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Advertising the American Dream

Kristen Merlo

The collective fantasy of the American Dream is a central aspect of the American lifestyle. This social ideal, however, is not as universal as often assumed. Jack Solomon identifies the duality of the American Dream through a cultural analysis of consumerism: “The one [face of the American Dream] communally egalitarian and the other competitively elitist” (Solomon, 160). This multifaceted notion of the American Dream is demonstrated through advertising, as the Dream’s depiction differs in its portrayal depending on the demographic group to which it is presented. The progression and eventual regression of the populist versus elitist American Dream throughout a lifetime is exemplified through advertising aimed at specific portions of the population.

Beginning with the distribution of the Sears-Roebuck Catalog in the 1890’s, advertising has played an important cultural role in the American experience. Dubbed “America’s wish book,” the Sears-Roebuck Catalog established perceptions of pure wealth, success, and happiness in the minds of struggling American farmers. The catalog – along with the imaginations of the farmers – depicted “urban consumption as a route toward cornucopian existence.” It was a monumental publication in that it put the American Dream into paper form for all the country to see and helped advertising to emerge as “a kind of urban map, suggesting a world of streets paved with gold” (Ewen).

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Advertising as a demonstration of the American Dream did not stop with the Sears-Roebuck Catalog; rather, it escalated through newspaper, radio and television, and is in full-force in the technologically-dominated society of today. Consumerism is representative of desire, and this desire parallels the abstract idea of the American Dream:

By semiotically reading the signs that advertising agencies manufacture to stimulate consumption, we can plot the precise state of desire in the audiences to which they are addressed. Let's look at a representative sample of ads and what they say about the emotional climate of the country and the fast-changing trends of American life. Because ours is a highly diverse, pluralistic society, various advertisements may say different things depending on their intended audiences, but in every case they say something about America, about the status of our hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs. Solomon 161

This "status of our hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs" becomes increasingly important in one's attempts to define the American Dream as a universal concept. Do all Americans share these same hopes, fears, desires, and dreams? Semiotician Jack Solomon argues against the universality of the Dream, describing "this swing between elitist and populist approaches in advertising" as a reflection of "a basic division within the American Dream itself, a mythic promise that at once celebrates democratic equality *and* encourages you to rise above the crowd, to be better than anyone else" (147-48). Solomon's essential split of the appeals of consumerism into aspects of elitism versus populism defines the duality of the concept of the American Dream.

An effective evaluation of this duality is exemplified through advertising aimed at specific portions of the population. For instance, the populist appeal can be observed

in advertising directed towards children, where the focus of television commercials often stress “fitting in,” and needing a product because “everyone else has it.” Television commercials which advertise toys depict children playing together with action figures, dolls, or board games. A child is never pictured alone playing with such a “cool product;” rather, it can be inferred that by having a certain product, a child will be more likely to fit in and have friends. Brainwashed from a young age and lacking the “ability to apply a filter to marketing aimed at them,” children grow up in an era of information overload and constant consumer stimulation (Meltz).

The advertising directed at children is especially manipulative due to childrens’ level of cognitive and neurological development and the recognition by advertisers of their vulnerability. Eric Schlosser discusses juvenile nagging tactics in his article, “Kid Kustomers,” defining “pity naggings” as claims that “the child will be heartbroken, teased, or socially stunted if the parent refuses to buy a certain item” (183). There is certainly a populist appeal here, as a necessity for feelings of belonging and inclusion are expressed. Highly demonstrative of populist children’s advertising in action are the television commercials for KidzBop compact discs which compile all of today’s “hottest music” with a fun, kid-oriented feel. Such commercials depict large groups of happy children singing and dancing together to their favorite songs. Everyone listening to the music is included and having a great time. There is no evidence of a superior child; and interestingly enough, a variety of ages and ethnicities are depicted (KidzBop). Likewise, past commercials for SkipIt and PushPop have utilized similar techniques of large-scale fun and inclusion.

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If the populist advertising in the world of children manifests the “hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs” of children, the notion of the American Dream begins to change in accordance with the change in advertising directed towards the teenage population. While the products marketed toward children are promoted through the ideals of populism and inclusion, the American Dream takes on a dynamic approach as the consumer market of adolescence promotes both populism and elitism. Adolescence can be recognized as a time of intense social conformity or as a period of rebellion – and the market plays on both of these appeals. Society endorses the American Dream of the teenage years as a time to fit in and blend, but also to stand out and become the best and most popular. In a time of social, emotional, and consumer confusion, Roland Marchand’s “Parable of The Democracy of Goods” helps explain pursuing the best, while maintaining egalitarian status:

By implicitly defining “democracy” in terms of equal access to consumer products, and then by depicting the everyday functioning of that “democracy” with regard to one product at a time, these tableaux offered Americans an inviting vision of their society as one of incontestable equality.
Marchand 151

Thus, “Parable of the Democracy of Goods” serves as the linkage between the populist and elitist advertisements of the teenage market.

In a study conducted by Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg entitled “Appeals in television advertising: A content analysis of commercials aimed at children and teenagers,” various conclusions were reached which express the duality of the American Dream in teenage advertising. Interestingly, Buijzen and Valkenburg identified the populist

appeal with female teenagers and the elitist appeal with male teenagers, stating, "Having the best, competition, and achievement were the dominant appeals in commercials aimed at male teenagers, whereas romance, sexuality, and belonging to a group were emphasized in commercials aimed at female teenagers" (349).

Solomon identifies a McDonald's advertisement as exemplary of the populist teenage approach: "we may catch a glimpse of a hamburger or two, but what we are really shown is a teenage fantasy: groups of hip and happy adolescents singing, dancing, and cavorting together" (165). In contrast, the advertisements for products such as UnderArmor and Gatorade depict the teenage appeal of elitism --striving to be the best. They promote excellence, competition, and winning – convincing consumers that these products are necessary to succeed – a critical component of the American Dream, for some.

As the duality of the American Dream appeals to members of the teenage market, the elitism approach becomes increasingly prevalent among advertisements directed at adults. From high-class refrigerators to luxury vehicles and classy vacation packages, the adult population craves status symbols as part of their definition of the American Dream. Alexis de Tocqueville has the population pinned with his recognition of "the competitive nature of democratic societies" as breeding "a desire for social distinction, a yearning to rise above the crowd" (Tocqueville). Semiotician Jack Solomon goes onto explain the differences between American elitist society and others as American elitists lack distinctive facial expressions or aristocratic symbols that other cultures possess. Tocqueville continues, "Status symbols, then, are signs that identify their possessor's place in a social hierarchy, markers of rank and prestige ... The object itself doesn't really matter,

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since it ultimately disappears behind the presumed social potency of its owner” (Solomon 162). During a period of life focused on work, monetary reward, and financial success, the adult population defines its American Dream with desires to be the very best and to achieve distinction.

As an almost direct contradiction to the affluent, elitist-seeking lifestyle of an adult member of American society, the elderly consumer perceives the marketplace and the Dream with a differing set of values and desires. Whereas advertisements aimed at the adult population suggest prosperity and superiority, advertisements for products directed towards senior-citizens “reflect the lack of respect and fear of aging – in short, the ageism – typical of the media’s treatment of older people.” Often represented as “the prevailing stereotype of seniors as bumbling, crotchety, or senile,” advertising and entertainment do not present the American Dream for the elderly in the same way as for other portions of the population (Wood). The appeal of the advertisements directed towards seniors is representative of the populist approach, and acts as a type of consumer regression throughout a lifetime. Seniors must deal with the struggles of adapting to a lifestyle in which they are no longer independent and often face deteriorating health and psychological ailments. Over the years, advertisers have recognized the statuses of the elderly’s “hopes, fears, desires, and beliefs,” and have created the sense of a populist appeal in advertising. Dave Collis explains the harsh reality that “Our society notoriously finds little use for the elderly. It defines them as useless, forces them to retire before they have exhausted their capacity for work, and reinforces their sense of superfluity at every opportunity” (Collis). However, when approached with populist ideals and the goal to include

members of the over-fifty age group, advertisers succeed in the marketing of their products.

For instance, a television commercial for The Scooter Store, “America's leading supplier of scooters and power chairs for people with limited mobility,” is often aired during television programming such as *The Price is Right* and other shows which are viewed by the elderly population. The approach of this scooter commercial is certainly populist. It includes shots of senior citizens out and about in the community and interacting with their families and members of society. Without the scooter, the commercial suggests, the elderly people depicted would be stranded in their homes – alone and depressed. Advertising directed towards the elderly population has come a long way over the years, as new tactics suggest the guidelines: “Instead of a message that says, ‘I feel terrible, give me product X,’ we welcome ads that say, ‘I feel great with product X’” (Wood). The realization of inclusion as a fundamental aspect of the American Dream at the senior citizen age becomes apparent through advertising in which the elderly population is encouraged – with the help of certain products – to regain position and take part in society.

Thus, this dynamic notion of the American Dream has established itself as a cyclic component of the societal lifestyle. Advertising becomes an interestingly important and useful tool in the examination of the ever-changing facets of the Dream –as it helps to identify the populist and elitist approaches in the world of consumerism. Beginning with a populist appeal for children and then morphing into a mélange of populist and elitist for teens, the American Dream demonstrates itself as a lively component of society. The adult population is drawn to the elitist approach. Due to ageism, advertising appeals revert back to the elementary notion of populism.

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