

Multinational TV Commercials: *Reality* or *Simulation* of Happiness and Ideals?

Costas A. Petrakis

Lecturer

Department of Public Relationships and Communication
Technological University in Ionian Islands
Constantinou Metaxa 2, 28100 Argostoli, Greece

Ioanna Gavriel Ioakeimidou

Technological University of Ionian Islands

Marina-Selini Katsaiti*

Assistant Professor

Department of Economics and Finance
College of Business and Economics
United Arab Emirates University
P.O. Box 17555
Al-Ain, UAE

Abstract

In the modern world, the so-called art of advertising promotes and is a part of globalisation. Advertising fulfils the desire to consume by creating “ideal” stereotypes of happy and successful individuals. As promoted and advertised by the media, success has become a synonym for money, consumption, and power. As presented in advertisements, the ideological strength of happiness is a socio-historic parameter. Happiness is quantifiable, according to Baudrillard (1970), and can be reproduced by values incorporated in the consumption of goods of services. Through theoretical and secondary qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study attempts to test the hypothesis that because of quantification, individuals directly link the consumption of goods with the adoption of the values and “ideals” embodied by the goods.

1. Introduction

According to Marx’s Grundrisse, objects become commodities if they obtain an exchange value. These goods are exchanged through the use of images, symbols and values, whereas the consumers receive non-genuine indulgence. Commercialisation and commercial advertisements complete each other, as greater commercialisation of art and culture results in the replacement of values with commercial values and principles. Demand often increases overall as a consequence of an increase in the demand for values rather than for goods (Williamson, 1978). Hence, consumer satisfaction comes into being through its representation in an advertisement.

Individuals do not always consume items for their objective value per se. On the contrary, individuals often “consume” the ideals and values incorporated into goods, mainly because of the social beliefs regarding what each item represents. In this way, consumption offers a criterion for distinguishing or even re-evaluating individuals. Individual consumers form their attitudes towards a product based on their expectations of the social characteristics associated with the product. Advertisement and consumption are experienced as solutions to social inequality and the emptiness felt by the solitary consumer who hopes to find a position within the social elite (Baudrillard, 2000).

Oftentimes, consumers unconsciously seek to shape their personalities by using social acceptance and popularity as their criteria. Consumption habits and patterns play an important role in this process.

In the past, individuals were characterised by differences in inherited elements (e.g., nationality, religion and origin) that were not the results of choices and/or consumption. Now, people are distinguished by differences in ideology, clothing, lifestyle, and other distinctions based on a socialised exchange of factors that serve consumption.

Social reality is determined to a large extent by the mass media. Models, rules, social institutions, values and ideas are repeated and engaged as knowledge and experience in an autonomous and differentiated way aimed at forming a concrete orientation for the public (McQuail, 2000). What is subsequently consumed is not only the object-merchandise but also its social importance, which is contradicted by the identity of the subject as a member of the political community (Demertzis, 2000). The message delivered by the mass media in advertisements has an “exchange value” for the audience, the potential consumer. As defined by Blumer (1939), the notion of “mass” describes the media’s audience (target group), whose consumer behaviour is influenced or even indirectly controlled.

Advertising delves into every aspect of daily life and dominates through communication, as communication and advertising in some cultures have become so difficult to distinguish from one another that they are treated as synonymous. Many established brands are associated with specific, often moral values through advertising and the media. In a system of global values and homogenisation, the study of culture and lifestyle loses significance. The message that ties products with brands and values is the same worldwide so as to stimulate the same consumption motives in any consumer.

Consumers face a deluge of advertising every day, and although these images last for only a few seconds, they impact our unconscious for much longer periods and ultimately shape our tastes and preferences. Stereotypes appear and reappear until they become consolidated and give a distorted impression of real time, as every moment is experienced in the present and through consumption.

This article has the following objectives: i) to introduce a new terminology that attempts to capture the “accounting” reality behind individual consumption behaviour and ii) to examine the impact of multinational companies’ television (henceforth TV) advertisements on consumers by using secondary qualitative and quantitative analysis. First, we introduce the new term “*Système-comptable*” to express the fact that everything can be measured in numerical terms. We argue that each individual holds his or her personal “balance sheet”, which can represent all individual activities in numerical fashion. Second, we examine whether individuals consume the ideals and values (according to the prevailing social beliefs) incorporated in consumer goods. If this hypothesis is verified, we argue that individuals are defined through the consumption and use of certain goods and that their “balance sheets” reflect these ideals and values in a numerical form. Our goal is to identify the common ground of TV commercials, which aim to motivate consumption by evoking specific emotions and ideals.

We assess whether individuals realise the influence of TV advertisements on their own beliefs, believe that advertisements reflect societal values and ideals and are affected by the values and ideals conveyed in TV advertisements.

The following section presents our theory regarding the “*Système-comptable*”. Section 3 discusses our research methodology and approach. Our quantitative and qualitative analysis and results are reported and discussed in Section 4. The final section concludes.

2. “*Système-comptable*”

The “*Système-comptable*” is essentially the trend towards quantifying all observations, recordings and representations of the world. This trend is established and represents the only reliable methodology for studying the efficient instrumental conduct of human beings. As a preliminary matter, we argue that we live in a system in which everything (i.e., goods, services, realisable values, ideas and dreams) can be measured in numerical (i.e., monetary) terms.

In its statistical form, knowledge in areas such as medicine, the natural and social sciences, and other disciplines is an ossified tool that is losing its main substance with respect to quality. At this point, we must acknowledge that people are no longer interested in that part of life that cannot be quantified.

In conjunction with what we call “ideal”, the “*Système-comptable*” is a (worldwide) system of “accounting”. The records of this accounting extend to infinity and are interconnected through advertising with an infeasible ideal of life that is far from any realisable capability of (reaching) happiness. This distance from realisable happiness is due to the following two factors: a) happiness cannot be measured in absolute terms, and b) happiness refers to a dialectical relationship between personal, creative, mental development and the social environment. This relationship can bear fruit within a creative environment, which can be guaranteed through participation in networks, teams, communities, or society as a whole. However, the media underestimates the creative gathering and the significant value of social relationships.

A systematic and quantified assessment of the production possibilities of individuals and societies as well as the values that these two parties can produce suggests the possibility of optimal control and central planning. For example, we refer to a system that is based on, among other factors, the media planning departments of advertising companies. In addition, the greater the quantification of values and ideas, the more endangered their quantified magnitude will be. Perhaps the aforementioned quantification process is one of the factors behind the economic crisis we are currently experiencing and the successive socio-economic shocks that will follow. Human beings sell out their hopes and dreams and see happiness as distant. At the risk of being judged as idealistic, we strongly emphasise that a world with no vision is destined to disregard its own values and thus destroy itself. Hence, the political order that humans must create and enforce should be directed towards the de-quantification of our world.

In his critique on Marcuse’s analysis of the relationship between the cultural and advertising industries, Noerr (1997) asserts that eternal beauty, youth, free communication and harmony are seen as imaginary visions. Certainly, any cultural good that is mainly produced for television is first assessed based on its association, in terms of values and style, with the content of TV commercials.

Whether the potential of quantifying the analysis of everything is realised depends on the following condition described by McLuhan: “*Understanding media, the extensions of man: Any community that wants to expedite and maximise the exchange of goods and services has simply got to homogenise its social life*” (p. 229). The production of goods targets formed tastes, and the desire for greater consumption places advertising in an advantageous position because it promises that tastes will be realised through the acquisition of goods and that the consumer’s conscious pursuit and unconscious desire for distinction will be satisfied (Bourdieu, 2002). Depending on the social and economic environment from which a message originates, the message can generate different responses in one’s mind. This factor transforms advertisements into ideal stories concealed within all of the desired models of the public sphere.

The exposure to images and the media’s construction of a pseudo-reality eventually replace real experience and complicate the process of distinguishing between effigy and reality (Baudrillard, 1983). Eco’s statement (1979) that a sign is anything that can be used to tell a lie captures the multiple levels of semiotic analysis and codes that one can explore. Brands function as shortcuts by distinguishing between high and low quality goods. They constitute a type of “commonly accepted rule” by defining the “quality” of things. Without brands that enable this signalling process, the rate of change and the conflicting media messages would create a chaotic environment in which the selection process would be too overwhelming to bear.

However, brands act as signals by clustering together brand characteristics easily recognisable to consumers. This function helps consumers decide which “package” of values allows them to best realise their ideals and derive the most happiness.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy & Approach

According to Remenyi et al. (1998), if a research philosophy is based on positivism, then the research must be applied to a mutually accepted social reality for its final product to show law-like generalisations. The aim of a researcher using positivism is to examine a specific theory through the use of data and to test a hypothesis (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2007). However, the interpretivistic approach emphasises the importance of identifying the differences in the rapidly changing societal roles of individuals. These differences are identified by generating data from the questionnaires of quantitative research (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2007).

The most appropriate research philosophy for the present study combines interpretivism with positivism (Saunders et al., 2007). The influence of TV commercials on individual consumers varies significantly mainly because of the differences in their characteristics, such as their principles, values, and ideals. In turn, these characteristics depend on the consumers' personalities, ethics, cultures, gender, age and psychology. Interpretivism will help us better understand the impact of multinational TV commercials on consumers. In addition, it will shed light on the way TV advertisements reflect the perceived value of ideals in consumers' minds. At the same time, the positivist approach will connect these insights on the basis of the established theory in the hope of offering meaningful and instructive conclusions.

It is important to note that each research philosophy is related to a different research approach. According to Saunders et al. (2007), a deductive approach is combined with positivism and an inductive approach with interpretivism. Collis and Hussey (2003) argue that in deduction theory, socially accepted rules explain observable facts. In contrast, inductive testing theory 'is a theory building process, starting with observations of specific instances and seeking to establish generalisation about the phenomenon under investigation' (Hyde, 2000 pp.82-90). This process involves assembling information and devising a theory or finding one that already exists to "fit" the statistics (Connor, 2005).

In this study, the authors seek to investigate the role of the "*Système-comptable*" in our lives and its impact on our perceptions of happiness and ideals. In addition, we examine the ways in which multinational TV commercials influence us through semiotics. Because of the nature of our research question and the arguments presented above, we deem it appropriate to combine the two research approaches. Deduction is adopted when we establish our hypothesis, devise our framework (Creswell, 1994) and conduct the interviews. Next, to test our theory, we generate data in the inductive way by using a questionnaire.

3.2 Research Methods

According to Malhotra and Birks (2003), data can be collected through Secondary, qualitative and quantitative methods. We choose all three techniques for the purpose of our study. The secondary approach is used to justify the theoretical background, whereas qualitative data analysis is used to both test the validity of the existing theory presented by the secondary method and establish and support our hypothesis formation, which will enable the researcher to perform appropriate and suitable quantitative analysis. Finally, quantitative data analysis (i.e., the questionnaire output) allows the researcher to test its agreement with the qualitative results and investigate whether the quantitative results are consistent with the existing literature. This "triangulation" (i.e., the combination of secondary, qualitative and quantitative methods) allows the researcher to benefit not only from the results offered by each independent method but also (and more importantly) from the additional information derived through the shared conclusions offered by their simultaneous use (Tashakkovi and Teddlie, 2003).

For the purposes of our study, we deem it appropriate to utilise all three data types. Secondary data are suitable primarily because numerous sources are used, which saves cost and time in the implementation of the study (Ghauri and Gronhaugh, 2002). The availability of secondary data often determines whether a study can be implemented. In addition, secondary data are usually more accurate because they arise from statistical analysis and not from individual sources (Aaker et al., 2001).

However, the use of secondary data also has limitations. The first is the gap between the units of data measurement used in past research and those used in our study (Malhotra and Birks, 2003). In addition, secondary data could be outdated. Consequently, depending on the specific characteristics of the study, the data might not address and meet the needs and requirements of the study. With respect to the present paper, outdated data would not be suitable because advertising methods and techniques change rapidly, as do trends. To address these problems, we collect primary data and conduct analysis.

Qualitative research includes the means, techniques and approaches that help the researcher understand the implications and motivations behind behaviours and attitudes. Thus, qualitative research is a tool for collecting and analysing data. Data collected through the qualitative approach come from unstructured or semi-structured questions that give respondents the opportunity to describe their feelings and behaviours. According to Mariampolski (2001), the use of semi-structured questions allows the respondents to analyse the advertisements freely according to their feelings.

Furthermore, qualitative research is related to data analysis through holistic and descriptive approaches. These approaches include case studies that examine consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards descriptions of a consumption decision and analyses of each type of consumer. In addition, the qualitative method is important because it can offer explanations for and insights into human behaviour. Through the qualitative method, the researcher can collect information about consumers' opinions of a new product, their evaluations of communications in marketing and their preferences, which vary in relation to the culture. The qualitative approach helps the researcher comprehend why and how people choose products and services, their reasons for and methods of utilisation, and their feelings, which are related to their perceptions of different brands and various categories of products (Ioakeimidou, 2008). In addition, the researcher can explore the methods of communication that affect individuals with regard to certain products in the marketplace and how these preferences evolve to enhance consumer satisfaction and willingness, which leads them to repurchase a product within the limits of its perceived value (Mariampolski, 2001).

In the present study, we questioned knowledgeable respondents regarding the reasons for their behaviour and conduct in-depth interviews on a one-to-one basis in a natural, unstructured manner.

The main advantage of qualitative research is that it facilitates faster organisation, turnaround and feedback than quantitative research. Qualitative research also provides a deeper understanding of the emotions and motivations in consumer behaviour, allows subjects to be directly involved, is more confidential and can be controlled at every step of the process. Finally, it is cost-effective. The main argument against the qualitative method is that if the sample is small, the researcher becomes a part of the sample (Malhotra and Birks, 2003). According to Saunders et al. (2003 p.101), 'Validity is concerned with whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about'. A researcher can evaluate internal validity by asking the following question: 'Will similar observations be made by different researchers on different occasions?' (Smith, 1991 cited by Connor, 2005 p.5). To overcome these limitations, researchers should quantitatively test the findings of qualitative research through a questionnaire by using the findings of the qualitative stage as a basis.

According to Malhotra and Birks (2003), quantitative research involves questioning respondents regarding the 'what, when, where and how of behaviour'. Marketing research data rely on values that are categorised or partially examined. The main limitation of this approach is that the results cannot be generalised to the full sample.

4. Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis & Results

The qualitative research interviews took place in Athens, Greece in 2010. Thirty-four individuals, 18 males and 16 females, were interviewed in mixed teams of two, three and four people. Based on the general background of the research participants, it is assumed that our qualitative research respondents are not familiar with the broad use of research for marketing purposes. That is, the respondents perceive TV advertisements either critically or naively.

It is important to stress that consumers do not always believe or realise how goods and advertisements affect their daily lives and routines. This observation stems from the qualitative research, in which the respondents report having total control over their consumption habits and thus being uninfluenced by advertisements. However, companies invest significant resources in advertising campaigns in the hopes of altering consumer behaviour by creating emotional links with the values represented by certain brands.

From the analysis of the qualitative questionnaires, it is understood that some respondents believe that TV advertisements reflect a genuine way of life, whereas the majority believe that advertisements do not do so, either because there is no objectivity—mainly because of the element of exaggeration—or because advertisements exploit our feelings to sell the advertised products.

Numerous respondents agree that advertisements have made them laugh. Others report to having retrieved a certain memory from watching a TV advertisement. In addition, the respondents state that if they were to act in a TV advertisement, they would prefer to advertise products used in their daily activities or products that defend social values. Based on their responses to the questions that are strongly related to consumerism and the rate at which consumers are affected by TV advertisements, the majority of respondents appear to share views that contradict those proven true by previous marketing and communication research.

The participants in our research declare themselves to be uninfluenced by TV advertisements. Obviously, consumers, particularly those who took part in this qualitative research, prefer to give the impression that they are not affected by TV advertisements and that their consumption decisions are not related to any type of mass commercial communication. Only the minority reports experiencing positive emotions, excitement and romanticism when watching TV advertisements.

In response to the questions reflecting values, our respondents report that the five most important values in their lives are health, family, friendship, work and solidarity. Relaxation, freedom, and professional rewards were mentioned less frequently. Other values were reported sporadically, including justice, equality, independence, homeland and honesty.

It is strongly believed that values such as beauty, friendship, happiness, love, joy and romanticism cannot be measured using numbers and that even if some of these values are presented in TV advertisements, it is up to the individual to control the influence of these advertisements. However, from the responses, it can easily be shown that the companies with famous brands that invest great sums of money in advertising campaigns achieve brand recognition and brand connection with what we call values and ideals. According to the respondents, these advertising campaigns explain why the “Coca Cola” brand is connected to what we call “joy”, “Trident” to “smile”, “UNICEF” to “truth” and “understanding”, “Dove” to “beauty” and “Mercedes” to “passion”.

The researchers also examined the sentiments and memories recalled in the consumers’/respondents’ minds in relation to some brands. The questionnaire results follow.

4.1 Quantitative Results and Analysis

The survey was conducted in Kefalonia, Greece in February-March 2011. Three hundred fifty-two individuals completed the survey. Of those participants, 150 were males (42.61% of the sample) and 202 females (57.39% of the sample). Almost half of the respondents had been educated at universities (50.85%). Of these respondents, 21.31% were males and 29.55% females.

The females aged 25-29 report watching more TV advertisements than the rest of the sample. According to those females’ reports, TV advertisements have the greatest influence on their consumption behaviour. The majority of the respondents report watching more than 10 advertisements during a TV programme and having bought at least one product because they liked the advertisement. No other statistically significant results were found with regard to gender and age differences.

At the 95% confidence level, the responses to our questionnaire indicate that certain ideals, such as respect, love, family, honesty, friendship, communication, motherhood, and understanding, are not represented by TV commercials. This view is also reflected in the qualitative analysis results. In addition, the respondents assert that those ideals should have been represented by TV advertisements to a greater extent. It is generally established that TV advertisements do not cause negative feelings, such as anger, fear, insecurity or stress. In contrast, most respondents report that some TV advertisements have made them laugh.

According to the questionnaire responses, the respondents perceive TV advertisements as fairy tales. The respondents demonstrate the following beliefs: i) TV advertisements have a false influence on consumer behaviour, ii) everything in our daily routines can be measured numerically, iii) we are victims of TV, and iv) happiness does not depend on the goods we own or consume as a result of TV advertisements. All of the aforementioned results are robust at the 95% level.

In conjunction with the qualitative results, the above findings show that the respondents realise and strive to control the significant effects of advertisements on consumer behaviour.

4.2 Reliability and Component Analysis

We conduct Principal Components Analysis (PCA) on the questions examining the relationship between values and consumption. Cronbach’s α for the 13-item sub-survey (questions 51 through 63—see Appendix) on the respondents’ perceptions of advertisements was 0.6316, implying that the responses have high levels of internal consistency that are statistically satisfactory. Regarding the PCA on the 13 items described above, we use an orthogonal rotation.

The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.717. The KMO values for all of the individual items exceeded the acceptable limit of 0.5. This measure suggests that the sampling adequacy of our research is appropriate. Three components with eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 explained 55.22% of the variance in the sub-sample. The following table presents the rotated factor loadings.

Table 1: Principal Component Analysis Rotated Factor Loadings

Item	Comp* 1	Comp 2	Comp 3	Comp 4
Advertisements are not real—they are fairy tales	0.3045	-0.3119	0.1986	-0.1336
There is no beauty in advertisements	0.3530	-0.1449	0.2924	-0.2709
Everything can be measured using numbers	0.3841	-0.0035	0.1297	0.2435
Values have disappeared	0.4160	-0.0226	0.1608	0.3369
The purpose of advertisements is to impact us	0.2992	-0.0980	-0.3909	0.2880
Money is important in our lives	0.1774	0.2471	-0.5332	0.3151
We are victims of TV	0.2846	-0.0491	-0.1679	-0.0857
Advertisements borrow elements from daily life	-0.0748	0.3871	0.1789	0.3325
Advertisements underestimate the intelligence of the audience	0.4218	-0.0626	-0.0704	-0.1746
Happiness depends on the goods that we own	0.1323	0.4559	-0.1479	-0.1990
We consume because of advertisements	0.1649	0.2900	-0.2686	-0.5834
There are implications in all advertisements	0.1423	0.3607	0.4281	-0.1213
Ideals are represented by popular brands	0.1084	0.4820	0.2298	-0.1032
Eigenvalues	2.75	2.04	1.27	1.10
Percentage of variance	0.2120	0.1574	0.0977	0.0851

* “Comp” is an abbreviated form of “component”.

Our PCA analysis reveals four components to be significant in the analysis of the survey results. These components (Component 1: q59, q54, q53, q52; Component 2: q63, q60, q58, q62; Component 3: q56, q62, q55, q52; and Component 4: q61, q54, q58, q56) explain most of the variation in the data.

Now the pattern becomes clearer. The first factor is marked by high loadings on the value items. The second factor is marked by high loadings on the advertising approach items. The third factor focuses on the relationship between money and advertisements. Finally, the fourth factor is based on elements of consumption and values. Thus, we conclude that satisfaction, as measured by our questionnaire, is composed of those four aspects. Hence, we arrive at a *classification* of the variables. The above PCA analysis leads to three conclusions. First, the responses are highly consistent. Second, the sampling adequacy of our research is appropriate. Third, the following four main factors explain our findings and their variations: values and ideals, advertising exposure, money, and consumption.

4.3 Making the Connection: Qualitative, Quantitative Results and the Theory of the “*Système-comptable*”

Our theory posits that individuals are influenced by the values present in advertisements and that these values are adopted in the individuals' daily lives as a consequence. The happiness and ideals promised by TV advertisements do not reflect reality. The respondents seem to be influenced by advertisements, either consciously or subconsciously, as shown by their decisions to consume particular products and brands. The respondents appear to recall the advertisements of certain products at the time of consumption. However, our findings reveal that the respondents are aware of the reality “constructed” by TV advertisements, and although such advertisements might be entertaining to watch, they appear not to further influence the respondents' personal valuation systems.

The argument that everything is measurable—what we call the “*Système-comptable*”—is verified by the survey findings. The respondents comprehend the influence of TV advertisements on consumption habits and value formation. However, they realise that this state is one that they must conform to and aim to change at the personal level rather than an ideal situation. Regarding the significant gap between the values that the respondents believe are present in advertisements and the values that the respondents believe should be present, one may argue that individuals have an inherent need for such ideals to be associated with their daily lives through their consumption of goods and services. Thus, our quantitative results reveal that the presence of values in TV advertisements may be interpreted as an inherent need of individuals to see them instead of as the marketing techniques of companies seeking to present those values to the individuals.

5. Conclusion

The present study attempts to associate the fulfilment of individual happiness as well as social success and acceptance with individual consumption habits. We claim that the values and ideals presented in TV advertisements often become the objects that consumers desire to acquire instead of the product itself. The widely accepted practice of quantifying and measuring all dimensions of human life in the form of numbers (and as a consequence in monetary terms) renders the consumption of goods and values a “race to the top” for both the individual and the society. This practice is intensified through the extensive use of TV advertisements and their invasion of our daily lives.

The above hypothesis is tested through the use of qualitative and quantitative research. Our findings seem to support our hypothesis. Individuals confirm that they watch TV advertisements. In addition, they assert that advertisements do not influence or control their consumption decisions. However, they state that they associate brands with certain values. Furthermore, the respondents testify to having recalled personal memories or experiences as a result of exposure to a certain brand or a TV advertisement representing the brand. These results might seem contradictory at first. However, upon closer inspection, it is understood that TV advertisements and brands subconsciously influence individual consumer decisions and “value functions”. Our initial hypothesis made this exact point (i.e., that the impact exists, is significant, and occurs mainly because of the indirect effects of the delivered message). From our analysis of the values expressed in TV advertisements, we conclude that individual valuation systems are affected through the exposure to and association with certain products and brands.

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