

*The Influence of Postmodernism on the Art of Advertising: How It Shapes Identity*

“I’m living a major lie and I find myself torn. When I wear clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch, people see me as a much cooler person than I really am.” (Engel, “Marketing Everyday Life”) Postmodernism has greatly influenced popular advertising techniques which shape a person’s individual identity. Advertising has become an essential part of forming human beings’ self-images and defining who they are in regards to other human beings. Since postmodernism has had such a large impact on the art of advertising in the past 50 years, the general populous has been unknowingly indoctrinated by the prevailing beliefs of the ruling society. It is important that every person is aware of the forces in this world that affect his or her thought process and the resulting daily actions. Thus, this research paper (which knows that it is a research paper) will examine various aspects of postmodernism and how it has specifically influenced advertising. To obtain a proper perspective, one must begin by building a firm foundational understanding of postmodernism by closely inspecting its history and giving an overview of its main points. After establishing an overview of these fundamentals of postmodernism, the paper will build off this basic infrastructure and delve into the movement away from objectivity towards subjectivity and how advertising has become more self-focused, tearing apart the generally accepted ideas of individualism. This will lead into the final investigation of the research paper, in which the paper will critically analyze, in detail, various postmodern tendencies such as the deconstruction of truth and how such propensities have carried over into the realm of advertising and therefore affect the formation of our singularity. This shall all work together to prove the thesis which claims that postmodernism has had such a great impact on the art of advertising that it is

blatantly obvious at times, and all such advertising is very pivotal in the shaping of a person's supposedly unique identity.

As one embarks on his journey to explore postmodernism and attempt to understand its complex structure, he should make sure that they have a steady grip on what they believe so that their beliefs may possibly be influenced by what they learn in books and conversations, but not easily swayed to the point of immediate dismissal. Not thinking through something before fully accepting it as truth is a dangerous thing, as this paper will illustrate in the hope that the reader will better understand these words currently before your eyes. Read, process, think, believe: occasionally know.

Movements such as postmodernism are always initiated by someone who disagrees with the current state of some practice in the world and decides to work in direct opposition to the very thing with which they disagree. Therefore, to fully understand postmodernism, we must understand the prior era: modernism, which in turn stemmed off of rationalism. Professor Catherine Lavender defines modernism as "a cultural movement which rebelled against Victorian mores" (Catherine Lavender, *Modernism--A Working Definition*). The Victorian era "created astonishing innovation and change: democracy, feminism, unionization of workers, socialism, Marxism, and other modern movements" but was largely defined by "their sense of social responsibility" (Roth, "Victorian England"). The beginnings of postmodernism are difficult to trace to a single, momentous occasion although many scholars pinpoint the origins somewhere in the 1960's when the hippie movement emerged in reaction to the Vietnam war and challenged the current social norms. "According to Charles Jencks, the end of modernism and the beginning of postmodernism took place at 3:32 P.M. on July 15, 1972. At that moment the Pruitt-Igoe

housing development in St. Louis, a pinnacle of modernist architecture was blown up” (Postmodern Times, Veith, 39).

The Pruitt-Igoe housing project was designed by Minoru Yamasaki, the same architect who designed the World Trade Center towers, which is interesting considering the way in which these were destroyed and the results of their destruction. Despite the great ambitions of this project for homeless people, it became unusable and was destroyed. Postmodernism did not rise from the ashes of the ruins, but simply began to build upon the rubble and embrace the disconnected thoughts and ideas lying therein. In fact, much of postmodern beliefs are embodied in this particular event; the subjectivity and deconstruction of truth to the bare elements, even more basically, a cynical, questioning attitude towards any events in the world. The failure of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project raised the question, since this project to help homeless people in the St. Louis area failed to achieve the modernistic aspirations of the people who planned its construction, how can anything else based on the same principles possibly solve any of society’s other problems?

Postmodernism began to question all the beliefs and ideals set in place by modernism, making it become less of a concrete concept or firm stance on matters of the world and more of an attitude, or lifestyle, of irony and disbelief. The hipster is the current embodiment of this lifestyle, (just as the hippies embodied postmodernism in the 1960’s,) where the main rules are that there are no rules, thus resulting in irony, which actually becomes a rule in itself, which becomes even more (but unintentionally) ironic. Postmodernism as a whole is rather self-contradictory by its own nature of refutability of the culturally accepted norm. By its own right, postmodernism avoids definition, and the fact that it evades defining is a way of defining what it

is, thus making the entire idea very self-contradictory. This idea indwells commercials which lack a practical explanation, which becomes an explanation in itself. The absence of practicality and the usual sense expected in commercials eventually becomes the expected. Less commercials talk about the functionality of their product, and focus more on the form of their product and how it will fulfill a deeper desire down in the core of your being.

Malcom Barnard says “Fashion and clothing are the mass-produced means by which the individual style is constructed; somehow we believe that the shirt, or the skirt, which both exist in thousands of copies, is 'us.' Mass produced garments are used to construct what is thought of and experienced as an individual identity, a way of being different to everyone else” (Fashion as Communication, 174). Just like the quote at the beginning of this paper, everyone who buys a specific brand believes to some extent that it builds their identity, whether they realize it or not. The simple choice every morning between Starbucks and Wawa coffee is a complex decision of how you are formulating your supposedly unique character which other people perceive as you. Many people spend their lives wanting to be like someone else, which is why people read magazines, watch television, and go to the movies every weekend. Arthur Berger explains this strange desire for a supposed connection by saying, “...we are all fascinated by others and want to know as much as we can about them, their personalities, their hidden selves” and he continues to contemplate that “it may also be that the sense of isolation and separation many people feel in modern societies exacerbates their hunger for relationships” (Seeing Is Believing, 109). This is exactly why someone will devour fashion magazines and read up on the latest celebrity news, so that they can know who to imitate, and how to go about that while remaining “individual.” Truth is one of the ideas which postmodernism often questions. Postmodernism takes the self-centered

nature of human beings and amplifies it with the belief in subjectivity that makes people believe that they decide what truth is for them personally. They begin to say to themselves “I am ‘the captain of my soul,’” as William Ernest Henley said in his famous poem, *Invictus*. In essence, you decide who you are and who you will become. This mindset has turned the world of advertising away from an objective interaction between the buyer and seller into a more subjective transaction wherein each party decides what part they want to play and what that means for them personally.

The tendency of postmodernism to question truth was best displayed when Friedrich Nietzsche asked “What, then, is truth?” and answered himself by saying that truth is “a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions” (On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense, pp. 46-47). The difficult thing is that if a person seriously contemplates this idea for some amount of time it begins to seem as if it may hold some validity, which then leads to questioning whether anything can possibly ever be really true. But this view is difficult to reconcile with a belief in absolute truth, at least in the way that Nietzsche presents it. This shows how ingrained the postmodern belief is in our culture of “have it your way” and “made-to-order” slogans. The society at large has moved from an objective standpoint on decision-making, basing their decisions on fact and reason (essentially truth), to a subjective decision-making process which is entirely based upon their personal feelings, opinions, or tastes. Thus, an advertisement cannot openly declare “our product is better than our competitor’s product”; instead they must show in a special way why their product is better, otherwise they run

the risk of your advertising self-protection gates to be raised, thus destroying an chance of your purchasing their product. This is clearly seen in many new car commercials, such as the commercial for Volkswagen titled “The Force” which the research paper will discuss in detail at a later time.

In the 1970s many people declared the death of Fine Art. But then in the 1980s it was seen that Fine Art had not died, rather, modernism had come to an end. The art that continued beyond modernism was called postmodern. This art was not held together by any ideological orientation, orientations of modernism. For one thing, modernism had put a great deal of emphasis on style and originality. But in postmodernism that is no longer important (Josephson, From Idolatry to Advertising).

Postmodernism has affected every facet of advertising, from the graphic design of print advertisements and cinematography style of video commercials to the messages conveyed in every medium employed by businesses in hopes to get consumers to purchase their products. “On the whole, the postmodern turn in the arts reacted against what was seen as both the decay of an institutionalized high modernism and a failed avant-garde” (Best, Kellner, The Postmodern Turn 130). Thus, the art of advertising has continued to push the limits, questioning the generally accepted rules of advertising thus far. Since postmodernism has swept through our culture, seeping in every person’s pores and permeating their very being, it is no surprise the extent to which the characteristics of postmodernism show up in every stage of advertising. Although there are a multitude of steps which are taken to prepare every marketing campaign, the outlet where postmodernism shines through the clearest are the commercials.

Commercials aren't about products anymore, they're about what products can do for you;

so instead of needing to know what ingredients are in my shampoo, I just need to know that it will make my hair as thick and shiny as Beyonce's. Instead of needing to know what tests have been done on a medication, I just need to see images of healthy senior citizens playing with their grandchildren. Thus, advertising helps us shape our identities by first providing us with gaps in those identities, (not pretty enough, not skinny enough, not healthy enough,) and then filling the gaps by providing a solution in the form of their product. (Ruth Trego, Thoughts on Postmodernism)

The shift from modern to postmodern advertising techniques can be seen in something as simple as a timeline of Coca-Cola advertisements through the years. They began very simply designed, according to the era, with details about Coca-Cola's ingredients and pricing. Over the years, as postmodernism took hold of the world, you can see the gradual change in the advertisements as they begin to focus more on what Coca-Cola can "do" for you (such as get your a beautiful looking lady in a two-piece suit.) A classic example of this appeal to a common, higher human emotion is the "Hilltop" ad which "shows a group of young singers standing atop a mountain in the Italian countryside, performing an original song called 'I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing.' The public reaction was overwhelming—people around the country besieged radio stations, asking them to put the song into their regular music rotation." (Foust, "Coke Ads Through the Ages") The reaction to this advertisement was so great that Coca-Cola had a group record another version of the song which went on to be a Top 10 hit and a peace anthem during the Vietnam War. The power of this commercial is clear to see; they did not simply present the product for its inherent qualities, but showed how Coca-Cola could be a transcendent being that has the power to unite nations (perhaps also making it aware of itself and its power, making it

even more postmodern.) They were able to tap into the core value of community and show it in such a way that reminded every viewer of their deep longing and hope for that true community to come into existence. Thus, the commercial told the consumer, if you purchase a can of Coca-Cola you are not only enjoying a cool beverage, but you are helping form your identity by bringing together diverse groups of people under the same umbrella.

Levi's "Go Forth" commercial is a prime example of postmodernism in advertising, taking pieces from every art form and piecing it together to form an emotive advertisement that absolutely reeks of postmodernism to the extent that "it will generate little more than a rolling of eyes on a mass scale" (Garfield, *Levi's Too Romantic for Its Target*). The commercial is comprised of a collage of seemingly unrelated black-and-white video clips (reminiscent of the famous postmodern art-house film, *Koyaanisqatsi*) glazed with a romantic poem by Walt Whitman and flourishing musical tones and the occasional firework sound. Garfield continues in his article to discuss how the commercial is so obviously postmodern as to make the very believers of postmodernism laugh in disbelief at the blatant attempt to appeal to this very audience. The hopeful words and images put forth an identity that appeals to the patriotic and optimistic nature ingrained in every American's heart and soul. The rejection of a traditional narrative format is also indicative of the postmodernism present in this advertisement such as when Berger talks how postmodern "videos also tend to reject linear narratives, with beginnings, middles, and endings. This is important because we use (or perhaps, more correctly, we used to use) narratives to help us understand ourselves, to help us create meaning, to give us insights, and to help us situate ourselves in the chaotic world in which we live." The dismissal of such logical storytelling in this commercial clearly proclaims the postmodern repudiation of all

reason. The creators of this commercial were aware of this culture's wariness of typical advertising that try to gimmick the consumer into purchasing their product and tried to overcome this barrier with their "Go Forth" commercial. Their solution was to not display the jeans outright (or even really at all, practically) but make it completely obvious that they were trying to sell not their product, but rather an emotion. Whitman's poem "America" (featured in the commercial) includes such adjectives as "equal", "strong", and "capable" which are all things that the ordinary American (or human being, honestly) generally aspires to be. But as Garfield concludes "That's why postmodernism abounds: It's a way to trick the audience by flattering them into thinking that they can't be tricked by plain old brand messages" (Garfield).

Volkswagen's commercial titled "The Force" which premiered at the 2011 Super Bowl is another prime example of postmodernism's effect on advertising. No words were spoken the entire commercial, there was no display of why the "all-new 2012 Passat" is so great or why anyone should feel anticipation at the fact that it is "coming soon." The commercial simply appeals to our senses of memory and humor by combing the memorable Star Wars theme song with a hilarious, short narrative of a young boy trying to be something larger than himself. Perhaps this is exactly what the commercial hopes to display and appeal to in the viewer.

Our daily lives are permeated with postmodernism; as we walk through the shopping meccas of our cities, as we rest our weary limbs before the flickering images of Steve Carrell and Conan O'Brien, and as we casually flip through fashion magazines before we close our eyes for slumber. It is impossible to walk from your front door to your mailbox without seeing some object that is a result of postmodernism in some way or another. Even the art of architecture has been greatly impacted, which can be seen by the progression away from order and bare

functionality of older buildings to a more recent marriage of form and functionalism; a bond that can be observed in an object as complex as one of Robert Venturi's architectural creations or as simple as the paperclip.

The debate of the rightness or wrongness of the postmodern belief continues to wage onward whether or not we are aware of it. If we hope to become responsible citizens of this world who have something worthwhile to deepen the discourse, we must first learn the basic precepts of postmodernism, explore the various values encapsulated therein, and then examine the manner in which postmodern is practically applied to our narrow topic of study. Even more so, as believers in Christ, we should consider the words of Psalm 11:3 which ask, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" We should answer this calling by expanding our understanding of postmodernism as much as possible. The goal of this paper was to objectively display how a person could follow this route of reasoning. The paper began by establishing a broad overview of postmodernism and its history (which can help a lot when researching such ideas) and followed this foundation with an exploration of a handful of the different tenets of this philosophy, such as deconstruction, subjectivity, and irony. Then the paper discussed how these have shone forth in various advertisements, citing specific examples of such occurrences. Whether you are researching the influence of postmodernism on advertising, architecture, or art as a whole, following this basic outline of action can aid you in learning how to best address the topic in relation to postmodernism or any other historical philosophy.

Most importantly, this research paper wants you to move forward, to be interested, to continually seek out truth in any form possible. Read, process, think, believe: occasionally know.

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