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

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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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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.

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

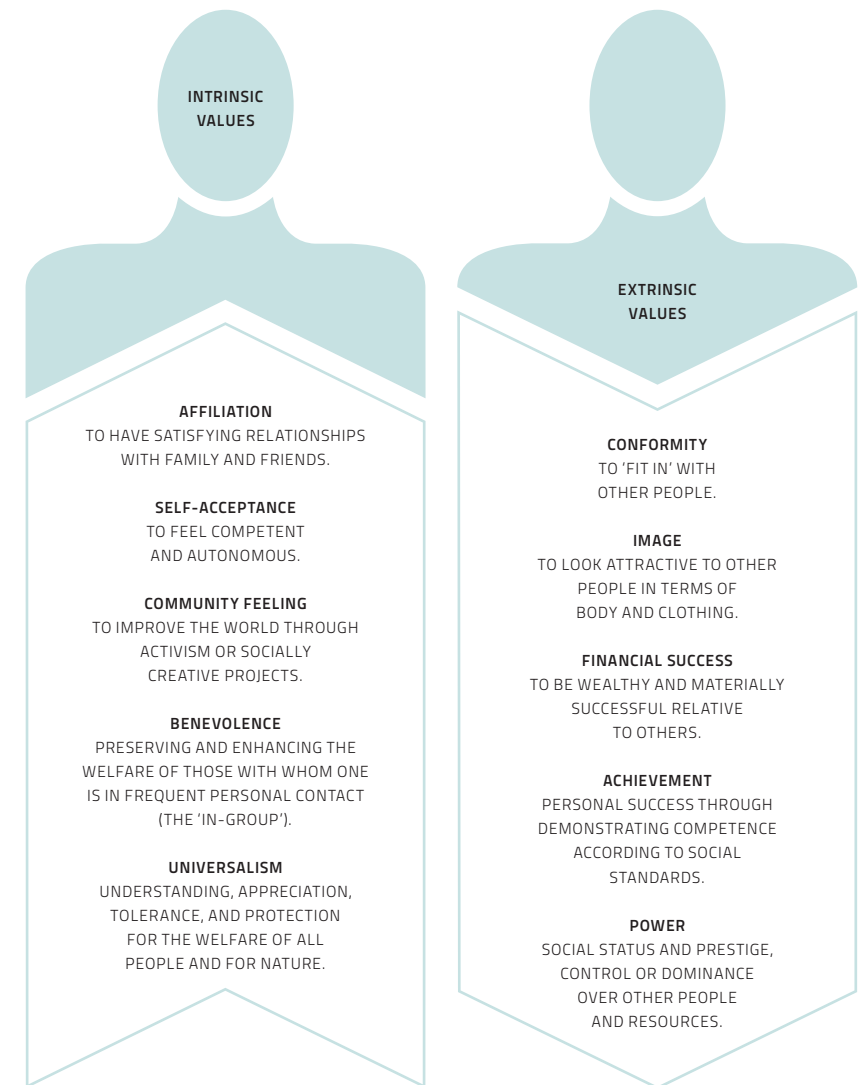


Table 1: Examples of opposing pairs of intrinsic and extrinsic values.³¹

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.

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