Newly updated for the digital era, this classic textbook provides a comprehensive historical study of advertising and its function within contemporary society by tracing advertising's influence throughout different media and cultural periods, from early magazines through social media. With several new chapters on the rise of the internet, mobile technology, and social media, this fourth edition offers new insights into the role of Google, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube as both media and advertising companies, as well as examining the role of brand culture in the twenty-first century.

William Leiss is Professor Emeritus at Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada, and Research Associate, McLaughlin Centre, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Stephen Kline is Professor Emeritus in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, Canada.

Sut Jhally is Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, USA, and Founder and Executive Director of the Media Education Foundation.

Jacqueline Botterill is an Associate Professor in Communication at Brock University, Canada, where she teaches and researches in the areas of promotional and consumer culture.

Kyle Asquith is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, Media and Film at the University of Windsor, Canada.
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The original three authors began the research for what became the first edition of this book, published in 1986, about thirty-five years ago. At that time, the academic study of advertising was still largely confined to the fields of marketing, economics, and consumer behavior. To be sure, there was a semi-popular literature as well, which was usually highly critical of the contents of advertisements, but its coverage of the topic was haphazard, for the most part: One got the distinct impression that the authors of such works found the details of the material they were criticizing to be distasteful, to say the least, and thus intrinsically unworthy of serious analysis. All this began to change in the 1980s, as a cohort of scholars and writers began to take an entirely new and in-depth look at the subject of advertising.

Historians, sociologists, business-school professors, social theorists, psychologists, and communications researchers entered the fray in increasing numbers, bringing a spate of entirely new perspectives and research methods to bear on this subject matter. The serious study of advertising was thoroughly transformed in the process. This new generation of commentators opened up the wide vistas of history and culture, on the one hand, and entered deep into the physiognomy of individual advertisements—the structure of their aesthetic design, persuasive techniques, and specific representations of persons and goods—on the other. Much of this literature is referenced in the chapters that follow. But if we were asked to single out one title from this era, one contribution that best pointed the way to a new appreciation of its subject, it would be the marvelous book written by the historian Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, published in 1985—a work by an author whose insight, sophistication, and breadth of view set a high standard for everyone else who would venture into this territory.

Our own approach in this book has been based on a communications perspective, as the title indicates. We maintain that, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, and continuing down through the turn of the twenty-first century, modern advertising has been responsible for nothing short of a revolutionary transformation in the techniques of persuasive communication. Designed initially for the selling of goods, in the era in which the mass consumer markets were being born, advertising practice developed over time an increasingly sophisticated view about how social communication works. Now, today, that understanding is used to market not just consumer goods, but also to construct dialogues in society involving complex ideas-political messages, advocacy by environmental groups and large corporations, people trying to change social values, those trying to influence lifestyle choices, and many others. Over a century of continuous development, and moving closely in step with regular innovations in communications technologies, advertisers taught all of us how rich, diverse, and simply fascinating are the ways in which a message can be conveyed.
Preface to the Fourth Edition

For this has been, without a doubt, a process of educating our sensibilities. This point can be illustrated by comparing two ad formats, one from around 1900 and another from a century later. In Chapter 2, the reader will find a discussion of the communicative format of the old Sears catalogue, which remained a venerable institution, especially in rural areas, throughout the entire first half of the twentieth century. An illustration, taken from the 1908 edition, accompanies this discussion, showing the complete reliance on a print-based form of expression, relieved only by stylized drawings; the target audience was expected to digest a truly immense quantity of words in order to get the message. Contrast this with the extraordinary British tobacco ad campaign of the early 1990s by the brand Silk Cut, which relied entirely on pure visual imagery, with no words whatsoever, for its message strategy. The imagery, showing a bolt of purple silk (purple was the brand's signature color) being cut by huge scissors, or patched with a band-aid after having been cut, had no accompanying text in the body of the ad itself. Rather, the ad designer was relying on the government anti-tobacco health message, required by law to be printed along the bottom panel of the layout, to trigger the reader's set of mental associations and thus to “release” the promotional meaning for the product! An entire century of consumer experience with new communicative formats and strategies—researched, planned, and designed by ad agency personnel, and implemented in a series of discrete stages—was required in order for anyone to be able to understand what those Silk Cut ads were about.

All editions of this book have presented a single core idea, called “cultural frames for goods.” In this idea, we have sought to draw together all of the many separate strands that make up the fascinating complexity of advertising practice and its products, as they have evolved during the entire period between the late nineteenth century to the present time. We argue that one unifying cultural frame is dominant during a specific historical period and then transitions into a newer one. In the first two editions of this book, we arrayed the cultural frame as a series of four discrete phases. In the third edition, a new member of our author team, Jackie Botterill, developed the idea of a fifth frame, enabling us to make sense out of what has been happening in advertising practice during the 1980s and 1990s. Professor Botterill's imaginative and insightful construction of the fifth frame remains applicable to the latest phase of advertising practice down to the present day.

The fourth edition of Social Communication in Advertising has been prepared by Kyle Asquith, who has updated the contents to consider twenty-first-century advertising and consumer society, with revisions throughout and two all-new chapters. Chapter 12 examines the institutional structure of twenty-first-century advertising, the current power struggles and strategies at play in the industry as marketing dollars shift from traditional mass media to internet, social, and mobile media promotion. Chapter 13 turns from the technological and institutional contexts of the twenty-first-century mediated marketplace to discuss the larger cultural messages of advertising, which although shifting in formats, remains a privileged social communicator.

As Chapter 13 concludes, while much appears to have changed in advertising and consumer culture in recent decades, the contemporary environment must be understood as the cumulative result of a much longer history of advertising, commercial media, policy, and capitalist consumer culture. The historical research in this book, theoretical contributions, and attention to advertising’s cultural and institutional (including regulatory) contexts—going back to the first edition in 1986—are more important than ever to understand. Likewise, much of the work added by Botterill, in the third edition, demonstrates how the “digital” era of advertising was actually several decades in the making. Botterill identified interest in narrowly
targeted niche audiences, research- and data-driven marketing approaches, “below the line” promotional efforts, ways to counter supposedly cynical and resistant audiences, and the mise-en-scène frame, in the 1990s “Gen X” era—long before the “millennial” persona became a buzzword in the 2000s.

Finally, Chapter 14 offers a significantly updated review of advertising policy and regulatory debates in light of the changing institution of advertising in the twenty-first century.

William Leiss, University of Ottawa
April 2018
I first encountered Social Communication in Advertising as an undergraduate student, and this text has helped frame most of my work since then. It is a genuine honor to be involved in this project. First and foremost, I wish to thank William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jackie Botterill for their leadership in critical advertising studies and for the decades of research and writing that went into this book before I became involved. Related to my work on the fourth edition, I am grateful for the help of two research assistants, Erin Forbes and Kyle Trepanier, and also acknowledge the support of the University of Windsor Humanities Research Group. Finally, I wish to thank Matthew McAllister for further leadership in critical advertising scholarship, and for his personal mentorship and support.

Kyle Asquith, University of Windsor
April 2018
1 Introduction

This book examines the role of advertising and promotional communication in the expansionary phase of the market economy, from the early twentieth century to the present. There are a number of obvious reasons for doing so. Advertising is after all a major sector in the global economy—part of the broader system of production, distribution, and consumption in the global marketplace. Global advertising spending is projected to hit over $600 billion in 2018, and will keep growing at a rate of 7 percent per year (Liu 2016, 3). In the United States, advertising expenditures, across all media, average out to over $600 spent on each population member, per year—this ranks above any other nation in the world, and the global ratio of ad spending to population averages out to approximately $80 per person.

The willingness of corporations to speak to consumers directly in media subsidized the development of our information and entertainment infrastructures—from newspapers and billboards to social media. Promotional communication permeates and blends with our cultural environment, punctuating our television watching, seamlessly weaving into our internet and social media browsing, and saturating our magazines, movies, and video games. In short, advertising has become an accepted part of everyday life. The symbolic attributes of goods, as well as the characters, situations, imagery, and jokes of advertising discourse, are now fully integrated into our cultural repertoire. Children sing jingles while playing. Dinner party guests talk about their favorite (or most reviled) ads. Internet users watch, share, and discuss their favorite advertisements. Some spectacularly successful advertising campaigns have become legendary artistic statements: for example, the 1984 Macintosh Computer that “premiered” on the Super Bowl or the various commercials and branded content “mini-films” that Wes Anderson has directed in the 2000s. It is their prominent discussion of consumption that leads some commentators such as James Twitchell (1996) to compare advertising to a religion for its honest celebration of consumer goods as the key to contemporary American life-ways.

We agree with Twitchell that no other discursive practice in modern society better exemplifies the tensions underlying the expansionary phase of market society. Since the 1950s, these tensions have provoked a growing debate about the role that advertising plays in the marketplace. Celebrated by the enthusiasts of marketing as the informational tool that empowers the consumer and critiqued by mass culture gurus for turning consumers into dupes, the advertising agency seemed to embody all that was both good and bad in the changing relationships between producers and consumers. Some styled it a mirror, reflecting back to us our deep-seated material visions of well-being. Others felt it was a persuasive force articulating new consumption patterns that impacted the ongoing social, economic,
and cultural practices of the consumer society. Advertising thus became the lightning rod for critics who accused it of all manner of evil, from accelerating environmental destruction to breeding a generation of super-sized children.

More than a century ago in North America and Western Europe, the forms of privileged discourse that touched the lives of ordinary persons were church sermons, political oratory, and the words and precepts of family elders. These discourses informed our relationships to goods, to each other, and to our social world. Such influences remain with us, but their prominence in the affairs of everyday life and their rhetorical force and moral authority have diminished considerably as the marketplace has expanded and as the mass media has grown in prominence.

Over the course of the preceding century, the marketplace itself has become a significant medium of social communication. The space left over in personal life has been filled largely by what we call the mass media’s discourses through and about objects. We intend this seemingly awkward phrase to convey the following basic idea: Communications among persons, in which individuals send “signals” to others about their attitudes, expectations, sense of identity, values, intentions, and aesthetic expression, are strongly associated with, and expressed through, patterns of ownership, preference, display, and use of things. We also intend this phrase to convey something more specific—namely, that a significant portion of our daily public talk, thought, and action within the expanded market setting is about consumer goods and what they can do for us or should mean to us.

Our own analysis starts by acknowledging that within all human cultures, the relationship between persons and nature is fundamental to our survival. We extract, refashion, and consume natural materials in the form of goods to meet our needs. But we also find that in transforming nature into goods, we are fabricating important channels of social communication. Goods-in-use mark honor, prestige, and rank; bind us in affection, love, and friendship; designate moments of celebration; denote safety and trust; bind us in communities; and serve as a catalyst for fantasy and reflection. Clothing, tools, bowls, beads, and many other things invoke myth and tell stories through their display and use (both everyday and ceremonial), and as a part of the broader system of social transactions within the family, the community, and the market. Whether in the ceremonial sharing of food within the community, in the bartering over value at the fair, or in the ritualized gift-giving at marriages, objects are enchanted with a profound range of meanings because they are embedded within the warp and weft of social relations we call “material cultures.”

We believe that the modern consumer culture shares with earlier economic relations this fundamental characteristic: Material objects produced for consumption in the marketplace not only satisfy needs, but also serve as markers and communicators for interpersonal distinctions and self-expression. These symbolic markers are the mediating communicational elements that connect people and the consumer goods they use to satisfy their wants. In a market economy, too, goods are communicators—symbolic markers that embed consumption practices in daily social interactions and exchange.

What chiefly distinguishes our contemporary society from earlier ones is not only the sheer volume of goods and services available to consumers in a market economy, but also the sheer intensity of the promotional effort whereby marketers seek to link consumer needs to the characteristics of the products they sell. Economically speaking, the expansion of the marketplace has seen a profound growth in the production and distribution of material culture, that is, the totality of goods and associated services circulating in a modern industrial economy.
On the symbolic level, we have seen a parallel expansion of the associated discourses about commodities and their modes of production and consumption.

As we survey the development of the contemporary market economy, we are impressed not only with the enormous expansion of our material culture starting in the twentieth century, but also with the changing meanings that surround the expanding world of goods and the ways these goods are used by consumers in everyday life. We argue, therefore, that advertising's role within the relations of production and consumption forged in the mediated marketplace should be seen not only as economic, but as cultural as well.

Our main point is a simple one: Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise, but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions. This venture is unified by the discourse through and about objects, which bonds together images of persons, products, and well-being.

This book sets out to historically trace the changing discourses through and about things within the expanding mediated marketplace. Our analysis of the market's expanding role in material culture does not assume a bifurcated world in which economy and culture are inherently opposed—quite the opposite. It insists that although the accounts of the market economy provided by business (mostly concerned with commodity exchanges for money) and by sociology (mostly concerned with the meanings of goods and their social use) often differ, both are necessary for the understanding of the role played by advertising in the changing discourses through and about goods. This is because in a mediated marketplace, goods are the point of contact between commodity relations and the broader channels of social communication. This is also why we think advertising's discourse through and about objects is a useful interpretive key for tracing aspects of our consumer culture.

The marketplace has become a preeminent institution in the consumer society because it is the point of access to material culture and the expanding discursive space in which the meanings of social consumption are transacted and negotiated. People in contemporary society also come together in “taste cultures,” “lifestyle groupings,” “demographic cohorts,” or “ethnic communities,” which represent distinctive consumption patterns. Such subsidiary social formations can be both temporary and quite informal in nature but are tracked by businesses through marketing research and are targeted by all sorts of promotional communications, building a feedback loop between producers and consumers into the social communication of the marketplace. As the marketing practices became more adroit at assessing this social dimension of consumption, so too advertising became a “privileged” form of social communication—meaning that we accord what it says a place of special prominence in our lives.

We refer to the markets’ social communication about consumption as privileged in two senses. First, in our market-industrial societies, economic affairs and marketplace transactions occupy a preponderant place in public life. For example, much of our political debate deals with managing the national and international market economy as a means of maintaining uninterrupted growth in our material culture. The talk about our economy’s fortunes has come to overawe everything else and, indeed, forces most other concerns to be expressed in its terms and language. A hockey game becomes “an entertainment product on the ice,” and delivering the goods to consumers becomes the “bottom line” for both corporate and state enterprises. Second, at the individual level, the discourse through and about objects sidles
Introduction

up to us everywhere, beckoning, teasing, haranguing, instructing, cajoling, and informing our
daily interactions with each other in most settings. Even if we go off on weekend wilderness
quests, we do so in a team wearing branded jackets and armed with solar-powered stoves.

As national consumer products flooded shops, so did the social communication in and
through goods. In the expanding consumer marketplace, goods became “doubly articulated”—
first, in terms of the meanings and uses imputed to them by consumers in their daily lives; second, by the promotional discourses of corporations that advertised them in the marketplace.
The historical growth of the marketplace is experienced in and through the expanding social
communication about consumption generally.

Advertising as Persuasion in the Marketplace

Vance Packard (1959) started his enormously popular The Hidden Persuaders by explaining
that it was about the way many of us were being influenced and manipulated—far more than
we realized—in the patterns of our everyday lives. Large-scale efforts were being made, he
claimed, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing deci-
sions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social
sciences. Typically, these efforts took place beneath our level of awareness (Packard 1959, 11).

Citing the use of motivational research (using focus groups of audiences to discover
the basis of behavior, particularly consumer behavior) by growing numbers of advertisers,
Packard attempted to show that consumers were becoming creatures of conditioned reflex
rather than of rational thought. Most important, he alleged, this manipulation took place
at a subconscious level. Packard’s criticism was not leveled at all advertising but only that
which was underhanded and covert; indeed, for most advertising, Packard had nothing but
praise, referring to many advertisements as “tasteful, honest works of artistry.” His main
theme, however, concerned the obnoxious character of what he regarded as devious forms
of advertising.

Wilson Bryan Key’s (1972, 1976) discussions of the alleged technique of subliminal perception
in advertising reinforced Packard’s dark vision of the manipulative and hidden impacts of advert-
sising. Key was concerned not so much with the use of motivational research and non-rational
techniques of persuasion, but with ascertaining whether techniques impossible to perceive at
the conscious level of awareness were concealed within the construction of the advertising
message itself and whether they could influence behavior. For example, Key claimed to find the
word “sex” baked into the surface of Ritz crackers and deeply symbolic sexual imagery used in
the depiction of ice cubes in alcohol advertising.

This “secret technology,” he asserted, “modifies behavior invisibly, channels basic value
systems and manages human motives in the interest of special power structures…. Sublim-
inal stimuli assault the psyches of everyone in North America throughout each day of their
lives” (Key 1976, 2). Neither Packard nor Key, it should be noted, was ever able to point to
actual instances in which such alleged manipulative techniques induced consumers to do
anything that they would not otherwise have freely chosen to do. But at least Packard could
point to actual programs for motivational research; no other commentator, either within the
advertising industry or outside it, has ever corroborated Key’s assertions about advertising
practices, nor is there any evidence that motivational effects result from subliminal stimuli.
The popularity of these attacks appears to rest on the general impression they create that
advertising is a powerful and omnipresent apparatus with better knowledge of consumers
than they have of themselves, and that this knowledge is used to manipulate them into buying goods they do not need.

Business spokespersons often admit that in the past, advertising was deceptive and was used to solve problems of under-consumption in an economy that had become newly capable of producing consumer goods in great profusion. In his book *Marketing: Concepts and Strategy*, Martin Bell conceded that national advertising of the 1920s and 1930s did indeed seek to escalate consumer demand: “The high-powered, skilful manipulator of consumer opinion, using personal salesmanship and aggressive advertising, took charge in many American businesses. His was the specialized task of selling the goods that had been mass produced and mass distributed. He found that almost anything could be sold with enough expense and effort” (1966, 7).

But during the 1930s, social criticism of this aggressive approach also increased. In response, the marketing industry, recognizing the limits of aggressive persuasion, framed a new orientation based on two key strategies: intensive market research and the effective design of new products. This replaced the practice of merely churning out whatever goods manufacturers thought would be useful to people, and then looking for ways to flog them. The new strategy was given a name: the *marketing concept*. “The marketing concept starts with the firm’s target customers and their needs and wants; it plans a co-ordinated set of products and programs to serve their needs and wants; and it derives profits through creating customer satisfaction” (Kotler and Turner 1981, 31). Marketers and advertisers became the apostles of a liberal conception of the marketplace, discovering (not creating) consumer needs, designing products to meet them, and using advertisements to communicate the availability and desirability of products.

Proponents of the marketing concept believe that contemporary marketing and advertising are the very lifeblood of our complex, market-oriented economy. Marketing techniques are used to make goods more meaningful and thus overcome some of the disadvantages of the specialization of labor, through which most persons become unfamiliar with the characteristics of mass-produced goods. The marketing system should be seen as a provisioning technology and cultural resource that confronts the enormous task of matching tens of millions of consuming units with tens of thousands of producing units. Its strategies are based on the premise that the consumer, as ultimate decision maker, is a rational problem solver who takes full advantage of this communication technology.

The marketing concept involves the integration of the “four Ps”: *product* (shaping and designing products to meet consumer needs); *price* (pricing appropriately to generate sales); *promotion* (promoting sales through advertising, store displays, and selling strategy); and *place* (placing products in appropriate retail outlets). In this view, advertising is a small part of a broader business project—the component of the “marketing concept” that links a corporation’s survival to the way it helps people to match their needs with products, thus making a valuable contribution to the efficiency and freedom of our expanding market economy.

Implicit in the marketing concept is the assumption that the most efficient way for the market to function is to allow consumers to direct producers, rather than the reverse. Under classic liberal theory, the market behavior of consumers is based upon deliberate and calculated action. Rational consumers faced with many products will purchase only those they truly require to satisfy their wants; rational producers of goods (in the face of competition from other marketers) will produce only what consumers want. Thus, the self-interested actions of buyers and sellers together within the free, competitive market will ensure the most efficient
functioning of the system. Bell (1966) has outlined how the consumer behaves according to the rational approach. The satisfaction of a want involves four stages: the recognition of a want, the search for means to satisfy the want, the evaluation of competing alternatives, and a decision. Advertising plays its part in the search and evaluation stages.

Advertising figured prominently in our public discussions of the market economy as it became a favored business practice—the leading pillar of modern marketing practice (price, product, distribution, and promotion). Public controversies intensified as corporations invested in advertising to influence consumer opinion and behavior in their battles of survival—rather than lower prices or develop new goods. The sometimes-fanciful attempts made by merchants at “sexing up” their wares seemed at odds with the pat marketing concept that imagined a rational consumer who chooses among goods based on the product information discussed in advertising. Social critics questioned whether it was possible to describe advertising’s role in the modern marketplace with such simplistic models of consumers’ decision processes.

In their study of the rhetoric of advertising, Gunnar Andrén and his collaborators distinguished between non-rational influences, or persuasion, and rational influences, or argument. The latter operates in the public or consumer interest, whereas, it is alleged, the former does not. Judged from this perspective, the rhetoric of advertising (the form of presentation) would have to conform to a particular set of criteria if the communication were to qualify as sensible guidance to the consumer. Andrén et al. concluded, not surprisingly, that advertising does not contain sufficient information to be the basis of reflective choice among products, and that “advertising does not serve the consumer or the public interest” (1978, 112).

The launch of commercial television in the 1950s especially provoked some within academic circles to see the growing specter of commercial persuasion as symptomatic of a fundamental malaise in the market economy. Once again, we note the importance of Vance Packard’s book in this context. The Hidden Persuaders, published in the early 1950s, opened a window into the marketers’ account of what they did by exposing the “depth psychology” techniques they employed. For many, this book evoked consumers’ increasingly uneasy relationship with the onslaught of media advertising. There were two important challenges launched by Packard’s critique: First, its account of marketing as a form of manipulation situated advertising within the theories of communication and culture, rather than within economics. Second, this exposé of previously hidden marketing practices called marketers’ integrity into question. Depth psychology had given marketers a tool for subverting rationality, it could be argued. Granting advertisers unfettered access to media channels, therefore, allowed them to gain control over the psychic reins of the consumers’ desires and satisfactions. Although Packard himself was resolutely a liberal, his arguments seemed to confirm the long-standing dogma of Marxist critics that advertising creates wants in people for things they do not need.

The understanding of advertising as primarily persuasive communication has been much debated since the 1960s by political economists concerned about the changing power relationships between producers and consumers in the market economy. Advertising caused unease because it seemed to have broken free from its original product-information mandate to become a highly persuasive and seductive form of communication. Defending advertisers against such attacks, marketers ridicule the idea of themselves as all-powerful psychic manipulators. Their
basic contention is that the informed consumer and the responsible producer remain the cornerstones of the democratic market system. After all, those marketing goods do not strive to create wants but rather to discover what wants to exist and to design and manufacture products to respond to those wants. Nor is the consumer a manipulated and controlled dupe, they retorted, but rather a free agent who searches the market for suitable means to satisfy his or her own needs and desires—and this argument has only intensified in the twenty-first century, when consumers can produce and read millions of reviews, and have access, via e-commerce, to literally every commodity in the world. Advertising, it could be said, actually plays a minor role in market transactions by informing consumers about the results of the attempts by manufacturers to keep up with the demands of consumers.

In a seminal article entitled “The Economics of Information,” discussing the relation between advertising and its use by consumers, George Stigler (1961) justified advertising as an important source of consumer information. Provisioning oneself with goods takes time—one needs to “search” for products in an increasingly complex marketplace; advertisers provide a service for which consumers are willing to pay, since it reduces their search costs and improves their choices. These costs are associated with the time that would be spent talking to salespeople, reading pamphlets, searching for product information and reviews, and cruising the shops, which are more easily accomplished by paying attention to advertising. Stigler admitted his remarks were perhaps more appropriate to classified and retail advertising, but suggested that the same logic applied to more spectacular brand advertising on television: “The assimilation of information is not an easy or pleasant task for most people and they may well be willing to pay more for information when supplied in an enjoyable form” (1961, 222). Advertising itself must become an attractive and accepted form of popular entertainment to earn its privileged place in the market economy. In this sense, information designed to persuade consumers is a legitimate, even welcome aspect of market competition for most consumers.

Advertisers were perhaps rightly offended by this accusation of manipulation for what they felt was legitimate persuasion. Manipulation involves outright deception (lying or falsehood), whereas persuasion is supposed to harbor only allowable exaggeration and embellishment—what is known in the trade as “puffery” (Aaker and Myers 1975, 567-77). This distinction has been important to the advertising industry in redefining the boundaries of debate about its advertising. In essence, it says that while advertisers are not to lie, they are not necessarily bound to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth—a vital distinction. Nor are they to be restrained in their attempts to communicate product information vividly and dramatically. Alvin Achenbaum, then senior vice-president at J. Walter Thompson, put it this way: “To the degree that an advertiser intends to deceive his prospects and succeeds, he is manipulating…. But what constitutes deception is not always clear-cut. And to say that emotion, subjectivity, incompleteness are deceptive is not necessarily so [sic]” (quoted in Moskin 1973, 48).

Theodore Levitt (1970) argued that since the relationship between product use and symbolism is a fundamental part of all human interactions with objects, there cannot be anything wrong in principle with advertising’s participation in this universal process, so long as its audiences are not subject to acts of outright deceit. Information and persuasion from uncounted sources swirl around all the individuals who live, work, and shop in this setting. Both informative and persuasive communications are vital and indeed necessary ingredients
of decision-making processes in politics, in social relations, and in the marketplace. Advertisements include both communication formats but constitute only one ingredient in the mix, and not a particularly outstanding one at that. In short, there is nothing special about advertising. Supporting this standpoint, even a group of Toronto theologians upheld the position that persuasion is “legitimate and valid and entirely defensible” because the consumer is always more than a mere spectator in events (Oliver 1981). In order to legitimate this type of persuasion, the advertising industry has had to redefine what constitutes social influence in the marketplace as something broader than simply providing consumers with information.

Gradually, the term “manipulation” faded from the debate. But as Michael Schudson pointed out in his 1984 book, Advertising the Uneasy Persuasion, the economists’ account of advertising also comes loaded with ideological baggage, depending on what we mean by information, choice, and persuasion. At first glance, much of the national advertising we encounter today contains neither much information nor much explicit persuasion. Most people, we think, would agree that appeals to people’s emotions and feelings are perfectly legitimate parts of the social communication about goods. As Schudson also reminded us, in all cultures, goods have been part of our most intimate moments and social rituals. If advertising is to be criticized at all, he continued, objections should be directed not at its lively symbolic representations, but rather at specific acts of omission or distortion it creates in the marketplace. We largely agree. So, can we conclude that consumers’ acceptance of marketing persuasion is a rational process that empowers them?

In their detailed review of studies of consumer choices, John Driver and Gordon Foxall claimed, “the depiction of consumers as rational, problem-solving beings is actually a highly limited description of buyer behavior” (1984, 87). Most people seem indifferent to much of the “information” about goods already circulating around them and express very limited interested in obtaining more: “For many purchases a decision process never occurs, not even on the first purchase” (Driver and Foxall 1984, 92). Rather, most purchasing decisions appear to be strongly influenced by interpersonal communications, especially word-of-mouth information.

Impulse and routine are most typical of consumers’ “low-involvement” purchases; the consumer seems “essentially passive,” selecting among products without spending much time or thought seeking information. The whole enterprise of shopping (except perhaps for consumer durables, fashion clothing, and personal-care items) is just an everyday occasion. Driver and Foxall therefore conclude that advertising seems to have “no power beyond engendering passing interest and, perhaps, cursory comparative evaluation; it is certainly, of itself, incapable of building preference or conviction” (1984, 93).

The key phrase in this passage is “of itself”: The problem is that the defenders try to draw a line between the market economy and the market culture, as well as advertising as business communication and advertising as social communication. We refuse to accept this arbitrary distinction, for clearly the market’s social communication about goods is more complex than that. What strikes us as a crucial flaw in this way of thinking is the artificial line economists draw between the social and economic relations we establish with goods. Although they rightly reject the manipulation model of social communication, the economists’ account also provides a very limited reading of the role that advertising plays in consumer culture. Indeed, perhaps the least interesting question we can ask of a particular advertising campaign is
whether it actually increased the sales of the product, for the answer is of interest only to those who staked their hopes on its particular product story.

As Andrew Wernick (1991) pointed out, navigating one’s way within market society requires constant attention to the modes of consumer behavior as the arena wherein pleasure and the good life can be found. It is hardly surprising, then, that we pay enormous attention not only to our own and to others’ consumption styles as we consider what is fashionable or trendy—or as appropriate to our own social situation—nor that we turn to the media or to celebrities for guidance in this complex task. To these discourses on consumption, advertising provides some additional clues about how to live life and find well-being in contemporary market society. Although advertisers inundate consumers with the symbolic meanings and lifestyle references, in the final analysis, consumers determine which ones are most meaningful to them. The associative meanings that advertising projects onto goods are often recognized as fantastical and silly, as motivated purely by the interests of sellers. The fact that an estimated 80 percent of goods introduced into the marketplace fail despite the intensity of promotional efforts launched on their behalf testifies not only to the urgency with which marketers feel they must communicate with consumers through advertising, but also to the general ability of consumers to filter advertisers’ persuasive appeals. That consumers exercise limited choice in the market or see through advertising’s persuasive strategies does not imply that advertising’s social communication is entirely benign or inconsequential, however.

Going beyond the Rhetoric

For too long, the debates about advertising have been much too narrowly concerned with advertising’s role in promoting particular goods and services in “superficial” ways. Many individuals hold contradictory and sometimes diametrically opposed views on advertising, mirroring the divergence of opinion in society as a whole. Advertising has given rise to harsh criticism ever since it became prominent in media, on the grounds that it has a negative impact in general—for example, that it encourages people to over-value “material” things in life. Advertising has been accused of creating wants, manipulating psychological processes, and promoting unworthy ideals. On advertising’s behalf, we have reviewed the rational information model of consumer choice, the nature of persuasion, and the importance of symbolism in forming the individual’s sense of satisfaction. On neither side do we get very far.

The critics turn out to be interested chiefly in attacking the materialist ethos in general and, except for brief rhetorical flourishes, pay little or no attention to the actual workings of advertising. Suggestions that ads affect us without our being aware of their influence are alarming, although this sort of claim usually turns out to be groundless. Serious criticisms of advertising have been around almost as long as their target has and doubtless will remain with us, ranging from idle, general unease to sharper, more specific forms of attack. The continued debate lends support to the common perception that advertising has some influence on serious issues in modern social lives. One overall observation about advertising’s critics will be ventured here. Objections directed at advertisements, the industry, and its alleged social impacts are often indirect attacks on the materialistic ethos of industrial society, or on capitalism in general as a social system; these are critiques of society masquerading as critiques of advertising. We have not presumed to evaluate their merits, but we do think that when advertising is used as a surrogate for these larger concerns, its critics are aiming at the wrong target.
Thus, the debate about advertising is often vaguely cast. Both the usual criticisms and the usual defenses often end up at the same point, although they arrive there by quite different routes. In the defenses, as in the criticisms, we are hard-pressed to identify either advertising’s uniqueness as a form of modern communication or its unique place and function among the many overlapping social forces in modern life. Most people working within the industry today no longer cling to the notion that advertising exerts a strong influence on consumer behavior. Most agencies argue that advertising works broadly to enhance the cumulative brand values associated with products. It is in the cumulative and broad impact of advertising messages that their influence is to be felt. Even advertising researchers Driver and Foxall, for example, concede “the aggregate effect of advertising on a materialistic society may be very great” (1984, 98).

Indeed, advertising’s overwhelming presence today leaves little doubt that it is a factor to be reckoned with. In part, society tries to keep tabs on what the industry is doing by regulating it. Laws and industry codes of ethics are supposed to discourage unfair or misleading practices. All regulation is an attempt to work out a compromise among parties with conflicting viewpoints, but regulating advertising has not, by and large, ended the disagreements about its influence or appropriateness. Looked at in depth and as a whole, the ways in which messages are presented in advertising reach deeply into our most serious concerns: interpersonal and family relations, the sense of happiness and contentment, gender roles and stereotyping, the uses of affluence, the fading away of older cultural traditions, influences on younger generations, the role of business in society, persuasion and personal autonomy, and many others.

How do we react to this omnipresent discourse about the impact of advertising and marketing as central institutions of modern life? Typically, with matters that are major fixtures in everyday life, that are regarded as permanently troublesome but also indispensable—such as public education—we are ambivalent. So it is with advertising. Extensive public opinion surveys show that a high proportion of people enjoy ads as an art form, think that neither our economy nor media could exist without advertising, and regard it as playing a generally positive role in society. Yet, many simultaneously complain about advertising as an annoying interruption consisting of overblown claims and representations. For example, a recent Nielsen study of the much sought-after “millennial” youth audience shows that young people will skip or otherwise avoid ads if given the choice, yet they overwhelmingly volunteer that ads are a necessary part of their media-driven lives (Shayon 2017).

The Social Communication Approach to the Study of Advertising

Our emphasis in this book is on analyzing advertising’s role as a primary form of social communication within new institutional contexts. We acknowledge that it is impossible to study advertising as a privileged form of social communication without reference to both the changing practices of marketers, on the one hand, and the emerging institutions of commercialized media, on the other.

By virtue of the media’s saturation of everyday life and of the expanding scope of marketing as a strategic activity, advertising must be recognized as a special (and uniquely problematic) business institution because it lies at the intersection of the economy and culture. Situated between producers and consumers in the expanding marketplace, and between media and audiences in the mass-media system, advertising has become a key site of negotiation.
between the economic and cultural spheres. Agency practice is linked to many aspects of modern commodity circulation, including the production, design, and marketing of goods, their communication to audiences through the media programming sphere, their distribution through retail outlets and the patterns of consumer behavior, and the incorporation of goods into broader cultural meaning and practices.

Rejecting the limited economic debates, some scholars have celebrated advertising for its positive contributions, not only to rising standards of living but also to the expanding range of lifestyle choices, social diversity, and aesthetics articulated in our material culture (Twitchell 1996; Richards, MacRury, and Botterill 2000). Increasingly, advertising has been acknowledged as a form of artistic expression in its own right and as an inspiration to the arts in general. Each year, prizes are awarded at an international competition held in Cannes (site of the famous film festival). Numerous blogs review and critique each year’s round of Super Bowl ads, treating the advertising texts as films. Musicians have launched careers by having their songs featured in commercials (see Powers 2010). Many youth and media professionals see advertising design as a “high art form of the postmodern era” and the leading edge of fashion and design (Nava and Nava 1992).

While we agree that advertising’s place within both our economy and our culture can no longer be considered as separate issues, these new culture-oriented defenders downplay advertising’s historical contribution to the expansion of the American material culture, preferring instead to see it only as an autonomous part of the postmodern popular culture system (Fowles 1996). But we seek to show that, far from being an autonomous agent, advertising is part and parcel of a highly industrialized, market-oriented society. We believe that advertising’s impact on our social attitudes, values, aesthetics, and interactions can be appreciated only when it is analyzed in its institutional context as part of our promotional culture.

In what follows, we will attempt to situate the communicative power of advertising in the context of successive commercialized media technologies and the promotional relationships being forged between various sectors of cultural production in the media-driven (or “mediated”) marketplace. In so doing, we hope to provide a broader and more complex characterization of the advertising industry: As an industry, advertising mediates between commodity production and cultural production; as a message form, it adopts, revises, and shapes other cultural message systems; most importantly, through research, it appropriates the social structure and cultural dynamics of market society, and recycles them as strategies targeted toward segments of the population—making the marketplace into an oscillating feedback loop.

Thus, advertising is a channel through which social change is constantly mediated—both a discursive practice contributing to cultural and economic change and a representational practice wherein such changes can be witnessed and interpreted. This is not to say that advertising is the central determining factor in the expansion of the consumer society; rather, we present it here as an indispensable sector that helps us interpret the underlying historical developments that have been forged in the mediated marketplace over more than a century.

We argue, therefore, that advertising is best studied as a form of social communication about material culture, as an institution within which the market economy and culture are coordinated and negotiated, and as a cultural resource used by individuals for a variety of reasons, many of which may have little to do with the purchase of the product presented in an individual advertisement. To address advertising in this way requires us to take a broad view of our subject, one that is built upon two pillars: history and culture.
The pillar of history is reflected in the consensus that we can grasp the implications of present-day practices best by seeing how they were composed and put into place during the twentieth century. Older advertisements are a treasure house of fascinating and often amusing illustrations of how people and products used to look; exhuming and examining them is a pleasant chore. They are also a condensed and graphic representation of certain aspects of life in times past. Robert Atwan, Donald McQuade, and John Wright (1979) put together a selection of ads spanning the twentieth century in their book *Edsels, Luckies and Frigidaires*, and remarked quite accurately that “advertisements tell us in miniature a great deal about an entire civilization, its actual material life and interlocking collective fantasies” (preface).

Even a cursory glance at the past helps to persuade us that what exists now is by no means the inevitable outcome of prior events, that things could be other than they are. For example, if some of the businesspeople who controlled media industries in the 1920s had had their way, there would be no commercials on radio and television. Had this happened, we would have grown up knowing only noncommercial broadcasting, which would appear normal to us, and under such circumstances, most of us would be offended at the very idea of having commercial messages on the electronic media. Our present-day situation, considered by itself, always appears at first glance to be a world that is whole—everything seems to be linked naturally to everything else. Thus, to understand the present, we must first, so to speak, disassemble it. In this book, we will devote a good deal of space to inquiries into the historical evolution of various institutions: consumer goods marketing, the communication media, popular culture, and advertising agencies. Then we will put the pieces together again.

The advertising industry is a complex mechanism, made up of many parts, and its products reflect that complexity; by taking it apart and reassembling it, we hope to show how it works. This type of historical analysis has fallen out of fashion with some historians, who have rejected the idea of reducing complex histories to epochs and great meta-narratives. In their place, historians have offered in-depth analysis of particulars—minor practices and local events, for example, rather than large-scale, universal, or global concepts. The alleged justification for this alternative approach is that these “mini-narratives” are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, and make no claim to universality or ultimate truth. However, the flaw in this approach is a poor understanding of what most historians have actually done. In point of fact, most historical studies are miniatures—accounts of working-class life, of women’s roles, of the creation of business empires, of resource industries such as the fur trade and the fishery, of forms of oppression such as slavery, and so on. This traditional study of our past is indispensable for understanding both how the present came about and what the future possibly holds. Without it, the world we observe in our surroundings appears natural to us, and it is easy to take it for granted. We can understand today’s world, however, only if we step back from it and realize both how novel it is, compared to all past societies, and how it came into being.

The second pillar for the study of advertising is culture. Many controversies about the real or imagined effects of ads on specific aspects of attitudes and behavior are bound up with our cultural traditions. We have in mind, however, the more general issue of how advertising systematically responds and contributes to cultural changes.

The least important aspect of advertising’s significance for modern society is its role in influencing specific consumer choices—whether wise or unwise—about purchasing products. The debates about advertising still focus too greatly on advertising’s role in shaping individual consumer choices. Advertising’s defenders maintain that a modern economy relies
upon the provision of both straightforward factual information and persuasive messages to consumers; regulation and industry professionalism control blatantly misleading or deceptive statements. Advertising's critics argue that consumers get very little useful information from advertisements and could make more sensible choices if they were not bombarded constantly with (often misleading and deceptive) messages about products. Both of these positions have limited understandings of advertising by narrowly apprehending the role of advertising in culture.

Then what is advertising about, if it is not about influencing consumer choices? To avoid misunderstanding, we wish to emphasize a key point here: All forms of advertising, from classified ads, to grocery store flyers, to sponsored search results or social media posts, to nationwide television campaigns, transmit some information about goods or services from those who own them to those who may wish to acquire them. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that such information has some influence on some of the decisions about acquiring goods and services that most people make every day.

Exactly what kind of influence is exerted on which people, and whether or not this influence is beneficial for society, are matters of long-standing controversy that will not be settled in the near future, or perhaps ever. Meanwhile, both modern society and advertising have been undergoing major changes that have affected every aspect of their interaction: the type of persons addressed by advertisements, the type of information presented in them, the media through which they are transmitted, and so forth. The entire social context and social significance of advertising have altered radically. If we continue to think about advertising as being mostly about the transmittal of specifics about item X from person (or company) A to person B, we will remain unaware of the most interesting and important developments affecting it.

The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic and sustained rise in the real income and purchasing power of the average person in Western consumer societies, where most people have access to a huge and constantly changing array of goods. At the same time, technological innovations in media communications transformed the message formats for advertisements themselves. Improvements in photo reproduction, for example, might be understood as contributing to the very important shift within twentieth-century advertising away from heavily text-based messages to images. The shift to images was accompanied by a trend toward advertisers devoting less copy to talking about products, and more to claims about how those products could benefit people's lives. More recently, digital technologies and social media platforms made advertisements something for consumers to interact with, rather than passively consume—hence the rise of various viral campaigns. Understanding advertising's role requires paying attention to the context of the production of its messages, to the technology utilized, and to the changing habits of mind and techniques employed by its practitioners.

**From Product Description to Social Communication**

For over a century, advertisers constructed a vast, diverse, and continually changing library of messages that both schooled consumers in the use of objects and offered guidance about personal maintenance, appropriate values, and correct behavior for social acceptance. In short, advertising offered models of the good life and insight into how to achieve personal pleasure and social success. We argue that the vast library of commercial fables, fairy tales, and tropes represents something more than salesmanship. It can be understood as a cultural discourse through and about goods.
The linking of goods to social dialogue introduced a profound influence within the discourse through and about goods, but it arose out of the more focused interest in formats, which attracted audience attention. Similarly, advertising developed within the nexus of a great many contradictions, which often strengthened the unique quality of its messages instead of distracting from it. For example, several studies of the industry emphasize the interest in shaping messages that please the cultural elite, including other advertising practitioners. At the same time, the practices of advertising are also influenced by the need to “speak to people on the street.” In attempting to close the divide between aesthetic and pragmatic communicational concerns, advertisers popularized high and modern arts and were often more in tune with and willing to react to changing public sentiments than many other institutions.

As consumer societies matured, advertisers demonstrated this key communications aspect of the consumption process more and more clearly, particularly through dramatic changes in marketing and advertising strategies. Herein lies the real importance of advertising in modern society: It is the privileged discourse for the circulation of messages and social cues about the interplay between persons and objects. The discourse through and about objects is privileged—that is, it occupies a special place in our lives—for three reasons. First, because the state of our economy is the predominant concern in public affairs. Second, because messages about goods surround us through our interactions with communications media. Third, because our interpretation of the social world is formulated against the backdrop of these messages. In comparison with the importance of this service, advertising’s transmittal of details about product characteristics is a trivial sidelight.

Advertising helped industrialism to bring products associated with a refined lifestyle to the ordinary person. Keeping workers poor made less and less sense as the factory system’s astonishing productive capacities became apparent—the only arena capable of absorbing the system’s output was the one occupied by those who had been poor for so long. The modern economy, one based upon systems of production linked to consumption, emerged.

In seeking to analyze and understand this discourse and its historical evolution, it is necessary to weave together and synthesize elements from a number of different perspectives within the general domains of history and culture. Following the history of advertising, we find that agencies became uniquely positioned within the cycle of production and consumption. Agencies undertook a specialized function, but worked in conjunction with other important professionals—one of the most important being media professionals. The history of print, radio, and subscription-based television testifies that media can be commercially viable without advertising subsidy. However, the advertising subsidy took root and helped to shape the growth of the modern communications industries.

The flow of money, reasonably straightforward at first, became exceedingly complex. In the late nineteenth century, producers began to allocate a proportion of their income to advertising. At first, the money went directly to the media; later, it was channeled through advertising agencies, which took a proportion of the billing as their sales commission. Consumers pay this advertising subsidy to the media as part of the price of a product. Advertising Age estimates that for some luxury car brands, such as Lincoln or Jaguar, over $2,000 in advertising is spent for every vehicle sold in the United States (2017, 27). The proportion varies across industries—manufacturers of cosmetics, personal-care products, and household goods allocate a high proportion of all expenses to advertising. Advertising now accounts for almost all revenue for broadcast media (except in public networks such as the BBC or PBS, public radio, and specialty cable satellite channels); advertising revenue far exceeds subscription revenue for
both print and digital publishers; and advertising is also the primary revenue source of two of the twenty-first century’s most powerful companies, Google and Facebook. Media events such as the World Cup, Olympics, and even presidential elections are so advertising laden that they result in measurable upticks in global advertising spending in the years in which the events occur (Liu 2016).

Advertising became the crucial bridge between the activities of selling products and communication as both spheres expanded rapidly. This is a simple but much overlooked aspect of its significance in modern society. The commission system was dissolved in the 1980s, and now advertisers often pay for media and advertising separately, but these new practices have not severed the advertising subsidy to the media. One of the major uses of this bridge, then, was to help allocate a proportion of the income accruing to industry from consumers to the development of media. Money, influence, and information crossed the bridge. The media, in turn, adjusted to these new sources of revenue by setting up departments and services (such as market and circulation research) to accommodate its growing relationship with agencies and advertisers, thereby diverting funds from editorial, programming, and internal development efforts. Agencies also bridge the work of marketers, product designers, consumer researchers, promotional specialist public relations experts, and direct marketing professionals.

Table 1.1 summarizes our main argument and findings about the development and the place of advertising as social communication in modern culture. It reflects our belief that only through

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media for Advertising</th>
<th>Newspapers/ Magazines</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Digital/ Converged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Strategy</td>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Non-Rational</td>
<td>Behaviorist</td>
<td>Segmentation</td>
<td>Anthropological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising Strategy</td>
<td>Utility</td>
<td>Product Symbols</td>
<td>Personification</td>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>Demassifying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. Period</td>
<td>1890-1925</td>
<td>1925-1945</td>
<td>1945-1965</td>
<td>1965-1990</td>
<td>1990-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements in Ads</td>
<td>Product qualities, price, use</td>
<td>Product qualities, symbolic attributes</td>
<td>Product, person prototype</td>
<td>Product, activity, person-setting</td>
<td>Product, activity, person-setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphoric-Emotive Themes in Ads</td>
<td>Quality, useful, descriptive</td>
<td>Status, family, health, white magic, social authority</td>
<td>Glamor, romance, sensuality, black magic, self-transformation</td>
<td>Leisure, health, groups, friendship</td>
<td>Authenticity, spotlighting, reflexivity, diversity, commodity activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Frames for Goods</td>
<td>Idolatry: Products are abstracted from process of production, presented as pure use-values</td>
<td>Iconology: Products are embodiments of attributes, configured in social judgment</td>
<td>Narcissism: Products are personalized, and satisfaction is judged in interpersonal terms</td>
<td>Totemism: Products are emblems of group-related consumption practices</td>
<td>Mise-en-Scène: Products are props for the self-construction of changing scenes and life-scripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Figure 1.1</td>
<td>Figure 1.2</td>
<td>Figure 1.3</td>
<td>Figure 1.4</td>
<td>Figure 1.5</td>
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an integration of insights from a number of different approaches is it possible to fully under-
stand the role of advertising in the discourse through and about objects. Table 1.1 draws upon
five main perspectives to aid us in this objective.

First, we focus on the broad economic changes that characterize the transition in societies
from largely agricultural and artisanal (craft) modes of production to a predominantly industrial
mode of production. This transition necessitated not simply the adaptation to new ways to pro-
duce goods, but also the development of new mechanisms for the distribution and circulation
of goods.

Second, we draw upon socio-cultural perspectives in seeking to understand how these eco-
nomic changes influenced how people relate to goods. We pay special attention to how the cul-
tural forms that give meaning to the world of things undergo a drastic repositioning, such that
in the consumer society, marketplace institutions come to replace the family, community, and
religious institutions that were important in agricultural societies and earlier forms of industrial
society.

Third, we look to the specific manner in which these economic and socio-cultural changes
were institutionally mediated by the emergence and development of two key symbiotically
related industries: commercial media and advertising agencies. Rather than only studying
advertising as the final texts to which consumers are exposed, we give considerable atten-
tion to the institutions that support advertising. In terms of the media, we focus on the way
the successive integration of newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and internet media into
the sphere of marketplace communications profoundly influences the nature of the discourse
through and about objects. Different media offer different potentialities for advertising formats
and strategies, but these media are also shaped directly and indirectly by the needs of adver-
tising, especially advertising agencies. As such, we also spotlight advertising agencies through-
out the historical development of advertising. It is important to find out how the agencies and
advertisers are thinking about consumers and ways to appeal to them.

Fourth, we analyze advertisements from all periods to see how the economic, socio-
cultural, and institutional contexts influence their form and content. The advertising text
reflects a negotiation of meaning. Advertising is privileged, as we have suggested, but the
decoding of intended messages is not ensured: The interpretive labor of audiences must be
engaged for meaning to be released and transmitted. The encoding practices of advertisers
are informed by an imagined or mobilized target audience. The construction of the audience
occurs in the latent projections of advertising industry creative departments and formally
through the research loop that feeds information about cultural trends and target market
tastes into design practices. A wide variety of changing strategies—which amount to intuitive
guesses about the marketplace—are devised by advertisers, and those deemed useful are
repeated and spread throughout the promotional system, forming a historical record from
which to derive insight into the changing socio-cultural dynamics of a particular historical
moment.

Fifth, drawing upon our original analysis of magazine advertisements, as well as more recent
advertising case studies, we can see how this framework impacts upon our general understand-
ing of goods and the ways in which they are integrated into the process of satisfaction and com-
munication in the consumer society. In particular, we focus on the predominant set of images,
values, and forms of communication in any period that provide what we call a “cultural frame
for goods.” We find the product promoted and the unique characteristics of the target audience,
particularly their gender, nuance the cultural frame, but still we feel it is possible to identify five major cultural frames that have historically given some definition to the relationship between people and things from the early twentieth century to the present. Figures 1.1 to 1.5 provide an example of print ads from each frame.

**Figure 1.1 Utility: A discourse about product quality**

*Source: Courtesy of The American Tobacco Company.*
Introduction

Layout of This Book

Part I traces the development of modern advertising in the twentieth century, considering the larger social context of industrialism and modern life; the growth of interdependent institutions necessary for advertising’s advance, mass media, and full-service advertising agencies; and, with this context in place, a close study of advertising texts to introduce the first four cultural frames for goods that evolved throughout this period.

Chapters 2 and 3 sketch the main differences between the earlier form of industrial society and the consumer culture that has replaced it over the course of the twentieth century. We now have a society unique in human history—one wherein most individuals depend on a continuously
growing array of marketed goods for the satisfaction of their needs. This has been made possible by the succession of technological triumphs in industry, by the rationalization of the market economy by manufacturers and financiers, and by the long and bitter struggles of workers to win a decent standard of living and a semblance of social democracy.

Chapter 4 traces the emergence of mass communications in modern society, from print (newspapers and magazines) to broadcasting (radio and television), and attempts to foster a proper appreciation of these media as institutional actors. By the end of the nineteenth century, the print media had established new forms of communication, created the public
Introduction

that they addressed, and, above all, set up the fertile interaction between media strategy and audience segment—all this before the sale of commercial advertising space began to generate significant revenues. So well-established was the framework for the transactions between media and their audiences by this time that, when the new broadcasting media appeared on the scene, they slipped relatively easily into the mold established by the print media. Chapter 5 then turns to the formation of the modern full-service advertising agency.

Figure 1.4 Lifestyles: A discourse about social groups and their activities
Source: Courtesy of Schenley Industries.
that developed in tandem with the mass media and played a critical role in the bonding of media and advertising. The first service performed by advertisers was the selling of space within the media, but over time, creative, research, and accounting departments were added to the focus on media.

Can we devise a way to look at ads so that—out of their own form and content—they yield up this story? We take up this challenge in Chapter 6, in which we present our own research
design for analyzing the historical development of advertisements from the early twentieth century until 1980. In the total system of advertising, the agencies turned out scene after scene and act after act of a never-ending drama of consumer satisfaction, using images of people, products, and forms of well-being as their players. Our research design enables us to follow each of the players and its lines separately, as well as to keep track of their interactions, revealing significant patterns in each period and changes in the development of modern advertising. Although we first conducted this study many decades ago, we believe that it remains valuable today as both a historical study and a methodological model for approaching advertisements as socio-cultural texts. Chapter 6 concludes with a fuller explanation of the stages of development outlined in Table 1.

The success of both the advertising message formats and the major shifts in their content—from description of the product to the linking of persons, products, and settings in symbolic representations—was not due primarily to their intrinsic merits as artistic creations. Rather, ads evolved alongside other, more general changes in society that loosened up and diversified the range of approved cultural models that guide the search for personal satisfaction. Chapter 7 follows up on this point. Anthropological studies tell us that, in human societies, material objects have always served to convey meanings and messages about rank, status, privilege, roles, gender, and class; about how such social subgroups were formed; and about what rules groups devised to dictate their conduct to each other. We look at the modern consumer society as an anthropological type and find that the age-old function of goods as communicators is now combined with the special capabilities of the new technologies of mass communication, the immense productive resources of modern industry, and the diverse array of lifestyle models for personal satisfaction, to generate the discourse through and about objects. Advertising makes all this possible, for it is the place at which industry, media, and lifestyles converge.

Part II is devoted to a detailed study of advertising during a unique period in the late twentieth century, when advertising’s social communication reached a new maturity and sophistication during the larger social changes of post-Fordism and neoliberalism. Our study reveals intensive discussion of the processes of “dematerialization” and “demassification,” or what is taken to be a heightened attention within consumer culture to the symbolic aspects of goods and where sectors of the population develop lifestyles fashioned in opposition to mass society. Chapter 8 provides an overview of the sea change that ushered in the era of demassification, including larger political economic conditions, and case studies on “yuppies” and “Gen X” to demonstrate advertising’s new interest in consumer lifestyle segments amid broader social shifts. Chapter 9 follows up with theoretical debates, turning to a number of thinkers to fully assess the state of late-modern consumer society. Continuing our prioritization of institutional contexts, Chapter 10 maps the mediated marketplace of this period, during a critical juncture of deregulation, new technology, and corporate globalization. Not unlike the situation in the early twentieth century, the partnership of (and sometimes power struggles between) advertising agencies and commercial media played a central role in our larger culture of consumption.

In Chapter 11, we present a case study on how advertisers along with other cultural intermediaries mobilized consumer segments by developing a template for understanding the habits and tastes of particular audience niches. This research explores the formation and modes of address used by advertisers in the 1990s to speak to the “culturati”—a highly educated and affluent audience who developed lifestyles and consumption habits to distinguish
themselves from the masses. We examine how the magazine Vanity Fair captured this culturally aspirant class and how the advertisements in this publication spoke to their particular cultural anxieties. This analysis extends the historical study presented in Chapter 6 and, importantly, establishes the fifth cultural frame that defines contemporary consumer culture.

Part III traces advertising developments through the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Notably, this era marks advertising's partnership with digital communication platforms, including the internet, social media, and mobile media—such as tablets and smartphones. Key themes explored in Chapter 12 include advertising's partnerships and institutional power struggles with new kinds of information-communication firms, such as Google and Facebook, and how the internet media marketplace provides advertisers with both threats—for example, audiences blocking advertisements—and opportunities—data-mining, microtargeting, and a host of new strategies such as “branded content,” “native advertising,” and “influencer marketing.” The chapter concludes by arguing that a number of boundaries have now blurred, including the line between content and advertising, what precisely defines an “advertising company,” the previously separate territories of advertising and public relations, and even producers versus consumers of advertising.

These blurred boundaries suggest an expansion of advertising, as a privileged social discourse, in twenty-first-century consumer society. Chapter 13 examines the cultural consequences of advertising’s expansion and the state of our larger society when marked by trends such as cause-related marketing and ethical brands, brand communities, branded selves, and the overall condition of a promotional culture. The chapter also takes our narrative full circle, placing twenty-first-century advertising in the fifth frame established by the 1990s, while also addressing the inertia of over a century of advertising communicating messages of satisfaction in a mediated marketplace.

We conclude in Chapter 14 with an analysis of social policy issues. Given the complexity of advertising as a social institution—both the institutional complexity of the historically shaped mediated marketplace and the cultural complexity of advertising's evolving symbolic design and audience interpretation—the rather clumsy tools of regulation almost inevitably fail to achieve their objectives. As such, we make the case for a “wide” understanding of advertising policy. This understanding goes against the long-established narrow regulatory paradigm that views advertising as merely having the economic function of communicating product information to rational, sovereign consumers—and hence falls into the same economistic pitfalls we introduced in this opening chapter. We then survey a variety of advertising controversies, including ones unique to the twenty-first century, such as privacy, and long-standing controversial categories, namely alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceutical advertising, advertising to children, and political advertising. These controversies highlight advertising’s contentious position in society, but also the challenges of attempting to govern it.
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