# WHY INTEREST GROUPS ATTACK ADVERTISING: A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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## ABSTRACT

A number of interest groups seem to thrive on attacking advertising, especially when their attacks might culminate in more stringent advertising regulations. Following a brief introduction to interest groups, this paper describes the formation of two kinds of attitudes -- attitudes toward advertising content and attitudes toward advertising effects -- that seem to underlie much advertising criticism.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO INTEREST GROUPS

In his seminal work, The Governmental Process, David Truman (1951) defines an interest group as:

> . . . a shared-attitude group that makes certain claims upon other groups in the society. If and when it makes its claims through or upon any of the institutions of government, it becomes a political interest group. (p. 37)

Another name for a political interest group is simply a "pressure group." (Bone and Ranney 1976, p. 101)

A few things should be noted about the terms "shared-attitude" and "group." Shared attitudes, a mutual orientation toward the group's interest, provide group members with frames of reference for interpreting and evaluating events. Feminist groups, for example, share attitudes about inequalities in women's status and, accordingly, interpret many diverse events from this frame of reference. Similarly, interest groups devoted to combating alcohol abuse will see drinking behavior differently than those less concerned about this social problem. The term "group" does not necessarily imply a small group where interaction is based upon face-to-face contacts. Interest groups can be much broader collectivities that interact primarily via mass communications. As Truman (1951) puts it, "the existence of neither the group nor the interest is dependent upon formal organization, although that feature has significance, particularly in the context of politics." (p. 36)

It follows that some interest groups are better organized than others. Some groups have a well defined membership, committed rank-and-file members, efficient means of communication, and a well funded political program. Other groups, in contrast, are more loosely defined, less committed, communicate irregularly, and have little or no social or political program. Furthermore, almost every interest group has an active minority of members. "Even a superficial look at an organized group reveals that its decisions and affairs are in the hands of a small number of activists. The larger the group the smaller is the percentage in charge." (Bone and Ranney 1976, p. 103) This active minority is likely to be comprised of one or more crusading reformers, those moral entrepreneurs who have either formed or joined the interest group to further their own "career." (Becker 1963) These activists often spearhead advertising criticism.

Interest groups can be classified according to the kinds of social problems they seek to ameliorate. For instance, some groups have relatively narrow agendas that focus upon issues in advertising and the mass media. A group in this category would be Action for Children's Television (ACT), one of whose ultimate goals appears to be the elimination of all broadcast commercials directed toward young children. Another group in this category is the Rev. Donald Wildmon's Coalition for Better Television (CBTV). This group seeks to eliminate sex, profanity, and violence from television programming and advertising, and even monitors both media forms for their sexual content (Pendleton 1981).

Other groups have a much broader agenda that inexorably expands to include advertising perceived as germane to the group's major interest. For example, the public health interests that worried about the relationship between smoking and health in the 1950s, became opposed to cigarette advertising in the 1960s (Fritschler 1975). Similarly, feminist groups organized in the 1960s quickly came to attack the portrayal of women in advertising (Grant 1970). Unfortunately, this simple categorization is a bit untidy. After all, the concerns of CBTV can be seen as an extension of the lengthy social and political agenda of the Moral Majority. Also, some public health interest groups, such as John Banzhaf's Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), were formed to deal mainly with the relatively narrow issue of cigarette advertising.

Finally, interest groups that attack advertising differ markedly in their philosophies and tactics. Organizations such as ACT, ASH, and most feminist groups have relatively progressive programs and, presumably, attract a liberal constituency. CBTV, on the other hand, promotes very conservative values and draws its constituency from fundamentalist Christians. Moreover, the liberal groups seem apt to support their attacks with social science research, a veritable cottage industry in academia, while CBTV argues from a strictly moral, Biblical point of view. Lastly, the liberal groups often depend upon sympathetic governagencies, especially the Federal Trade Commission, to advance their cause. CBTV, in contrast, has gone directly to the networks and sponsors with its demands, brandishing the threat of a boycott as its weapon (Cohen 1981).

## ATTITUDES TOWARD ADVERTISING CONTENT

There are always some activists within an interest group who take the group's interest very seriously. In the feminist movement many women, and some men, believe that the status of women has been and still remains a social problem of enormous magnitude. A few of these people, perhaps having personally experienced sexual abuse or job discrimination, openly call themselves feminists and use this label to organize much of their self-image. Similarly, in the alcohol problems field, many individuals, some of whom are recovering alcoholics themselves, deal directly with abusers on a day-to-day basis and, consequently, cannot help but observe just how damaging the drug can be. In extreme cases, work in the alcohol problems field and beliefs about the severity of alcohol abuse and alcoholism become central to a person's life and

world view.

Now, consider those women who are quite serious about the feminist movement. They might agree that people should not be treated as sex objects, that woman's role is not necessarily limited to homemaking, and that all too many women are raped or otherwise physically abused. While watching television or reading a magazine, what might these women observe? For one, they notice many ads that, at least in their minds, treat women as sex objects. They also see countless ads for household products where the central character appears to be a traditional, somewhat insecure, housewife. To make matters worse, they even spot a few lingerie ads that intimate female bondage and other forms of physical violence. In short, their view of reality is being contradicted by advertising content and their sensibilities are bound to be offended.

Imagine another scenario: the experiences of therapists who work in veteran's hospitals or halfway houses rehabilitating alcoholics. Suppose that while driving home after a long and often frustrating day, they hear several catchy, happy radio jingles for beer and spot several gigantic billboards for whiskey, all of which feature beautiful, healthy, seductive models. Later in the evening, they might turn on their television sets and see half a dozen commercials starring rugged outdoorsmen, famous athletes, and other celebrities extolling the virtues of sundry beer and wine brands. If they decide to silence the television and page through their favorite newsweeklies, they will probably find ad after ad telling them how this or that brand of liquor facilitates almost every social occasion and, in so doing, enhances their social standing. By bedtime the therapists must feel as if the world is inundated with alcohol advertisements, most of which seem to fly in the face of their working experiences with the human consequences of alcohol abuse and alcoholism. Indeed, their concern about alcohol problems might even make them more attentive to such ads than the average person and, hence, even more likely to be offended.

These groups of hypothetical interest group members are likely to be critical of, respectively, the portrayal of women in advertising and alcohol advertising. Furthermore, after reading a feminist or an alcoholism publication, or after having a discussion with someone who shares their attitudes and experiences, they might discover that they are not the only ones critical of advertising. They may even learn of new criticisms, as well as variations on their existing ones. The result of such interactions is that emerging beliefs are validated and become more firmly rooted and better articulated. As these individual experiences multiply, as critical attitudes spread amongst the activists and then to the rank-and-file, advertising becomes part of the interest group's agenda and a controversial issue in its own right.

Let us generalize from these hypothetical examples. One reason an interest group expands its agenda to include advertising, is because some ads challenge the group's shared attitudes. That is, the portrayal of women in advertising often illustrates the very social conditions that feminists find objectionable, while alcohol advertising usually ignores the social problems of alcohol abuse and alcoholism. As scholars have noted (Levy 1959, Myers 1971), advertising is replete with symbolic content. At the same time, the process of social problem definition, an important interest group activity, usually entails the manipulation of, as well as clashes over, various symbols (Blumer 1971). Thus, it is not surprising that an interest group concerned about a social problem comes to criticize advertising. To group members advertising symbolizes an alternative, competing definition of the social problem. Stated differently, advertising content annoys, irritates, and is criticized because it suggests a world view that an interest group refuses to accept.

## ATTITUDES TOWARD ADVERTISING EFFECTS

Although this line of reasoning might explain why an interest group criticizes the content of advertising, it does not explain why so many people also believe that advertising has negative effects or, in other words, contributes to a social problem. Clearly, one explanation should be eliminated at the outset. There is almost no reliable, empirical evidence proving that advertising was or is a causal factor behind alcohol problems, sexuality, profanity, cigarette smoking, or the status of women. Some content analyses do support the critics' claims, but advertising content does not necessarily imply advertising effects. Only in the areas of children's advertising and, to a lesser extent, the portrayal of women in advertising, has there been much research to serve as a basis for interest group attacks (see, e.g., Walstedt, Geis and Brown 1980). Therefore, attitudes toward advertising effects seem to be founded largely on speculation, and not on facts.

This suggests that a better explanation can be found by analyzing the psychology of the critics. For example, a belief about the deleterious effects of advertising may actually serve as a rationale for taking offense to its content. When the critic is asked why he or she dislikes a particular kind of advertising, saying that the ads aggravate a social problem provides a reasonable, socially acceptable justification. However, in most advertising controversies, beliefs about the negative effects of advertising are voiced too frequently to be merely a convenient excuse for being offended.

Perhaps, instead, advertising is used as a scapegoat, blamed in lieu of more important, but less visible causal factors. Morris Chafetz (1975), a former director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), has commented: "Because advertising has prominence, perceived wealth, and is ubiquitous, it is a 'safe' scapegoat for some who are as concerned as I over our growing national problem of alcohol abuse and alcoholism." (p. 15) Explanations of this sort appear more promising, but need to be more thoroughly explicated.

There seems to exist a deep-seated human need to explain the world around us, to give meaning to our environment. For instance, we constantly attempt to explain our own actions and the actions of others. We try to assign blame when things go wrong and find reasons for success. At a more sophisticated level, jurors in courts of law and scientists in the midst of their research are also engaged in a process of explanation. This motivational assumption about human nature is the foundation for all theories of attribution (Shaver 1975) and, if researchers in this field are correct, people apparently spend a lot of time and mental effort in order to make attributions and, thereby, construct plausible explanations.

If people have a need to explain their world, then it seems reasonable to expect that interest group members try to explain the social problems that constitute their shared interest. Evidence for this phenomenon is ample. There is a great deal of research on the determinants of alcohol abuse, cigarette smoking, and

the status of women. Needless to say, this research represents the social scientist's curiosity about the causes of social problems. Yet, researchers are not the only people so motivated. Mass media commentators frequently offer their own explanations, as do politicians and bureaucrats responsible for establishing salutary programs. Even the man on the street, during conversations or while engaged in idle thought, might speculate about social problems.

However, the type of person most likely to need some explanation for a social problem is the interest group activist who takes the problem very seriously. For this person, a social problem is an intrinsically harmful condition and any knowledge about its causes might be useful in dealing with it. For example, a staunch feminist should be very curious about the determinants of women's status since this knowledge might help in improving conditions for women. Similarly, a professional therapist who cares a great deal about alcohol abuse and alcoholism should be especially eager to understand the reasons behind alcohol problems. Such understanding might be helpful in treating and rehabilitating problem drinkers or in formulating public policies to prevent new abusers. Generally speaking, the more important and immediate a social problem appears to someone, the greater should be the motivation to explain it.

The concerned individual will soon discover that there are a number of plausible explanations for the social problem, one of which is advertising. But unlike many of the competing explanations, which are often supported by voluminous research findings, the effects of advertising upon the social problem have rarely been subjected to empirical verification and so remain a glib hypothesis. Why is this untested hypothesis often so popular with interest group members? The reason is because advertising possesses several characteristics that facilitate its role as causal villain or scapegoat and, in the process, satisfy deep-seated needs to explain the social problem.

First, since the effects of advertising upon social problems have rarely been, and cannot easily be, subjected to empirical test, they also cannot be proven false and eliminated from any future consideration. As a result, hypothesized negative effects remain a tantalizing possibility beyond the reach of quantitative, social science methodologies.

Second, many people have long maintained a strong belief in the power of advertising to persuade and manipulate (Schramm 1973), even though there is much routine evidence to the contrary. Indeed, despite repeated denials from academics and practioners alike, there is even a widespread belief in the use and efficacy of subliminal advertising (Zanot, Pincus and Lamp 1983). If advertising is already presumed to be the main reason for, say, alcohol brand choice, then, by extension, one might also believe that it is the force behind the decision to drink and even drink to excess. Beliefs in the persuasive powers of advertising, like beliefs in the occult, may be due to people's natural fascination with powers beyond their individual control.

Third, advertising perceived as germane to a social problem constantly confronts the person who worries about the social problem. This seeming ubiquity, particularly when combined with a tendency to dislike all advertising, might lead to an overestimation of its saliency as a causal force. Competing determinants, in contrast, might be relatively "invisible" or abstract. For instance, parent-child conflicts over toy purchases could be caused by the influence of both toy advertising and peer example. Toy advertising, however, should be more evident to the beleaguered parent than the relatively unseen interactions between one child and another.

Finally, advertising satisfies a person's need to explain because it is a comparatively tractable variable. Although a person might believe that male chauvinism is the major factor behind the low status of women, there is usually not too much that can be done about it. The portrayal of women in advertising, on the other hand, might be more amenable to some remedial action. This consideration seems to be the reason why cigarette advertising, rather than cigarette production or distribution, became the major issue for the anti-smoking forces of the 1960s (Sobel 1978).

With these important need-satisfying properties, beliefs about the negative effects of advertising are bound to spread amongst those who fret over a social problem. Furthermore, several types of social influence usually accelerate this process of belief diffusion. For example, incipient beliefs might be reinforced and elaborated during conversations with someone else who cares about the social problem and holds advertising responsible. Also, a person might learn to associate advertising with the social problem while reading a newspaper or magazine article or while watching a television documentary. Finally, interest group activists, likely to be most critical of the effects of advertising, might disseminate their views to the rank-and-file via newsletters, pamphlets, and other publications.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The process of interest group attitude formation is a phenomenon with important implications. Interest group attitudes can influence the opinions of the public at large which, in turn, may affect the policies of the various industry, media, and governmental regulatory bodies that control advertising. More important, these attitudes can lead to direct political pressures on the regulatory bodies in the form of petitions, lawsuits, or, if allies are present, Congressional action. Thus, what interest groups think about advertising could eventually be translated into what private and public policy-makers do about advertising.

The leap from attitudes critical of the content and effects of advertising to outright political action may entail the formation of an intermediate attitude category: attitudes toward advertising regulation. If an interest group member dislikes the content of a particular kind of advertising, then this person should naturally desire to see some changes made. If, in addition, this person believes that the advertising contributes to a social problem, then the desire for corrective action should be all the greater. As before, the diffusion of these regulatory attitudes is facilitated by person-to-person contacts and by mass media publicity. However, this relationship might not necessarily hold for all people. No matter how much they dislike or question a certain kind of advertising, some individuals may not believe in advertising regulation as a means to ameliorate a social problem. Other values, such as a belief in the freedom of speech, could suppress this relationship. Nevertheless, when surveying the opinions of an entire interest group, the three categories of critical attitudes should be intercorrelated.

In conclusion, this paper has defined interest groups and has shown how they vary in terms of their organization and social-political agendas. It has also dis-

cussed the formation of attitudes toward advertising content and advertising effects. Criticism of advertising content appears to arise when ads portray a social problem in a way that challenges interest group definition or perceptions of the problem. Advertising is accused of contributing to the social problem because interest group members need an explanation and advertising, as much or more than other factors, can satisfy this need. Criticism should be greatest amongst those activists who truly care about the problem, but personal interactions and mass media publicity help to diffuse critical attitudes to even the least concerned of the rank-and-file.

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