Marketing Ethics in a Capitalist Nation: How consumer brands solidify and profit from constructed family and individual identity narratives

Francesca Esce
fesce1@ithaca.edu

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Alison Shields
ashields@ithaca.edu

ABSTRACT TO BE CONSIDERED FOR AN AWARD: Rigid dichotomies that govern the performative identities of consumers and the public displays of brand images are a symptom of a capitalist economy. Scholars from Karl Marx to Judith Butler have critiqued the emergence of capitalism as a motivator for societal inequities that have been cited throughout modern history; from the terrors of colonialism to the hegemonic pressures represented through Western pop-culture. This historical critique of a system that creates rigid binaries in the formation of identity and creation of values is one that is often left out of the discourse for consumer brand strategy and management. Social scripts that are hidden in the subconscious of everyday consumers dictate which market segments they belong to. Performing “well” according to these social scripts benefit the consumer by giving them a visible and profitable place and sense of belonging in society. Specifically, this research aims to analyze and deconstruct the social concepts and closed systems of American family values and individualized “coolness;” in particular asking how these institutions allow specific people to reap certain societal benefits while leaving others in the dark.

Rooted in phenomenological and performative identity theory, the dissection of social trends, historical and cultural context is imperative for understanding the pervasive nature of consumer brands in the lives of everyday Americans. Awareness of the social inequities that come out of targeted advertising and representation grounded in capital gain and commodification is integral for creating corporate transparency in order to strive for ethical marketing practices.

By examining the combination of literature and scholarly articles from multiple disciplines including marketing, brand strategy, economics & socialist feminist theory, the outcomes elicit important probes about the “truths” that govern intellectual life and the question of what is authentic, or if authenticity is even possible. Meeting weekly with Dr. Alison Shields from the Department of Marketing and combining the lessons from four years of Women’s and Gender Studies courses and courses offered in the Honors program, has facilitated the discussion of how these truths fit into the discourse of ethical marketing and branding practices.

In addition, with the steady increases in the enlightening and liberal nature of postmodernism, the compiled research predicts that the future of consumer brands will have to adapt and appeal
to collectives beyond families- to sustainable communities and modern, changing households. To focus on appealing to real, authentic, human values that go beyond what’s “cool” or what is conceived as “good.” In order to attempt to understand the complex notion of authenticity, the research explores an understanding of what humans value both terminally and instrumentally, and how these values drive our family and individual identity narratives which marketers and brand managers then study and interpret as consumer behavior. Exploring the foundation of human value aids marketers in introducing effective methods of brand strategy, but also is imperative to the implementation of ethical branding initiatives including corporate transparency efforts, fair and meaningful representation and corporate social responsibility endeavors.
References


Images:


**Figure 1: Concentration of wealth in the U.S.**

![Bar chart showing concentration of wealth in the U.S.](image)

Figure 1 illustrates the concentration of wealth in the U.S., as documented by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2011.
Figure 2 is a table that demonstrates the models of product attributes and benefits that are often translated cognitively into human values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete attributes</th>
<th>Brown, fizzy, red can</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract attributes</td>
<td>American, modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional benefits</td>
<td>Everywhere, always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial benefits</td>
<td>My friends drink it, socialize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental values</td>
<td>Provides correct user image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Values</td>
<td>Belonging, security</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Mooij, 2010*

Figures 3 & 4 show images of print adverts from the mid 20th century that are used as a catalyst for the research.