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A Critical Review of the Costs of Advertising: a Transformative Consumer Research Perspective

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Abstract This critical literature review incorporates a transformative consumer research (TCR) perspective in highlighting selected transgressions in corporate social responsibility that touch on (1) wealth consolidation, (2) environmental degradation, (3) commodification, (4) semiotic contamination, and (5) an erosion of accountability. It argues for a participatory approach among stakeholders in sustaining marketing research and assessing consumer policy that is both ethical and critical for academic marketers and practitioners alike. Transformative consumer researchers work to ensure that advertisements, messaging, and integrated marketing communications play a key role in promoting honesty and transparency. At the same time, transformative consumer research recognizes that advertising often masks the underlying costs incurred by society in general, and consumers in particular. TCR practices presently exist, and examples are presented to highlight these practices in consumer policy.

Keywords Advertising · Integrated marketing communications · Transformative consumer research · Corporate social responsibility · Ethics

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In 2015, venerable German automobile brands Audi and Volkswagen lose brand equity for falsifying reports about diesel fuel emissions. The missive will costs the manufacturers billions of dollars and forces a recall of some 900,000 vehicles (Hotten 2015). Coca-Cola partners with a nonprofit organization to shift the obesity claim and prescribe that Diet Coke and exercise are compatible. The company fails, however, to disclose that it sponsored the nutrition research (O'Connor 2015). A furniture company publishes magazine advertisements featuring soft-focus photographs of deer in virgin forests to underscore their commitment to the natural environment even as they pressure regulators for more clear-cutting of timber and exemptions from environmental legislation. Mobil Oil runs a television ad where Native Americans look over a littered meadow being cleaned up by school children using plastic bags manufactured by the company claimed to be biodegradable, when they are, in fact, not. A forest-product firm runs glossy television ads promoting their paper under the names of environmental stewards Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold and promotes itself as “one of the oldest, continuously operating forest product companies in the Pacific Northwest.” However, its factories discharge toxic effluents into the air and water, poisoning surfers in California (Simpson 2014).

In each of these cases, the advertisements, messaging, and public relations—which constitute a company's integrated marketing communications (IMCs)—portray these actors practicing corporate social responsibility and environmental stewardship to explicitly mask their capriciousness and environmental irresponsibility (Ford 2008). Bige Saaticioglu and Julie L. Ozanne's (2013) insightful critique that markets certainly include groups but, often unintentionally, exclude other segments in the process, is warranted in these cases (Ozanne et al. 2009). Researchers who organize themselves to rectify social problems in the marketplace form part of participatory action research or transformative consumer research (TCR). These approaches assume that the community is a neglected yet viable unit of analysis in consumer policy and consumer behavior research (Ozanne and Ozanne 2011).

We recognize that the critical review of advertising that follows can be traced back to well before the 1950s (Advertising Age 1957), and to the works of American economist and sociologist Thorsten Veblen (1899, 1904) and the more lyrical arguments of William Blake (2007) and Ralph W. Emerson (1879), and the transcendentalism and self reliance of Henry David Thoreau (1910, 2015) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1851). Their analyses about human alienation and environmental disruption caused by the Industrial Revolution still resonate today. However, our contribution extends these nineteenth century arguments by anchoring them in a critical review of the advertising and TCR literatures. By “critical,” the article does not fully weigh the costs and benefits of each but instead identifies only key challenges or drawbacks. By “review,” the authors rely exclusively on secondary data from communication studies, mass media, and economics journals as well as literature from the disciplines of consumption studies, sociology, public policy, natural resource management, and law, a small sample of which is referenced here. These sources were collected mainly from English- and Spanish-language academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Science Direct, where the authors searched for articles based on their title or abstract from 1970 to 2015. Our keywords include advertising, consumer policy, transformative consumer research, consumption, product life-cycle, regulatory control, and sustainability. We read the abstracts of over 800 articles and book summaries, before culling the list down further for a deeper examination. About half (53%) of the literature we ultimately cite draws on advertising, communication

studies, and cultural studies; about a third (29%) derives from the marketing, consumer behavior, and transformative consumer research research; and the balance comes from the fields of environmental studies and regulatory control (Table 1).

Based on an extensive and interdisciplinary marketing-literature review, the transformative consumer research in this paper identifies five questionable marketing practices: advertising transfers wealth to advertisers and corporations, promotes materialism and cynicism that contribute to waste and environmental degradation, dehumanizes human beings by promoting selfishness and anxiety, degrades the quality of language and symbols, and erodes accountability. We argue for sustaining a transformative consumer research perspective that leads to personal and collective well being (Mick 2006; Mick et al. 2012), which is both an ethical and philosophical claim promoted by the American Marketing Association. Accordingly, marketers should (1) do no harm, (2) foster trust in the marketing system, and (3) embrace ethical

Table 1 Costs of advertising literature review

Advertising, communication studies, and cultural studies (90 references, 53%)

Advertising Age 1957; American Advertising Federation (AAF) 2015; Altstiel and Grow 2010; Arens 2004; Bahary and Adamo 2012; Barrage et al. 2014; Bator and Cialdini 2000; Berman 1981; Blake 2007; Boorstin 1962; Bovee and Arens 1992; Carreira 2000; Christakis et al. 2004; Deery 2009; Dachevych 2014; David et al. 2012; Davies 2014; Diamond 1975; Drumwright and Murphy 2004; Emarketer 2014; Emerson 1879; Evans and Hall 1999; Ewen 2003; Fernández 2011; Fischer 2010; Fiske 1987; Fowles 1982; Fox 1985; Fromm 1955, 1976; Gómez Capuz 2001; Grigg 1997; Groden 2015; Guzmán González 2002; Hall 1980; Hayakawa 1964; Herman and Chomsky 2002; Hirschmann and Thompson 1997; Hovland et al. 2007; Hunt and Chonko 1987; Hyman et al. 1994; Iser 1978; James et al. 1994; Johar and Sirgy 1991; Kachru 2006; Kaser 2013; Kensicki 2004; Killoran 2014; Lasch 1979; Layard 2005; Leiss 1976; Letizia 2010; Leymore 1975; Longfellow 1851; López 1998; MacBride 1980; Mackay 2000; MacNeil 1983; Marchand 1985; Mangold and Faulds 2009; McLuhan 1951, 1953, 1964; McLuhan and Fiore 1967; Moon and Frank 2000; Moores 1993; National Science Foundation (NSF) 1978; Patterson 2004; Postman 1986; Presbrey 1929; Pollay 1985, 1986; Potter 1954; Putnam 1995, 2000; Radway 1994; Real 1977; Renner and Fernández-Domínguez 2015; Rotzoll and Christians 1980; Skomia 1965; Snell-Homby 2000; Stelter 2009a; Taflinger 1996; Teschner 1974; Thoreau 1910, 2015; Tichi 1991; Traube 1992; Turner 1992; Turngate 2007; Veblen 1899, 1904; Williamson 1994; Weir 1963; Yeshin 2006

Transformative consumer research (TCR), consumer policy, and marketing and consumer behavior (49 references, 29%)

Aaker 1997; American Marketing Association (AMA) 2015; Ballantyne et al. 2006; Bossy 2013; Brower and Warren 2006; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2012; Crockett et al. 2013; Fetherstonhaugh 2009; Galli and DegliEsposti 2012; Gleick 1999; Harris et al. 2011; Hettche and Scarpaci 2009; Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Honoré 2004; Hunt et al. 1989; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Kotler 1967; Lair et al. 2005; Leonard et al. 2008; Levy and Grewal 2014; Mick 2006; Mick et al. 2012; Morales and Scarpaci 2012; Moutinho et al. 2011; O'Connor 2015; Ozanne and Anderson 2010; Ozanne and Murray 1995; Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008; Ozanne et al. 2009; Ozanne and Fischer 2012; Ozanne and Ozanne 2011; Pierce et al. 1992; Quart 2003; Rindfleisch et al. 1997; Safdar 2013; Saad 2011; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Scarpaci 2014, 2015; Schiller 1973; Schau and Muniz 2002; Schor 1999; Scott 1992, 1993; Sheldon and Kasser 1998; Solomon 2015; Sprott et al. 2009; Sunstein 2015; Sunstein and Thaler 2008; The Havana Consulting Group (THCG) 2014; Van Bommel and Spicer 2011; Wolburg et al. 2007

Environmental studies and regulatory policy (31 references, 18%)

Barnet and Cavanagh 1994; Barnouw 1978; British Petroleum (BP) 2003; Brown and Sovacool 2010; de Sola Pool 1983; Durning 1992; Fishbein et al. 2002; Florida 2007; Ford 2008; Friedrichs 2007; Galbraith 1967; Guimaraes and Liska 1995; Hamilton 2003; Hardwood Group 1995; Harris 2007; Hawken 1993; Heilbronner 1981; Held 2010; Kuratko and Goldsby 2004; Lane 2001; Lovins et al. 1999; Mishan 1967; Orr 1994; Radmacher 2008; Rose 1974; Sachs 2006; Simpson 2014; Sovacool 2010, 2011; Stelter 2009a, b; Tetlock 2005; Wyatt and Lipton 2014.

Some references encompass multiple literature subsets. However, their inclusion here reflects the perspective derived from the authors' reading of the work and consensus about their classification

values (honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship) (AMA 2015). Transformative consumer research challenges the status quo to create new models of business and new forms of consumption that question, among other variables, the underlying mechanisms (advertising, IMC) that drive certain marketing practices (Crockett et al. 2013).

The value of such a literature exploration is threefold. We go beyond the observation by Alfred Lasker about the backbone of advertising in the early twentieth century: “salesmanship in print, driven by a reason why” (Arens 2004, 7). Advertising has become so pervasive and powerful that is now “orchestrating everyday consciousness” (Ewen 2003; Kensicki 2004). That is why we believe that marketers and mid-level managers have an ethical obligation to constantly re-examine the far reach of their craft (Kuratko and Goldsby 2004; Ozanne and Ozanne 2011). Corporate IMCs constitute a growing portion of our overall social environment. As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) observed almost 50 years ago, “environments are invisible; their ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception.” Corporate messaging keeps audiences in a perpetual “inattentive state of distraction” (Marchand 1985) that requires an interdisciplinary perspective to understand (Moore 1993). Our study is thus an attempt to make the impacts of these aspects of marketing visible to strengthen the study of consumer policy. Following Ozanne and Fischer (2012, p. 104), “[t]ransformative consumer researchers need to be eclectic in their use of methods by developing a broad range of tools to deal with diverse social problems.”

Second is the article’s holistic approach to the literature. Similar to Pollay (1985, 1986), the authors reviewed reputable studies and articles from fields as diverse as marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, environmental studies, business ethics, and communication studies. Included are psychological studies that view IMC and corporate messaging as sources of conditioning with consumer research implications; sociological investigations that assess role modeling and aspiration, which can influence collective behavior; anthropological research looking at rituals, symbols, and the way humans give meanings to objects and each other; educational research studying child development and the learning process; and communication articles that assess the role of mass media, propaganda, and information dissemination (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008).

Third is that although the study takes a critical view of IMC, it rejects overly deterministic and knee-jerk accounts supposing that marketing and advertising images inject certain ideas and attitudes directly into the minds of targeted consumers (Schiller 1973) or the “hypodermic needle” theory noted by Marchand (1985). As a sample of such thinking, luminaries such as Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, and Roland Barthes have argued that recipients of advertising are essentially passive, held captive by the “communications apparatus of the capitalist interests” and “prisoners of false consciousness” (Tichi 1991, p. 9). Fromm (1976, p. 110) notes that marketing practices driving consumption can “smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer like an opiate or outright hypnosis.” These are overly simplistic assessments (Barnouw 1978; Boorstin 1962; McLuhan 1951, 1953, 1964; Real 1977). Wolburg et al. (2007, p. 335), for example, argue that alcoholics can talk back to their beer commercials by recognizing that these TV ads appeal to emotions, celebratory occasions, and high skill levels that are the very experiences and qualities most elusive to beer (over)consumption.

This paper takes a softer and more nuanced view. It conceptualizes integrated marketing communication strategies and society as mutually interactive, each influencing the other. Though it is not solely the determining factor, IMC does condition consumer choices, much like the air blown into a balloon gives it its shape. Promoting consumer goods and services is not the sole causal factor in the consequences depicted below, but it is associative and therefore

relevant to consumer policy and marketing research. This is why Turner (1992) calls the sphere of consumption and its attendant strategies a “recombinant culture,” implying that IMC creates a shared reality only with the participation of consumers. Consumers are not merely the result of passive firms’ efforts to change attitudes and to persuade, but are active producers of perceived meaning (Hall 1980; Iser 1978; Scott 1992, 1993). That Philip Kotler’s (1967) seminal characterization that marketing is all about the 4Ps (price, product, promotion, and place), is now being substituted for the 4Es (from price to exchange; from product to experience; from promotion to evangelism; and place to everyplace), testifies to the changing nature of IMC specifically, and marketing in general (Fetherstonhaugh 2009).

Corporate Promotion in Form and Function

Marketing strategies rely not only on text and speech but also images and motion pictures. Advertising predominately relies on the human senses of sound and sight. Sound, whether on the radio, in a movie, or on micro-sound chips in magazines, enables words to be presented to the “theater of the mind.” It can also conjure images and actions that do not necessarily exist, such as the noise of a breeze rustling leaves to imply a soft spring day or the sound of waves to make listeners think of a sunny beach (Turngate 2007). Sight, perhaps “the most useful of the communication channels available to the advertiser,” blends words and images effectively and economically to enhance persuasive appeal (Taflinger 1996). Evans and Hall (1999, p. 2), for example, call images the “technical unit of the modern mass media” for their ability to combine logical and emotional claims together. It may be axiomatic that business promotions are also *sponsored*; the information it presents is paid for, highly selective, and therefore incomplete. It does not discuss everything there is to know about a particular product so that consumers can make an informed decision. It is not neutral or unbiased or necessarily even based on fact (Radway 1994). However, consumer policy analysts and consumers recognize that these promotions provide only fragmented and selective information designed for “consumption” rather than “thinking” (Diamond 1975; Ozanne and Murray 1995). Nonprofit advertising is not exempted from these prescriptions as all advertising aims to alter consumer (B2C) or business (B2B) behaviors in some fashion. Significantly, this behavior does not always lead to purchase a product or service. Rather, its goals can be to raise awareness about a brand, product, or service; remind a customer that although the product is well established, sending a gentle reminder that says “hey, we’re still here,” may be necessary; or simply using humor or celebrity endorsement to distinguish itself in a highly congested field of advertising (Levy and Grewal 2014).

IMCs should be accurate, informative, and *persuasive* in the sense that they are focused on identifying and differentiating products and services so that consumers will buy them, or that public perception will be altered. The central purpose of IMCs is not just to move merchandise, but to enable strategy, develop brands, and secure market share, among other goals (Aaker 1997). Appearing in many modes and media enhances its persuasiveness. Particular delivery mechanisms include billboards, printed flyers, radio, cinema, television, the Internet, magazines, newspapers, stickers, and “creative” practices such as skywriting, ads on automobiles and buses, and product placement in television and movies (Traube 1992; Skomia 1965). The television commercial is considered the “most effective” format, reflected both by its high prices and ubiquity (Hirschmann and Thompson 1997). Common advertising techniques include repetition, appeals to authority and popularity, statements on corporate websites and

in regional media, testimonials from experts and ordinary people, emotional appeals, artistic expressions, slogans, and buzzwords. Fowles (1982) surveyed thousands of advertisements and found a common set of 15 general suggestive themes including the need for sex, the need to achieve, and the need to satisfy curiosity.

To be fair, these examples of corporate promotion do blur the line between its content and the media that distributes it. IMC involves “hardware” comprised of websites, servers, computers, television stations, satellites, printing presses, and studios, but it also encompasses “software” and human elements such as advertising firms, financiers, lobbyists, and politicians. Lest we forget, soap operas, game shows, situational comedies, and even motion pictures are sponsored and intimately tied to advertising interests, with plot lines often written in conjunction with advertising agencies (Fox 1985). The boundaries between IMC and mass media, in other words, overlap.

Nor has corporate messaging and brand positioning remained static. As noted above, the basic “marketing mix” shift from the 4Ps to the 4Es captures that dynamic (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Social media and an organization’s ability to have consumers interact with the company in ways that do not lead to sales drive this shift in marketing. The rise of so-called advergames (online games coupled with interactive advertisements to target particular consumer segments), blogs, Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and a variety of emerging venues intentionally promotes information about topics that help a (potential) client by adding value (Solomon 2015, pp. 96–97). Normatively, then, customers trust the messages sent out through these various channels, which, in turn, builds brand equity and value (Presbrey 1929). A potential customer who can identify a firm or brand in a particular product or service category, whether through assisted or unassisted recall, is an asset to a firm and aligns with a company’s integrated marketing communication strategy (Altstiel and Grow 2010; Sprott et al. 2009). One thread in the behavioral regulation literature is that nudges actually enhance both human agency and consumer education (Sunstein 2015; Sunstein and Thaler 2008) even if consumers do “embrace irrelevant information” at times (Leonard et al. 2008, p. 358).

Promotion or Evangelism? Either Way, There Are Social Costs

To be sure, advertising and IMC can change behavior in positive ways. Social marketing (smoking cessation, anti-litter campaigns, anti-drunk driving, drug prevention, safe sex campaigns, among others) aims to change behavior in non-commodified ways. In the USA, however, television and radio PSAs (public service announcements) are mandated at a minimum by the Federal Communication Commission and are largely aired in the wee hours of the night when paid advertisers are less forthcoming (Bovee and Arens 1992). While estimates vary, it has been repeatedly cited that the average person is exposed to about 3000 for- and non-profit messages a day. Global media expenditures in 2015 were \$505 billion and are expected to reach \$662 billion by 2018 (Emarketer 2014). Children, moreover, see at least 50,000 television commercials a year (Barnet and Cavanagh 1994: p. 171; Brower and Warren 2006; Durning 1992; Hawken 1993; National Science Foundation 1978), and seeing Viagra ads would seem to be the least of their problems (Thomaselli 2009). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, people spent about 110 h “consuming” traditional advertisements a year, or about 126 min per week (Gleick 1999, p. 127; Honoré 2004, p. 167; MacKay 2000). Americans’ time in front of a screen (television, computer, smartphone) now stands at 8 h with 61 min of

advertisements and promotions consumed per day (Stelter 2009a). Quite simply, we spend more time consuming corporate messaging than we do engaging in sex,¹ and all of that exposure brings a suite of negative impacts, including choice fatigue (Ballantyne et al. 2006; Moutinho et al. 2011).

The sections that follow detail five costs of advertising that a transformative consumer research framework might raise: advertising transfers wealth to advertisers and corporations, promotes materialism and cynicism that contribute to waste and environmental degradation, dehumanizes human beings by promoting selfishness and anxiety, degrades the quality of language and symbols, and erodes accountability (Table 2). We sidestep the impact of PSAs and other forms of social marketing because there is considerable evidence that those forms of advertising rarely change behaviors and, in good measure, largely “preach to the choir” of viewers who already know the purported benefits of these spots in pro-environmental (Bator and Cialdini 2000; Guimaraes and Liska 1995), anti-drug (Fishbein et al. 2002; Hettche and Scarpaci 2009), and anti-smoking (Pierce et al. 1992) campaigns.

Wealth Consolidation

One direct effect of promoting consumption is to consolidate wealth among already wealthy corporations, despite the rise of much publicized initial public offerings (IPOs) among the plethora of new technology companies. For example, when Facebook went public, well-established companies purchased the majority of their shares (Safdar 2013). Simply put, advertising is designed to shift money from consumers and viewers—convincing them to buy things—and transfer it to manufacturers and producers. The 100 largest US corporations, for example, pay for 75% of all global advertising. Even public programming in most countries is now funded half or more by corporations. The much-ballyhooed Super Bowl football ads in 2014 ran an average of \$4 million for a 30-s spot (Killoran 2014), and 2016 ads will fetch \$5 million (2015).

Recent structural changes within the mass media, such as deregulation and centralization, have made television stations and newspapers even more dependent on advertisers for funding. The largest media corporations—Disney, Comcast, Time Warner, Viacom, News Corporation—simultaneously own television networks, printing presses, studios, and news shows. The interests of the news media therefore become intertwined with those of powerful corporations. With the decline of federal support of public broadcasting in the USA (CPB 2013), the boundary between editorial and advertising departments has weakened, transforming newsrooms into transnational corporate empires and public relations spokespersons. The controversy surrounding the possible merger of Time Warner and Comcast in 2014 underscores this consolidation and potential lack of competition (Wyatt and Lipton 2014). Consider, too, the impact that Rupert Murdoch’s corporation had on politics in the UK after his company’s journalists were tapping into politicians’ cell phone messages and e-mail. Advertising prices soared as titillating news from illegal wiretaps at Buckingham Palace, and the nation’s parliament boosted Murdoch’s media empire of television, print, and other media. Moreover, corporate advertising in Murdoch’s news empire has not changed (Davies 2014). Put another way, advertising serves and propagandizes on behalf of powerful corporate interests (Fiske 1987; Herman and Chomsky 2002).

¹ According to these sources, the average American spends 30 min each week engaging in sexual intercourse.

Table 2 Summary of the social costs of promoting consumption through IMC and advertising

Consequence	Explanation	TCR policy recommendations
Consolidation of wealth	For profit messaging is designed to convince consumers to spend money on products that in essence transfer wealth from individuals to corporations; they aim to conflate consumer needs with wants.	Corporations and individuals own stocks that generate wealth and should reside with those actors. However, jargon-free caveats for consumers (financial disclaimers, safety information, product information) and corporate social responsibility actions that are well aligned with a firm's core competencies (e.g., free or subsidized drugs in pharmaceutical companies; gift programs to vulnerable groups by consumer durable manufacturers) would mark a step in the TCR direction. Extant divisions of consumer protection (in US states and Canadian provinces) frequently highlight corporate altruism. Social media also culls these best practices among for-profit firms, as do non-profit "watch-dogs" such as Charity Navigator, which assess the ratio between services delivered and administrative overhead.
Environmental degradation	IMCs directly use depletable natural resources and indirectly shape norms and attitudes associated with waste and consumption.	Third-party assessment of environmental practices provides consumers with information about product components, harvesting practices, water consumption, farm and aquaculture certifications, and product origin. Examples include ISO 14001, MCERTS, Forest Stewardship Council, Carbon Trust Standard, Seafood Watch, fair trade certificates, and childfree labor certificates, among others.
Commodification	Advertising commodifies human relationships and interaction, using stereotypes that strengthen insecurity, dehumanization, fear, and anxiety. Consequently, commodification can erode human communication skills at the expense of face-to-face interaction.	Advertising organizations such as the American Association of Advertising Agencies and marketing organizations and their regional chapters (e.g., American Marketing Associations) embrace codes of conduct. The latter and related trade industries finance public service announcements (PSAs) in electronic and print format but often at late hours when viewership/readership is low. Promotional spots by the American Association of Retired Persons as well as Methodist, Roman Catholic, and other faiths also indirectly promote the value of face-to-face interactions and voluntarism in local communities.
Semiotic contamination	Brand promotion or evangelism can distort the symbolic environment and degrade language.	The Hollywood films guide (G, PG, R, etc.) ratings as well as the promotion of adult entertainment in (late) evenings already keep some adult-content material away from minors. Still, terms like erectile dysfunction (ED) are frequently used during prime-time news broadcasts and are viewed by children of all ages. National film efforts to curtail the rise of Anglicisms in non-English productions.

Table 2 (continued)

Consequence	Explanation	TCR policy recommendations
Erosion of accountability	IMCs leave little space for public deliberation and refutation, and advertisers and their sponsors are held responsible for false and dangerous claims only after lengthy and arduous regulatory channels.	Solutions include revoking limited liability for advertising forms and/or suggesting that advertising companies start looking at other more accountable business models, e.g., community interest companies, B corporations, and low-profit limited liability companies (L3Cs). While voluntary product recall exists across industries and services, public regulatory agencies remain the ultimate arbiter (e.g., public health, agricultural inspection, consumer safety, environmental oversight). Independent testing by third-party sources drove the exposure of the Volkswagen/Audi and GM's ignition-switch problems.

All of these marketing strategies, moreover, influence preferences, suggesting that consumers do not always act in their own interest, nor can they serve their interests by acting collectively (Fiske 1989). Corporate messaging often does not distinguish between needs and wants, or even between disease and treatment. An axiom in most marketing campaigns is that consumers need to be convinced that their wants should be presented as needs, so that the purchase of a product or service actually solves a problem. It operates on the belief that what individuals prefer is always and everywhere good for them; although somewhat extreme, Hamilton (2003) argues that such satisfaction is akin to measuring the well-being of an alcoholic or an addict by the number of drinks or drugs they consume. An interesting view is that people are not materialistic enough and fail to appreciate the functional attributes of products and services as much as they should. Thus, a washing machine is not really judged about whether it gets our clothes clean, but whether we have acquired a piece of furniture that makes a statement about our taste in color or brand preference (Williamson 1994). The gap between what people have and what they want determines how contented they are, or what the late economist Mishan (1967) called the “margin of discontent.” Mishan argues that it can be closed by increasing one’s possessions while keeping wants constant, or by maintaining one’s level of possessions and reducing desires. Yet, attempting to shift consumer behavior prevents wants and desires from ever remaining constant. It “works” only by ensuring that preferences are subject to control and manipulation. The behavior of consumers comes to reflect not their own interests, but the preferences of other organizations and institutions. Or as Mishan (1967, p. 65) concluded: “it is perverse to characterize the market as a want-satisfying mechanisms when we are exposed every day to attempts by the market to influence what we want.” In response, the American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1986 countered that ads produce artificial needs with spots that state, “Despite what some people think, advertising can’t make you buy something you don’t need” (glaad 2015). The AAAA’s tag line, “Advertising: Freedom of Choice,” rings true here. Or, as consumer behaviorist Michael Solomon (2015, p. 135) argues: “Advertisers simply do not know enough about people to manipulate them.”

Lastly, conventional promotional strategies (i.e., mass communication print and electronic media) require resources (MacBride 1980). Far from a new argument, a large portion of the creative energy of wealthy nations is channeled into IMCs, resulting in less enrichment of

culture than would be possible if this energy were redirected to other efforts (Potter 1954). The sophistication and subtlety, complex and clever symbolism, needed to convince a consumer that a tub of vegetable fat can give us something special, is a truly difficult task. Hundreds of thousands of individuals must devote their lives to helping corporations manipulate people into buying more margarine or a pair of sneakers at the expense of another corporation selling a practically identical item. Hawken (1993) argued that this is not only waste of talent but also it is a net “disvalue” to society; the removal of value by transferring money that should go to more productive uses. As a crude comparison, consider what more than a half billion dollars spent each year on advertising could accomplish. As Held (2010) has calculated, humanity could have used 1 year global advertising revenue to completely eliminate hunger and malnutrition, provided reproductive health care for all women, distributed clean drinking water to all people, achieved universal literacy, doubled the budget of the United Nations, and immunized every child—*twelve times over* (Fig. 1). Recent US Supreme Court rulings under the helm of Chief Justice Roberts eliminate the maximum amount of political contributions that companies and individuals can give to political parties and candidates and drive this message home forcefully. The stakes of transformative consumer research have never been greater.

Environmental Degradation

Advertisements damage the natural environment in two ways: by directly using resources (paper, ink, electricity) in their production and distribution and indirectly by selling products with high turnover rates and shaping social attitudes about waste. Though advertisements take

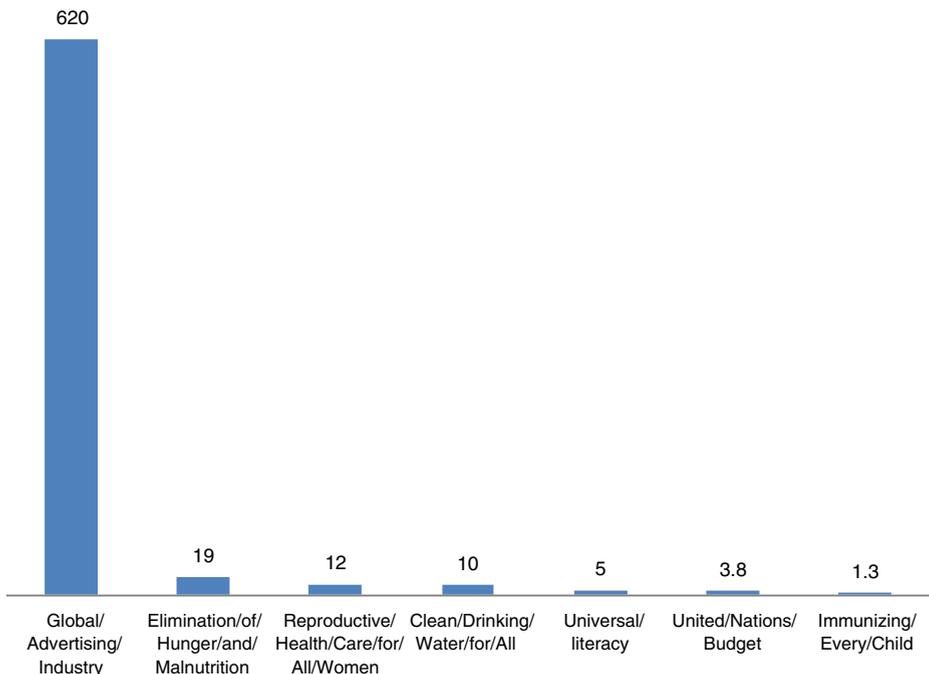


Fig. 1 Comparison of annual expenditure on advertising compared to estimated funding needed to meet selected basic needs (billions of \$USD). *Data source:* Held (2010)

many forms, examples of two are most revealing: television commercials and printed junk mail inserts. About one quarter (24.8%) of US television programming, for instance, is now advertisements (Bahary and Adamo 2012). Advertising is responsible for the many natural resources used to maintain and power television sets and other telecommunication devices. Televisions, although they bring us news and entertainment (Deery 2009), use roughly 1 to 2% of global residential electricity, meaning they are responsible for millions of tons of carbon dioxide emissions and all of the negative externalities—acid rain, climate change, pollution—associated with the electricity sector. Televisions rapidly become obsolete, with state-of-the-art models becoming exchanged an average of every 3 to 6 years for newer models (e.g., cathode ray tubes, circuit boards, LED screens, HD television). Yet, at a post-consumer stage, televisions leech heavy metals and other hazardous materials into landfills and also release carcinogens upon incineration. Each television contains lead, chromium, cadmium, hexavalent chromium, brominated flame retardants, beryllium, copper, and plastics. Lead is the most common solder material, and the older cathode ray tubes in televisions contained between 4 and 8 lb of lead as a radiation shield. Other than pesticides and paints, electronics such as the television are the most hazardous products discarded by households in the developed world. In 2006, for example, more than 160,000 televisions and monitors were discarded *each day* into landfills, creating 3500 tons of waste (Sachs 2006).

The post-Cold War era has ushered in a new wave of advertising and new consumers. In Cuba, the demise of USSR support has shifted consumer preferences there from “older” Soviet-made (cathode ray tube) televisions to more expensive flat-screen Asian imports, despite decades of state preaching about what constitutes appropriate consumption (Morales and Scarpaci 2012). Cuban youth increasingly look towards local rap or reggaeton singers (Scarpaci 2014) and the exile community in South Florida (Scarpaci 2015a) for signals about brands and quality goods on an island where the government’s leadership used to identify what was essential and non-essential consumer behavior, products, and services. Recent survey data indicate that the average Cuban-American traveling to the island carries \$3200 in cash with them, and that almost every recipient (98%) uses some of the money for cell phones, whereas less than half spend it on food (THCG 2014). In Chile, a recent survey of over 300 consumers in a top-of-the-mind listing of all Chilean brands positioned the Swiss company Nestlé as a leading Chilean brand; a few focus group participants in the same study even thought the dove and nest logo of Nestlé was reminiscent of the nation’s bucolic countryside (Scarpaci 2015b).

Print advertisements also involve notable levels of pollution. Junk mail in the USA—meant here to mean advertisements mailed in bulk—is responsible for more than 51 million metric tons of annual carbon dioxide equivalent emissions. When put into context, that is as much greenhouse gas pollution each year as 9 million cars, or 2.4 million cars idling 24 h a day, 7 days a week, or nearly 85,000 international flights on a Boeing 747-400 (Ford 2008). Consumers in the USA alone receive 100 billion pieces of junk mail each year, or 848 pieces per household. The environmental footprint of printed advertising extends beyond deforestation and the transport of timber and paper to printing, distribution, and waste disposal (Ford 2008). A transformative consumer research perspective supports some level of reduce, reuse, and recycling into is messaging.

Indirectly, advertising shapes norms about consumption. In its most banal function, its intent is to preoccupy consumers with material concerns that frame commercially available goods or services as the path to happiness and the solution to social problems (Rindfleisch et al. 1997). Seen alternatively, it aims to ease consumers’ decision-making about products and services that can add value and utility to one’s life and solve problems. A transformative

consumer research perspective suggests that the accumulation of objects, what is “new” and “desirable,” becomes an end in itself. Heilbroner (1981, p. 40) even called advertising the “deadliest subversive force within capitalism.” As the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1967, p. 219) elaborated:

Advertising and its related arts thus help develop the kind of man the goals of the industrial system require—one that reliably spends his income and works reliably because he is always in need of more. In the absence of the massive and artful persuasion that accompanies the management of demand, increasing abundance might well have reduced the interest of people in acquiring more goods.

Galbraith implies that the propensity to over-consume is an elemental part of the current industrial system.

The result can lead to overconsumption of food, cars, pornography, clothes, hair products, and houses—virtually every product and service on the market (Patterson 2004). Saad (2011) postulates that girls reared in media-saturated environments, and who hail from unstable families, are more likely to use cosmetics, wear provocative attire, and put on high heels. In turn, the consumer segment drives up the demand for certain products that sexualize them—than girls whose exposure to media is less and whose families are more stable. The general population commonly replaces items not when they wear out, but when styles, images, and fashions change. Many manufacturers build obsolescence into their products so that they can sell more goods, and both producers and users “throw away” many components and items as waste. But blame cannot be placed solely on manufacturers and advertising. On the one hand, Cooper (2012) has found that consumers in advanced industrial economies frequently dispose of products that are fully functional. On the other hand, Rodriguez et al. (2015) report that most iPhone users cite product obsolescence as the main reason for disposing their devices; this from a company whose “passion for the environment” has launched them on a “continuing mission to leave the world better than we found it” (Apple 2015). In aligning with TCR actions, consumers in industrialized countries have entered a post-industrial age of “consumption communities” where they make themselves known and enhance their identity and status through the products they purchase (Brown and Sovacool 2010). Such overconsumption produces refuse, garbage, trash, and waste. In 2012, Americans generated 338 million tons of municipal solid waste and recyclable trash (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2014)—working out to more than 1 ton per person each year. It is estimated that less than 1% of all materials mobilized to serve the market are actually made into products still in use 6 months after sale (Lovins et al. 1999). Consumers “act like huge vacuum cleaners, sucking in resources and then blowing out huge volumes of wastes that must be buried, dumped into the oceans, or vented into the atmosphere” (Hamilton 2003, p. 184). David Rose’s (1974, p. 359) more jaded observation four decades ago was that we have created a system where “increasingly large amounts of energy have been used to turn resources into junk.”

Commodification

For-profit promotion not only transfers wealth and damages the environment but also erodes relationships between individuals. Although it is never framed this way in business administration courses, at its core, advertising creates a perpetual state of displeasure, where consumers must always question their appearance, lifestyle, and possessions. Many of the techniques

mentioned in the section above—appeals to sexuality or domination—dehumanize interpersonal relationships, encourage simplistic social explanations, and aggravate sexism, racism, and homophobia. By romanticizing goods rather than people, advertising erodes spirituality and a sense of community. Consumers are increasingly turning to reference groups (esteemed individuals such as family, friends and co-workers)—to validate their consumption choices. Parents, for example, are reduced to intermediaries (e.g., surrogate marketing targets) between children and the market; colleagues and friends become things to envy, compete with, or emulate; sexual urges become reduced to stimuli to push products (Fromm 1955; Hirschmann and Thompson 1997; Leiss 1976; Pollay 1986; Williamson 1994). Parents become reduced, as Christopher Lasch (1979, p. 180) has written, to “create new anxieties instead of allaying old ones” and to make people “acutely unhappy.” All dimensions of human psychology—fears, sources of shame, sexuality, spiritual desires—become nothing more than a “treasure house to be plundered in the search for a commercial edge” (Hamilton 2003, p. 83). The surge in pre-teen and adolescent suicides that is attributed to online (e.g., cyber-) bullying has even been linked to the victim’s inability to assume appropriate or socially conscribed levels of consumption (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Hovland et al. 2007). Quart (2003) argues that persistent marketing to pre-teens and adolescents leads to poor self-esteem that can last a lifetime. By contrast, one transformative marketing research approach among children and the general population is to set up sharing libraries of toys, books, bicycles, and other products and services (Ozanne and Fischer 2012; Ozanne and Ozanne 2011). These practices both reduce carbon footprints and community engagement in non-commodified ways. TCR policies and practices do not have to be complicated.

Recent evidence seems to confirm that advertising has replicated feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness on a wide societal scale. Despite fourfold increases in consumption in the past four decades, human beings in advanced market economies report being less happy than before, and many countries are plagued by growing rates of depression, interpersonal and institutional distrust, and weakened companionship. Lane (2001) has documented a strange contradictory pattern in the USA of rising real income but a falling index of subjective well-being, or people consistently reporting themselves as being “less happy.” National surveys have also shown that Americans believe that the value system dominating their society is wrong, with too much emphasis on materialism, greed, and selfishness, and not enough focus on family, responsibility, and community (Schor 1999; Hardwood Group 1995). Layard (2005) has shown that after a certain level of income, consumers are happy no matter how much they consume; a pattern of the past few decades that is consistent over time and space (David et al. 2012; Hamilton 2003; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Rindfleisch et al. 1997; Sheldon and Kasser 1998). It becomes an emotional habit in which the consumer is repeatedly trying to restore self-identity, which ironically creates the very conditions that deteriorate social cohesion (Hamilton 2003).

Semiotic Contamination

The fourth impact, perhaps the hardest to quantify, is the degradation of language and symbols. Advertising decisively and irreversibly changes the character and composition of our textual and visual environment. The advertising industry pours forth thousands of images any given day, and the average length of exposure per advertisement is 3.5 s. Thanks to “mental shortcuts” or heuristics, advertisements increasingly require minimal skills to comprehend and are largely aimed at instant gratification (Kaser 2013). Advertising and its symbols

substitute images for claims, and they typically make emotional appeals (Johar and Sirgy 1991) and not logical statements. Commercials cultivate the idea that complexity must be avoided, nuances are dispensable, qualifications impede the simple message, and visual stimulation is an efficacious substitute for thought (Christakis et al. 2004; MacNeil 1983; Postman 1986).

Language controversies created by advertising also entail the spread of English words into Indo-European and other linguistic families. Technological innovations and globalization have spawned this encroachment not just in tourism (Moutinho et al. 2011), and it remains a concern outside English-speaking countries (Kachru 2006). Witness, for instance, the deliberation by French and Spanish linguistic academies, which each year reviews which English words or Anglicisms are acceptable when comparable native terms are lacking or less concise (Gómez Capuz 2001; Grigg 1997; López 1998). Reluctantly, Anglicisms are increasingly accepted in foreign cultures even though many of the concepts inherent in them run counter to local culture, offend national interests, and lead to cultural homogenization (Fischer 2010; Snell-Hornby 2000). Spanish verbs used in the USA and elsewhere in the America (*rentar* (to rent); *parquear* (to park); *cliquear* (to click)) as well as nouns (*zafacón*, safety can or waste basket; *marketa* (market)) indicate this semiotic staining (Carreira 2000; Fernández 2011; Guzmán González 2002; Renner and Fernández-Domínguez 2015; Teschner 1974).

Erosion of Accountability

A final consequence of advertising is an erosion of accountability. Advertisements are in essence controlled speech with little room for public deliberation, and both advertisers and their sponsors have considerable leeway when false or dangerous claims are made (Berman 1981). In one sense, advertisements are a form of discourse controlled only by those paying for the ad and/or owning the system that distributes it. The principle of common carriage, or public access, is not possible; access is given only to those with studios and the wealth to afford the advertisement. “Full and robust” citizen participation is not possible with advertising, which only serves the interests of the client (de Sola Pool 1983). Consumption, alas, can lead to isolation, chips away at social intercourse, and reduces civic engagement (Putnam 1995, 2000). What does TCR promote? The use of social media to push back against false promises of corporate abuse, corruption, and neglect (Mick et al. 2012).

Advertisements, therefore, enable corporations to control the images of their products and services, and they often abuse this trust. Consider the following examples:

- Walker Machinery, which manufactures heavy equipment for coal mines, places billboards along interstates in the USA claiming that “coal” is “carbon neutral” even though it is the single largest source of national carbon dioxide emissions (Radmacher 2008).
- Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines proclaims that it is committed to environmentally safe products while they openly dump toxic wastes into the sea (Friedrichs 2007, p. 61).
- Chevron runs advertisements that they are a green company populated with environmentalists seeking to protect the natural world while they actively lobby against strengthening the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, spend \$43 million to defeat renewable energy legislation in California, and clear the Amazonian rainforest (Stelter 2009b).
- British Petroleum (2003) is able to say that they “support the belief that human rights are universal,” that the “protection of human rights is a legitimate concern of business,” and that “we will demonstrate respect for human dignity and the rights of individuals,” and

then violate labor codes and human rights statutes in Central Asia to maximize profits (Sovacool 2010, 2011).

- Kentucky Fried Chicken showed a reunion under a chestnut tree where a family devours buckets of delicious chicken, but not the mile-long conveyor belt where chickens are pumped full of artificial chemicals before they are stunned, killed, de-feathered, decapitated, bled, and dismembered at the rate of almost 100 per minute (Hawken 1993, pp. 100–103).
- Automobile dealerships in Europe claim that the Audi A5 was Euro NCAP safety tested. Researchers working undercover actually documented that nine out of 10 Audi dealerships untruthfully promoted the vehicle's rigorous safety testing and even boasted that the vehicles had received a 5-star safety rating when they had not (Dachevych 2014).
- Mining corporations fund billboards throughout West Virginia highways that warn travelers they are entering President Obama's no-coal jobs zone when, in fact, the same state's own independent research bureau concludes that coal mining jobs have declined while gas and oil jobs—driven by fracking production—have increased (West Virginia Economic Outlook 2015, 7).

Have the lines between puffery and false advertising become so blurred? These examples show that corporations strive to dominate public thought and discourse with few suitable checks and balances beyond retracting a false claim or paying relatively small fines. Indeed, the system functions because consumers do *not* see many of the true consequences of manufacturing and production. As David Orr (1994, p. 125) once joked, “if the end of the world arrives anytime soon, news of it will be brought to us by all of the major networks, each competing for the highest Nielson ratings; the sponsors will include many of the corporations whose various activities made the event possible.” Just as the American Marketing Association incorporates a strong ethical framework in its bylaws, so too does The American Advertising Federation and their *Principles and Practices for Advertising Ethics*. The document recognizes that the public's growing distrust in government and certain industries has created a “hostile environment” to which the advertising industry must respond. They have drafted eight principles premised on the belief that “all forms of communications, including advertising, should always do what is right for consumers which, in turn, is right for business as well. For while we are in an age of unparalleled change, this overriding *truth never changes*” (AAF 2015, p. 2; emphasis original). The principles address protocols about advertising to children, transparency and honesty, educating advertising professionals, and related issues. A much-maligned industry, their very ethics statement shows data that about one in five Americans always or sometimes believes advertisers (AAF 2015, p. 4). Like most ethical statements, ethical comportment may ultimately rest on the moral character of individuals who must serve as a backstop to possible transgressions. As Kuratko and Goldsby (2004) have noted, it is challenging to tease out the difference between corporations and “rogue” middle managers (Harris et al. 2011, p. 11).

Interestingly, when confronted with the possible costs of advertising, many firms take a detached view. One study conducted in-depth interviews with senior corporate executives and found that they were plagued by “moral myopia,” a distortion of moral vision preventing ethical issues from coming into focus, and “moral muteness,” an inability to talk about ethical issues (Drumwright and Murphy 2004). The study noted that business administrators were more concerned with competitors stealing their ideas than accurate descriptions of products or the social good. It noted that media and publicity departments were obsessed with pushing the edge, being over the top, and being “more offensive,” meaning some actually viewed ethics as “bad for business” and claimed that imposing a code of conduct on these activities would

violate tenants of free speech. When it came to ethical and moral issues, the authors concluded, advertisers were like an “ostrich with its head in the sand,” or in the word of one participant of their study, “ignorance is bliss.” Such ethical myopia has been confirmed by a variety of other studies including Moon and Frank (2000); James et al. (1994); Hyman et al. (1994); Hunt et al. (1989); Hunt and Chonko (1987); and Rotzoll and Christians (1980), and recently popularized by the AMC network’s drama, *Mad Men* (Letizia 2010), which ran for seven seasons and lifted the small cable network to new status within the industry (Saf0 2015).

Conclusions

A critical assessment of integrated marketing communications and their attendant advertising costs involves many stakeholders in consumer policy. Most modern IMC strategies aim to position corporate images and brands but also consolidate wealth among corporations, which carries externalities. IMCs can achieve strategic goals, enhance brand loyalty, and secure market share without resorting to questionable practices. We argue that a transformative consumer research perspective is a useful approach to re-examine corporate messaging because advertising aims to rearrange reality, create envy and a sense of inadequacy that creates false needs, and induce purchases that are often inappropriate, unnecessary, and wasteful. Furthermore, marketing practices like these extend and fuel consumption into our lives. What some consider a box of flashing lights of words and images on a page is really a sophisticated system of ensuring that consumers think about the next upgrade or modification. Transformative consumer research recognizes that products, slogans, and brands can never give real meanings to human lives, so some modern consumers may fall into a permanent state of unfulfilled desire. In direct contravention to the idea in economics that independent consumers go in search of products that will satisfy their needs, humans have become extensions of the products and brands that they consume (Ballantyne et al. 2006; Hamilton 2003, p. 88). Witness, for instance, the labor market culture that emphasizes why the creative class should “brand themselves” in the growing global competition for new talent (Florida 2007); “personal branding” has become an extension of advertising’s pervasiveness and differentiation, as well as a “startlingly overt invitation to self-commodification” (Lair et al. 2005, p. 307). Although the forces creating creative capital are a boon for the new information economy, there are limits to what a 21-year-old college graduate can actually claim despite self-promotion on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and tattoos (Schau and Muniz 2002).

Though the official narrative is that advertising helps discerning consumers make informed choices, transformative consumer research recognizes that it can also be a primary agent of massive deception. Transformative consumer researchers realize that the status quo in marketing can isolate individuals, degrade the sanctity of language, images, and symbols, and enable corporations to control public discourse with little responsibility and accountability (Hayakawa 1964). The pervasiveness of advertising in our social fabric explains to a large degree why its shortcomings can result in so much damage, and it also identifies how the system can be changed. We as a society can, for example, impose more restrictions on the quantity and nature of advertising and marketing messages. Transformative consumer research can demand legislation requiring more truthful advertising and require that advertisements fully disclose the pros *and* cons to their products, or mandate that they present their claims in testable or falsifiable forms (Hamilton 2003; Hawken 1993; Mick et al. 2012; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Tetlock 2005; Weir 1963; Yeshin 2006).

TCR practices are already among us even though they may not be identified as such. Consider the slow-food movement gaining hold in more than 150 nations. It is a consumer movement that promotes commitment to community family and friends and the local environment by celebrating the value of preparing and sharing meals at home and drawing on local food producers whenever possible (Bossy 2013; Galli and DegliEsposti 2012; Van Bommel and Spicer 2011). A transformative consumer research perspective is not a liberty-denying mechanism; choice will always remain. Marketers and consumer policy analysts can foster better communication among stakeholders and associations of advertisers and marketers through a transformative consumer research perspective rather than relying only on advertising claims.

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