

# **PERSUASIVE ADVERTISING: MANIPULATION OR SYMBOLIZATION?**

*A psychoanalyst exploration of the role persuasive advertising fulfils in our lives*

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30 May 2022

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Word count	7558
Main study	BSc International Business Administration

## **Contents**

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 Specification of concepts .....	3
<b>2. Origins of advertising.....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Informative advertising .....	4
2.2 Public relations .....	4
2.3 Persuasive advertising.....	5
<b>3. Persuasive advertising as manipulation.....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Advertising and autonomy .....	6
3.2 Definition of autonomy.....	6
3.3 Persuasive advertising and shallow autonomy .....	7
3.4 Fallacy of advertising critique.....	8
<b>4. Plague of Fantasies .....</b>	<b>9</b>
4.1 Ideology .....	9
4.2 Lacanian triad .....	9
4.3 Fantasy.....	9
4.4 The Other .....	10
<b>5. Futility of advertising critique.....</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1 Omnipresence of advertising critique .....	11
5.2 Decaf resistance .....	11
<b>6. Persuasive advertising as symbolization.....</b>	<b>13</b>
6.1 Fulfilling desire?.....	13
6.2 Constituting the gap.....	13
6.3 Advertising as fantasy.....	14
6.4 Traversing the fantasy .....	15
6.5 Implications of persuasive advertising as symbolization .....	15
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>8. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>18</b>

## 1. Introduction

How come that nowadays we can find all information regarding products and services online, but the amount of advertising seems bigger and more all-pervasive than ever before? When I started studying International Business Administration in 2017, I was completely sold on marketing: the creative and the psychological side of business studies seemed to come together in this field. With data analytics, a specific target group, good story telling and a convincing advertisement, you were able to help consumers pick the right product or service.

By following philosophy courses throughout my business bachelor, my opinion started to change and I became more critical of marketing and advertising practices. Especially after I saw VPRO Tegenlicht's episode *Rebellen tegen Reclame*: maybe ads do not fulfil the role of helping consumers making good purchasing decisions, but they rather hamper our critical thinking, perhaps it even manipulates us into buying certain products.<sup>1</sup>

In the episode, lawyer Ramsi Woodcock explains that advertising justifies its position with the informative view: a free enterprise economy requires informed consumers.<sup>2</sup> The purest form of such advertising are the Yellow Pages: signs that are simply announcing the availability of a product or service.<sup>3</sup> From mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there has been a shift towards an economy based primarily on information technology. At the rise of the information age, the informative function of advertising has become obsolete as a useful source of product information. The “add to cart” page in online stores now gives all information on products that consumers possibly need. Even though the information function has become redundant, companies have failed to decrease their amounts spent on advertising. Due to new methods such as targeted online advertisements, it seems like advertising has entered even *more* spheres of human life, but these new technologies do not seem to improve advertising effectivity.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than showing the ignorance of companies and advertising agencies, the abundance of persuasive advertising leaves open the idea that companies and marketeers have motives *beyond* merely informing the consumer. There is a big group of business ethicists that argue that persuasive advertising is manipulating consumers into buying certain products and/or services. Additionally, they are questioning consumerism and late capitalism at large.

However, although for decades there has been an ubiquity of (persuasive) advertising critique, the amounts of advertising have still not decreased, and the centrality of consumerism in our society has not shifted. So maybe it is not only companies that have certain motives for the conservation of persuasive advertising, maybe the critics – and us individuals at large, also have our reasons. Individuals are always looking at a form of meaning within their lives, and according to psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, persuasive advertising fulfils this very role of symbolization within our capitalist society. Perhaps marketeers are consciously creating a fantasy that is not directly related to the product.

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<sup>1</sup> Kees Brouwer “Rebellen tegen reclame,” *VPRO Tegenlicht* (Hilversum: VPRO, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ramsi A. Woodcock, “The Obsolescence of Advertising in the Information Age,” *The Yale Law Journal* 127, no. 8 (Jun 2018): 2273.

<sup>3</sup> Paul C. Santilli, “The Informative and Persuasive Functions of Advertising: A Moral Appraisal,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 2, no. 1 (Feb 1983): 29.

<sup>4</sup> Olga Fedorenko, “On the Futility of Advertising Critique,” in *Explorations in Critical Studies of Advertising*, ed. James F. Hamilton, Robert Bodle and Ezequiel Korin, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017), 83.

So what is the real goal of persuasive advertising and what role do we want it to fulfil in our society? In this paper I will explore the following thesis: *Persuasive advertising should not be seen as a way to manipulate our subconsciousness, as amongst others, Crisp and Arrington have stated, but should rather be seen as a form of symbolization to support, but not fulfil our fantasies – as Žižek argues.*

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the differences in argumentation of business ethicists (like Arrington, Crisp) and Žižek and explore the role persuasive advertising has in our society and the effects it has on the individual. In order to do this, chapter 2 and 3 will explain the origins of advertising and why/whether this can be regarded as manipulation. chapter 4, 5 and 6 respectively will explain Lacanian theory, criticize the effects of advertising critique, and lastly argue for the role persuasive advertising plays in symbolizing ourselves. But first, the scope of this thesis will be further demarcated and concepts will be further specified.

### **1.1 Specification of concepts**

**Informative advertising – persuasive advertising:** The thesis focuses on persuasive advertising from commercial institutions specifically, not delving further into informative advertising nor advertising for NGOs. Persuasive advertising reaches from targeted online advertising to posters and billboards in public space.

**Manipulation of subconsciousness – symbolization of desire:** The thesis indicates a core tension between the philosophers' starting point of analysis:

- Business ethicists like Crisp and Arrington rely on Freud's psychoanalytic approach and start from the object (advertisement) itself. They question whether persuasive advertising is ethical based on the assumption that the advertisements might manipulate our subconsciousness.
- Žižek follows the psychoanalyst Lacan with the idea that there is no unconscious mind, but rather an individual with a symbolic order. The starting point here is not the object, but the desire of the subject (consumer-citizen). Žižek would rather question the role marketeers have in the process of symbolizing the subject's desire.

**Consumer-citizen:** The term consumer-citizen (and “individual”, “subject” alternately) will be used following Santilli to describe the subject of this thesis.<sup>5</sup> As the subject is indeed seen mostly as a consumer in consumerist and capitalist ideology, but we ought not to forget the opening to other possible horizons *beyond* capitalism. Therefore “-citizen” will be included to demonstrate the individual's role beyond consumption.

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<sup>5</sup> Santilli, “The Informative and Persuasive Functions of Advertising: A Moral Appraisal,” 32.

## 2. Origins of advertising

In *The Century of the Self*, Adam Curtis demonstrates how Freud's psychoanalysis and Bernays' public relations is used to manipulate the masses, and at large questions the implications of consumerism and commodification. Hence it will provide the foundation for the argumentation of persuasive advertising as manipulation by Arrington and Crisp.

### 2.1 Informative advertising

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mass-industry started to develop in the US. During the First World War, mass production was flourishing. Products and services were sold on the basis of needs, because they were deemed functional.<sup>6</sup> Consumers would prefer one product over the other based on the factual merits of these products.

Companies knew information drives behaviour. If it wasn't for informative advertising in newspapers and Yellow Pages, people would not know about the availability of certain products. The advertisement is printed to convey useful information, without an overt intent to persuade or entice consumers.<sup>7</sup> The free enterprise economy requires informed consumers.

Around 1820, Hegel already argued that in the modern world, the main function of products were rather social – creating relationships between members of a community, than merely functional and economic.<sup>8</sup> A decade later, after World War I, this became even more evident. Companies became afraid of overproduction, and needed a way to sell products, even though people did not *actually* need them. Wall Street banker Paul Mazur wanted to transform thought from a needs to a desires culture. He trained people to *want* new things. Before, only rich people would buy things they did not need, but with this new form of advertising, desires would overshadow needs. It was the start of the all-consuming self.

### 2.2 Public relations

The formation of the all-consuming self was made possible by persuasive advertising. Edward Bernays questioned whether mass persuasion was possible during peace time. He named such practices **public relations council**. Bernays was the American cousin of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and used psychoanalytic theory to appeal to the masses. He was working towards mass consumer-citizen persuasion. Hence, modern advertising focuses on selling *experience* rather than disseminating information.<sup>9</sup>

Bernays looked at things playing upon people's irrational emotions. People would consume irrationally, if you would link products to emotional desires and feelings. His idea of associative advertising was based on Freud's idea that many of individual's thoughts and actions are compensating for desires which they have been obliged to suppress.<sup>10</sup> Bernays for example linked celebrities to products, and used product placement. Hence, people desired products not for their intrinsic worth, but for the symbol created. It became the rise of **consumerism**: ordinary citizens transformed into consumers by wanting and buying things they did not need. This became the central motor of American life.

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Curtis "Happiness Machines," *The Century of the Self* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Santilli, "The Informative and Persuasive Functions of Advertising: A Moral Appraisal," 29.

<sup>8</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "General Introduction," in *Political Writings*, ed. Laurence Dickey and Hugh Barr Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Woodcock, "The Obsolescence of Advertising in the Information Age," 2279.

<sup>10</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 52.

Bernays learnt to tap into people's deepest desires in order to manage the irrational force of the masses. He connected irrelevant objects to emotional desires and feelings. In line with Hegel's earlier quote, "you buy things not for *need*, but as a way to *express yourself*". As consumers started seeking for desires rather than needs, they turned into happiness machines. The happy and docile consumer(-citizen?) was content as long as they could consume to express themselves.

### 2.3 Persuasive advertising

The form of persuasive advertising that Bernays called public relations council, would now rather be called **puffery** or **associative** advertising. Where products are linked to unconscious desires of consumers through *suggestive* language and desires.<sup>11</sup> According to Waide, associative advertising is a technique including all the following techniques:<sup>12</sup>

1. The marketer wants consumers to purchase a product;
2. The marketers labels some deep-seated non-market good to the product;
3. The products has a questionable (if any) relationship to the non-market good;
4. Through advertising, the product is related to a non-market desire it cannot satisfy;
5. In some cases, the product actually gives satisfaction to the non-market desire, but only because of the advertising

It is a form of carefully designed bragging with a certain effect. By creating illusions, symbols and implications, companies are responding to the unconscious desires of consumers. They design advertisements that respond to those needs and desires. For example, an advertisement from Axe deodorant shows the *New Axe Effect*: by using their product, men will have hordes of women running after them. The ad responds to the men's deep-seated desire for sex and status, rather than (their need for) the factual product.

Besides this form, Crisp distinguishes two other forms of persuasive advertising. The second is called **subliminal suggestion**: New Jersey cinema started screening ice cream commercials during movies, resulting in a startling increase in ice cream sales during intermissions. Here, consumers act *automatonously* rather than autonomously: based on subjection rather than autonomous desire.<sup>13</sup>

The third form is called **repetition** or **indirect information transfer**.<sup>14</sup> Often advertisements are repeated so frequently that its memory is drummed into consumers' minds. Some ads are shown over and over again, *ad nauseam*. For Bernays it was important that the advertised products should be everywhere around, so they would enter the consumers' mental space.<sup>15</sup> From its repetitiousness, the advertisement yields indirect information. We tend to assume that a product advertised so often has to be good. For example, with its explosive amount of advertising, Coca Cola has become the first thing consumers think about when they think of refreshment. Through persuasive advertising, the brand is woven into the consumers' emotional fabric.<sup>16</sup>

Are these techniques of manipulation and control, and do their successes show that many of us have forfeited our autonomy and become a community, or herd, of packaged souls?

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<sup>11</sup> Roger Crisp, "Persuasive Advertising, Autonomy, and the Creation of Desire," *Journal of Business Ethics* 6, no. 5 (Jul 1987).

<sup>12</sup> John Waide, "The Making of the Self and World in Advertising," *Journal of Business Ethics* 6, no. 2 (Feb 1987): 73-74.

<sup>13</sup> Crisp, "Persuasive Advertising, Autonomy, and the Creation of Desire," 413.

<sup>14</sup> Robert L. Arrington, "Advertising and Behavior Control," *Journal of Business Ethics* 1, no. 1 (Feb 1982): 4.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Curtis "The Engineering of Consent," *The Century of the Self* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Woodcock, "The Obsolescence of Advertising in the Information Age," 2279.

### 3. Persuasive advertising as manipulation

#### 3.1 Advertising and autonomy

In 1980, news channel CNN started selling advertising globally: meaning companies were able to broadcast their commercials all over the world. Although around 50 years earlier the idea of public relations council emerged, this technological development caused persuasive advertising to become even more pervasive, and might have resulted in the revival of the discussion around persuasive advertising as manipulation.

To define the debate, we will mostly discuss the exchange between Robert Arrington and Roger Crisp: these two philosophers have laid foundation for a whole lot of articles on advertising and autonomy in the *Journal of Business Ethics*. Based on four different notions of autonomy, Arrington explores whether advertising hampers our autonomy. Crisp argues the standards Arrington has set are too weak. However, they have the basic agreement that the relationship between advertising and autonomy would always be negative or neutral. In order to substantiate these arguments, they use Freud's idea of the subconsciousness (via Bernays' theories of public relations) and Frankfurt's idea of first- and second-order desires.

The aim of business ethics is to explore whether business practices are aimed at securing a good life for individuals. They want to explore whether persuasive advertising hampers this. The business ethicists attempt to take a critical(?) stance towards advertising and the commercial world. Whether they actually do a successful attempt towards this will be further explored in this chapter and in chapter 5.

#### 3.2 Definition of autonomy

Consumer autonomy is broadly defined as the ability to reflect on what one has good reasons to do in the marketplace, and to act accordingly. In order to decide whether an action can be deemed autonomous, Frankfurt's *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* is used.<sup>17</sup> Frankfurt distinguishes two types of desire:

- **First-order:** is a desire for *anything* except another desire: I desire to have ice cream.
- **Second-order:** is a desire for a desire: I desire to desire ice cream.

If the first- and second-order desire are aligned such as in the example above, the first-order desire can be deemed autonomous and truly mine. However, there are also situations where desires are unaligned. Frankfurt suggests the conflict of an unwilling addict: where on the one hand the addict wants to take the drug, but on the other hand has the desire to refrain from taking it.

Sneddon, who wrote *Advertising and Deep Autonomy*, makes a further distinction between first- and second-order desires.<sup>18</sup> To him, first-order desires are regarded as **shallow autonomy**: whether consumers make autonomous choices/decisions, where we only consider the *objects* of desire. Crisp and Arrington – who will be discussed more thoroughly in the next paragraph, mostly remain in this domain.

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<sup>17</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (Jan 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Sneddon, "Advertising and Deep Autonomy," *Journal of Business Ethics* 33, no. 1 (Sep 2001): 15-28.

However, one can make non-autonomous decisions and still be an autonomous person, e.g. during medical decision-making. Sneddon is more interested in **deep autonomy**: this is much more central to the identity of individuals. In line with Frankfurt's second-order desires, it is more important to assess *which* mental states are worth desiring. The authors in this domain criticize persuasive advertising as being one of the tools of consumerism and capitalism at large that decrease our openness to other possible ways of living. For example, by making individuals believe that the market can satisfy all our desires, and encouraging people to think that they are what they own. Although valuable, this more ideological perspective lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

### **3.3 Persuasive advertising and shallow autonomy**

When applying Frankfurt's theory to the case of associative advertising of Axe deodorant, it would look as follows. The individual associates the deodorant with their desire for sex and status, hence they purchase the product. Their first-order desire is the desire for Axe deodorant. But this desire is actually fuelled by their second-order desire for sex and status.

Arrington argues that the unaligned first-order desire to purchase the deodorant can still be deemed autonomous when the individual has an appropriate justification for the first-order desire. For example, they think they purchase the deodorant to smell fresh. He concludes that rather than fully controlling our decisions, advertising agencies influence us by appealing independent desires we *already* have. Thus, advertising may, but certainly does not always control our behaviour and create wants.<sup>19</sup>

Crisp adheres to a more strict notion of autonomy. The individual may *think* they are purchasing the product to smell fresh, but this is actually based on the unconscious deep-seated desire for sex and status, which the product cannot possibly fulfil.

Decision is central to the theory of the market-process. However, due to these associative claims, consumer-citizens are no longer able to judge a product based on its merits. Crisp would hence argue that persuasive advertising overrides the autonomy of individuals and hence can be regarded immoral. If the product has genuine merits, it should be possible to mention them. Every desire is *prima facie* non-autonomous and irrational if it is induced upon the individual without their knowledge and for no good reason.<sup>20</sup>

Crisp therefore encourages marketers to think about the implications of the ads they develop: are they imposing a distorted system of values on consumers? Is the product they promote of genuine value to consumers? Another suggestion by business ethicist Santilli – who claims *all* persuasive advertising is immoral, is to restrict advertising messages to those that actually objectively *need* it, and not subjectively *want* it. In the light of current advertising techniques, this is possible with targeted online advertising. To be morally defensible, ads should be stripped of all attractive and colourful properties until made merely informative.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Arrington, "Advertising and Behavior Control," 6.

<sup>20</sup> Crisp, "Persuasive Advertising, Autonomy, and the Creation of Desire," 414.

<sup>21</sup> Santilli, "The Informative and Persuasive Functions of Advertising: A Moral Appraisal," 29.

### **3.4 Fallacy of advertising critique**

The problem with this form of argumentation is that business ethicists assume that companies claim to sell a *product* with their advertisements. They have the assumption that in some devious ways, marketers mislead consumer-citizens into purchasing products on false grounds. However, business people have made clear all along this is not the function of an advertisement. Paul Mazur in 1982 already explained that the goal of an advertisement is to sell *desires*.

Crisp for example stated that through associative advertising, the individual is unable to purchase a product based on its merits. In the case of Axe deodorant, the brand does *not claim* that the merit of their deodorant is that you will have herds of women running after you. What the ad is doing, is selling you a piece of your desire for sex and status.

What advertising critics have been doing all along, is accusing marketers of something they have already confessed to. Marketers have been expressing loud and clear that their advertisements are not based on the product's merits, but on consumer-citizens' desires. With a discussion based on false grounds, it is hard to deem these arguments as genuinely critical of the corporate world. However, it is important to understand their line of reasoning, as there might have been another motivation for business ethicists to add on to this discussion around advertising and autonomy. This will further be explored in chapter 5.

## 4. Plague of Fantasies

This chapter will explore concepts around Žižek's book *Plague of Fantasies* referred primarily to the flood of audio-visual representations that facilitate ideological manipulation. He gives an incisive critique of liberal capitalist ideology. To understand this form of ideology, Žižek bases his insights on mostly Lacanian concepts, that will be further explained in this chapter.<sup>22 23</sup>

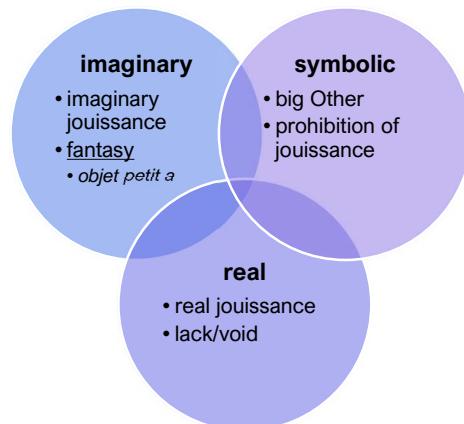
### 4.1 Ideology

To Žižek, **ideology** should not be seen as a false consciousness, as Crisp and Arrington would argue for, but rather as convictions externalized in material practices, rituals and institutions. Ideologies (socialist, capitalist, fascist), should be seen as *economies of enjoyment*. These externalizations channel the subject's desire. The desire that is displayed has to be maintained. The ideological belief should be sustained by a so-called cynical distance.<sup>24</sup>

### 4.2 Lacanian triad

For Marx and Engels, **dialectical materialism** meant that the world has an objective reality independent of our ideal world of mind or spirit. For Žižek, the fundamental takeaway from this is that identity is *displaced* from itself. The alienation of the individual is based on three fundamental Lacanian registers:

1. **The imaginary** involves *fantasies* of consistency with which we identify. These fantasies *mask*, but do not solve the lack we feel because of displacement.
2. **The symbolic** develops itself as consciousness and is the network of language and communication. It thereby structures our perception of reality. It is a structural impossibility: always incomplete and inconsistent and therefore may never be attained. It is the awareness that there is a certain structural lack, void, originated through the displacement of dialectical materialism and the decentred self.
3. **The Real** is not reality, but the most basic level of our consciousness. It is the recognition of the irreducible inconsistency of the symbolic, and hence the part that cannot be symbolized.



### 4.3 Fantasy

**Real jouissance** is surplus enjoyment, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle. This is the absolute limit of the Symbolic. To ease the tension between the basic understanding of the Real and the demands of the Symbolic, we have **fantasy**. It is the framework that orders our desires and conceals the fact that the desires are unattainable. For example: advertising could be seen as an ideological fantasy to support the capitalist economy of enjoyment.

<sup>22</sup> Kelsey Wood "The Plague of Fantasies," in Žižek: A Reader's Guide (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 126.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel Carachilo and Bohdan Pikas, "When Philosophers Disagree: A Philosophical Analysis of Marketing Advertising," *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness* 12, no. 2 (Jul 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Fedorenko, "On the Futility of Advertising Critique," 87.

The gap between the Real and the Symbolic, and our decentred self, gives fantasy its purpose. Fantasy offers us a sense of closure by masking the displacement of the symbolic subject. But it is important to emphasize that the fantasy does not solve the void. Our symbolic order is dependent on fantasy to support our sense of reality. Fantasy provides rationale for the inherent deadlock of desire.<sup>25</sup>

Fantasy teaches us how to desire. It tells me what I am for *the Other*. Our **object petit a** is the object of fantasy: our ultimate object of desire. It is the imagined treasure within me that makes myself feel worthy of the Other's desire.

#### 4.4 The Other

According to Lacan, the Other begins to determine human subjectivity during the **mirror stage**. From 6 to 18 months during infant's development, the desire of the child becomes the desire of *another*. An alter ego who dominates them. This is where the alienation of the subject starts, and the self becomes decentred. After 18 months, the mirror stage is replaced by socially elaborated situations.

**The Other** is hence the ideal that we live through, knowing we can never bring the Real and the Symbolic together. We are allowed to externalize intimate feelings and beliefs through the Other. This is best explained through the notion of interpassivity:

One of the most common examples regarding **interpassivity** is the function of TV laughing tracks. The laughing track (the Other) interacts with the TV-show, so you do not have to. Hence, the track is enjoying the show *for you*. You have the illusion of interacting with the TV-show, without actively and actually having to do so.

This creates a **perverse** situation: you are satisfied because the Other enjoyed *for you*. We do not seek our own enjoyment, but seek desire and self-knowledge through the Other. We become the instrument of the Other's enjoyment. Hence, the Other represents an ideal that we live through, since we know our gap between The Real and the symbolic can never be closed. We have to remain attached to and dependent of the Master. Fantasy structures our enjoyment and makes us accept these social relations of domination.

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<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 43.

## 5. Futility of advertising critique

### 5.1 Omnipresence of advertising critique

Although there is an ubiquity of advertising critique, and its fallacy has already been clarified, the amount of persuasive advertising did not seem to shrink. In the light of internet and information technologies, user information has become commodified and used for more specific and targeted, new forms of (online) advertising.<sup>26</sup> The amount of advertising seems to have grown only stronger and has become even more pervasive. The role of business ethicists cannot be deemed effectively critical in this debate. Clearly, advertising critique is not contributing to the decrease of advertising – but then what is its function?

The stance of advertising critics seemed clear: persuasive advertising hampers our critical thinking by promoting products based on merits the product does not possess. Additionally, persuasive advertising is seen as an effective vehicle to sustain consumerism within capitalist ideology and therefore narrows our horizons to look beyond this particular way of living.

However, these statements were made based on the false assumption that the idea of a persuasive advertisement is to sell a product, whilst its goal is to sell a desire. Although the goal of persuasive advertising has been ultimately clear, critics keep on accusing marketers of practices they have already confessed to. Additionally, if the goal of these business ethicists was to decrease the amount of persuasive advertising, they have failed to do so.

Their critique has had little implications for the real world. Santilli – who argues that every form of persuasive advertising is inherently immoral, advocates for stripping down all advertisements to a merely informative core. This seems to be an unfeasible goal: even the smallest adjustment affects consumer-citizen behaviour: whether an ad is placed in the centre or the corner of a page, already influences its effect. Crisp encourages marketers to think about the products they promote and the role they play in society. But what exactly he hopes to achieve with this, remains unclear.

As mentioned before, new technological developments did not result in *less* advertisements. Not only on marketers' side, but also on consumers' side little change was set in motion. Although we are aware of the role ads play, we continue to buy advertised products and participate in consumerism. Movements into fair trade, local, and sustainable shopping might have transformed the way we consume, but did not disturb the centrality of consumption in contemporary life.

### 5.2 Decaf resistance

Contu (2008) describes resistance as “the sign of a collective oppositional and antagonistic force with a transformative anti-capitalist stance”.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, there is a big group that is doubtful and sceptical of the role of advertising in its current form, may it be on false grounds. But there remains a gap between the ubiquity of advertising critique and the abundance of persuasive advertising. If the purpose of the critique is to reform advertising, the achievements so far seem unimpressive.

Advertising critique until now has not resulted in structural, transformative changes. Contu would rather describe this phenomenon as **decaf resistance**. Decaf, because it is

<sup>26</sup> Fedorenko, “On the Futility of Advertising Critique,” 87.

<sup>27</sup> Alessia Contu, “Decaf Resistance: On Misbehavior, Cynicism, and Desire in Liberal Workplaces,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (Feb 2008): 365.

resistance without a cost: it threatens and hurts nobody. Decaf resistance, as it is resistance without the risk of really changing our ways of life or the subjects who live it. The advertising critic feels superior to those who are presumably unaware of the manipulation of persuasive advertising. However, even these critics still participate in advertising-mediated consumption, thereby “objectively” materially believing in advertising.

Decaf resistance creates a comfortable position for the critic. It shapes a so-called “safety valve for integrating critically minded subjects.” They feel good about themselves for giving some form of resistance, but are still able to enjoy consumption without the costs and risks involved – the best of both worlds. The subject keeps the advertising at arm’s length. It seems that they do not *want* to achieve transformation of the advertising industry. The achievements of advertising critique might consciously be unimpressive – the critic is in a comfortable position.

Because what would happen if we would have a (in Lacanian sense,) *Real* act of resistance? It would be an act for which we would have to bear the costs. It is an impossible act, in the sense that the gap between the *Real* and the *Symbolic* has to be maintained. (Capitalist) ideology is sustained by a cynical distance: it allows us to engage in the practices that the ideology prescribes without confronting the logical leaps that the ideological formation contains and without feeling compelled to change those practices.

Žižek suggests that the consumer-citizen purchases knowing that the product can never fully satisfy their fantasy – which will be more extensively discussed in the next chapter. The consumer-citizen also knows that their critique will not actually bring about transformation. They are consciously keeping the fantasy (created by persuasive advertising) at arm’s length. Therefore the attention should no longer be focused on the question whether persuasive advertising is manipulative. Advertising is here to stay and we want it to. The attention should rather be focused on what function persuasive advertising has in our society and what role marketers and advertising agencies play in our society and why we need them to play this role.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Carachilo and Pikas, “When Philosophers Disagree: A Philosophical Analysis of Marketing Advertising,” 26.

## 6. Persuasive advertising as symbolization

### 6.1 Fulfilling desire?

Crisp and Arrington use Freud's idea of the subconscious as the fundament of their argumentation to explore whether marketing is ethical. Persuasive advertising manipulates consumer-citizen autonomy. They assume consumers are naïve and hope they will attain their desires by purchasing an advertised product. However, this would be a very illogical step for marketers to make: if the desire can be met by a couple of purchases, any further desire for consumption becomes obsolete. So it might not be a question of *fulfilling* a fantasy.

According to Žižek, consumer-citizens do not actually believe that buying the advertised product makes them attain their fantasy. Rather, the advertisement is part of the symbolic order the individual uses to symbolize and represent itself and its relation to the world. This asks for a different approach to the subject of persuasive advertising. To quote the psychoanalyst:

The task is not to provide answers, but to show how we perceive a problem can be part of a problem, mystifying it instead of enabling us to solve it. There are not only wrong answers, but there are also wrong questions.<sup>29</sup>

So, it might not be the question how we can "solve" advertising. But it is rather important to understand the role advertising has in the symbolization of the subject, and why we need marketers to help us in this process. Marketers might be providing us a service, functioning as an instrument of the subject's symbolization.

### 6.2 Constituting the gap

There is a constitutive lack between the subject and the Other: although we are never able to reach the ultimate object of desire, we keep attempting to fulfil this desire through the Other: everybody desires through the Other, but nobody can ever get the unattainable object of desire. This lack between the subject and the Other is sustained by the void of *possible* Otherness. The vain hope that the Other Thing is waiting for us just around the corner. We are unable to accept ultimate closure.<sup>30</sup>

The impossibility of closure for the subject is sustained by the gap between the Real and the symbolic. And this distance is necessary: because what if our fantasy would be fulfilled and something Real happens? To take on the Axe example again, to actually have herds of women running after you? This would mean we cannot symbolize reality anymore, and have to take everything literally, which would ultimately result in psychosis. This will be elaborated in 6.4 *Traversing the fantasy*.

Jouissance is pleasure *beyond* the pleasure principle. This does not mean there is *more* pleasure beyond this point, it actually becomes insufferable – traumatic. The individual has the assumption that the possession of certain objects will lift the traumatic character of jouissance, even though this is impossible. There is this unbreakable connection between Real jouissance and desire. Both the subject and the Other are unable to grasp Real jouissance. . But still, the subject's existence is centred around pursuing this impossible jouissance.

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Purpose of Philosophy is to Ask the Right Questions," accessed 19 May 2022, Big Think, video, <https://bigthink.com/videos/the-purpose-of-philosophy-is-to-ask-the-right-questions/>.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 39.

Real jouissance is the limit of the symbolic. It protects us from getting close to the Real. The Real is the part of reality that cannot be symbolized. Jouissance helps constitute the gap between the Real and the symbolic. The decentred self has a lack of meaning and is looking for symbolization. The subject is therefore dependent on fantasy to structure and animate jouissance and sustain the gap of symbolic inconsistency.

### 6.3 Advertising as fantasy

There is this ever-present tension between the Real and the symbolic. The gap between them cannot be closed. To mediate and cover up this symbolic inconsistency, the subject attempts to symbolize itself through **fantasy**. This is the framework that orders our desires and conceals the fact that the desires are unattainable. Persuasive advertising is one of the instruments of fantasy in our capitalist economy of enjoyment. It aids this process by presenting images that contribute to the fantasy and support the consumer's ability to symbolize themselves within this ideology.

An example would be a commercial for a cleaning product: showcasing a perfectly clean kitchen in a beautiful home. According to Crisp and Arrington, the consumer-citizen would buy the product based on the subconscious thought it will achieve whatever the commercial is showcasing. According to Žižek, the subject *knows* it will not accomplish this, however will still attempt to achieve it.

The consumer-citizen has the fantasy of a perfectly clean kitchen. Marketers have connected this fantasy to an object: the cleaning product. The subject knows the spotless kitchen is impossible to achieve: only a showroom model could be this clean. But still the subject will try to achieve this kitchen. By purchasing the product, the subject is contributing to its fantasy whilst not *actually* having to accomplish it. The actors in the commercial (the Other), take care of the spotlessly clean kitchen, so the subject does not have to.

This is a case of interpassivity: the subject is not actively contributing to its ultimate desire, but enjoying it through the interaction of the Other with the kitchen. Creating a passive and comfortable position for the consumer-citizen: by purchasing the product, the subject creates the idea that it (temporarily) contributed to its fantasy, without exceeding the limit of the symbolic, entering the sphere of the Real.

The subject will not achieve the spotless kitchen by a single purchase of the cleaning product, and will only be temporarily satisfied by this purchase. Although the consumer-citizen is aware that a single purchase – or whatever purchase at all, is unable to contribute to *actually* achieving the ultimate object of desire, the subject still worries about achieving it and will attempt to reach it.

This creates an ideal situation for marketers and companies: consumer-citizens will purchase their products to contribute to their fantasies, but these products will never fulfil the subject's desire, resulting in even more and ever-present consumption. Making the subject dependent on companies to help symbolize itself. Hence, we need marketers to channel the subject's desire in our capitalist economy of enjoyment.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Fedorenko, "On the Futility of Advertising Critique," 86.

## **6.4 Traversing the fantasy**

Žižek argues that consumer-citizens know they are never able to achieve the extreme showcased in an advertisement. However, with new technologies and media infrastructures, and other devious methods to create a certain fantasy around a product, the line between the fantasy created and what is Real might be unclear.

It might even mean closure of the gap, a phenomenon that was already briefly mentioned in *Decaf resistance*. This would be the ultimate horror: we would no longer have the desire to desire. Žižek, following Lacan, calls this **traversing the fantasy**. It means we give up the belief that there is a Big Other. We enter the sphere of the Real: that part of reality that cannot be symbolized.

Hence, we have full responsibility for our actions: no one else can justify, support and sustain the beliefs that animate our acts. Instead of the contingency offered by the tension between fantasy and desire, the Real and the symbolic. It means “precisely the acceptance of the traumatic fact of radical closure: there is no opening, contingency as such is necessary.”<sup>32</sup>

The Lacanian Real is not Real in the sense of being impossible, as before might be assumed. It is rather Real in the sense that it is too traumatic to assume. True anxiety is caused by the awareness that we did a free and Real act: contrary to all that seems reasonable and acceptable in our liberal postmodern world.

Once the fantasy persuasive advertising offers is traversed, we will have to look for another way to participate in symbolic rationalization in our symbolic order within the capitalist economy of enjoyment. To distance ourselves from the trauma of doing a free and Real act, we may too easily participate in symbolic rationalization *again*.<sup>33</sup> The removal of persuasive advertising as a fantasy within capitalist society will not contribute to the breakdown of capitalism. It rather means the subject will have to find another form of symbolic rationalization within this ideology.

Persuasive advertising will most likely get a replacement within the capitalist economy of enjoyment. The takeaway of the role persuasive advertising plays in our society might not be hopeful as it is most likely that we have to stay within the boundaries of the capitalist system. For structural change to happen – which might include the fadeaway of persuasive advertising, we would have to look for options *beyond* and outside of capitalism. Which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project.

## **6.5 Implications of persuasive advertising as symbolization**

Stripping down advertising to an informative core as Santilli suggested would remove the possibility for individuals to symbolize themselves. The product would not please as much, as it does not contribute to our symbolization. We hence want marketers to play the role they are currently playing. Individuals are always looking for ways to symbolize themselves within the symbolic order and persuasive advertising is playing an important role in this.

To prevent traversing the fantasy, the gap between fantasy and the Real should be made clear. This gives the task to marketers to place emphasis on the extreme and unattainable elements in advertisements. By focusing on radical and fantastical aspects, it becomes ultimately clear to the consumer-citizen that this fantasy is unattainable. In line with

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<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Contu, “Decaf Resistance: On Misbehavior, Cynicism, and Desire in Liberal Workplaces,” 364.

Arrington and Crisp's critique, this would remove the possibility of considering an advertisement as manipulative or deceitful. Leaving us with a paradoxical implication: the more unrealistic the advertisement, the more realistic our perception of it. By having an advertisement that is more farfetched, the fantasy will appeal to a larger group of people and leave the advertisement open to the interpretation of the individual.<sup>34</sup>

They might even be doing best at their job without being conscious of all these philosophical and psychoanalytic contemplations. Persuasive advertising is an important vehicle for subjects to symbolize themselves within the capitalist ideology of enjoyment. Marketers play an essential role in providing advertising as fantasy to help sustain our gap.

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<sup>34</sup> Carachilo and Pikas, "When Philosophers Disagree: A Philosophical Analysis of Marketing Advertising," 29.

## 7. Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis is not as optimistic as anticipated for: it was rather frustrating and uncomfortable. Throughout the process I was not getting the answers I hoped for:

The goal of this thesis has changed quite a bit over its course, but always with the main assumption that persuasive advertising fulfils a negative – maybe even manipulative, role in our society. Completely in line with the base of argumentation of business ethicists. Only to discover that their argumentation was based on false grounds: how are we able to accuse marketers of something they have already confessed to do?

Even *if* persuasive advertising could be regarded as manipulative, my contribution would not change anything. It perhaps even makes me more hypocrite: I get to criticize consumerism, but I also still get to participate in it.

Although quite unsuccessful, business ethicists like Crisp and Santilli are trying to look *beyond* capitalist ideology, while Žižek knows we can only think *within* capitalism. Gradually, the actual function of persuasive advertising started to become clear. But once I realized that traversing the fantasy does not contribute to the breakdown of capitalism, but would rather result in another form of symbolization, I became quite demoralized.

There does not seem to be an “answer” to persuasive advertising in our current capitalist ideology, but in the end that is not the goal of this thesis. To again quote Žižek on the importance of asking the right questions:

The task is not to provide answers, but to show how we perceive a problem can be part of a problem, mystifying it instead of enabling us to solve it. There are not only wrong answers, but there are also wrong questions.<sup>35</sup>

By creating persuasive advertising, marketers contribute to our symbolization by providing a fantasy that orders our desires and conceals the fact that the desires are unattainable. Personally, the development of this thesis contributed to my revaluation of the role of marketers. Their role is not to show us the merits of products and services, but rather to function as an instrument of our symbolization through advertising. Hence, it is clear we need and want marketers to play the role they are currently playing within society.

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<sup>35</sup> Žižek, “The Purpose of Philosophy is to Ask the Right Questions.”

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