Hashing Out the Meaning and Purpose of Current Tobacco Advertisements

Larry C. White (LW) was born in the 1940’s and grew up with a generation that witnessed a drastic change in the American perception toward smoking as unanticipated health concerns began to surface. Disgust in his own former smoking habits prompted him to write the 1988 publication _Merchants of Death_. In this book he talks about how original findings linking smoking to cancer were successfully masked from the public for about a decade. Had he learned about the harmful effects of smoking in 1953 when they were first discovered and not from the surgeon general in 1964, he may not have picked up the habit in his late teen years. White believes that advertising does play a key role in recruiting new female and youth smokers.

Hugh High (HH) is a professor of Economics, Finance, and Law at the University of Cape Town. He has published several works concerning a variety of Economic Issues in many English speaking countries. His 1999 collection of tobacco studies _Does Advertising Increase Smoking?_ presents data from research in a number of nations concerning the ineffectiveness of advertising bans to reduce smoking. He suggests that the correlation between smoking and recognition of tobacco campaigns by youths only exists because youths that choose to smoke will automatically be more interested in recognizing the brands. He concludes that advertising does not encourage new smokers to try a cigarette; other sociological factors are more responsible for this pressure.

Yasmin Sati (YS) writes for the United Press International. In May of 2002, he wrote an article responding to a commercial by theTRUTH.com. Truth targets an audience aged 12 to 17 years who are likely to use smoking as an outlet for their rebellious needs. He communicates that theTRUTH.com’s primary concern is that tobacco companies try to project liberating characteristics onto their products to make sales to rebellious teenagers. TheTRUTH.com uses this fact unravel tobacco advertising. By presenting the addicting nature of cigarettes and probabilities for premature death, anti-smoking campaigns educate youths and help them to realize that smoking in fact traps consumers.

James E. Marlow (JM) writes for the Journal of Communication Inquiry. In 2001 he reviewed billboard cigarette advertising from the previous decade. He raises many valuable points about the mastery of that particular form of visual advertising by the tobacco industry. Painting in the third dimension and paying little attention to the boundaries of the billboard frame, companies were able to communicate images of freedom to consumers. The billboards beg children to imitate the artists’ rebellion against reality with their own rebellions—mainly smoking cigarettes. Without relying on words, these images made the best of the short window of viewing time as people glanced up while driving by at 70 mph.

Spokespeople for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company (RJRT) post the latest statements and disclaimers on the company’s home page. They repeatedly claim that they are working to reduce advertising exposure of their products to youth audiences. Their newest campaign titled
“Pleasure to Burn” was begun only a couple of years ago and aims to mix “classic and contemporary images that represent what Camel truly is.” Their mission statement discusses their obligation to financial growth. The ethics behind this pursuit for growth are discuss through RJRT’s philosophy that adult smokers who choose to enjoy their products do so responsibly. They pride themselves on their research efforts and anti-smoking youth campaign.

Researchers Joel Spivak and Michael Berham (JS&MB) conducted research at the University of California, San Diego that was released to the public through the National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids in July of 2002. They conclude that though there are many influences for and against youth smoking, advertising does play a substantial role. By defining the “liberation” of their products, tobacco companies are particularly successful in attracting the children of authoritative parents. This population viewed smoking as independent, cool and fun. The study was conducted on 1641 California adolescents.

Amanda Johnson (AJ) is currently completing her first year at Stanford University. Her interests in health and in societal responses to advertising brought her to research the history of tobacco advertising. The tobacco industry relies heavily (the weight of this is debatable) on effective advertising to replace an ever changing population. Until an individual is addicted to the nicotine, there is no innate biological drive to begin smoking. She will serve as the moderator during the following discussion by the six panel members concerning their widely varied opinions on the role of advertising in the tobacco industry.

Dialogue...

AJ: I would like to thank the panel for joining us this afternoon. We have quite a diverse group of writers, researchers, spokespeople, and a professor here to discuss the focus and objectives of current tobacco advertising. Since I know your comments on this subject vary widely, I suppose I will start off by asking you to talk about what you believe to be the focus of tobacco advertising as it exists today.

RJRT: RJ Reynolds tobacco products are among the best advertised in the industry and we take pride in our commitment to maintaining honest advertising to the public. We do not intend for our advertising to manipulate non-smokers into trying our products, nor do we choose to target these audiences. Advertising is simply a method by which we are able to maintain our share of the market and compete with other tobacco manufacturers.

LW: How can you possibly claim to avoid targeting specific audiences and replenishing your older dwindling population with new younger smokers!?! The whole point of advertising is to get more people to buy your product and since market shares don’t change all that much for large companies like yourself, the best way to get more people to buy your product is to increase the number of overall smokers. Youth are your best option because if you can get them hooked now, you will have a steady flow of income for several decades to come.
HH: Mr. White, you make a good point about general economic objectives. However, studies show that advertising does very little to change the number of new smokers. Countries that have banned advertising for tobacco related products have seen very little decline in the number of consumers that buy their product. As RJRT stated previously, advertising is only successful at making adjustments within the market concerning the relative amounts each company is able to sell.

AJ: I recently reviewed a chart concerning the prevalence of smoking among US adults and found that over the past 40 years since the Surgeon General first warned about cigarettes’ cancerous effects the steady decline in smokers has slowed to rest around 25 percent of the population over the age of 18. With the number of people dying each day, it is surprising that this number does not continue to go down. How would you account for the slowed change?

YS: Clearly, tobacco companies are able to replenish their consumer population by recruiting new smokers! While the older population dies off, cigarettes are advertised to youths as a way to assert their independence.

JS&MB: We would have to agree with that statement. Our research from the past couple of years showed that tobacco advertising was particularly effective on adolescents with overly controlling parents. While the parents try hard to teach their kids right from wrong, their innate desire is toward rebellion. Tobacco manufacturers provide an outlet for this rebellion.

RJRT: We would like to clarify that we do not target children with our advertising. Retailers for our products are required to card individuals that look as though they could be under the age of 25 to assure that no one under 18 can buy their own tobacco products. In addition, we take pride in our continued efforts to be involved in schools across the country with our anti-smoking campaign. Many documents support our position that family and peer influence are still the leading troubles with youth smoking.

JS&MB: So you are saying that kids are in no way attracted to the exotic figures that you sell to their biweekly editions of *Sports Illustrated*? We won’t deny that negative peer pressure is likely the most convincing force that entices kids to begin smoking. However, our research strongly shows that advertising greatly undoes the positive family influences that attempt to keep children away from smoking. Though fewer children who smoke come from nurturing homes, those that do chose to smoke in rebellion against this type of home are the children most affected by advertising. The “cool” image of the men and women in your advertising appeal to them because these fictional individuals are the antithesis over over-controlling parents.

JM: San Diego must be a great place to research, because I think you guys are right on target. Cigarettes companies to choose to illustrate the liberating nature of their products. The billboards from the 90’s are perfect examples of how companies used their visual work to relay a message of independence. Philip Morris paid no attention to the restrictions of the rectangle frame when dust clouds from the Marlboro horses kicked clouds of smoke above the frame. Joe Camel through dice into the third dimension and invited consumers to be a part of his billboard scene. Cartoon images themselves even symbolize an escape from reality.
AJ: I can see how billboard advertising could be a tricky art. Consumers only get to see the images for a short amount of time before speeding by in their cars. It makes sense that much needed to be said in the arrangement of the images themselves—everything certainly needed to be strategically placed. However, RJRT, your newest campaign wasn’t in effect before the billboard ban in 1998. I would like to hear a little about the focus of the “Pleasure to Burn” advertisements.

RJRT: After agreeing to discontinue Joe Camel during with the 1998 MSA agreement because of some misconceptions as to his purpose, we needed a way to reestablish that particular campaign. “Pleasure to Burn” combines images from the past and present in a celebration of the brand’s rich heritage that dates back to 1913. With this campaign, we rediscover the diverse personality of Camel cigarettes and remind consumers of the brand’s continual dedication and quality over the century.

YS: How exactly do the provocative images of the “Pleasure” series celebrate the past? I don’t buy it. The campaign seduces consumers. It invites adult men and women to imagine sexual fantasy and invites children to grow up even faster. The sexual freedom of the characters depicted in the ads translates to the type of independence sought by insecure individuals—mainly confused teens. This is where anti-smoking campaigns like theTRUTH.com work to undo the damage of cigarette advertising. Piling 1200 body bags in an ally creates a visual of the amount of Americans who die daily from their addiction. A dependence on nicotine is far from liberating and theTRUTH.com wishes to convey this message to teens.

AJ: Those are both fitting interpretations of an artistic and appealing advertising campaign. I think if we can take one piece of knowledge away from this discussion today is that the ambiguity of visual advertising leaves much room for interpretation. I think we can all agree that ads serve the specific purpose of selling specific products to a select customer population. The objectives behind this sale are left to interpretation. These interpretations vary depending on the personal objectives of the individual judging the ad. Statistical data can be found to back up all sides of the argument for and against continued visual campaigning by tobacco companies.