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Media and the Production of Consumer Society: A Socio-Media Critical Perspective

Abstract

This research paper addresses the media and its role in entrenching consumer culture. Mass media present many daily advertising messages, whether written, audiovisual, or electronic, in attractive and engaging ways. The goal is to encourage consumers to purchase the goods and services offered by advertisers, thus increasing the media outlet's revenue from advertising. In turn, the advertiser benefits from promoting their products and services. In this context, the Frankfurt School has critiqued the content presented by the media in society, with its thinkers harshly criticizing media outlets for their role in entrenching consumer culture among individuals. This culture serves the interests of media professionals and the economic interests of society.

Keywords: *advertising, consumption, consumer society, media*

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Media və istehlak cəmiyyətinin istehsalı: sosial-media tənqidi perspektiv

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat işi mediaya və onun istehlak mədəniyyətinin möhkəmləndirilməsindəki roluna toxunur. Kütləvi informasiya vasitələri gündəlik, istər yazılı, istər audiovizual, istərsə də elektron xarakterli bir çox reklam mesajlarını cəlbedici və cəlbedici üsullarla təqdim edirlər. Məqsəd istehlakçıları reklamçılar tərəfindən təklif olunan mal və xidmətləri almağa həvəsləndirmək və bununla da media orqanının reklamdan əldə etdiyi gəliri artırmaqdır.

Öz növbəsində, reklamçı öz məhsul və xidmətlərini tanıtmıqdan faydalanır. Bu kontekstdə, Frankfurt məktəbi cəmiyyətdə medianın təqdim etdiyi məzmunu tənqid etdi, onun mütəfəkkirləri media qurumlarını fərdlər arasında istehlak mədəniyyətinin möhkəmləndirilməsində oynadıqları rola görə sərt şəkildə tənqid etdilər. Bu mədəniyyət media mütəxəssislərinin maraqlarına və cəmiyyətin iqtisadi maraqlarına xidmət edir.

Açar sözlər: reklam, istehlak, istehlak cəmiyyəti, media

Introduction

The world has recently witnessed rapid acceleration in the media field, as communication methods have become more diverse and widespread. This has resulted in a fundamental shift in how information is exchanged, and social interaction has occurred. The digital revolution, embodied in the internet and its various innovations, has increased the speed of news and content dissemination, making media present in all aspects of daily life.

Research

In light of these developments in the media, advertising has emerged as a key channel for communication in society, playing an important role in promoting products and goods and influencing individuals' consumption decisions. With technological advancements and the spread of digital media, advertising has become more advanced and diversified, employing new strategies to capture individuals' attention and encourage them to purchase. Although advertising contributes to driving the economy and enhancing competitiveness among institutions in society, it also raises questions about its impact on consumption patterns, individual behavior, and the formation of excessive consumer trends—an issue that this research paper aims to clarify.

1. A Reading on the Concept of Consumer Society:

The term "consumer society" emerged in economics during the Industrial Revolution and became increasingly common after World War II. It refers to a society whose economic system is based on the widespread consumption of goods and services. With the development of the Industrial Revolution and the rise in production rates, finding a balance between the abundance of products and increased consumption became essential. To achieve this, within the framework of the capitalist system, countries worked to stimulate consumption to absorb the surplus production resulting from industrialization (Al-Hadidi, 2002). However, the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that all humans are natural consumers, and throughout history, they have consumed to satisfy their needs and desires. Our focus on consumption is not something new. Consumption and satisfaction are natural human traits that certainly predate the emergence of industrial capitalism, modern technology, and large markets. However, he draws our attention to a new phenomenon in human history—a characteristic not previously associated with human consumer tendencies—the phenomenon of consumer society (Al-Khouildi, 2024).

The term "consumer society" refers to a society where consumers are encouraged to consume goods and services in large quantities. In his book *The Consumer Society* (1970), the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard argues that consumption in Western societies is a structural element of social relations. At the individual level, it is no longer a means of meeting needs but rather a means of distinction. The consumer society results from the need for economic growth generated by capitalism and its natural outcome, capital accumulation. The quest for more significant, more diverse, and innovative production due to competition to increase profits requires consumption that is broader and faster than ever before. The result is a lifestyle driven by consumption, accompanied by the unrestricted exploitation of the Earth's and human resources, especially in the most deprived countries. For Baudrillard, consumption is the defining characteristic of Western societies (Al-Salmi).

The manifestations of the consumer society are reflected in the following:

A) Isolation and alienation from others: David Riesman states that the individual, obsessed with earning to increase their capacity for consumption, finds no time to connect with others, listen to them, empathize with them, or engage in mutual exchanges. Thus, modern consumer society denies

the value of participation among people, preoccupying them with the relentless pursuit of possessions they own and competing to acquire them.

B) Violence: Consumer society creates alienation between individuals, resulting in feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and violence. Roger Garaudy stated, "In societies where the vast majority of people are deprived of the joy of participation, violence becomes the law of individuals and groups." Consumer society directs its momentum toward a relentless pursuit of acquiring and consuming things, deceiving individuals into believing that accumulating possessions and their constant renewal will satisfy their hearts' yearning.

C) Detachment from values and principles: While certain social groups enjoy all the pleasures that life has to offer and discard tons of food in trash bins, millions of people suffer from malnutrition, hunger, and death.

C) Environmental problems resulting from environmental pollution.

D) Social problems: In consumer society, divorce rates rise, disobedience between parents and children increases, and vice and immoral relationships spread—all in a relentless pursuit of material gain at the expense of principles and values (Al-Taie, 2024).

2. The Media Model's influence on consumer behavior:

Advertising is the primary resource for most media outlets, generating substantial profits and making it an indispensable tool for these platforms. In this way, advertising serves a dual economic function: it is an important means for producing companies to market their goods and familiarize the public with them, encouraging consumers to purchase them to sell while simultaneously providing the primary source of income for media outlets (Al-Taie).

Advertising offers several benefits to the reader, the advertiser, and the newspaper. The reader sees advertising as informative and persuasive. The advertiser seeks to stimulate demand for their product through advertising. Commercial or industrial activities in society cannot be performed without advertising as a marketing tool. For the newspaper, advertising serves as a source of income.

Newspapers aim to satisfy and attract advertisers by offering large advertising spaces in search of financial returns that ensure their survival and continuity. This is always reflected in the policies prepared by media institutions (Bilal, 2024).

Given the increasing importance of advertising in helping companies introduce their products to the public, commercial advertisements have dominated most media outlets in all their forms. These outlets present hundreds of advertisements daily, urging the public to consume various types of goods—from essential to important, less essential, and even luxury goods and highly indulgent items. This has given the media a commercial character and made it the primary means for consuming goods and services. The amounts spent on commercial advertisements in various media have reached enormous figures (Ben Marishid, 2009).

In general, advertising in the media serves three functions (Dib, 2024):

A) Providing Information:

Advertising works to change consumer behaviour quickly and efficiently by providing consumers with information and data that help them discover aspects that they are unaware of regarding the advertised product, its usage methods, and its various benefits. Individuals often rely on advertising as a primary tool in their consumption decisions. In this way, advertising provides consumers with information about the product, its features, benefits, where to obtain it, and the prices at which it is offered.

B) Changing Consumer Desires:

Advertising helps change consumer desires if it is well designed and effectively utilized. It can lead to a fundamental change in consumer desires and attitudes. For advertising to have the desired effect on changing consumer desires, it must be based on a thorough study of the determinants of consumer behaviour and the cognitive processes involved in deciding to consume a particular product or brand. Additionally, social and cultural factors that influence consumer behaviour must be considered.

As a communication tool, advertising can bring about changes in consumer habits, desires, and consumption patterns if the following conditions are met:

- The advertisement must highlight the advantages and benefits that the consumer will gain by embracing the new idea or desire.
- The consumer must be willing to change their attitudes and adopt new ideas.
- The advertisement must create a general atmosphere of support for the consumer, ensuring that the decision to accept the new idea or direction is sound.

C) Changing Consumers' Preferences for Different Brands:

Most of the time, advertisers find themselves in a position where they need to change the behaviour of consumers who are already interested in a product, meaning that they must shift their preference from a competing brand to their own. In such cases, the advertiser relies on the desires and needs of consumers, using various advertising methods to achieve this shift in consumer preference from one brand to another. The advertiser may focus on presenting their product as the best or claim that the brand they are offering is the most accepted in the market, and so on.

Mona Al-Hadidi, a Professor of Media at Cairo University, presented some justifications that make advertising beneficial not only for consumers but also for media outlets, which she explained as follows (Fayyad, 2024):

- Advertising is an effective means of helping consumers meet their needs for goods and services in a better way.
- Advertising allows the public to learn about the characteristics and usage methods of the goods and services they need and how to obtain them without effort. It keeps consumers informed about new developments in production and services.
- Rapid societal change creates disruptions among people regarding appropriate behaviour and consumption patterns. In this society, a socially active individual does not have an immediate guide that provides sufficient information for navigating these changes more effectively. In this case, commercial advertisements serve as a guide to achieve this goal.
- Advertising increases the public's taste, increases their awareness, and improves their use of new goods.
- It is currently challenging to introduce new goods and brands into the market, especially consumer goods, without advertising.
- Advertising helps achieve the principle of equal opportunity for advertisers.
- Advertising plays a social role by providing material to discuss and strengthen social relationships. On the other hand, it is an entertaining pastime during leisure time, whether through viewing or commenting with others.
- Advertising provides media outlets with significant financial resources, allowing them to manage financial burdens.

3. The Frankfurt School and Critique of Media Content:

The Frankfurt School was considered the first contemporary social philosophical and critical movement, and it criticized the ideas promoted by the Enlightenment era to establish a critical theory of society that links thought and practice dialectically.

The critical theory is associated with its founders, Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), and his colleague, Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), as well as with the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt, where the two friends developed negative critical thinking that was reintegrated into philosophy, stripping itself of any authoritarian or utopian claims.

In addition to Adorno and Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse (1898–1984) also emerged. His thought was characterized by his rejection of the existing repressive society and his call for revolution by emphasizing reason's decisive and revolutionary role in human life. He argued against viewing society from a one-dimensional perspective, particularly in his book *One-Dimensional Man* (Mourad, 2024).

4. The Frankfurt School's Critique of Media and Its Role in Consumption:

Advertising today is a form of mass communication aimed at attracting individual attention and encouraging the adoption of a specific behaviour. It has transformed into an important economic driver, influencing the ideas and behaviours of consumers. This is achieved through immense advancements in advertising technology, which now controls the production process in terms of

marketing patterns, presentation, and consumption. Additionally, specialized experts create strategies on the basis of pleasure in ownership and the thirst for shopping while generating new needs and encouraging individuals to consume more goods and services.

The primary goal of advertising or publicity is to condition people to consume, create imaginary needs for them, and drive them to satisfy those needs through means that do not align with reality. Furthermore, it is based on glorifying consumer culture by portraying consumers as modern, civilized individuals who live happily by consuming specific services and products (Qasemi).

Therefore, through its researchers, the Frankfurt School focused on directing critiques of media content, particularly advertising. These criticisms were centred around the following points (Sahban, 2024):

***- Focus on consumer media:**

The media is the first step toward consumption and a powerful driver of it, as it instils trust in viewers, guides the public, and encourages consumption through the following:

***- Advertising and the social consumption frenzy:**

Advertising stimulates appetite, arouses curiosity, encourages adventure, and opens new doors to consumption. It helps to invent types of goods that were previously unknown and unnecessary. Therefore, producers aim to deceive viewers into believing that there is an urgent need for this or that product. Through advertising, they can gain consumers' approval of a product by providing them with a range of information that helps them discover certain features of the product or service and its availability in specific locations and times. Advertising, therefore, is merely a means of fulfilling consumers' desires.

***- Focus on Stars and Women in Promoting Product and Service Consumption:**

Most media outlets focus on stardom in all its forms, using it in society to convey an idea, modify behaviour, or market services. For example, we see an artist, athlete, or social figure driving a car or using perfume, which leads the viewer to believe that they must consume what this personality consumes. Ultimately, this is part of consumer culture, transforming the screen into a factory for stars, models, presenters, and celebrities. Creating stardom for promotional purposes is closely tied to profit, as media outlets hide what global companies plan to achieve market dominance. The media glorifies celebrities and stars, instilling in younger generations the belief that dancers, artists, actresses, and football stars are more important than scientists, scholars, preachers, teachers, engineers, and doctors are.

The previous points have led some researchers to oppose advertising in the media, presenting a set of justifications for this opposition, which include the following:

- Advertising is a means that leads to an increase in unnecessary consumption, as it encourages and entices individuals to buy things they do not genuinely need or pushes them to increase their consumption. This is a barrier to achieving saving behaviour or rational spending for individuals.
- Advertising increases production costs, which the consumer ultimately bears.
- Advertising leads to an imbalance between individual spending on necessary and unnecessary goods.
- Advertising misleads the receiving audience by including exaggerations, false claims, and unrealistic promises that cannot be trusted.

Media outlets resort to psychological and social strategies to influence the audience. These strategies include evoking emotions and reinforcing the culture of social necessity, making individuals feel that owning a particular product is part of integrating into society. These outlets also redefine needs, transforming luxuries into necessities through repeated and persistent advertising.

Conclusion

At the end of this research paper, we conclude that media outlets, in all their forms—whether traditional or modern—are essential tools in shaping individuals' consumer desires. They go beyond their classical role of transmitting information to the public and have become a driving force in creating consumer needs and encouraging individuals to embrace them. This is reflected in diverse

and professionally crafted media messages, such as commercial advertisements, digital marketing, and product promotion through entertainment content, which build stereotypical images of ideal lifestyles linked to the consumption of specific products and services.

In this context, criticism has emerged against the media, accusing it of serving the dominant class in society, especially businesspeople, by enhancing their influence and promoting the consumption of all types of products through commercial advertisements.

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