

Shock Tactics in Advertising and Implications for Citizen-Consumer

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Abstract

In 1990's a few companies produced advertisements that carried explicit social and political messages. Pioneering this move was the Italian clothing company whose "shock advertising" style was soon adopted by other companies including Diesel, FCUK, and the Body Shop. While some praised these companies for addressing important issues, others condemned them for exploiting social and political issues. This study explores the implications shock advertising for advertising language, the functions of advertising, and the notion of consumer-citizen. The paper first reviews three paradoxes that shock advertisements introduce into the discourse of advertising. Next, it discusses the possibility of a performative function for advertising, which in addition to selling products can incite public debate and dialogue on social and political issues, and foster positive notions of identity and citizenship. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

Key words: Shock advertising; Benetton; Diesel; Ideology; Consumer; Citizen

1. Introduction

Critics have blamed advertising for manipulating people, creating and instilling false needs and values, promoting materialism, perpetuating stereotypes, and presenting a personal world of consumption sheltered from social problems (Haug 1986; Kellner 1990; Lasch 1979; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986; Leymore 1975; Packard 1960; Pollay 1986; Schiller 1989; Schudson 1984; Williamson 1978). It is claimed that advertising is a form of social communication which promotes "non-communication" (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986), operates as a "distorted mirror" (Pollay 1986) that reflects and reinforces only the values, lifestyles and philosophies that serve the interests of companies, and creates a "commodity self" (Haug 1986) who sees consumption as solution to social and personal problems. Many have condemned advertising institution for its contribution to the development and reinforcement of an undemocratic social order by fostering concentration of enormous economic and cultural power in the hands of a few corporations (Jhally 1987; Kellner 1989; Schiller 1989).

Although there is some validity in these criticisms and majority of advertisements do portray a "fantasy" world structured around product consumption (Williams 1980), in the 1990s, a few companies, such as Benetton, Diesel, FCUK and Body shop, became notorious for producing advertisements that carried explicit political and social messages. Pioneering this move was the Italian clothing company, Benetton, whose advertising featured, instead of product pictures, images of AIDS, wars, environmental disasters, racism, and recently, convicts on death row. Benetton ads quickly entered into the public discourse, provoking heated discussions about what the role and content of advertising should be. The company was both condemned for its appropriation of serious issues to sell goods and praised for highlighting urgent social concerns through its advertising. Beyond inciting public debate, Benetton ads also spurred legal action, which resulted in banning of several of its campaigns in various countries. Other companies, including Diesel, FCUK, and the Body Shop, adopted similar shock tactics in their advertising, providing support for the existence of what Falk (1997) refers to as the "Benetton-Toscani effect" in advertising.

Opinions on such advertisements are polarized. Some blame companies who use shock tactics in their advertising for emotional manipulation and commercialization of serious social issues; others praise them for highlighting the very same issues. Nonetheless, shock advertisements generate academic and popular debate. In this paper, I explore the implications this advertising style bears on the nature of advertising language, the functions of advertising, and the notion of consumer-citizen. Specifically, I first examine what makes these advertisements so shocking. I argue that, underlying the controversy these advertisements create, are a set of representational, ideological and interpretive paradoxes. Next, I discuss the possibility of a "performative" function (Butler 1993) for advertising, which in addition to selling products can incite public debate and dialogue on social and political issues, and foster positive notions of identity and citizenship. The paper concludes with a review of future research avenues.

2. Why So Shocking?

Shock advertising, refers to a genre of advertising that aims to “elicit attention for a brand name by jolting consumers” (Belch and Belch 1998). Critics suggest that as consumers become more and more advertising literate and savvy, it becomes harder for creative people to craft advertisements that attract attention (Belch and Belch 1998; Goldman and Papson 1996; Grierson 1998). Some advertisers seek to cut through the clutter by deliberately creating controversial advertisements that distress the audience. Shock can be delivered through provocative images of human suffering and misery as well as through images that are erotic or pornographic, disgusting, vulgar, and morally insulting or mocking.

Research shows that shock appeals attract attention and improve brand recall (Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Vezina and Paul 1997). However, these advertisements also trigger criticism. Critics accuse these companies of commercializing and trivializing political and social issues to promote sales of their products (Back and Quaade 1993; Falk 1997; Giroux 1994). Many industry commentators condemn such ads for being tasteless and exploitative, and find these companies guilty of breaching the standards of advertising and morality to generate more sales (Grierson 1998; Lockwood 2002; Poynor 2000). I argue that controversy associated with these advertisements derive from their bold attempt to challenge the conventions of advertising, and, thereby, introduce ambiguity into the advertising discourse. A closer examination indicates that shock advertisements defy the established norms and principles of advertising through three sets of paradoxes: representational, ideological, and interpretive.

2.1 Representational Paradoxes

Advertising, given its commercial goal of creating a positive image for the brand, is guided by a representational strategy of showing the pleasurable and happy experiences associated with the product. Advertisements portray the glamorous, pleasurable, and fantastic images of people, situations and places, and promise happiness, beauty, fun, self-esteem, control, and the like as a result of product use. If a problem is presented, it is only to be resolved at the end through the promised magical transformative power of the advertised product. With its ultimately idyllic structure, advertising, thus, belongs to the realm of fantasy, fiction and “unreality.” As Scott (1994a) explains advertising images are a sophisticated form of visual rhetoric not transparent reflections of reality, and require consumers to draw on a learned vocabulary of pictorial symbols.

In many campaigns of Benetton, however, iconic images of human suffering and distress replace images of fantasy and happiness. For example, the ad featuring David Kirby, a newly dead AIDS victim surrounded by his family confronted consumers with the cruel and tragic reality of AIDS. Other executions included the picture of the shrouded body of a bloody corpse after a Mafia killing in Italy, an albino Zulu girl being shunned by others, an African soldier holding a human femur behind his back with a Kalashnikov hanging from his shoulder, poor black people scrambling in a waste lorry, and grim pictures of convicts on death row. The fall/winter 1997 campaign of Diesel, which featured six different images all shot in Pyongyang, North Korea, pursued a similar strategy. The imagery of third-world misery guided the construction of the advertisements. One ad showed a rundown neighborhood where a poster hanged on the wall of a house promoted fictitious “Brand O Tours” portraying a smiling Western couple and a copy that read “Escape Now.” Another one promoted “Lucky Ice Cream” with a tagline reading “For A Better Tomorrow.” The ad-within-the-ad showed a young blonde woman naughtily spoon-feeding her boyfriend against the grim faces of North Koreans waiting in line probably for their food rations.

This conscious attempt to replace the fantasy of consumption by social and political commentary not only violates the structural norms of advertising but also problematizes the cultural codes that distinguish genres in terms of whether they represent “reality” or “unreality.” According to Back and Quaade what underlies the effect of the blurring of reality and unreality is the employment of a “pseudo-documentary” style whose structuring principle is “a fetishization of images of abject catastrophe” (1993, p.74). In contrast to the known and accepted constructedness of advertising imagery, when confronted with documentary or news photography, the audience expects to see a transparent reflection, a mirror image of an external reality. The originality of this advertising style lies in “placing images normally confined to the news into a sphere of discourse where they are normally excluded” (Goldman and Papson 1996, p.50). The disjuncture between the subject matter and the representational logic of advertising discourse creates a shock delivered to the advertising form itself.

According to Giroux (1994), Benetton advertisements, whose structuring principle is shock, sensationalism and voyeurism, are attempts to rewrite the relationship among aesthetics, commerce and politics. He argues that Benetton engages in a “representational politics” that claim to reflect the “truth” through its register on realism. However, because these images are decontextualized and then recontextualized in advertising, they are stripped away from their historical and ideological conditions of production, and thus, are depoliticized. The aestheticization of politics turns the images of suffering into fascinating spectacles which “simply register rather than challenge the dominant social relations reproduced in the photographs” (Giroux 1994, p.17). Similarly, Falk suggests that these ads take spectacular representation to the extreme, and evidence both “the separation of the advert from the product” and the increasingly permeable boundaries between different genres (1997, p. 72; also see Goldman and Papson 1996; Tinic 1997).

While Benetton attempts to expose social reality through shock and sensationalism, Diesel blends irony into the spectacle. A much attention-generated advertisement of Diesel featured multiple image reproductions of a young man aiming a handgun point-black at the viewer. The text read: “Modern children need to solve their own problems: teaching kids to kill helps them deal directly with reality – but they learn so much quicker when you give them a guiding hand! Make them proud and confident! If they never learn to blast the brains out of their neighbors, what kind of damn future has this country of our got???” Another Diesel ad showed celebrations at the end of the Second World War and featured male sailors kissing – a criticism of the homophobic reaction in the U.S.A. to moves to allow homosexuals in the armed forces. The 2001 campaign “Lifestyles on Top of the World” attacked various Third World stereotypes. The ads, offering an upside-down version of the World, showcased a new Africa, a mirror image of the so-called developed world, and highlight the sexy, wealthy and successful jet-set. Images of young black women lounging in the back of a limousine, drinking champagne were juxtaposed with headlines from a mock newspaper, *The Daily African*. The twist on stereotypes extended to famine, war and disease in Europe and the Americas.

Many authors argue that advertising is influenced by the postmodern ethos, and more and more advertisements are incorporating features of postmodern aesthetics in their attempts to communicate with a postmodern consumer segment (Davidson 1993; Domzal and Kernan 1993; Goldman and Papson 1996; Sandikci 2001). The blurring of the distinction between reality and unreality, the mixing of different genres, the invocation of spectacular aesthetics, and the use of irony that characterize Benetton and Diesel style advertising resonate with postmodern aesthetic sensibility. From a broader perspective, the representational paradoxes underlying such advertisements represent a shift from modernist to postmodernist logic in which the motive to establish a meaningful association between the product and the ad imagery gives place to a deliberate mismatch of signifiers and signifieds that resist closure and aesthetic comfort.

2.2 Ideological Paradoxes

Ordinarily, the language of advertising is characterized by indifference toward social problems and apolitical stance. Advertising is seen as presenting a personal world of consumption stripped away from social and political problems (Goldman 1992; Haug 1986; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986; Leymore 1975; Marchand 1985; Schudson 1989; Williamson 1978). These studies, often drawing on a Marxist perspective, link the development of advertising to the development of modern consumer society, and argue that advertising represents “a form of domination that perpetuates capitalist hegemony” and operates as “a privileged non-democratic and privatized form of discourse” (Harms and Kellner 1998). According to Haug (1986), advertising is part of what he calls “commodity aesthetics” which shapes the values, perceptions, and consumption behavior of individuals to integrate them into capitalist lifestyles.

Advertising, the “illusion” or “distraction” industry, involves the promise of happiness, and “since the vast majority of people can find no worthwhile goal within the capitalist system, the distraction industry appears to be a good investment for the system as a whole, as well as for competently run private capital” (Haug 1986, p.121). Haug demonstrates how advertising produces false needs and distorts human interaction and sense of self-worth by providing dubious role models, fantasies, and anxieties. Similarly, in their historical analysis of the emergence of the consumer society, Fox and Lears (1983) document how capitalism developed a culture appropriate for profit maximization via the production and consumption of goods, and discuss advertising’s role in creating a culture of consumption and a new form of capitalist hegemony. When read from the perspective of critical theory shock advertisements such as those of Benetton and Diesel present two dilemmas. First, they blur the distinction between personal and public realms; second, they simultaneously offer system critique and reinforcement.

These ads problematize the assumption that advertising is confined to the personal world of consumption by invading that realm through the incorporation of political and social issues into their messages. According to Schudson, although advertisements appear to invoke traditions of social solidarity like family, kinship and friendship, the satisfactions they portray are invariably private and “do not invoke public or collective values” (1989, p.22). However, Benetton and Diesel advertisements consciously talk about the “real world” and “real problems” that concern people and make people concerned. Both companies rigorously claim that conventional advertising is insensitive to real issues and state that advertising should “change people’s minds and create compassion around social issues” (Fressola quoted in Squires 1992, p.18). Echoing the Marxist critics, Luciano Toscani, the creative mind behind Benetton’s advertising until his departure in 2001, condemns advertising for fraudulence: “The advertising industry has corrupted society. It persuades people that they are respected for what they consume, that they are only worth what they possess. ... One day there will be a Nuremberg trial of advertisers who have corrupted every form of communication. I will sit on it, I will be the prosecution and the public” (quoted in Clough 1992, p.15).

Similarly, Diesel states that what underlies its “Successful Living Campaign” is a very conscious intent to mock advertising’s promise of paradise: “Diesel appropriated the ‘consumer products make better living’ theme (so beloved by advertisers from the 50s onwards) and translated into the ‘Diesel – For Successful Living’ campaigns. Diesel images of consumer paradise must however be interpreted very ironically: the standard promise of ‘success’ found in most advertising is exaggerated and made absurd” (Diesel, Company Web Page). Diesel’s most recent campaign takes a shot at large multinational corporations whose marketing activities, as Diesel claims, go as far as dictating their consumers’ emotions, such as drink that soft drink and you will be happy, or wear those sneakers and you can “just do it.” The campaign features “Happy Valley” where excitement, joy, passion, pleasure, fun, freedom and romance are available to experience and buy from Diesel, and a mascot named “Donald Diesel” who guides people through Happy Valley. On the one hand, by featuring disturbing or ironic commentaries on social and political issues, Benetton and Diesel advertisements deviate from giving a message of “you can buy happiness.” In fact, they imply that “consumption will not provide the gratification you have been programmed to hope for” (Squires 1992, p.19). On the other hand, by attaching their logo on to the advertisements, they offer their products for the appreciation of the consumers. What emerges out of this perplexing hybrid is a message that simultaneously reinforces and criticizes capitalist and consumerist ideologies.

2.3 Interpretive Paradoxes

The absence of product information or, in some cases, the product itself, the pretense of photo-documentary style, the use of socially and politically charged images, and the presence of a blatant mockery of consumption, contradict with the expectations of an audience, who is accustomed to seeing in advertisements a blissful world constructed around the product. The ambiguous, unconventional, and shocking nature of these ads challenges viewers’ interpretive assumptions and conventions about reading advertisements. Drawing on reader-response theory, Scott argues that “the reader’s recognition of the genre of a given text frames and guides the reading experience” and “collective wisdom about persuasive tactics in general and past experience with the advertising genre in particular directly informs the process of reading ads” (1994b, p.464). Even though advertisements often borrow the conventions of other genres, the readers still need to recognize them as advertisements in order to identify the commercial intention of the message. The blurring of genre distinctions and the heterogeneity of conflicting messages in shock advertising raise several issues concerning the nature of interpretive process. Following Scott’s argument, we can expect that the reader first needs to identify the genre of the text in front of her, and then invoke the reading conventions associated with that genre.

The potential dilemma here stems from the hybrid nature of these advertisements. While the presence of the logo confirms that this is a commercial message, the presence of social/political commentary problematizes its status as an advertisement. Conversely, although the image resembles to news photography, the inclusion of the logo negates its documentary status. What confronts the reader is a hybrid text that requires the invocation of reading conventions of multiple genres, and employment of various types of cultural literacy and subcultural interests. Studies conducted from the perspective of reader-response theory demonstrate the interpretive openness of advertisements; that is, the same ad can be read differently by different consumers (Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliot 1999). However, polysemy does not refer to indeterminacy and infinite number of interpretations. The formal and structural characteristics of the advertisements on the one hand, and cultural understandings and skills shared among subsets of consumers on the other hand, pattern the meanings of advertisements.

Although advertisements do not offer fixed meanings, they significantly shape a preferred reading in order to achieve a desired communication with the audience. Through the representational and ideological paradoxes incorporated into their structure, Benetton and Diesel ads appear to push the limits of polysemy and deliberately motivate multiple and even conflicting readings. Overall, by disrupting the representational, ideological, and interpretive norms, shock advertisements do not only relocate advertising to a radically explicit political forum but call for rethinking the potential of advertising as something more than a hegemonic tool of the capitalist ideology.

3. A Performative Function for Shock Advertising?

Discussions on the relationship between advertising and citizenship usually take a critical stance suggesting that advertising adversely affects the abilities of people to think and act as conscious citizens and promotes an identity emptied of civic virtues (Goldman 1992; Lasch 1979; Marcuse 1964; Jhally 1987; Williamson 1978). Based on the Marxist notions of human alienation, fetishization, and reification, consumption is ultimately viewed as a mode of misrecognition. According to Fromm, for instance, advertising appeals are essentially “irrational” and “have nothing to do with quality of merchandise, and they smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer like an opiate or outright hypnosis” (1941, p.128). From a similar vein, Williamson argues that “advertisements obscure and avoid the real issues of society” such as organization of production (1978, p.47). Lasch (1979) also perceives advertising as a form of manipulation that aims to “educate” consumers into a way of passive consumption, and claims that advertisements promise consumption as a solution to the “aching void” deriving from the meaninglessness of jobs and emptiness of lives. In short, advertising instills false values, and constructs people as passive consumers, an identity devoid of critical consciousness and citizenship virtues.

Not only advertising and consumption contradict the logic of citizenship, they are viewed as weakening the efficacy of the public sphere and, in consequence, the efficiency of democracy. Echoing Habermas’s views, Harms and Kellner (1998) perceive advertising as a non-democratic form of discourse. According to the authors, “advertising undermines the psycho-cultural base for a public sphere and democratic participation in social life. While democracy requires an active, inquiring public citizen/subject, advertising is a part of a privatized consumer society which offers commodity spectacles as a substitute for participation in social life. Democracy requires that its citizens express concern about public life and actively participate in efforts to reform and improve society. Advertising attempts to assure and assuage its audience and to promote the belief that individual commodity solutions are present for all problems” (Harms and Kellner 1998, p.12). Citizenship embodies the ideals of the public sphere – openness, participation and critical consciousness – which advertising and consumption deny. By promoting a passive, ahistorical, and privatized individualism advertising and consumption represent the opposite of citizenship, and “the tension between ... [consumer and citizen] as identities is fundamental” (Dahlgren 1995, p.148).

But, if advertising is capable of constructing “false” identities why should it not be capable of fostering positive notions of identity? Addressing this question, Meijer (1998) discusses several examples of advertising practice that inspire new civil attitudes and ideals, and challenge the modernist dichotomy between the consumer and the citizen. Her examples include the Burrell Agency, the largest black-owned advertising agency that makes ads that celebrate “black citizenship;” the multinational brewer Heineken and a life insurance company Amev whose campaigns “both incorporated enjoyable visions of cultural differences and alternative lifestyles;” and finally, outdoor executions of various shock advertising campaigns (Meijer 1998, p.241). In regard to the last example, Meijer argues that outdoor advertising, because of its visibility and intrusiveness, “stimulates people to think about themselves in terms of liberal or conservative, masculine or feminine, even black and white” and incite public debate as “while talking with others about the ads, people give meaning and substance to civic values” (1998, pp.246-7).

Advertising performs several functions in addition to selling goods. It provides symbolic information about products and consumption activity; it helps people in constructing their identities through providing lifestyle and role models; it operates as a significant site of popular cultural production. If advertising is capable of performing all of these roles, perceived as positive or negative depending on the ideological position of the researcher, then can it undertake a new role that reconciles capitalist aims and critical consciousness, however perplexing it may appear? Critical studies often consider advertising and citizenship as a contradiction, arguing that advertisements obscure the real issues of society and erode the critical abilities of people to think and act as politically and socially conscious individuals.

However, by addressing highly charged social and political issues, shocking middle class values and sensibilities, and reflecting an ironic and cynical attitude toward advertising and consumption, these ads transform advertising to a language of conflict instead of consensus, incite debate and dialogue about social and political issues, and create almost a Habermasian public sphere (Falk 1997; Meijer 1998). Social dialogue through advertising may represent “the democratic, vital edge of the postmodern” (Gitlin 1989, p.58) and foster the development of a hybrid social identity – what Baudrillard (1996) has labeled the “citizen-consumer.” When we think of advertising as a potential site of the public sphere, three questions emerge. First, to what extent advertisements induce public debate and dialogue around issues of general interest? Second, who are the agents participating in this communicative action? Third, what effects does such public communication generate? Shock advertisements’ performance derives from their ability to enter into the public discourse. These advertisements stimulate two different types of discussion. On the one hand, they incite debates around the social and political issues they portray, i.e., Benetton’s “Looking at Death in the Face” campaign and the discussions it generated about death penalty (Girling 2004; Kraidy and Goeddertz 2003). On the other hand, they incite debates about the appropriateness of advertising as a medium to voice political and social commentary.

Multiple “publics” including consumers, retailers, company officials, intellectuals, interest groups, civil organizations, advertising professionals and industry organizations participate into the debate. These publics possess different levels of economic, political, and legal power, represent different interests, and voice conflicting views. The form of their participation ranges from outcry, complaint, criticism, approval and appreciation. Benetton ads are often among those that receive record number of complaints from consumers (Simpson 1992). However, reactions towards these advertisements proliferate, yielding to plurality of opinions rather than consensus. For example, the Benetton ad featuring David Kirby, the dying AIDS patient, caused substantial controversy in many countries it appeared. In Germany, the authorities banned the advertisement on the grounds of exploitation of human suffering. At the same time, however, a German AIDS group was praising the ad, hoping that “the picture would help break down taboos and bring death from AIDS into the public consciousness” (Reuters 1992). Similarly, when Benetton launched its advertising campaign “Looking at Death in the Face” in 2000, it stirred up many reactions. The Victims Rights Group in the United States, for example, vehemently criticized the campaign, arguing that by not mentioning the inmates’ crimes, the ads only glamorize murderers and “are causing unnecessary pain and distress to the families of the innocent people killed by the men the campaign intends to humanize” (Gwin 2000).

When the group picketed a Houston Sears store, Sears immediately pulled Benetton clothing from all of its stores, stating that the advertising campaign was inconsistent with what Sears stands for and is inconsistent with [its] customer base” (CNN 2000). At the same time, however, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers was thanking Benetton for the creation of an important statement against death penalty and exposing “evil to the light of universal human rights” (Rice 2000). The campaign also generated a heated debate among newspaper and magazine columnists. While some argued that the campaign, no matter how well intended or well received, is a “criminal exploitation” (Garfield 2000), others regarded the advertisements as a medium to discuss the dilemma of death penalty (Bierbauer 2000). Following the publication of the advertisements, several letters received from people condemning or praising the campaign and death penalty have appeared in the opinion pages of many national newspapers. The effects of these advertisements appear to be at two different levels: opinion formation and action taking. By inciting debate around the social/political issues they communicate and the functions of advertising institution, these advertisements motivate various publics to form opinion, be it in favor or in opposition. Second, they induce different publics to take action toward the company. The actions can range from writing complaint/appraisal letters, boycotting (by both consumers and retailers) or purchasing of the company products, and ultimately banning the advertisements. Whatever the result is, however, these advertisements enter into the public discourse, induce discussion, and transform advertising from a tool of generating consensus to one of debate.

4. Discussion and Future Research

So far, academic discussions on shock advertising have mostly involved disparaging views. What might be overlooked in the perspective, however, is that this style of advertising may open up new avenues of thinking on the nature of the advertising language and the functions of advertising institution. Advertising, as any other representational system, reflects both the perceptual, social and cultural conventions and features of the period it comes into existence and particular types of relationships between the producers and viewers.

As a repository of the aesthetic and cultural patterns by which socio-temporal conditions are perceived, understood and communicated, advertising and its transformation can inform us on broader cultural, social and political developments. Thus, following Smith's suggestion, we need to recognize "the ways in which social representations accompany, adapt to, and even formulate the nature of changes and trends in the capitalist economy. This seems especially crucial in a context in which capital's claims for the legitimation of contemporary social and economic structures are made largely at the level of the *consumer*, who is never the consumer of just a commodity but equally of the commodity's *text* and ideology" (1988, p.139, italics in original). To the extent that we see advertising as a hegemonic tool of capitalism antithetical to democracy, we forget the interpretive, resistive and performative capabilities of consumers. To the extent that we focus on the micro relationships between the consumers and advertisers, we overlook the social and political potential and impact of advertising.

A dichotomic understanding of citizenship and consumerism is problematic inasmuch as it tends to reify both terms, and underestimate the ways in which consumerism is implicated in citizenship. Like citizenship, consumption involves a complex subjectivity, and consumption extends well beyond the domain of exchange relations to practices of everyday life where emotions, identifications and sociality are constructed, enacted, and regulated. Communicative action prompted by advertising does not necessarily restrict political imagination or individuals' relations to multiple cultural communities. On the contrary, acceptance, negation or rejection of the messages these advertisements communicate may motivate the individual to rethink his or her own identity and identification with specific cultural subjectivities, including citizenship. The politicization of spaces formerly considered neutral allow people to assemble in new kinds of social, cultural and political relationships and create novel hybrid spheres. As Meijer points out "advertising may make people aware of various civic values that one could otherwise only encounter in the informative genres of the various public spheres. As more and more people turn away from those, advertising becomes one of the few mainstream and popular cultural sites where it is possible to find such narratives" (1998, p.244). The campaigns of Benetton reveal the potential and limit of transforming advertising into a sphere of public communication. Whether or not the public dialogue motivated by advertising enables individuals to reinterpret their social experiences and question the dominant cultural and political assumptions require further empirical research.

Interpreting an advertisement is a social act not only because shared socio-cultural resources among similar groups of consumers pattern ad meanings but also the social context of the reader influences the meaning as much as the textual structure of the advertisement (Ritson and Elliot 1999; Scott 1994b). Research shows us that there are many different social uses of advertisements, including using advertising texts, independently of the products they promote, as part of the daily interactions (Nava and Nava 1992; Ritson and Elliot 1999). If "advertising can form the basis of a wide variety of social interactions" as Ritson and Elliot (1999, p.273) argue, the public debate that Benetton advertisements generate represents a unique form of social use of advertising that has not been fully explored to date. Several questions regarding the nature of interpretive process and the scope of social uses of such advertisements await empirical investigation. Recontextualization of social and political commentary and system critique within a commercial communication tool suggests interpretive indeterminacy which implies that such images can be negotiated by different individuals in multiple and varied ways.

Future studies need to investigate to what extent social class, age, political standing, and lifestyle differences shape reading of these advertisements. From a cross-cultural perspective, studies contrasting the interpretive processes and responses of consumers from countries that are at different stages of consumption culture are likely to generate interesting results. From a pedagogical perspective, the debates shock advertisements generate indicate the importance of critical media and advertising literacy. Based on the notion that cultural texts are instrumental not only in producing meanings but also constructing subjectivities, the advocates of critical media literacy emphasize the asymmetric distribution of cultural skills and resources among different people and the power relations underlying reception of a text (Giroux and McLaren 1991; McLaren 1988). Future studies, thus, need to explore how and why certain messages are accepted or rejected as well as how dialogue encouraged through advertisements shape identities of individuals and foster virtual communities of consumers, or "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1996; also see Cova 1997). If these advertisements indeed create new tribes whose members share similar views on social, political and cultural issues, to what extent such formations influence consumption behavior needs to be investigated. From the managerial perspective, the case of shock advertising raises several questions regarding the effectiveness of such advertising.

While many of Benetton and Diesel advertisements have won awards for creativity, many have been banned. Luciano Toscani, who is regarded as the originator of shock advertising, had to depart Benetton after the uproar the “Looking Death at the Face” campaign caused in the United States. Diesel, on the other hand, changed its advertising agency twice, following its decision to develop more “product-oriented” advertisements. Its recent campaigns, however, continue to reflect the ironic attitude. While shock advertisements create awareness about the brands they promote, their long-term effectiveness is not known. To what extent increased brand awareness influences recall, attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand image needs to be empirically investigated. Similarly, future studies should explore whether shock advertisements change consumers’ perceptions of the advertising institution and motivate, at least certain consumer segments, to demand similar performances from other advertisers. Given the increasing popularity of notions such as “corporate citizenship” (Maignan and Ferrell 2001) or “citizen brands” (Willmott 2001), it is hoped that the present paper generates future inquiries into the potential of shock advertising both as a marketing instrument and a vehicle of public communication.

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