

Criticism Of Advertising For Unhealthy Wealth

Posted on October 24, 2018

Advertising is a paid form of communication designed to inform, persuade, remind, or influence an audience about a product, service, brand, organization, or idea. Unlike public relations, advertising normally gives the sponsor direct control over the message and the space or time in which it appears. The original essay argues that advertising frequently promotes sex, unrealistic beauty, racial stereotypes, promiscuity, and an unhealthy obsession with wealth. That criticism remains important, although advertising is not inherently harmful. A public-health campaign, safety notice, or clear product comparison can provide useful information. The ethical problem begins when persuasion depends on insecurity, deception, exclusion, or the suggestion that a person's value comes from appearance and possessions (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Pollay, 1986).

Modern advertising extends far beyond television commercials and magazine pages. It appears in films, music, search results, social-media feeds, games, influencer content, podcasts, mobile applications, and personalized email. Digital platforms can target messages according to age, location, interests, browsing behavior, and inferred characteristics. This creates more relevant communication, but it also gives advertisers the ability to reach people at moments of vulnerability. A complete criticism must therefore examine not only the visible image but also the data, placement, repetition, and business model behind it.

Advertising and the Creation of Desire

Advertising often begins with a real need—soap cleans, food satisfies hunger, clothing provides protection—but competition encourages companies to attach symbolic meaning to ordinary goods. A brand may promise confidence, sophistication, popularity, romance, youth, or success. The product becomes a shortcut to an identity. Consumers are not forced to believe every promise, yet repeated associations can influence what appears normal or desirable.

The original essay correctly notes that people may resist admitting influence because they want to believe their choices are fully independent. Persuasion rarely works by controlling a person like a machine. It works by framing options, making one brand easier to recall, connecting a product with emotion, and creating social proof. A consumer can remain capable of choice while still being influenced.

Interruptive and Embedded Advertising

Traditional advertisements interrupt a program, article, or activity. Digital advertising can be more deeply embedded. A product may appear in a film, a creator may demonstrate it during ordinary content, or a game may reward the player for viewing a commercial. Because the boundary between entertainment and promotion becomes less visible, disclosure is important.

Native advertising is designed to resemble the surrounding editorial content. It may be informative, but it should be labeled clearly so that the audience knows who paid for it. Influencers similarly have an ethical responsibility to disclose commercial relationships. A recommendation appears more trustworthy when it seems personal and independent; hiding payment takes advantage of that trust.

Sexual Imagery and Attention

The original essay argues that “sex sells,” using men’s magazine covers as an example. Sexual imagery does attract attention in some contexts, but attention is not the same as effective persuasion. A provocative image may be remembered while the brand is forgotten. It can also alienate audiences, distract from product information, or reduce people to bodies.

Ethical concerns are strongest when sexuality has little connection with the advertised product or when the image presents women and men as objects available for consumption. Repeated objectification can normalize the idea that appearance determines social value. It may also encourage audiences to evaluate bodies against edited, professionally styled, and commercially selected ideals.

Sexual content is not automatically unethical. Adults can choose expressive or humorous advertising. The questions are whether the content is relevant, whether consent and dignity are respected, who is being targeted, and whether the message reinforces coercive or unequal ideas.

Unattainable Beauty Standards

Advertising frequently presents bodies that have been selected, styled, lit, posed, filtered, and digitally altered. The result may be physically impossible or attainable only through expensive procedures, restrictive diets, or intensive training. When such images are presented as ordinary, viewers may interpret normal skin texture, body shape, age, disability, or weight as failure.

The original essay connects idealized images with cosmetic surgery, medication, and depression about appearance. These outcomes are influenced by many factors, so one advertisement should not be treated as the sole cause. Nevertheless, advertising contributes to a broader environment of comparison. The effect can be especially strong among adolescents, whose identities and bodies are changing and whose social belonging may depend heavily on peer judgment.

Muscularity and Male Body Image

Body-image pressure affects men as well as women. Fitness and grooming advertising may imply that masculinity requires extreme muscularity, height, hair, sexual success, and emotional control. Some men respond with unsafe supplements, compulsive exercise, or anabolic substances. A responsible campaign can promote health without presenting one body type as the requirement for dignity.

Anti-Aging Advertising

Anti-aging marketing often treats natural aging as a disease or personal neglect. Products may promise to “reverse” time, erase years, or restore social relevance. The language exploits fear of invisibility and mortality. Cosmetic products can have legitimate uses, but claims should be realistic and should not imply that older faces are defective (Federal Trade Commission, 2023).

Advertising and Unhealthy Wealth

The title’s phrase “unhealthy wealth” refers less to money itself than to the belief that expensive possessions prove personal worth. Luxury advertising often sells exclusivity, status, and distance from ordinary people. Cars, watches, clothing, homes, and travel are presented as evidence that the owner has succeeded.

Ambition and financial stability are not wrong. The problem occurs when advertising encourages debt, compulsive consumption, or contempt for those with fewer resources. A person may purchase beyond their means to maintain an image. Social media intensifies this pressure because possessions can be displayed publicly and compared continuously.

Wealth imagery can also hide the labor and environmental cost behind a product. A luxury item appears as pure beauty while the advertisement omits working conditions, resource extraction, waste, and supply-chain inequality. Ethical marketing should not be required to include a complete social audit in every image, but companies should not make false sustainability or labor claims.

Race and Representation

The original essay identifies racial stereotypes in advertising, particularly the unequal representation of Black women. Advertising has historically used caricatures, exoticism, servant roles, criminal imagery, and assumptions about family, sexuality, intelligence, and consumption. Some stereotypes remain visible; others operate through absence. A campaign may present one racial group as the default professional, family, or consumer while including minorities only in narrow categories.

Representation should not be reduced to adding one person of color to a photograph. Ethical inclusion

requires attention to roles, voice, lighting, styling, language, and decision-making behind the campaign. A Black woman should not appear only in advertisements for a problem framed as irresponsible behavior while white women appear in images of ideal motherhood. Such patterns can communicate moral judgment even without explicit racist language.

Companies also risk cultural appropriation when they use religious symbols, Indigenous designs, hairstyles, language, or traditions as decorative material without context, permission, or benefit to the originating community. Consultation and collaboration can reduce harm, but they should influence the campaign rather than serve as a final approval step.

Stereotypes and Market Segmentation

Advertisers segment audiences because different people have different needs and preferences. Segmentation becomes stereotyping when broad categories replace evidence about actual consumers. Assuming that all women prefer one color, all older people fear technology, or all members of an ethnic group share one lifestyle produces weak and potentially discriminatory communication.

Data-driven targeting can reproduce the same problem invisibly. An algorithm may learn from historical clicks and show high-paying employment or housing advertisements unevenly. The advertiser may not explicitly select race or gender, yet proxies and prior behavior can create unequal delivery. Ethical review must therefore examine outcomes as well as intentions.

Children and Vulnerable Audiences

Children may not understand the persuasive purpose of advertising as fully as adults. Characters, games, bright colors, influencers, and rewards can blur entertainment and commerce. Advertising for foods high in sugar, salt, or fat can shape preferences before children can evaluate nutrition claims. In-app purchases and randomized rewards can similarly exploit limited understanding of money and probability (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006).

Vulnerability is not limited to age. People experiencing illness, grief, debt, loneliness, addiction, or body-image distress may be targeted with products promising rapid transformation. A legal disclaimer does not automatically make an emotionally manipulative campaign ethical.

Subliminal Messages and Persuasion Myths

The original essay refers to subliminal messages. Popular discussion often exaggerates their power. Brief or hidden stimuli may influence attention under controlled conditions, but advertisers do not possess a reliable method for forcing consumers to purchase against their interests. More ordinary

techniques—repetition, emotional association, scarcity, social proof, personalization, and convenience—are more important.

Focusing only on secret messages can distract from visible manipulation. A countdown timer, selectively edited testimonial, or “limited stock” claim may be more influential than an image supposedly hidden in a logo. Media literacy should examine evidence rather than assume every design element is a conspiracy.

Scarcity, Urgency, and Fear of Missing Out

Advertisements frequently create urgency through limited-time offers, low-stock notices, flash sales, and exclusive access. Scarcity can be genuine, but false scarcity pressures people to act before comparing price or need. Digital systems can display personalized countdowns or repeated claims that other customers are viewing an item.

Fear of missing out connects consumption with social belonging. A person is told that everyone is upgrading, attending, or purchasing. Ethical urgency should be truthful, clear, and not designed to trap users in repeated subscription or payment commitments.

Personalized Advertising and Privacy

Personalization can help consumers discover relevant products, but it relies on data. Browsing history, searches, purchases, location, device identifiers, and interactions may be combined to infer interests or vulnerabilities. People often do not understand how widely data move among platforms, brokers, and advertisers.

Consent should be meaningful rather than buried in lengthy terms. Sensitive categories such as health, religion, financial difficulty, and children’s activity require stronger protection. An advertisement that reveals a private condition on a shared device can cause harm even if the targeting algorithm is technically accurate.

Health and Scientific Claims

Advertisements for supplements, diets, cosmetics, and wellness products often use scientific language to create authority. Terms such as “clinically proven,” “detox,” “natural,” or “doctor recommended” may sound precise while lacking meaningful evidence. Images of laboratories and white coats can substitute for actual research.

Consumers should ask what was tested, in whom, compared with what, and whether results were independently reviewed. Testimonials cannot prove that a product caused an outcome. Ethical

advertisers should distinguish preliminary evidence from established benefit and should state important limitations.

Greenwashing

Environmental concern has created demand for sustainable products. Some companies respond with genuine changes; others use vague labels, green colors, leaves, and terms such as “eco-friendly” without defining the claim. This practice, known as greenwashing, allows the brand to gain moral value without measurable improvement.

A credible environmental claim should identify the relevant product, lifecycle stage, standard, and evidence. One recyclable package does not necessarily make an entire supply chain sustainable. Consumers need comparable information rather than decorative virtue.

Positive Uses of Advertising

A balanced analysis should recognize that advertising can support beneficial behavior. Campaigns can encourage vaccination, road safety, literacy, anti-smoking efforts, blood donation, emergency preparation, and recognition of abuse. Commercial advertising can inform customers about price, features, availability, and new solutions.

Diverse representation can also challenge stereotypes. Advertising is one of the most visible forms of culture, and inclusive campaigns can expand which bodies, families, professions, and identities are treated as ordinary. Positive representation should be sustained rather than limited to a symbolic annual campaign.

Responsibility of Advertisers and Platforms

Advertisers should substantiate claims, disclose sponsorship, protect privacy, avoid discriminatory targeting, and consider vulnerable audiences. Creative freedom does not remove responsibility for predictable harm. Internal review should include legal, ethical, cultural, and accessibility perspectives.

Platforms also shape advertising through recommendation, auction, and targeting systems. They should provide transparent ad libraries, user controls, age protections, and enforcement against fraud. Responsibility cannot be transferred entirely to individual consumers because the system is designed with information and technical power that users do not possess.

Media Literacy and Consumer Response

Consumers can reduce manipulation by asking several questions: Who paid for the message? What emotion is being created? What evidence supports the claim? What has been omitted? Is the offer genuinely urgent? Does the advertisement make the audience feel inadequate before offering a solution (Kilbourne, 1999)?

Media literacy should not become blame. A person deceived by sophisticated targeting is not simply foolish. Education works best alongside regulation, truthful design, and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

The original criticism is justified: advertising often uses sex, unattainable appearance, racial stereotypes, and status anxiety to generate attention and sales. These messages can contribute to objectification, body dissatisfaction, debt, exclusion, and the belief that wealth determines human value. Digital targeting has made persuasion more personalized and less visible.

Advertising is not inherently bad. It can communicate useful information, support public welfare, and broaden representation. The ethical distinction lies in truthfulness, relevance, dignity, privacy, and the treatment of vulnerable audiences.

Consumers should learn to recognize persuasive techniques, but advertisers and platforms carry greater responsibility because they design and distribute the system. A healthy advertising culture would still compete creatively while refusing to make insecurity, prejudice, and deception its primary sources of profit.

References

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2013). *Racism without racists* (4th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

Federal Trade Commission. (2023). *Advertising and marketing basics*.

Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. Free Press.

Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. J. (2006). Does advertising literacy mediate the effects of advertising on children? *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 560–584.

Pollay, R. W. (1986). The distorted mirror: Reflections on the unintended consequences of advertising. *Journal of Marketing*, 50(2), 18–36.