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Selling the Stars, Role of Advertisement in Shaping Space Commerce & Consumer Culture in *The Space Merchants* (1952)

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Abstract

Advertising has been historically one of the most powerful tools for shaping consumer behaviour and desires. In the mid-20th century, media such as television, women's magazines, and cinema appeared as central forces in marketing communication. This study explains that how the products and ideas were presented to the consumers through these advertising tools. In *The Space Merchants* (1952) by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, advertising plays a central role in consumer society. This study explores a future where companies and advertising agencies are dominated not just in the society but also in space exploration. This study explores the representation of convincing advertising campaigns and their impact on the individuals, s lives. This study describes that how advertising companies through their tricky opinions lead towards the colonization of Venus.it also critiques the commodification of human desires and the loss of individual agency, and suggests the dangers of unrestricted corporate power and the social consequences of a hyper-commercialized society. Advertising transforms needs into artificial wants, surrounding itself into our daily lives and pushing the boundaries of consumerism, ultimately redefining how we perceive value, identity and success. This study not only highlights the social and psychological manipulation within consumer culture but also calls for awareness and resistance against the manipulative tendencies.

Key Words: Advertisement, Consumerism, Multinational Corporations, Venus's project, Hyperreal fragmentation.

Introduction

In contemporary society, individuals compete with various ideologies of groups and corporations that influence their identities. These corporations showcased the products and create the aspirational images for consumers to compete with social changes. In *The space Merchant's* era, the medium of advertising was not only limited to television but women's magazines also played a central role in shaping consumer behaviour. Advertisements were filled with endorsing various products and the unique and ideal ways of living in society. Firstly, the advertisers were aiming predominantly female readerships. From fashion and beauty products to household goods and appliances, advertisers used magazines to display their offerings and created aspirational images for consumers. secondly Cinema also contributed to the rising influence of advertising. Before



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the main feature film, audience would often see a series of advertisements which often promoted the products and services of consumer's choices. As Duffy (2013) pointed out, women's magazines tend to be filled with contradictions, emphasizing discourses of the "real" & "authentic" within individualized notions of empowerment and capitalistic-consumerist structures. Through supporting particular lifestyles and products, magazines do not force readers to comply with these suggestions, but they have been instrumental in the emergence of modern consumer culture and often recommend ways of life that are difficult to achieve. Kitch (2015) argues in these ways, magazines play active roles in creating a simulated presentation of reality, distributing images that constitute a simulated world.

This study highlights the deceitful power of advertising and its influence on consumers even when they believe they are resistant to its effects. It serves as a commentary on the ability of marketing to shape consumer choices and preferences, often operating on a subconscious level, which is a key element of the dystopian world depicted in the story. This rise in consumerism and the influence of advertisements on consumer behaviour is echoed in recent study, which is an epitome of hyperreal consumer culture. The story is about a copywriter whose identity is stolen and his high status in the society is lost due to a competition between two sponsoring companies and their desire for the biggest project for advertisers to advertise the planet, Venus. This story, takes place in distant future in New York City and it is the 22nd century and New York is the centre of happenings. The city is even more crowded than in the 1950s, and the Earth's conditions are at alarming. Instead of taxis, there are only overcrowded shuttles or just rickshaws that are considered an indulgence. Besides this, there are no longer natural resources such as genuine meat, fruits and vegetables. Everything is replaced by artificial substitutes that often contain addictive substances to hook consumers on never-ending chains of products. Advertising culture has created a world where people are disconnected from the actual consequences of their actions.

This study emphasizes the consumer trends where multinational corporations exceed over national boundaries. Advertising culture and consumerism are usually connected with the Western world but the first civilizations such as Ancient Egypt or Ancient Rome had already shown first signs of consumerism. Advertising in ancient civilizations like Egypt and Rome laid the groundwork for modern advertising practices, showcasing the early roots of consumer culture. Brier (1999) argues in Ancient Egypt, merchants and artisans used inscriptions on walls and papyrus scrolls to advertise goods and services, while symbols and markings on products acted as early forms of branding to communicate quality and trust. Town criers and temple carvings also played a role in spreading messages, promoting goods, and reinforcing the power and legitimacy of rulers. Benefiel (2010) says similarly, in Ancient Rome, painted messages on walls, mosaics, and shop signs aided as advertisements for goods, services, and events such as gladiatorial games or theatre performances. Merchants displayed their products prominently in bustling marketplaces, while political candidates used graffiti-like slogans to campaign for public office. Roman coins, adorned with messages and images of emperors and victories, acted as a circulating form of propaganda. Both civilizations emphasized visual appeal to attract attention in largely illiterate societies, with community spaces like forums, markets, and



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temples becoming hubs of advertising. Advertising has been around for thousands of years, long before modern media. Ancient civilizations used it to publicize the products and ideas.

In *The Space Merchants* (1952) Mitch uses smart advertising messages to persuade the people that moving to Venus is a great idea. He creates ads that make Venus seem exciting and full of opportunities, a fresh start away from Earth's problems. His ads use bright images and catchy slogans to show Venus as a land of freedom and success, where people can escape Earth's overcrowding and pollution. Mitch sells a dream, using emotional messages to make people believe in a better future. His marketing creates such a strong illusion that the truth no longer seems important, making Venus look like a paradise.

Theory

In current society, we observe an irresistible existence of consumer goods, facilities, and material richness, which marks a vital modification in human ecology. Unlike earlier times, when human interactions were the focused for few things, but today's wealthy society is increasingly shaped by its connection to material things. Baudrillard (1981) suggests that these objects are not just lifeless commodities but also include people, as individuals are no longer guided by natural ecological principles but by the logic of exchange-value. This shift immerses individuals in a structured pattern of consumption, where signs and symbols shape their sense of meaning. Advertising plays a key role in this hyperreal system, shaping perceptions and erasing the boundary between reality and its representations. According to Baudrillard, advertising, like mass media, reduces meaning, fuels stagnation, and transforms communication into a repetitive, mechanical process stripped of authenticity much like the hollow performativity of pornography. Baudrillard's perspective on advertising reveals how deeply consumer culture shapes our perceptions of reality, desires, and identities. According to Baudrillard (1981) advertisements are not merely harmless promotions for products; they serve as powerful forces of cultural reproduction, shaping how we see the world and influencing our behaviours in a commodified society. Advertising is central to Baudrillard's argument that "anything can become a consumer object," playing a key role in the commodification of culture. It does more than market goods and services it turns them into symbols within a wider system of consumption. Through distorting the lines between art, culture, and commodities, advertisements turn even the most abstract or creative aspects of human life into marketable products art, once considered a realm of high culture with intrinsic value, is increasingly commodified through advertising. Limited edition prints or replicas of famous works are marketed with the same strategies used for clothing or fast food, in doing so, advertising places art within the same system of consumer objects as jeans or hamburgers, where its value is determined not by its originality or craftsmanship but by its position in the marketplace and its ability to signify status or identity. Baudrillard's view that consumption now "lays hold of the whole of life." Through advertising, everything art, culture, and even personal identity is commodified and consumed as part of the same system. The role of these signs is similar to that of a magician, as that which is signified is conjured away in favour of the sign. In this instance the thing being signified comes into being at the same moment that it is stripped of its reality. The sign then assumes



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a hyperreal form, as it constitutes, simultaneously, both the affirmation and the negation of a give signified. Presence and absence occur simultaneously in the construction of the sign, and this leaves us “sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real” (Baudillard,1981,34).

Literature Review

Stuart Ewen in his work *Captains of Consciousness (1976)* explores how advertising and mass media shape public consciousness. He argues that advertising plays a critical role in the development of modern consumer culture, creating a system of desires that encourages people to buy not just products, but also lifestyles and values. Ewen examines the historical development of advertising, showing how it evolved into a powerful force that shapes public consciousness and consumer behaviour. He critiques how advertisers manipulate individuals by associating products with idealized images and social status. Naomi Klein’s *No Logo (1999)* examines how big corporations no longer just sell products but they sell lifestyles and identities. Instead of focusing on making better products, they invest in branding to make people feel emotionally connected to their logos. These brands become a part of everyday life, shaping culture, entertainment, and even politics. Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving (1956)* explains how modern consumer culture affects our relationships. He argues that advertising and capitalism make people see love and relationships like business deals where people sell themselves based on looks, status, or success. Instead of valuing real connection, society encourages people to seek relationships the same way they shop for products. Fromm’s critique of emotional dependence on material goods also relates to the exploration of how consumerism influences identity formation in both American and Pakistani contexts. In societies where advertising encourages happiness through products, people may feel alienated when material success fails to provide true fulfillment. By examining Barthes’ *Mythologies*, this study explores how advertisements function as mechanisms of cultural production, constructing desires and identities within late capitalist societies. This framework provides a foundation for analysing the ways in which literature critiques and reflects the dominance of consumerist ideologies in shaping human experience. Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies (1957)* offers a critical framework for understanding how advertisements create myths that shape consumer desires and cultural perceptions. Barthes argues that advertisements do more than promote products; they transform commodities into symbols laden with meaning, linking them to abstract values such as success, happiness, or social status. David Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity, (1989)* examines how advertising, as part of consumer capitalism, reshapes time and space, promoting instant gratification and superficial consumption. George Ritzer *The McDonaldization of Society (1993)* argues that advertising leads towards fast-food principles and control standardizing desires and promoting mass-produced goods, turning cultural experiences into uniform commodities. Edward Bernays *Crystallizing Public Opinion (1923)* highlights advertising as a tool of social control, manipulating emotions towards consumption. His work builds on propaganda techniques that manufacture consumer needs. Sigmund Freud *Civilization and Its Discontents (1930)* explores how consumerism channels repressed desires. Advertising taps into unconscious fears, offering products as psychological solutions, influencing



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modern marketing strategies. Juliet Schor (1992) *The Overworked American* links advertising to overwork, arguing that it fuels overconsumption by promoting endless desires, reinforcing a cycle of labor and spending habits. Iqani *Consumer Culture and the Media* (2012) examines magazines as spaces where ads and editorial content merge, shaping consumer identities through idealized images of luxury, beauty, and success.

Theoretical Framework

This study explores how the advertising culture in Costa Rica (*The Space Merchants*, 1952) has created a world where people are disconnected from the actual consequences of their actions, leading to a cycle of endless consumption. Mitch's internal conflict and the idealized images which he creates in his advertisements shows the critique of contemporary culture. Hyperreal representations in media and advertising shape perceptions and influence behaviour, even to the detriment of those who create these representations. The constant exposure to simulated experiences and representations leads to a loss of a clear, authentic sense of self. Individuals struggle to differentiate between their true, lived experiences and the hyperreal constructs they encounter. This fragmentation of identities highlights the impact of consumer culture on shaping perceptions and desires, ultimately influencing behaviour and societal norms.

In *The Space Merchants*, Jack O'Shea and Mitch Courtenay represent different facets of this advertising society, where Courtenay initially symbolizes the compliant consumer and O'Shea illustrates the potential for resistance. It was a big thing, the Venus rocket project. But it was our job to make it bigger. The public was not yet properly conditioned. They had been told, of course, that Venus was paradise, but they didn't yet believe it. That was our job (*The Space Merchants*, 1952). This study exemplifies how advertisement creates demand through manufactured public messages. In the study, the advertising team's task is to condition the public into believing that Venus is a paradise (*The Space Merchants*, 1952) even though the planet may be inhospitable or dangerous. The role of advertisements is to attract the individuals of society "You're wearing Starrzelius Verily clothes and shoes, Jack. It means we got you. Taunton and Universal worked on you, Starrzelius and Schocken worked on you--and you chose Starrzelius. We reached you...." (Pohl & Kornbluth, 1952, p. 108).

This study highlights the treacherous power of advertising and how it can influence consumers even when they believe they are immune to its effects. It serves as a commentary on the ability of marketing to shape consumer choices and preferences, often operating on a subconscious level, which is a key element of the dystopian world depicted in the story. The authors illustrate how mass media, through TV, banners, and other forms of communication, have the power to shape perceptions of reality. Even if these messages are not entirely truthful, if people are unaware of what is truly happening around them, they are likely to believe them. In this study, we see elements of late capitalism in the way products like Crunchies, Popsie, and Starr Cigarettes are not just consumed for their inherent qualities but also because they are designed to create dependencies and cravings. This perpetuates a consumer-driven cycle where individuals are constantly encouraged to buy and consume more while living in the capitalist system. Moreover, the mention of withdrawal symptoms implies a dependence on these products, which can be seen as a form of commodification and a way for



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corporations to profit from people's addictions and dependencies. The study illustrates the artificial and manufactured nature of desires and products and reflects late capitalism through the commodification of these products and the cycle of consumption that encourages constant consumerism to the detriment of individuals' well-being. The portrayal of consumerism in the narrative illustrates a vicious cycle where fictional products like Popsie and Starr Cigarettes, reminiscent of real-life consumer goods such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and popular chocolate bars like Crunchies, perpetuate a culture of consumption and addiction. Popsie, resembling popular soft drinks, is depicted as a sparkly beverage containing caffeine and being slightly addictive. This mirrors the marketing strategies of real-life soda companies, which often promote their products as refreshing and energizing while fostering a sense of dependency among consumers.

Similarly, Starr Cigarettes, positioned as a top-tier brand, underscores the allure of addictive substances within consumer culture. The portrayal of these cigarettes as prestigious or desirable reflects the glamorization of smoking in advertising and media, despite the well-known health risks associated with tobacco use. In the 1950s, the promotion of cigarettes, mainly through television, led to a significant increase in the number of smokers. Before that, smoking wasn't as widespread. However, some cigarette brands that remain popular today, like Marlboro and Viceroy, were already in existence. The study explores a scene where the character is offered green tip cigarettes, but he declines and expresses his preference for Starrs and automatically lights one.

In *The Space Merchants*, advertising explores the hyperreal nature of consumer culture by presenting an idealized and simplified version of reality where consumption becomes the primary means of achieving happiness and fulfillment. Representations of reality often overshadow actual lived experiences. The solution to achieving domestic dreams was often presented as buying more products, the latest appliances, cleaning supplies, or beauty products. This focus on consumption as the key to happiness aligns with the concept of hyperreality, where external objects hold more power than genuine fulfillment. The novel illustrates how an intentional effort creates a hyperreal experience, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Mitch has an incredible talent for creating advertisements, supported by a team of gifted individuals. The aim is to transport individuals into a mental space where reality and fiction become blurred. First, words. We want words that are about Venus, words that'll tickle people. Make them sit up. Make them muse about change, space, and other worlds. Words to make them feel noble about feeling the way they do and make them happy. (Pohl & Kornbluth, 1953). This statement emphasizes using words that evoke curiosity and excitement about Venus, stimulating people's imagination and making them yearn for something beyond their current reality. The goal is to instil a sense of discontentment with the present and hope for the future, inspiring people to dream of a better, more fulfilling existence. These crafted messages appeal to people's desires and aspirations, advertisers seek to influence their thoughts and emotions, finally they shape their behaviour and purchasing choices. This study highlights the convincing power of language in marketing and the role of advertising in shaping cultural attitudes and beliefs.

The impact of tech giants, multinational companies, and financial institutions in current society echoes the control of corporate entities in shaping



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individual and social identities. Our society remains deeply rooted in consumerism, with advertising, marketing, and the continuous search of material wealth exercising a powerful impact on our lives. The constant bombardment of advertisements, create an environment where image and identity are carefully curated and commodified. individuals are maintaining a false reality constructed by advertising agencies and corporate culture. Advertising culture has created a world where people are disconnected from the actual consequences of their actions, as depicted in this study, Mitch is confronted with a stark conflict between the idealized, glossy images he crafts as an advertising executive and the harsh reality on the ground in Costa Rica. The advertisements portray a romanticized vision of life in Costa Rica, emphasizing independent farmers and the juicy ripe goodness of Chlorella Proteins. However, Mitch's experience reveals the grim realities of the situation. Mitch realizes that he is responsible for creating these deceptive and overly positive advertisements. This realization dawns on him as he lives the challenging life in the very place he has depicted so positively in his ads. He recognizes that his work contributes to a false representation of reality and the continuation of consumerist standards. This internal struggle is significant, as he should be focusing on planning to escape his current situation, but his thoughts are overwhelmed by the advertising slogans he has crafted. This indicates that even he is unable to escape the influence of his creations and representing the concept of simulacra and simulation in the context of an advertising executive. During the discussion we come to know, "Preg Not never prevents a couple from having a baby; it just permits them to postpone it until they can afford to do the job right" (Pohl & Kornbluth, 1953, p. 95).

This suggests the impact of advertisement, that having a child is framed as a job, and Preg Not (presumably a fictional birth control) is a tool to ensure this job is done with the "right" resources. This copies a consumerist attitude where children are seen as products requiring financial investment rather than natural parts of life. The study creates a hyperreal scenario through advertisements, where the natural and emotional aspects of having a child are substituted with the pragmatic, transactional mindset of employment. This suggests that in contemporary society, the concept of parenthood has been simulated or constructed to fit within the framework of consumerist ideals. This portrayal indicates that the simulated reality of financial stability takes precedence over the biological reality of human reproduction.

Conclusion

The study explores how people in the story link with different corporate entities, represent the split nature of society. Ads became more visual with less copy and showed social lessons in a social tableau (slice-of-life) that instructed on how to fit in, how to be modern A recent advertising innovation is "guerrilla marketing", which involve unusual approaches such as staged encounters in public places, giveaways of products such as cars that are covered with brand messages, and interactive advertising where the viewer can respond to become part of the advertising message. Guerrilla advertising is becoming increasing more popular with a lot of companies. This type of advertising is unpredictable and innovative, which causes consumers to buy the product or idea. The influence of tech giants, multinational companies, and financial institutions is a replication of this power.



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Advertising, marketing, and the constant detection of material wealth still exert a powerful influence on our lives. The constant bombardment of advertisements, social media marketing, and the pressure to consume can be seen as a continuation of the consumer culture. The pressure to adapt to societal norms and expectations, often related to appearance, status, and success, continues to affect individuals in our society. Social media, in particular, has amplified these pressures and created an environment where image and identity are carefully curated and commodified. They are complicit in maintaining a false reality constructed by advertising agencies, as they support the growth of corporations through their consumption. Baudrillard argues that media play a fundamental role in constructing hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, "Television, film, advertising, and digital media produce and disseminate images and narratives that shape our perceptions and experiences of reality" (Baudrillard, 1981).

This study reviews the idea of manipulation of consumer behaviour by powerful advertising agencies and corporations. This refers that consumers are becoming increasingly passive and predictable in their purchasing habits, almost as if they are being programmed by the constant attack of advertisements and marketing messages. It raises questions about the role of corporations in shaping cultural norms and values. Advertising often presents idealized and exaggerated representations of products, people, and experiences. These hyperreal images create a sense of aspiration and desire among consumers, forcing them to endeavour for an idealized version of reality that may not be attainable. The advertising culture has created a situation where people are disconnected from the actual consequences of their actions. This internal conflict presents the critique of contemporary culture, where hyperreal representations in media and advertising shape perceptions and influence behaviour, even to the detriment of individuals who play a role in creating these representations. The concept of authenticity becomes indescribable, as constant exposure to simulated experiences and representations leads to a loss of a clear, authentic sense of self. Individuals may struggle to differentiate between their true, lived experiences and the facilitated, hyperreal constructs they encounter. Hyperreality contributes to the fragmentation of identities, as individuals face diverse and often conflicting cultural, social, and simulated spaces. The advertisement shows the hyperreal nature of postmodern consumer culture by presenting an idealized and simplified version of reality, where consumption becomes the principal means of achieving happiness and fulfillment, and where representations of reality often overshadow the actual lived experiences.

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