing campaigns push us to make impulsive purchases of things we mostly don’t need - but still want.

“A fairly substantial body of research agrees that those who feel bad about themselves and who are exposed to advertising are much more likely to rush to purchase all the toys, gadgets and electronics that we are urged to buy. They think it will make them feel better. But of course it doesn’t - it just creates a vicious circle of watching, wanting and poor well-being. It can also cause tension in families as kids ask for things they can’t have and parents feel endlessly guilty about buying stuff and about not buying stuff. No one really wins, apart from the retailers.” - Professor Agnes Nairn, University of Bristol

Our public spaces, our choice

The fight against advertising is not a fight against desiring. We should want more from life not less, and we should demand it. The question is: more of what?

Adverts are all around us. Outdoor advertising is a particular problem because we have no choice about whether we are exposed to it.

But there is another way. Communities and cities around the world are standing up to outdoor advertising. The cities of Sao Paolo in Brazil and Grenoble in France have both banned billboards. And there is a growing movement for Bristol to become the first city in the UK to remove corporate outdoor advertising.

Find out more: www.adblockbristol.org.uk
Twitter: @AdblockBristol

Published by Adblock Bristol, October 2018: for a happier, healthier city free from the pressures of corporate outdoor advertising

References
1 Edward Bernays, Propaganda, 1928
4 http://www.centrion.co.uk/low-cost-big-results-roadside-advertising-works/
8 https://www.scottishfriendly.co.uk/blog/2013/12/diary-christmas-pressure/
9 Professor Agnes Nairn http://www.bristol.ac.uk/efin/news/2017/should-christmas-treat-advertising-for-our-children-be-put-on-a-diet.html

Artwork by Matt Bonner, Burg Arts, 2018