

## **Advertising, public relations and social marketing: shaping behaviour towards sustainable consumption**

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### **Summary**

As the world struggles to sustain mass consumption as a lifestyle of choice, the need for sustainable behaviour becomes increasingly evident. Even though there are already a number of technical and legislative solutions underway, we still need to work on changing our consumption habits. This calls for social marketing strategies that can lead to promotion and acceptance of sustainable behaviour on a global scale. The problem, however, is that social marketing for sustainability that dominates the media today is ineffective and even counterproductive.

In this study, I will examine what drives consumerism, and argue that sustainable consumption could be promoted as an alternative lifestyle, based on the same strategies that have successfully established mass consumption as a way of life. Countering the claims made for traditional social marketing, I will suggest that appealing to people's innermost desires in the same way commercial marketing does, is in fact a more effective means of behaviour change than the negative information campaigns that are prevalent today. This calls for a different type of social marketing—one based on positive appeals related to subjective wellbeing and self-fulfilment, and not on scare tactics and dull educational campaigns.

### **Introduction**

Today we live in a society that keeps us constantly on a lookout for new offers, bargains and sales (Lury, 2011). Our relentless pursuit of shopping almost resembles primal activities such as hunting and gathering for things that we have come to see as 'essential' for our survival. These essentials include things such as fashionable clothes, a new house, better car, latest mobile phone, or an exotic vacation (Zukin, 2004, p253). We often justify our purchasing impulses with greater convenience, comfort, and user friendliness (Crocker, 2012, p17), or we convince ourselves that we are doing ourselves a favour by purchasing things that are new, improved, and more powerful, or smaller, faster, smarter, cheaper (Zukin, 2004, p255). We have come to believe that buying more goods will make our lives better. In this search for all things better, we constantly replace things that do not need replacing with things that we do not really need. No matter how hard we work, and how much we spend on products and

lifestyles, some things always remain beyond reach (Shah *et al.*, 2007, p7). These are the basic characteristics of what we call the 'consumer society' (Baudrillard, 2005).

This expansive consumerism creates a vicious cycle of individuals striving to have the same or more than others around them. Since many of our needs and wants are relative to the circumstances of others around us, this behaviour acts as a 'social push' of ongoing growth. As some increase consumption, the rest face a higher reference point. This ultimately pushes the society as a whole to higher consumption, a consumption that is too precarious for the world to maintain (Briceno and Stagl, 2006, p1542), or for the economy to sustain (McKibbin and Stoeckel, 2009).

From a historical point of view, mass consumerism is a relatively recent phenomenon, yet it has come to occupy a central place in our lives. Today, consumption shapes our attitudes, lifestyles, expectations, and beliefs (Campbell, 2004, p27; Crocker and Lehmann, 2012, p385). This means that not so long ago our behavioural patterns radically changed, and we came to accept consumerism as the answer to all our problems, even when this borders on the irrational. The need to reverse this trend has given rise to the idea of sustainable consumption (Jackson, 2011), which is broadly defined as "[...] consumption which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (DEST, 1996, p2). According to the literature, achieving sustainable consumption requires solutions that go beyond the development of new products and product substitutions. This includes the promotion and acceptance of concepts such as responsible consumption, consumption reduction, voluntary simplicity, and sustainable lifestyles on a global scale (Jackson, 2005, p3; Peattie and Peattie, 2009, p261).

The literature also reveals that the emphasis on sustainable consumption primarily falls on the identification of the problem, and what the implications might be if we continue consuming as we do. This is often followed by proposals that provide some practical and technical solutions, or recommendations for introduction of various policies and legislations (Schor, 2005, p310). New technologies, systems innovation, sustainable design, sustainable production, laws, promotions, education, information, and incentives can certainly help, but one of the most important issues raised, again and again, is the need for a shift in our way of life (Thorpe, 2010, p3). We need to change the way we consume (DEST, 1996, p6).

If the problem of sustainable consumption is caused by our behavioural patterns, at the very least, we need to focus on replacing old habits with new (Jackson, 2005; Ehrenfeld, 2008, pp46-47). Environmental psychologists, in general, agree with this: while reusing or recycling

available products is highly beneficial for society, change of purchasing behaviour can deliver far greater environmental benefits (Gardner and Stern, 2002; Steg and Vlek, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that people need to be convinced to change their behaviour for the benefit of both themselves and for the society at large. This has been attempted through a range of persuasive activities broadly labelled ‘social marketing’ (Wymer, 2010, p99).

### **Social marketing revisited**

The term ‘social marketing’ was coined in 1971 in a paper published by the *Journal of Marketing* (see Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). While there are number of definitions of social marketing, a general agreement defines it as a process that leads towards influencing or changing public behaviour through the systematic use of commercial marketing and communication techniques, with the intent of delivering a positive benefit to society (Andreasen, 2006, pp.7-8; Kotler, 2008, p8; Dann, 2010, p151).

While Kotler (2008, p11) describes the 1971 article as ‘pioneering’ for the discipline, by reading the article we can see that Koter and Zaltman’s argument was heavily influenced by an article published by Wiebe nearly twenty years prior to this in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (see Wiebe, 1952). From Wiebe’s (1952) article, which served as a major reference point to Kotler and Zaltman (1971), it can be seen that the concept of social marketing, even though not explicitly termed such, already existed. Then again, it has to be noted that this article was not ground-breaking either, but dependent on ideas first formulated by the great pioneer of Public Relations, Bernays, whose paper published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1928 deals with nearly identical issues (see Bernays, 1928a). In summary, from the literature review it can be seen that Bernays (1928a) was the first to introduce the argument that social programs can be ‘sold’ in the same way as commercial goods and services, and the other way around.

This is important to be noted in the context of this study because Bernays’s theoretical legacy and practical applications are essential to understanding the root of the problem we are trying to resolve today—unsustainable mass consumption. What few people know is that while Bernays laid down the foundations for what today is known today as social marketing, he was also one of the masterminds behind the rise of the consumer society.<sup>1</sup>

### **The rise of the consumer society**

Between 1885 and 1905, the emerging American corporations began their campaign to alter the relationship of power and dominion over prevalent social institutions such as the family, the church, the local community, and the state. Private businesses gradually started to dwarf

social and governmental institutions, and by the 1920's, virtually every single one of the largest American corporations was proclaiming itself to be, not merely a business, but an 'institution' in its own right. Their plan was to blur the line between business and society, and to ensure corporate interests became interests of public concern (Marchand, 1997, p80).

At that time, the majority of products were sold on the basis of need and functionality, properties, or material qualities (Stearns, 2001, p15), but for big businesses, this became unsustainable in the long term, for entirely different reasons than those we have today. The corporations were frightened that a day would come when people would think that they had enough goods and would stop buying, a belief that seemed to have been justified by the economic disruption that followed after the first World War. They knew that if they were to stay in business, they would need to transform the way their customers regarded their products (Cohen, 2004; Curtis, 2002).

The leading Wall Street banker at the time, Paul Mazer from the Lehman Brothers, outlined a vision shared by many corporate leaders at the time: "We must shift America"—he wrote—"from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality for America. [...] Man's desires must overshadow his needs [*sic.*]" (cited in Curtis, 2002; see also Cohen, 2004). This gave birth to unique new institutions such as the public relations counsel, the advertising industry, and industrial design. The aim of these 'cultural intermediaries' was to ensure that the 'immense accumulation of commodities' that occurred by the beginning of the twentieth century could be converted back into currency and profit (Jhally, 1998).

This was not easy to achieve. After World War One American industrialists were hated, envied, and despised in the popular mind, while politicians, such as US President Roosevelt were held in high esteem. Roosevelt was heralded for his commitment to reform the American financial system for the benefit of the people and at the expense of the corporations. To big American businesses, this became a matter of sheer survival. They felt obliged to enter the political arena out of 'self-defence'—as the President of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) dramatically proclaimed. According to NAM, industrial development was the answer to the US problems, not politics. And in their eyes, politicians were their main competitors and contenders for the confidence and favour of the public. In response, they used all the imagination, persuasion, and art that modern advertising and marketing could provide so they could tell their side of the story to the public (Marchand, 1998, p202-203).

With the help of psychoanalysts, sociologists, advertisers and designers, and with an enormous financial and logistical support from the corporations (and later the US government under the President Hoover), Bernays was one of the key players in the successful transformation of the American society into a consumer society in this period. Some of his greatest ‘successes’ were linking social issues with consumerism, as well as introducing celebrity endorsements and product placements in magazines and movies (Curtis, 2002).

The rise of this consumer society finally gave American corporations the political leverage they desired. Now they were able to give people things their politicians could never give. Their products ceased to be objects and became symbols and fantasies. Finally, they offered an answer to people’s innermost desires. This, in return, also gave them control over the public opinion (Curtis, 2002). There had never been more money, thought, effort, creativity, time, or attention to detail invested in any propaganda campaign aimed at changing public behaviour as in the campaigns for the creating and expanding consumerism (Marchand, 1997, p85; Jhally, 2000).

### **The engineering of the American dream**

Guided by his own beliefs of what was good for his country, and frequently shifting his employment between clients such as the US government and the big American corporations, Bernays was highly influential in creating an understanding of a capitalist-driven society in which democracy was shaped through consumerism. According to Bernays, the interests of the US corporations and the interests of the American people should be one and the same. He believed that “[t]he conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society”. As far as he was concerned, he was in charge of leading a social change campaign for the benefit of his nation (Bernays, 1928b, p9). Bernays actions were seen as highly controversial at time, and they are still considered as such (see St. John III, 2009; St. John III and Opdycke, 2011). Nevertheless, they were effective.

With Bernays’ help, big businesses succeeded in making consumerism to be seen not only as a much-needed stimulus to the US economy, but as a patriotic duty for all Americans as well (Cohen, 2004, p239). Corporations set out to convince people that purchasing things that they do not need was vital for the preservation of the American way of living. In the eyes of the public, private consumption was equalled to public benefit (Cohen, 2004, pp236-237). This is a concept that lives on today (Friedman, 2008).

To Bernays, and to many of his contemporaries, capitalism was the American dream (see Schudson, 2004), and this had to be preserved at any cost—even if it meant manipulating the public ‘for their own good’ (see Marchand, 1998, p203). Bernays called this the ‘engineering of consent’ (The F.W. Faxon Company, 1951, p6), and this viewpoint is consistent with the argument for ‘consumer engineering’ promoted by the advertising agencies in New York in the same period. If in the early days of consumerism, advertising merely called attention to the product and highlighted its advantages, in the first half of twentieth century, advertising already had begun to manufacture a product of its own: the consumer (see Lasch, 1978, p72).

As the massive campaign to sell the American way of life to the American people progressed (Marchand, 1997, p203), the ‘need’ for new and better products began to appear (Cohen, 2004). The 1930s became the golden era for the American industrial designers. New homes, streamlined trains, aerodynamic cars, and modern-looking fridges followed. With their help, everyday objects never looked the same again. Designers shaped and formed products that people would buy (Jodard, 1992, p59).<sup>ii</sup> Advertising executives from Madison Avenue went to extraordinary lengths to sell these new products that embodied the ‘American dream’. In addition to portraying idyllic settings of ‘everyday’ American life—or ‘capitalist realism’—as Schudson (1993, p6) put it, they even reached out to religious propaganda in their search for inspiration. In the process, they came to see themselves as ‘apostles of modernity’, propagating to the populace how to interact with the new dominant culture of consumer capitalism that they helped to create. Their goal was for consumerism to occupy the same place in the human mind that religion had in the past (Sheffield, 2006).<sup>iii</sup> Their relentless pursuit for new methods of commercial persuasion cemented consumerism as a way of life. People were persuaded to believe that they could satisfy their every need and desire, or overcome every fear, simply by purchasing products. From basic physiological needs such as hunger and safety, to psychogenic and hedonic ones such as love, prestige, esteem, and self-actualisation, everything had its price. Corporations started selling dreams, fantasies, and relationships by connecting commodities with powerful images of deeply desired social life (see Stø *et al.*, 2008, p244). This gave birth to the idea that success in life is within reach, which is an embodiment of the idea of the American dream; and ‘success’ was often aligned with material goods (Schudson, 2004, p566; Holmes *et al.*, 2012, pp20-21). And, as American corporations began to operate globally, their vision spread to the rest of world (De Grazia, 2005). That is why today we have a perception that we live in a world where a ‘fantastic conspicuousness’ of consumption is represented by an abundance of objects, services, and material goods (Baudrillard, 2001, p32).

### **The pursuit of happiness**

The idea of the consumer society promoted by Bernays and his associates during the 1920s and 1930s was based around a central idea that people can achieve happiness by accumulating wealth. But this does not mean that happiness is achieved simply by owning more things. The way people perceive happiness in life appears to be a universal conception, applicable across a variety of age groups, cultures, and income groups. In most cases, people's happiness is often based around their interpersonal relationships with other people (Kasser, 2002).<sup>iv</sup> The advertising industry sees an opportunity in the moments when we do not feel happy or satisfied with ourselves; a state often produced by 'reminding' us of what we might lack in our lives.<sup>v</sup> With advertising blurring the line between emotional, material, and spiritual satisfaction, we often reach out to shopping to satisfy our unfulfilled desires or to compensate for unfulfilled social needs (Thorpe, 2010, p9). Unfortunately, this 'retail therapy' is short-lived in its results, and we soon start to crave for our next consumer 'fix' in the pursuit of our happiness (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p36).

According to Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1997, p193), advertising is a multiplex form that absorbs and fuses a variety of symbolic practices and discourses. Both the substance and the images found in advertising messages are based on a wide range of cultural references. Advertising often borrows its ideas, its language, and its visual representations from the fields of design, literature, media, history, and even the future (in terms of people's perception of what the future might be like). Once the right references are collected, they are recombined around a theme that involves consumption (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1997, p193). The power of advertising lies precisely in this subtle mix of reality and fantasy—in creating a hyperreality. After all, the 'reality' that is sold to us every day through advertising is far from the actual reality (see Baudrillard, 1986; Eco, 1986). We often tend to favour hyperreality over reality because we constantly strive for something that is 'better' than the real and demand things that seem more exciting, more beautiful, more inspiring, more terrifying, and generally more interesting than what we encounter in everyday life (Sanes, 2011). We are in a constant pursuit of an ideal that can never be truly achieved, and this is where the manipulative power of advertising lies. This makes it harder for people to draw the line between what is sensible behaviour and what is careless over-indulgence (Muratovski, 2010, p80).

From this perspective, it can be argued that advertising is a predatory activity that preys on our weaknesses (Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011). Here I am not referring to the daily commercials that focus on selling trademarked fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), but about carefully conceived advertising of brands, created with the purpose of public manipulation in mind. This is the type of advertising that offers something that we desire or

need on a subconscious level. In this brand-driven advertising, the product is never the real offer, but only a substitute for something of social value to us—such as belonging to a particular group of people (Jhally, 1998; Neumeier, 2006, p151). Even the most luxurious ‘objects of desire’, which are products that clearly feed an extrinsic social aspiration such as status or prestige, often have an underlying intrinsic brand narrative associated with them that ‘justifies’ the high price (Faramah 2011). Furthermore, a study by Sundie *et al.* (2011) also shows that conspicuous consumption of expensive items can often be subconsciously linked to interpersonal relationships. According to them, luxury brands often act as a sexual signal aimed at attracting partners of the opposite gender. From an evolutionary perspective, these items can also act as a communication tool designed to gain reproductive rewards—an important signal that advertises the sender’s quality as a mate.

A series of surveys that examined the link between material wealth and subjective happiness concluded that intrinsic values significantly outweigh extrinsic values in terms of importance. According to the findings, which are consistent, what we want in life is a sense of autonomy and control, good self-esteem, warm family relationships, tension-free leisure time, close and intimate friends, romance and love—not more things (Jhally, 1998; Thorpe, 2010; Holmes *et al.*, 2012). This is not to say that material goods were not seen as important. They are still associated with a good quality of life, but what the research shows is that once people achieve a certain level of comfort, objects cease to make people happy (Jhally, 1998; Putnam, 2000, p332-333; Thorpe, 2010, p8). That is why, effective advertising sells happiness, and not products.

A recent study by Xiao and Li (2011) suggests that the same principle can be applied to social marketing and sustainable consumption. The study examined the link between sustainable consumption and subjective happiness, and found that a new trend is emerging: consumers who reported green purchase intention and sustainable behaviour started developing higher scores in life satisfaction compared to consumers of more traditional, ‘un-sustainable’ products. The study also showed that by choosing to purchase more expensive, but greener products, these more sustainable consumers were willing to sacrifice personal interests over collective benefits, and short-term losses over long-term gains (Xiao and Li, 2011). This means that some people at least have begun to view sustainable consumption as more valuable (and not simply more costly) than non-sustainable consumption—but not thanks to social marketing. On the basis of this study, Xiao and Li argue that people should be encouraged to think in a positive way about sustainable consumption, not only because it benefits the world or the society, but because it leads to improved wellbeing and life satisfaction (Xiao and Li, 2011, p328). The key point that we can take from this study is that



since sustainable consumption can provide self-fulfilment in return, it can be 'sold' as an appeal to our extrinsic values. This is a return to the exchange philosophy found in most commercial marketing, that is unfortunately often absent from many 'doomsday' social marketing campaigns.

### **The power of advertising**

In the twentieth century, the link between a citizen and consumer has been established so strongly, that it is impossible for us to introduce a 'non-consumer' model of true citizens today (Schudson, 2004, p570). Therefore, if we are to achieve voluntary social change, we need to embrace a consumer-driven approach and change the system from within. The way that we could do this is through advertising. According to Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1997, p193), advertising is a communicative activity through which social change is mediated. Considering that our daily life is so immersed in advertising, the question that we should be asking is how we can 'reconfigure' advertising so it can influence people to embrace sustainable behaviours. After all, as Stø *et al.* (2008, p237) argue, we cannot ask people to change their behaviour without offering them new dreams to dream.

Yet, some might reject this hypothesis on the basis that the negative aspects of advertising outweigh the social benefits, or that advertising trivializes real experience and engenders materialism, cynicism, anxiety, disrespect for age and tradition, and leads to preoccupation with sex and competition, its effectiveness and capacity to 'edit' or shape behaviour is in fact hard to dispute (Ling *at al.*, 1992, p346). Others may argue that advertising is unethical because it is manipulative by nature (Grier and Bryant, 2005, p330) and that it cannot achieve a social change because it reflects societal values rather than affecting them (Holbrook, 1987; see Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011).

Contrary to this, advertising critic Jean Kilbourne (2006, p12) argues that advertising is far from being a 'passive mirror of society'; instead, with much justification she describes advertising as a pervasive medium of cumulative influence and subtle persuasion. She says the influence of advertising is so strong, that for the consumer society, advertising performs the same role as myth did in ancient societies (see also Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011). Jhally agrees: "To not be influenced by advertising would be to live outside of culture. No human being lives outside of culture" (cited in Kilbourne, 2006, p10). While many agree with Kilbourne and maintain that advertising creates market demand by manipulating people's normal motivational impulses, Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1997, p32) argue that people already know their needs and desires. According to this viewpoint, advertising only makes people aware of certain items that might appear to satisfy their existing needs and desires. As

this suggests, the cruel illusion of advertising is not in the appeals it makes, which are very real, but in the answers it provides (Jhally, 1998).

Then again, while some oppose or criticise advertising in terms of its manipulative power, others oppose it because they believe it is not effective. The case for this view is put by Solomon (1994, pp100-103), who argues that the effectiveness of advertising is overstated. He even cites one advertising executive who in a testimony before the Federal Trade Commission observed that while people think that advertisers have an endless source of magical tricks and/or scientific techniques to manipulate people, in reality, the industry is successful when it tries to sell good products and unsuccessful when selling poor ones. According to Solomon, there is little evidence that advertising has the capacity to create patterns of consumption. Considering the failure rate for new products that ranges between 40% and 80%, he argues that advertisers simply do not know enough about people to influence them. This is only partially correct. Not all advertisers know how to influence people, but there are others who do (Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011).

In order to counter argue Solomon's arguments here, I can use examples from the world of luxury brands. An analysis into the psychology behind the purchase of a Porsche (Sundie *et al.*, 2011), or a diamond engagement ring by De Beers or Tiffany (CIBJO, 2007), or a Louis Vuitton bag (Frankel, 2011), would easily show signs of emotional manipulation by advertising. The whole business concept behind luxury brands is based around making people conduct irrational purchases driven by emotional impulses.

Contrary to the popular belief that luxury purchases are exclusively based around the notions of reputation, image, or social standing, these types of purchases can also act as gestures that articulate authenticity and caring in relationships (Miller, 2001, p229; Thorpe, 2010, p9), or as means of engaging into new sexual relationships (Sundie *et al.*, 2011). According to Fowles (1996, p167), the work of the advertising industry is to uncover 'deeper veins of sentiment', while producing fresh symbols that can provoke certain responses from the audience. Therefore, it can be argued that advertising should be based on the real (concealed) human motives, and not on the subjective reasons people give for what they do.

In line with this, Freudian psychoanalysts suggest that many human thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires that people are obliged to suppress. In many cases a product is desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because this product is unconsciously a symbol of something else, a desire a person may be ashamed to admit even to itself. According to Bernays (1928b, p52), most purchases are based on hidden desires. For

instance, a person looking to buy a specific car model may argue that he or she wants it for the purposes of transport—even though the person may in fact be burdened with it, or would rather walk for the sake of health. But subconsciously, this person may want a particular model of car because this car is perceived as a symbol of social standing, evidence of success in business, as a means of pleasing his or hers partner, or attracting a new one.

A recent study on the purchasing motives behind particular models of cars found this to be as current today as it was in the time of Bernays. Cars such as the Porsche are not the most practical ones on the market, and certainly not the most affordable. The Boxster, for instance, has very little cargo capacity, only two seats, terrible fuel consumption, and is frightfully expensive to repair. Yet for the people who spend extraordinary amount of money to buy one, these considerations are clearly irrelevant. What matters is the symbolic value of the car. According to this study, men that purchase Porsche Boxster do so because of their hidden desire to engage in short-term, casual sexual relationships. Interestingly enough, the study also found that women that are attracted to men driving Porsches share the same hidden desires. In this case, the Porsche acts as communicative signal that ‘enhances’ ones attractiveness to the opposite sex, and this has nothing to do with the practicality of the car or the fuel consumption (Sundie *et al.*, 2011).

### **Advertising of alcohol and tobacco**

Another important argument for the effectiveness of advertising can be found in the advertising of alcohol and tobacco. For over a century, the advertisers of alcohol and tobacco have been perfecting their techniques of persuasion while creating a mainstream culture around their products (Vaknin, 2007), even among children and teenagers (Pechmann and Reibling, 2000; Kilbourne, 2003).

The success of these products is staggering, especially if we take into account that these products can cause serious long-term health issues if used as advertised (Kilbourne, 2003). And there is more; no one enjoys their first cigarette or alcoholic drink, people often feel ill after smoking for a prolonged time, or feel nauseous after excessive (binge) drinking - and yet these products sell, and they sell well. These industries have managed to make their inferior products so appealing to the masses that it has taken decades of governments’ bans and restrictions on advertising and promotions to barely slow them down. Of course, these products are addictive, and that guarantees continuing purchasing, but this is an addiction people have to be groomed to. It takes time before a person actually starts enjoying these products and becomes addicted to them. In the meantime, physical addiction must be replaced with psychological addiction, which is created by advertising.

Many proponents of social marketing and public goods campaigns may look with resentment on advertisements for alcohol and tobacco, and may call them unscrupulous and unethical (Ling *et al.*, 1992, p346; Grier and Bryant, 2005, p330), and they would be right. But, we should not discard a century of knowledge in persuasion techniques, social patterns, and human behaviour research used for selling what in reality are very difficult products to sell, despite what many people assume. Then again, alcohol and tobacco advertising executives had unlimited resources and access to the best market research money can buy. This helped them to develop some of the most effective and most memorable marketing campaigns in the history of advertising and marketing. Once we remove the products themselves from the picture, we will see that there are lessons to be learned here.

It is interesting to note that the marketing strategies of alcohol and tobacco at the turn of the last century were not much different from those used by social marketing today. The key message was that these products were good for your health. Alcohol and tobacco were often sold as panaceas for all sorts of ills, ranging from heart ailments, to anxiety and stress—even for problems with conception (Blount, 2005, p38; Vaknin, 2007, p44). At the turn of the previous century, alcohol was even promoted as a healthy alternative to opium, especially among fashionable and respectable women. In the 1930s and the early 1940s, cigarettes were advertised in medical journals as a cure against cold, and all other kinds of illnesses. Prominent health specialists even claimed that they were good in preventing various heart conditions (Blount, 2005, pp38-39). In the time before the widespread use of celebrity endorsements, health endorsements were in high demand. For a compensation of five free cartons of cigarettes each, doctors lined up to endorse Lucky Strike as a great ‘throat protector’, and a remedy against irritation and cough. In 1930, according to Vaknin, 20,679 physicians were happy to claim that ‘Luckies are less irritating’ (Vaknin, 2007, pp27-28). This was *a* time when advertisers tended to assume that people are rational, and that they will do whatever seems to be in their best interest.

However, between 1930s and the 1960s, alcohol and tobacco advertisers radically changed their strategy. They stopped selling their products as ‘miracle elixirs’ and began highlighting the social benefits that were to be gained: “Smoking will make you distinguished, smart, and attractive; drinking the right brand of liquor will impress neighbours, clients, and help you relax after a long day”—they promised (Blount, 2005, p1). These products became symbols of hope and objects of desire, a form of escapism from the problems of economic recession, anxiety, stress, poverty, or solitude. Smoking and drinking became symbols for whatever people desired, from freedom, adventure and sex, to wealth and upward social mobility. At

the same time they were symbols of masculinity when it came to men, and symbols of emancipation and independence when it came to women (Vaknin, 2007, p36). They ceased to communicate any association with health or health-related points, as this was seen as counter-productive when it came to sales (Chapman, 1983, p20). Instead, they started selling lifestyles and fantasies, an assurance that life is good. Advertising promised that by consuming these products, the consumer would have instant success in life, become more attractive, cool, romantic, slimmer (for women), or stronger (for men), or just have more fun (Kilbourne, 1988; Peck, 1993; Martin, 2002; Audrain-McGovern, 2006; Vaknin, 2007).

Consuming these products became not only a personal choice but also a social experience; intimately bound up with broader relationships and values shared with a peer group (Szmigin *et al.*, 2011, p761). The addictiveness associated with these products was normalised, and even glamorised. Heavy drinking and chain smoking became socially acceptable (Peck, 1993, Alexander, Crompton and Shrubsole, 2011, p26). They even convinced people that they were misinterpreting their own feelings. For the advertisers there was no unpleasant drunkenness, only high spirits (Kilbourne, 1995). Cigarettes might taste bad at first, but they are an important initiation into the adult world, and a part of the ‘growing-up’ process (Chapman, 1983, p20).

### **Torches of freedom**

One of the ‘greatest successes’ of the tobacco industry was linking social issues with smoking, such as making smoking in public by women socially acceptable—a strategy that suggested smoking was a key to independence, gender equality, and modernity. Until the 1930s, smoking by women in public in the United States was considered to be a taboo. For the tobacco industry, this was seen as a problem that needed to be addressed. One of Bernays early clients, George Hill, the president of the American Tobacco Corporation, asked Bernays to find a way of breaking this taboo. Hill’s position was that they are losing half of their market by not having women smoking equally as men. The first thing Bernays did was to commission a psychoanalyst to conduct a study on what smoking means to women. From this study Bernays learned that women see cigarettes as a symbol of the penis—a symbol of male sexual power. The study also suggested that if smoking by women were introduced as a way of challenging men’s power, women would smoke because they will have their own penises. Bernays found a way to do that. Every year, New York held an Easter Day parade, which was attended by thousands of people. Bernays decided to stage an event there. He persuaded a group of rich debutants to hide cigarettes under their clothes and join the parade, and on his signal, to take the cigarettes out and light up at the same time. Then, he informed the press that a group of women were preparing to stage a protest during the parade by lighting, what

he called ‘torches of freedom’, clearly alluding to the great American symbol, the Statue of Liberty. He knew that this would provoke the media and that they will send their reporters and photographers to be there and capture this moment. Bernays created a story by bringing together an action—young women, debutants, smoking a cigarette in public (a radical thing at the time); and a symbolic phrase—torches of freedom (a strong mnemonic element). This meant that everyone who believed in social equality would pretty much had to support these women in their right to be treated equally as men. The next day, this story became popular not only in New York, but also across the United States and around the world. From that point onwards, the sales of cigarettes to women began to rise. What Bernays managed to achieve with this single, symbolic act was to give a birth to the idea that if a woman smoked, she would appear more powerful and independent—an idea that still persists today. This is one of the most dramatic examples of how Bernays used social issues to support consumerism—by linking emotional desires and feelings to products. While smoking did not made women freer, it certainly made them feel more independent. This meant that irrelevant objects such as cigarettes, if positioned and promoted in the right way, could become powerful emotional symbols of how people wanted to be seen by others (Curtis, 2002).

### **Problems of social marketing**

While the links between commercial marketing and social marketing are well established, and the latter is seen as a spin-off discipline, modern-day social marketing has consistently failed to achieve the same level of success as commercial marketing. Some proponents of social marketing argue that this is because social marketing is more challenging than commercial marketing. According to Kotler, since people perceive sustainable behaviour to be inconvenient and obtrusive, social marketers have difficulty achieving any substantial results (Kotler, 2008, p13). I disagree. The examples above demonstrate that regardless of what the perceived obstacles may be, there is always a way to persuade people to try and do something new.

After all, it is certainly not more convenient for people to go out of their way to purchase things they do not need, with money they do not have, only to impress people they do not know, or do not like. Yet people do that on a day-to-day basis, apparently influenced by advertising and marketing. If anything, social benefits that require behaviour change should be even easier to induce than many of the irrational and potentially harmful activities related to consumerism, that also often require significant financial commitments in return.

Then again, the problem for this may lie in the way social marketing is perceived. There is a ‘myth’ that social marketing is somehow different from commercial marketing, even though

the operational logistics between the two are identical. Kotler for example, argues that the key difference is that commercial marketing sells goods and services, which, he says, is far easier than selling 'behaviours', which is what social marketing does (Kotler, 2008, p8). This is incorrect. Commercial marketing influences and in fact 'edits' behaviours as much as it sells goods and services. Shopping is the most evident behavioural activity influenced by commercial marketing. If we look closer, we can see that marketing also influences particular behavioural patterns within the activity of shopping itself. If we take for example McDonalds or IKEA, we can see that these companies are even training their clients to perform particular tasks and duties as an integral part of the shopping process itself. McDonalds is asking its clients to wait in a line and to follow cues prior to ordering food, and then to clean up after themselves. IKEA is encouraging its clients to rely primarily on self-service, both in their shop and the canteen, and to self-assemble the furniture that they have just purchased. These are pre-designed behavioural steps that ensure consumer obedience, higher efficiency, and ultimately, higher profits (Muratovski, 2011, p255). Retail environments such as fast food franchises, shopping malls, airport shopping, casinos, and supermarkets are designed in such a way so they can shape or drive people's behaviour in highly predictable ways through a variety of cues or stimuli. Even when people make what appears to be a self-initiated purchasing decision, their minds often move along predetermined patterns. Even when it comes to selling healthy, or environmentally-friendly products that lead to sustainable consumption, commercial marketing is doing a far better job than social marketing (see Koolhaas, 2001).

The reason behind the success of commercial marketing can be found in its focus on the positive aspects of consumption, such as social inclusion and interpersonal relationships. This social aspect of consumerism is something that has to be taken into serious consideration, especially since it can be used in social marketing (Jackson, 2011, pp98-102). However, this is contrary to the expectations embedded in most social marketing, which fosters campaigns that dwell on the negative, or offer individuals little that is tangible or recognisable in return. Appeals based on positive emotions, such as love, excitement, sex, hope, humour, and positive role models, are already proven to be highly effective (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, pp976-978).

If we take a cue from some highly successful brands like Coca-Cola and McDonalds, we will see that they are extremely cautious about how they present themselves. For instance, they never allow their products to be placed in inappropriately themed ads such as those based on appeals to fear. Also, these brands never advertise in, or near the evening TV news, due to

concerns of being associated with shocking news reports, or with news broadcasts that dwell on the negative (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, p967; Praxmarer and Gierl, 2009, p517).

Contrary to that, typical social marketing campaigns focus on providing depressing informational/educational content, or on generating fear, guilt or shame. Even though there is a consensus that these types of campaigns are rarely effective and are at times counterproductive, social marketers continue to develop them (Kotler and Roberto, 1989; McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999; McKenzie-Mohr, 2000a; McKenzie-Mohr, 2000b; Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004; Steg and Vlek, 2008; Peattie and Peattie, 2008; Wymer, 2010; Brennan and Binney, 2010; Szmigin *et al.*, 2011).

In a somewhat contradictory fashion, Kotler also suggests that these campaigns should prevail because the social marketing community, in general, believes that reliance on voluntary behaviour change is an 'outdated' concept, hence behaviour change must be in some way forced. In addition to this, he proposes that marketing efforts should be focused on delivering more education, on promoting new laws, policies, and on generating stronger media pressure (Kotler, 2008, p10). However, social marketing of this type often ignores the underlying commercial marketing philosophy that each side has something of value to exchange (Szmigin, 2011, p765). While educational or negative social marketing can create awareness on a given issue, or terrify the audience into submission, it often offers nothing in exchange (Rotschild, 1999). To make things worse, in addition to this, social marketing often resorts to 'victim-blaming' by holding individuals responsible for their problems, thus obscuring institutional and societal forces over which individuals may have little control. Marketing efforts in this case usually address individuals and encourage individual behaviour change, thus implicitly holding individuals responsible for the solutions to the problems. This discourages individuals to take action, as they believe that there is nothing they can do on their own (Ling *et al.*, 1992, pp346-347; Grier and Bryant, 2005).

Numerous studies document that educational campaigns do not have any impact on sustainable behaviour (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999, p9), and neither do campaigns based on negative appeals that generate feelings of fear, shame, and guilt (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, p962). Yet, social marketers continue to use negative advertising, because as mentioned above, they believe that behaviour change should be forced (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000b, p532; Kotler, 2008, p13). What is particularly problematic with this type of campaigning is that negative appeals can be disturbing to the society at large and may cause adverse reactions.



The primary objective of negative social marketing is to create an emotional imbalance that can be rectified by engaging in, or disengaging from, a particular behaviour. Social marketers that use these methods hope that by creating discomfort, people will comply with their message in an attempt to decrease the feeling of discomfort (Brennan and Binney, 2010, p141). However, as studies have shown, highly graphic and emotionally charged advertising can result in emotional trauma and can lead to 'escape' from the message, rather than compliance or engagement. Fear appeals that generate most intense public aversion are the ones that try to create empathy by associating vulnerable people such as children, old people, or everyday regular people with situations of horror and shock; followed by high levels of repetition (Brennan and Binney, 2010, p143). Various studies have demonstrated that exposure to fear can evoke maladaptive responses. These are responses that try to cope with the unpleasant feelings evoked by the fear message, rather than to try to control or remove the danger expressed in the ad. Maladaptive responses include avoiding or tuning out the message, failure to process the message, suppression of the message, and counter-argumentation. Not only maladaptive responses minimise the threat without minimising recipients' actual risk of danger, but also, they may lead recipients to miss important information, or to process information in a biased manner and draw erroneous conclusions (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, p974). Another problem is that in a prolonged exposure to such messages, recipients may experience emotional burnout (Brennan and Binney, 2010, p145), or may experience feelings of anger and defensiveness, thus increasing people's risk and vulnerability (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, p975).

I am not trying to say that negative appeals are completely ineffective. They are effective, but this comes at a cost. When their purpose is to call for voluntary behaviour change, and they aim to 'force' people into changing their behaviour, this becomes a form of authoritarianism. From a political point of view, scare tactics are the hallmark of totalitarian regimes. Their purpose is to demoralize the population for submissive purposes. Certain political pressure groups, extremist revolutionary movements, and terrorist organisations pursuing regime change also use them to create an impression of crisis in order to show that the current system is dysfunctional (Muratovski, 2011, p261). While I can see the analogy, I cannot understand why social marketers in free societies resort to such techniques as well.

In any other situation, a modern society would not tolerate the use of fear campaigns. Imagine if fear campaigns were used by religious institutions, pharmaceutical companies, or by advertising aimed at children—particularly the fear of ridicule for not owning the latest toys or games. But, when it comes to social advertising, the same rules somehow do not apply. This is a problem because the use of fear appeals and threat-based ads raises a serious ethical

concern. Any deliberate fostering of anxiety by marketing communications for the purposes of behaviour change is simply wrong—even when it is based on good intentions (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004, p972).

However, it has to be acknowledged that some of these types of campaigns have inspired the rise of the politically conscious consumers. Their socially responsible purchases, or boycotts, are often driven by the fear of ecological degradation, the rejection of materialism and the market, the protection of children and the disadvantaged, or simply by a sense of human integrity. Their choice of what to consume, or not, has become a form of personal statement, and a badge of ‘belonging’ (Schudson, 2006, p198; Shah *et al.*, 2007, p7).

### **The ‘Truth’**

The ‘Truth’ (1998-2002) anti-smoking campaign by the American Legacy Foundation is a notable example of successful social marketing campaign that is based on this principle. The campaign was first launched in Florida in April 1998 as a part of an integrated state tobacco control aimed at reducing teen smoking. This was a nation-wide public goods campaign with a budget large enough (initially US100 million a year) to effectively counter market against the tobacco products to teens at risk of smoking. The campaign successfully led to a decline in youth smoking. In doing so, the campaign used similar advertising tactics as the ones they were trying to counteract: they produced paraphernalia and they used spokespeople that appealed to the demographics. Highly effective negative advertisements based on grassroots guerrilla tactics were some of their most memorable features (Apollonio and Malone, 2009).

One advertisement in particular, titled ‘Body Bags’, became one of their most effective ads. In it, a group of teens pulled up outside the Philip Morris HQ in New York City and stacked 1200 body bags onto the sidewalk in front of the building. They used a megaphone to tell the Philip Morris employees that this is how many people smoking kills every day. This campaign was so shocking that a number of Philip Morris employees reportedly required a psychological counselling after the campaign. Another ad, ‘Hypnosis’, also addressed tobacco companies directly, by showing two young men in a van driving to a neighbourhood where tobacco executives supposedly lived. They broadcasted a taped message aimed at ‘reprogramming’ them: “I am a good person. Selling a product that kills people makes me uncomfortable. I realize cigarettes are addictive (...)” (cited in Apollonio and Malone, 2009, pp486-487).

However, it has to be noted that these campaigns are quite different from the typical negative appeal social marketing campaigns. These campaigns vilify the tobacco industry and not the

‘victim’—the smoker, as it is usually the case. According to Apollonio and Malone (2009), this was a tactic based on political advocacy campaigning rather than social psychology. The key difference here is the positioning. Most social marketing campaigners have a problem to understand how to position their campaigns. For example, if we place the prevailing social marketing campaigns in a political campaigning context, then we will see a scenario where a political candidate is criticising the voters for voting for the wrong person, instead of questioning and challenging its opponents on their bad policies. Suffice to say that the political candidate who attacks the voters will have a much harder time amassing votes than then one who uses positive messages to appeal to voters’ emotions. In a social marketing context, rather than vilifying the teenagers who smoke, the ‘Truth’ campaign made a stand against industry power, manipulation, and authority, thus directly appealing to the teen’s desire to rebel. Unfortunately, very few social marketing campaigns have applied this principle, or achieved the same level of success as the ‘Truth’ campaign.

### **Conclusion**

For over a century, we have been conditioned to consume much more than we need, and often, much more than we can afford to by with various marketing, advertising, public relations, and design strategies. The problem that we are facing today—unsustainable mass consumption—is a problem derived out of corporate greed. Disguised as a social issue directly related to employment, development, growth, and progress, mass consumerism became normalised and desirable activity. But then, instead of an age of prosperity, we have witnessed a reality where the economic inequality continues to grow, the resources are becoming scarcer, and the environment increasingly polluted.

The campaigns that had brought out the rise of the consumer society did so by inspiring a substantial change in our behaviour. Now we are at a point where our behaviour needs to be changed once again. We can do that by embracing and reversing the same consumer-driven approach that caused the problem in the first place, and introduce a new kind of social marketing—one that can lead to promotion and acceptance of sustainable behaviour on a global scale need to be vastly different from the ones dominating the media today.

Behaviour change related to sustainable consumption cannot be achieved by saying that consumerism will destroy the world, nor by saying that sustainable consumption will save the world. Sustainable consumption can be achieved by implying that people will feel better and be happier if they consume sustainably. This is the exchange philosophy that is missing from most social marketing campaigns.

If we look at the success of commercial marketing, and especially the advertising of alcohol and tobacco, then we can see that we can promote anything, including sustainable consumption if we adapt this technique. By doing so, we can reach out to children in the same way alcohol and tobacco industries did—by using memorable cartoon characters and colourful features. We can target teenagers by developing communication platforms that will use aspirational role models and provide opportunities for social experience and inclusion. We can tell young professionals that sustainable consumption will make them look smart and stylish; and that they will impress their neighbours, their friends, and their clients by behaving in a sustainable manner. We can tell people that life can be good again, if we consume sustainably. If people believe that sustainable consumption will make them feel better about themselves, there is no reason not to believe that sustainable society cannot be introduced in the twenty-first century in the same way consumer society was introduced in the twentieth-century. That is why we need social marketing that promotes sustainable consumption by associating it with positive appeals.

While some might reject this approach and argue that social marketing of this nature is unethical because it uses techniques that can be seen as manipulative advertising, the effectiveness of this type of advertising to influence behaviour change is hard to dispute. Rather than trying to go against commercial marketing and brand advertising, we should try to understand their principles better and use them to inspire a new pursuit of happiness. A pursuit that will lead us to a society that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs—a sustainable society.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward L. Bernays, dubbed as 'the father of public relations', was an extraordinary individual, both as a practitioner and an academic. He made a name for himself working for the administration of the US President Wilson during the First World War at the Committee on Public Information. His job at the Committee was to ensure that the public opinion is supportive of the American participation in the war. This is where he learned the principles of mass communication and propaganda, and the power this had over public opinion and group behaviour. In 1919, drawing on his experience with the Committee on Public Information, he opened an office as Public Relations Counsellor in New York and started applying the same propaganda techniques for corporate clients. In 1923, he held the first Public Relations course at the New York University, and published extensively on the topic over the course of many years. His theory of influencing public opinion for the 'greater good' (based on his own, subjective view of what that is) was founded on the studies of social behaviour and crowd psychology pioneered by Gustav Le Bon (1896; 1913) and William Trotter (1919). The works by his uncle, Sigmund Freud (1920), were also a significant influence, and have excited considerable interest in his work. His seminal works such as *Crystallizing public opinion* (1923), *Manipulating public opinion: the why and the how* (1928a), and *Propaganda* (1928b) can be seen as cornerstones for the establishment of the public relations theory that is

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represented in a major way in both commercial marketing and social marketing today. (see The F.W. Faxon Company, 1951).

<sup>ii</sup> The most prominent designer of the era was Raymond Loewy. As a French immigrant to the States, Loewy brought with him to America a European sensibility. A mixture of American industrial power and the aesthetic sense of Paris formed his designs. He managed to create designs that were inspired by the archetypical 'American values', but combined with highly sophisticated styling for its time. His works embodied the very idea of the 'American dream'. From the toothbrush to the locomotive, the lipstick to the ocean liner, he helped to shape the culture of everyday life in America between 1925 and 1980. With clients ranging from Coca-Cola, Lucky Strike, Grayhound, NASA, Shell, and even the US President Kennedy, Loewy placed himself in a unique position to produce 'icons' of consumption (Schönberger, 1990, p7). His attitude was that everything would sell better if it looks better (Loewy, 1951). Loewy's influence rose to such levels that in 1949, he was featured on the cover of Time magazine (Jodard, 1992, p111). In 1976, Life magazine listed him as one of the one hundred key figures and events that had forged the United States of America since 1776 (Schönberger, 1990, p7). Other influential industrial designers of the time worth noting were Walter Dorwin Teague who worked for companies such as Eastman Kodak, Bausch & Lomb, Ford, Du Pont, Texaco; and Norman Bel Geddes, best known for his visionary design of the General Motors pavilion—'Futurama' at the 1939 New York World Fair (see Marchand, 1992).

<sup>iii</sup> Between 1920 and 1940, the 'Mad Men'—as they called themselves (see Cracknell, 2011)—used a variety of religious-like associations to achieve this goal. While they were not allowed to quote the Bible or to use religious figures such as Mary or Jesus, what they could do instead was use visual clichés of actual religious icons to produce subliminal, quasi-religious associations for their audiences. In that way they could use the power of religious imagery to inspire the same kind of desire and belief that religious icons or relics evoke. The 'apostles' used artwork and sublime imagery to display products, or to present celebrities, in a manner that reflected an almost religious devotion. A range of methods was used to achieve such effects. From the use of radiant lighting beams and the relative positioning of objects or individuals, to enlarging them, or having them tower over others—all with the purpose of giving the object or the person in question a heavenly glow that could be interpreted as divine blessing. By co-opting sacred symbols, advertising evoked immediate emotional responses and took over the spiritual environment as well. Such sacramental representation of products or personas through iconic visual imagery reinforced the perception of products as totems: products that could be fashioned and worshipped as gods (Marchand, 1985).

<sup>iv</sup> For example, our need to belong and to feel part of a community can be a powerful motivational force (see Maslow, 1943, pp381-382). In small rural environments, community links are stronger and people already feel that they belong to a group. The situation is different in environments such as large cities or highly developed countries. In urban environments, individuals usually live separate from their larger families, their friends are dispersed, and due to the dynamics of their daily lives, they usually do not have the time to join clubs, take part in various social activities, or to be active members of a religious congregation (Putnam, 2000). The French sociologist, Jacques Ellul (1973, p148) describes these individuals as members of 'fragmented communities' who lack the emotional support that an organised community can provide. This, in return, leads them to feel emotionally empty and devoid of meaning, even though their lives might be fulfilled with numerous daily activities. Another common experience is that in such environments, individuals often feel that even though they are surrounded by people, they are alone and isolated. To feel lonely while amongst a crowd of people is perhaps the most terrible ordeal of the urban individual. According to Ellul (1973, p9), this is the phenomenon of the 'lonely crowd'—an environment in which a person can share nothing, talk to nobody, and expect nothing from anybody, while still being in the centre of everything. The desire for integration and the social obligation to be a part of a network is a constant element of our human behaviour throughout our existence. Today, we can recognise

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this desire in the face of the enormous success of social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter (see Turkle, 2011).

<sup>v</sup> People often feel a very strong need to be integrated into the community, to have a setting, and to experience ideological and affective communication. This causes people to search for something that will fill in their inner void often in the form of some kind of entertainment, such as going to the cinema, bars, coffee places, and so on. But these are only temporary remedies. In the search for a deeper and more fulfilling experience, people become ready to listen to all kind of propaganda—including advertising. As this state of ‘emptiness’ can lead to severe personality disorders, advertising strives to encompass or embody various facets of human relations, emotional appeals. In return, a promise of integration can appear as an incomparable remedy (Ellul, 1973, p148-149). Despite the contentment of solitude from the daily chaos, people can still suffer deeply from feeling alone. This is seen as a fertile ground for advertisers. It is also worth noting that religious cults exploit the very same emotional weakness when recruiting their prospective members (see Mikul, 2009).