“Advertising culture and the making of the modern consumer”

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Abstract
My paper aims to historicize our understanding of the consumer, a being who nowadays quite often seems to be treated as a quasi-natural entity not only in some sciences, but also in politics, economics and in the media (and all that not only in the West). Specifically, I would like to show how at the beginning of the 20th century advertising deployed various means to bring forth a specific consuming subject and configure its emotional conduct. With a perspective informed by science and technology studies, I will argue that theoretical knowledge adopted by the advertising culture played a crucial performative role in these processes of subject formation.

The analysis focuses on various developments in German-speaking countries from the 1890s up through the 1920s. At the center of this analysis stands the transformation of the thrifty housewife into a consumer with needs. Finally, I will touch upon several shifts that took place with the introduction of psychology in advertising during the 1920s.
Around 1900, prominent German social scientists and economists were becoming interested in the connection between the establishment of capitalist economy and the genesis of a specific form of emotional conduct among its subjects. For example, the German economist Werner Sombart tried to show how the development of capitalist economy was closely linked with a shift in the way that its subjects conducted their emotional lives. Sombart emphasized that it was not the ahistorical nature of man that led him to strive for ever more growth, wealth and possessions. Rather, these strivings were produced by the capitalist system, which had itself become a sort of second nature.

Around the same time, liberal economists were reaching different conclusions. In their eyes, it was regrettable that the capitalist system and market economy were anything but securely established. The construction of a market economy was, they claimed, being placed in jeopardy by many things, the problematic behaviors of consumers being one of the most significant among them. What did the economists criticize consumers for?

Consumers did not consume enough and they did not consume correctly. And more precisely, female consumers, since 80% to 90% of all private purchases were made by women. Women’s lack of a “desire to buy”, and mainly upper- and lower-middle class women hindered the establishment and expansion of the market economy and the smooth functioning of market mechanisms. So long as these processes were not hindered in any way, they would ensure that merchants who best satisfied consumer demand would prevail. Market mechanisms, so claimed liberal economists, would thus contribute to the more efficient fulfillment of needs and the progressively increasing well-being of each and every individual. But the inherent powers of the market could only function if well-informed consumers, oriented towards the stilling of their own needs, consumed in a rational, calculating way. And it was precisely this, supporters of the market economy claimed, that consumers failed to do.

Economists identified multiple factors as responsible for the lack of a “desire to buy”: first, they thought it was undergirded by an “undeveloped state of needs.” Part of this problem was, they claimed, that women felt a limited desire to possess material goods beyond those necessary for the satisfaction of elementary needs. They did not strive to improve their own living conditions through the consumption of new commodities. Secondly, economists saw the foundations of the lack of a “desire to
buy” in “woman’s compulsion to save.” In contrast to thriftiness, which they considered to be one of the cardinal virtues of economic behavior and which, they assumed, required the capacity to master one’s own emotions, they understood this “compulsion” to be a state “of the mind’s complete subordination to powerful (inner) forces.” For its part, various factors contributed to the “compulsion to save”: being raised to be thrifty, limited financial resources, knowledge of the difficulties that accompanied wage labor and the task of caring for a family as best as possible despite limited means. They thought that these social and economic factors strengthened the supposedly natural female disposition to thriftiness. Emotional dispositions, which were interpreted as being natural and gender specific, but also as being subject to cultural influence, were regarded as contributing to consumers’ behaviors that were adverse to the establishment of a market economy.

In the interest of national economy and overall well-being, economists claimed that it was necessary to devise remedies for this problem. One of the primary remedies was to change consumers’ emotional conduct. For one, consumers had to learn to be aware of their changing needs, which evolved ever anew and which were considered crucial for economic growth and social progress. Conversely, consumers had to be weaned off of their “compulsion to save.” Yet at the same time, this agenda explicitly refrained from encouraging unrestrained consumption, as this would disturb the functioning of market mechanisms in the same way that the “lack of needs” and the “compulsion to save” did. According to economic theory, markets could only succeed when autonomous subjects acted according to self-interest. A key point of the agenda was to produce consumers with rationally calibrated needs who made well-informed purchases based on these needs. Schools, the press and advertising were called upon to make this agenda reality.

Advertisers, for their part, didn’t need to be asked twice: most of them thought that the market economy was the best of all possible economic systems. Beyond that, they hoped that they would receive more recognition by fulfilling the “educational” task that science had bestowed upon them. From the 1890s onwards the newly established journals for advertising served as a platform where advertisers and theorists of advertising emphasized their important economic mission. There was no doubt left to the fact that only those advertisements that adhered to ethical and moral principles could succeed in this task: “Modern advertising” was not supposed to lie
and thus wake distrust. Sensational announcements in the manner of a “market crier” were frowned upon as “tasteless,” techniques that aimed to emotionally overwhelm consumers had to be avoided. Advertisements were supposed to inform buyers in a matter-of-fact way, directing their attention to new products. They were supposed to truthfully enlighten consumers regarding the usefulness of new products, and to reliably quote prices. Objective information was supposed to generate rational needs, minimize the “compulsion to save” and make rational purchases possible and desirable.

Just like liberal economists, advertisers also conceived of department stores – whose development was significantly fostered and shaped by advertisers themselves – as sites where advertising’s educational task of producing consumers with rationally informed needs was carried out in exemplary fashion. It was claimed that department stores excelled at making new products known. Updated catalogs and slick brochures, which often listed nothing more than products and their prices and were delivered to the homes of consumers, made it possible for the latter to make themselves acquainted with various sellers’ offers in the peace of their own home. This, in turn, allowed them to make well calculated decisions. The same held true for the department stores themselves: Their aesthetically appealing ways of displaying commodities was perfect for grabbing the attention of consumers without overwhelming them emotionally. Rows of display cases and tables presented products with price tags in a clearly arranged way. Buyers could thus take their time and compare the quality and price of various products before making a carefully considered purchase. Sales assistants were forbidden from addressing customers directly and from exerting pressure. Only when asked by a customer were they allowed to offer objective information in a discreet manner. Just as well, the large entryway doors that inconspicuously allowed consumers to freely enter and exit the “capitalist big business” as department store were called, were another part of the set-up that was meant to promote purchases that served self-interest. The modern department store was considered to be an especially efficient socio-technical apparatus that positioned consumers as autonomous, goal-oriented, rationally desiring and thus “market-conform” individuals; it was hoped, indeed, that this apparatus would not only position consumers in this way, but would also produce such subjects.
Before the First World War, advertisers were already questioning whether or not psychology could be applied to serve their purposes. Initially they were skeptical. However this changed after the end of the war. The field of industrial psychology, influential not only in Germany, showed that processes of perception conformed to supposedly universal rules. Industrial psychology explained how psychological laws could be used by advertisers. They claimed that perceptions could be guided, thus rendering the effects of advertising more predictable. Advertisers and advertising theorists were convinced: Those insights of industrial psychology capable of contributing to advertising’s efficiency and predictability were promulgated in advertising journals, new handbooks and seminars at business schools. In-house advertising departments of large companies hired industrial psychologists to evaluate their advertising campaigns and companies set up laboratories based on criteria formulated by the discipline to test the effectiveness of their advertising campaigns.

The appropriation of knowledge generated by industrial psychology had wide-reaching effects: consumers were now treated as sensually perceiving beings. Increasing interest was directed towards influencing consumers’ behaviors by well calculated visual, acoustic, sensory and even olfactory experiences. Through the use of new media, design, light technologies, scents dispersed in shops, clever displays and much more, concepts and environments were created, in which perceptions, feelings, desires and the consciousness of consumers were animated, regulated and made malleable for merchants in a way informed by shifting definitions of consumers. Advertising practice thus was not only based on a certain perception of consumers: My thesis is that it also attempted to generate a specific sort of consumer.