ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we investigate the recent situation concerning the seduction of consumers by advertising and the media. A new plethora of media-organised conglomerates is attempting to monopolise our attention and steer our emotions, opinions and choices towards increased consumption through imposed wants in the interest of gross profits for a semi-invisiblised few. Herein we consider: the colonisation of public places (advertising), the work/spend cycle, increased work at the cost of leisure; impression management, status-conscious and conspicuous consumption, reflective versus pre-reflective thinking in consumer choices, the early recruitment of children, how human emotions can become the fuel of overconsumption, class-based emotions and fashion consumption, obsessions with body image, the evasion and silencing of criticism by the corporate media. The approach is one founded in critical theory - a perspective that describes the individual as reciprocally constituted by the society in which she lives, rather than as a passive entity existing prior to socialisation. It seeks to reveal the seduction of our subjectivities (running marketing strategies ‘from within’) as contrasted with the value-free, ‘objective’ approach of much contemporary social psychology. Contemporary theoreticians in sociology and consumer studies, including Pierre Bourdieu and Juliet Schor, are cited along with deeper philosophical perspectives from the earlier philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, complete with references from contemporary books and journals.
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we look at the seduction of consumers by the media, mostly advertising. The main argument here is that seduction is not simply a one-to-one phenomenon between localised individuals of wicked intent and unequal intelligence. But rather that on the mass level (in the sphere of social psychology) we are all subject to seduction through a plethora of media-organised conglomerates monopolising our attention and steering our emotions, opinions and choices in every public sphere.

Seventeenth and eighteenth century theorists made the assumption that consumer goods serve an essentially utilitarian purpose; i.e. the provision of all that is necessary for human welfare (Smith, 1776; Marx, 1867). This was the beginning of a ‘cultural studies’ approach where humans were regarded as objects, or recipients in a causal process of supply and demand, interacting with each other like natural forces. But this view needs reconsidering because most goods today are not necessary for human survival; many goods and services are marketed to elicit desire. Organisational structures seem to operate like authorless impersonal forces and are ubiquitous. Many contemporary wants have been researched, conceived and manufactured by these invisible marketing specialists within an advertising industry that seeks to expand their market sectors in the interests of prosperity for an oligarchical managerial culture, and massive profits—for a select and invisibilised few.

Much psychology is based on the liberal idea that the individual exists antece-dently to the environment in which she lives and is subject to causal processes much as the above mechanistic model proposes (see McDonald & Wearing, 2003, pp 2-20). Yet, by contrast, the critical approach regards the individual as both a recipient and an instigator in social affairs. Originating in Germany in the Frankfurt School, critical theorists regard the individual as constituted by the society in which she lives and acts as a responsible agent in its production and maintenance: there is a constant interaction between self and society (Held, 1980). By way of example, some marketing theorists suggest, to some extent, that a brand’s assets are created by the consumers themselves (Bengtson & Östberg, 2004). Furthermore, critical theory considers consumer culture as a manufactured entity itself, the product and instigator of broadly self-protecting middle-class ideology, which, in turn, can be used to limit human freedom (Simons, 2006; Tyson, 2015). Critical theorists propose a form of self-reflective comprehension involving both common understanding of everyday issues plus a theoretical explanation which aims to reduce mystification and entrapment in systems of ideological domination or cognitive dependence. In our time, this is often linked to insincere and fabricated social relations perpetuated
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