Chapter Nine. Research in advertising
Before delving into the current research it is important to situate the various important approaches taken with regard to advertising. Research in Advertising has followed the same trajectories, as those followed by researches in other areas of the mass communication process. The area of research in advertising concerns sources of advertising (organizational study of the organizations and agencies concerned with Ads), the messages of advertising (advertising messages, text, message, jingles, visuals etc.), the various channels for effective communication of advertising and their effectiveness in reaching their intended audiences (for example the preferable medium of the advertising campaign), the audiences (youth, elderly, women, housewives, children, working women, etc.) and finally the effectives of the Advertisements (that is measured through quantitative means, usually measured through the bottom-line i.e., recall by audiences, the sales figure etc).

But not all parts of the advertising process have elicited the same levels of responses from academic quarters. Parts of advertising’s communication process that had commercial value and interests were monopolized early on by business
organizations with the intent to improve their marketing skills. For example the efficiency of the advertising campaign and its potency in increasing sales figures compelled corporate interests to study the advertising process from the consumer research end. This research done from a commercial and consumer imperative is more or less inaccessible to the larger academic world interested in the field of advertising. While as an academic interest, advertising itself became a free for all, attracting interest from a wide variety of academic professionals ranging from advertising agencies professionals, to sociologists, cultural theorists, anthropologists, communication researchers etc. This 'balkanization' of research on advertising has scattered information over a wide socio-geographic area like sociology, feminist studies, political science, anthropology, psychology etc. Much of the scholarship done in these areas goes mutually unrecognized. Again most of the research in advertising is also medium-centric with much of the research being done on the print media and too less attention has been paid to other mediums of advertising. But apart from the dispersion of scholarship in advertising, some areas have emerged as the common concern of social and economic science. Areas that have elicited the attention of researchers in the field of advertising are portrayal of
race, construction of gender identity, imposition of stereotypes, the presentation of children, women, men, elderly, ethnic minorities, in advertisements, the ideological leaning of Advertisements, and a variety of cross-cultural applications, that involves advertising appeals and their effectiveness.

But let us not forget the advertising is after not just an academic subject but also a commercial activity, being a part of the much larger marketing process. Advertising emerged as an extension of an exchange process between buyer and seller, where in some cases the commodity that is being exchanged, could be nothing more than just an idea. Marketing is the concept within which advertising. Through the marketing process, companies satisfy customer needs. Marketing uses a variety of tools, which marketing books often call as the four P's: product, place, the price and the promotion. The principle aim of marketing is to satisfy consumer needs through things: products. The place where the product will be made available is the second biggest concern of the marketing process. The

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\(^a\) Rhea Sengupta (2006); Dana E. Mastro & Susannah E Stern (2003); Derek R. Avery, Morela Hernandez & Michelle R. Hebl (2004), Meredith Li-Vollmer (2002).


\(^*\) See Adrian Furnham & Virginia Voli
third of the marketing P involves the pricing factor. A product too steeply priced will be available only to a particular segment of the consumer market. And finally every detail of the product has to be passed on to the consumer to assist him/her in the purchase of the product/service. This is usually done through promotional activities like public relations, sales promotion, and advertising, which again will involve questions like what medium to choose? What time to spend in advertising? Of the various types and fields of research that advertising has been subjected to, two major concerns emerge; the Administrative approach and the Critical approach. To take a holistic approach, we need to divide research on advertising into two broad divisions, with regard to their motive and aims: the Administrative approach and the Critical Approach. For further information see (Holden, 2004) 

In the beginning of the 19th century, public opinion (and not advertisement) and its medium of expression was interrogated to measure its role in influencing social behaviour. Since Ads themselves were to be interrogated structurally because of their intention to influence their target audience, their effectiveness became the area of scholarship within the wider ambit of media scholarship. The principle concern in early media scholarship wasn’t advertisements but rather other media products like news, radio broadcasts, news-reels cinema etc. So while other media
outputs were being interrogated quite early on, the potency of Ads were left alone or inadequately scrutinized. Denis McQuail, points out that scholarship on media and its effects went through four phases. The early period ranging from the 1890 to the First World War looked upon the effects of media as direct and malevolent. In the face of what the media was put up to, by the propagandists, European dictators and the like, this was quite inevitable. This phase more or less lasted till the end of the Second World War. Goebbels, the British war broadcasts, American news reels merely reinforced what early social scientists like Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, had theorized: powerless men fighting a losing battle against an all-powerful media.
The Administrative Approach

The key concern of the administrative approach seeks to identify customers, generally understood to be a person who makes a decision to purchase a particular product/service, and a consumer who actually consumes the product or makes use of the service on offer. The administrative approach look upon advertising and its various processes from the point of view of the marketing mix, described as a ‘conceptual framework which highlights the principal decisions marketing managers make in configuring their offerings to suits customers’ needs’. Advertising therefore merely becomes one of the four P’s of the marketing mix, the others being product, price and place. Advertising therefore become relevant only as a process of a much larger marketing strategy, just a ‘paid form of non-personal communication of ideas goods or services delivered through selected media channels’. It is not the only means through which the promotional strategy is put in motion. On the contrary, direct marketing, sales promotion, and public relations can be means through which the promotion strategy can be put in place. For some
organizations the decision whether to advertise or not will be determined by an organization’s market situation and its objectives.

Administrative approach focuses on collection of information as a means of learning how to define consumers, measure their needs. The administrative approach is usually concerned with the more immediate task of advertisements such as marketing, sales promotion etc. Advertising therefore becomes secondary to the goals of the marketing process. Tools such as Implicit Associations tests (designed to measure the automatic association between mental representation, of objects and concept in memory allowing organizations to affect perception and influence behavior), projective techniques (which allows organizations to identity potential associations between brand images and the emotions that they may provoke in audiences/viewers/consumer etc), and focus groups allows for an easier understanding of consumer behaviour, their needs, which in turn can allow for more effective marketing (and in turn advertising campaign as well).
The Critical Approach

The cornerstone of the critical approach is the idea that goods should have no meaning other than the utility that they offer. Any additional meaning super-imposed on the object is unnecessary. Therefore advertisements that offer more than just the information and utility of a product stand de-legitimized because they provoke consumption through wrongful means. The position that advertisements offer more than just product information, and that advertisements create false needs has been the high point in the works of J.K. Galbraith, Herbert Marcuse, Stuart Ewen, Sut Jhally, Jean Baudrillard, among others.

Such Realization that media's content may have contrary aims and ulterior motives dawned towards the 1930s in response to the various uses and misuses, to which the mass media was subjected: propagandist radio broadcasts, alleged agenda setting role, mass hysteria, and war mongering. This led the Frankfurt School to formulate the critical theory that sought to unravel the way media and its various projections undermined civil and political liberties, and erode individual freedoms. The Frankfurt School sought to connect the dots between the implicit and the
explicit messages of mass communication. This critical economy approach later on, also opened to public scrutiny the role advertising played in modern society particularly its alleged role in sustaining the capitalist system and the various inequalities that the system generated. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer put forward the Culture Industry proposition which they said mass produced popular culture disseminated through the mass media and made people docile and content in their social condition.

The critical tradition continued well into the 1950s. In 1957 Vance Packard in his book *The Hidden Persuaders* claimed that persuasive techniques adapted from the psychological clinic were helping the advertisers to identify means of dominating human behavior, and that advertisers were able to exploit this information commercially on hapless citizens. In 1959 his book *The Status Seekers* sought to establish that status concerns were becoming increasingly obsessive in America, with Americans increasingly 'status rating' each other. This obsession with rating was forcing the American people to look for newer symbols with which to establish their own unique social identity. This craving for status symbols was having profound effects on every aspect of social life including consumption patterns in fashion, and food.
J K Galbraith, the famed economist and American Ambassador to India, asserted that the Classical free trade theory had become redundant in the age of Affluence and therefore it was imperative to restrict consumption and wastage through a restructured economy. His two seminal works *The Affluent Society* (1958), and *The New Industrial State* (1967), detailed among other things the role of advertisements played in the American social and economic order. Galbraith dismissed the long held belief of consumer sovereignty, proposed by traditional economic theories which usually ascribing the consumer with powers over the entire system of production.

Conservative economic theories attributed the consumer with free choices in deciding what was to be produced in society and in what quantity. But modern advertising and salesmanship couldn’t be reconciled with the notion of independently determined desires, ‘for their central function is to create desires- to bring into being wants that previously did not exist’\(^4\). Galbraith pointed out that marketing, advertising practices, and consumer research projects sought to violate if not actively dilute consumer sovereignty, through manipulative techniques of persuasion that bordered on propaganda and thought control. Since the affluent society values its ability to produce a high standard of living, it measures people in...
terms of their ability to possess things. Conversely, the more is produced, the more
must be possessed in order to maintain the appropriate prestige. Consumption
therefore was tied down not in terms of utility, but in terms of status-maintenance.
Advertising became the means through which the system sought to sustain itself
and pile pressure on consumers to buy things they didn’t need. As he noted, ‘the
even more direct link between production and want is provided by the institutions
of modern advertising and salesmanship. These can’t be reconciled with the notion
of independently determined desires, for their central function is to create desire- to
bring into being wants that previously didn’t exist§.

But more was to come. In 1968, Jean Baudrillard, the French poststructuralist, and
cultural critic in his book, The Book of Objects, described advertising as
connotational in its totality. He conceded that advertisements didn’t have a direct
effect, a view consonant with the view that emerged around the time that media
messages didn’t tell us what to think, but rather what to think about. Neither
advertising’s rhetoric nor even its informational aspect had a decisive effect on the
buyer. Advertisement messages could cancel each other out. They could induce
counter-motivations in individuals. And they could fail to convince people out of
sheer excessiveness and repetitiveness. But like all connotations, advertisements
were purely self-referential, and operated at an ideological level. Baudrillard claimed that advertisements did offer protection and gratification, and individuals responded to its leitmotiv. Advertisements didn’t alienate individuals; on the contrary advertisements assured individuals that they were sufficiently being taken care of. If the abundance of products put an end to scarcity, the abundance of advertising put an end to insecurity, relieving psychological insecurities by deploying an enormous solicitude. Advertisements assured us that we are being looked after.

But advertising’s claim of opening up an immense range of possibilities-freedom of choice was open to question. Advertising promised individual freedom but merely imposed uniformity provoking people into an endless imaginary competition. ‘The central thesis of Advertising’, Baudrillard said was that ‘through objects and advertising the consumer society offered individuals the possibility of liberation and self-realization, but merely offered to un-hinder fantasies that served to inhibit our deepest drives, replacing moral responsibility with naked hedonism. By means of advertising, as once upon a time by means of feasts, society puts itself on display and consumes its own image’6. As Baudrillard noted,
'Far from relying on the spontaneity of individual needs, advertising prefers to control these needs by mobilizing the collective reference and having consciousness crystallize entirely upon the collective idea. There is a kind of totalitarian social dynamics here, jubilantly celebrating its finest victory—the successful prosecution of a strategy of solicitation founded on the presumption of collectivity.'

Expanding his ideas further in his later book *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard claimed that differences in a modern society wasn’t created and maintained by possession of wealth but rather though status-competition. Advertisements become the means through which status competition is sustained. Advertisements don’t manipulate, they produce an unending stream of arbitrary signs, which lack coherent meanings, and change over time, meaning different things at different times, constantly engaging the consumer in a Sisyphus like task.

The same theme of ‘status-determined’ and ‘advertisements-driven’ consumption habits was propagated by Raymond Williams who asserted that advertising conferred symbolic meanings to goods. Williams distinguished between rational use of goods (measured in terms of their utility to us) and irrational use of goods
(measured in terms of what we thought they meant to us). Williams claimed that advertisements usually implied a secondary meaning to objects (their irrational use), an unhealthy practice.

In 1963 Wolfgang Fritz Haug in his 'Zur Aesthetic Von Manipulation/Towards an Aesthetic of Manipulation introduced the concept of commodity aesthetics or a beauty in the service of the realization of exchange value, whereby commodities are designed to stimulate in the onlookers the desire to possess and the impulse to buy. The real motive behind commodity aesthetic is not individual motive but unrestrained economic function. Haug traced the origin and form of manipulation in late capitalism. The advertisement appears with the deceptive appearance of mediating universality whereas in reality it only represents the interest of the capital. ‘Advertisements or the use of aesthetic sign boils down to channeling the existing needs of the population in such a manner they benefit consumption and as result profits.

Advertising’s claims that it fulfills an important economic function, that of informing consumers about products helping them make ‘informed decisions’ through information leading to a more efficiently run market also came under attack in the works of Gunnar Andren, L. Ericsson, R.Ohlsson, and T. Tannsjo who
dismissed the notion of inherent utility of advertisements, in their famous work, *Rhetoric and Ideology in Advertising*. They concluded that the rhetoric of advertising lacked sufficient information of products to be of any use to the consumer.

Sut Jhally argued that when the agrarian-based society was replaced by the industrial society, the influence of the family, community, ethnicity, and religion was eroded to be replaced by ‘discourse through and about objects’9. But the conditions that humans looked for in their life remained the same: personal autonomy, happy family life, tension free leisure time, good friendships etc. The Industrial society (having replaced the major institutions of agrarian society) only had goods and services to offer which in itself were very weakly related to human satisfaction. But since a market economy must be the medium through which all human needs must be satisfied, its institutions must orient behavior in that direction. So if goods themselves cannot satisfy all human needs, they must be made to look as if they do. Advertising therefore promotes the good life, or rather what a good life should be, to be satiated only through what the marketplace has to offer. Jhally noted, ‘Advertising does not work by creating values and attitudes out of nothing but by drawing upon and rechanneling the concerns that the target
audience already shares'. Jhally attributed propagandist values to advertising. The
ideological mooring of advertisements has been probed further in the works of
Goffman, Williamson. But most of these researches entailed a semiotic approach
based on a study of signs symbols, the connotational, and the denotation meanings
that operated a various levels and was thus hard to be pin pointed exactly.
Therefore content analysis has been the preferred choice when it comes to the
study of Advertisements. Empirical research using advertising exposure accounts
for 32.9% of all academic work done between 1970-2002. Whereas, content
analyses has been the preferred choice of research methodology on advertising
with the process accounting for 38.2% of the research done in the stream. 


References:

3. Ibid. Pg. 421
5. Ibid
7. Ibid. Pg. 179
10. Ibid. Pg. 251