

## 18. IMPACT OF ANTI-ADVERTISING ON SOCIETY

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This paper explores the impact of anti-advertising strategies on society, examining both its positive and negative outcomes, and argues that due to the inherent characteristics of human psychology and societal trends, anti-advertising will continue to be an effective marketing tool.

Advertising has long been a cornerstone of modern society, serving as a powerful tool for shaping consumer behaviour and brand perception. Over the decades, it has evolved from simple product announcements to sophisticated psychological campaigns designed to influence emotions, aspirations, and purchasing decisions. However, as the advertising landscape has grown increasingly saturated, consumers have developed a heightened awareness of marketing tactics, leading to widespread scepticism and even aversion to traditional promotional methods. This shift in consumer attitudes has forced brands to rethink their strategies, giving rise to more unconventional approaches that resonate with today's discerning audiences.

One such strategy is anti-advertising – a paradoxical approach that uses irony, satire, and self-deprecation to critique traditional advertising methods while still promoting a product or brand. Unlike conventional ads that rely on exaggerated claims or aspirational imagery, anti-ads acknowledge the inherent absurdity of advertising, turning what would typically be a one-sided sales pitch into a shared cultural commentary. By doing so, they create a sense of camaraderie between brands and consumers, fostering a deeper, more authentic connection. Anti-ads aim at disarming consumers by acknowledging the absurdity of advertising itself, creating a shared joke that fosters brand loyalty [1].

This strategy is rooted in the idea that by acknowledging the manipulative nature of advertising, brands can build a sense of authenticity and trust with their audience. In an era where consumers are bombarded with polished, hyper-curated marketing messages, anti-ads stand out precisely because they reject perfection in favour of realism. They tap into growing cultural fatigue with corporate jargon phrases, also known as “corporate speak” and empty promises, offering instead a more humanised and self-aware alternative.

Anti-advertising is the exploitation of irony, self-deprecation, comedy, and distastefulness to defy conventional advertising tactics with the aim of gaining the affinity with consumers or increasing conversion rates [2]. This definition highlights the calculated nature of the approach. While it may appear spontaneous or rebellious, it is often a carefully crafted strategy designed to appeal to consumers' desire for something different. The effectiveness of anti-advertising lies in its ability to balance criticism with promotion, ensuring that the brand's message still comes through even as it makes fun of the system itself that enables it.

An example of a successful anti-advertising strategy is Patagonia's “Don't Buy This Jacket” campaign, which urged consumers to consider the environmental impact of their purchases. By openly discouraging consumption, Patagonia positioned itself as a socially responsible brand, earning the trust and loyalty of environmentally conscious consumers. This campaign not only boosted Patagonia's sales but also reinforced its brand identity as a leader in sustainable business practices, which featured a striking black-and-white image of their best-selling jacket accompanied by the following text: “Patagonia: The Greenest Product Is the One That Already Exists”. As it is stated on the website, “It's time for us as a company to address the issue of consumerism and do it head on.” [2] The campaign is presented in Figure 1.

PATAGONIA: “The Greenest Product Is The One That Already Exists”

**DON'T BUY  
THIS JACKET**



**COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE  
REDUCE**

**WE** make useful gear that lasts a long time  
**YOU** don't buy what you don't need

**REPAIR**

**WE** help you repair your Patagonia gear  
**YOU** pledge to fix what's broken

**REUSE**

**WE** help find a home for Patagonia gear you no longer need  
**YOU** sell or pass it on

**RECYCLE**

**WE** will take back your Patagonia gear that is worn out  
**YOU** pledge to keep your stuff out of the landfill and incinerator

**REIMAGINE**

**TOGETHER** we reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace

Figure 1 – Patagonia's “Don't Buy This Jacket” campaign

An example of anti-advertising strategy that went wrong is the United Colors of Benetton's controversial advertising campaigns under the direction of an award winning photographer, Oliviero Toscani. Toscani's photos often feature shocking and disturbing imagery to provoke a reaction from viewers. While collaborating with Toscani, Benetton aimed at shifting from traditional model posing photography showing the brand's clothes to the advertisement policy that focuses on the world issues in order to raise awareness and create an added value for the brand.

One of the United Colors of Benetton's advertising campaign was based on bloodstained clothes, the ones that Serbian soldier Marinko Gajro supposedly wore on that fateful day. Print advertisements and billboards featured up-close, stark photos of a blood-drenched T-shirt and combat fatigues with a bullet hole clearly visible in the chest area. Another example of the United Colors of Benetton's advertising campaign featured the photo of an AIDS activist, David Kirby, taken in his room in the Ohio State University Hospital in May 1990, with his father, sister and niece at his bedside.

While these campaigns succeeded in generating media attention, they were criticised for exploiting various sensitive social issues and crises for commercial gain and were referred to as "shock advertising", although Benetton officially disapproves of the term. But as David Phoon notes Toscani's advertisement may seem exploitative or disingenuous, but in fact, it is a symptom of our current society [3]. The backlash from these campaigns ultimately hurt Benetton's brand image and alienated some of its core customers.

The provided evidence suggests that anti-advertising works only when it aligns with fundamental shifts in consumer psychology and media consumption habits. Modern audiences, particularly younger generations, have developed promotional immunity – a heightened scepticism toward traditional advertising techniques. This resistance stems from decades of exposure to exaggerated claims and manipulative marketing tactics. Anti-advertising bypasses this scepticism by adopting an unexpected approach: instead of pushing a product, it pulls consumers in through honesty, humour, or even self-criticism.

One key reason this strategy resonates is that it satisfies the human need for cognitive consistency. When consumers encounter a brand that admits its flaws or criticises its own industry, it creates a sense of psychological alignment. People prefer information that feels internally coherent, and anti-ads provide that by presenting a more balanced, less sales-driven perspective. Consumers perceive such brands as more trustworthy, leading to stronger emotional connections and higher long-term loyalty.

Another critical factor is social currency. In the age of social media, people share content that makes them appear clever, critical, or culturally aware. Anti-ads often contain an element of meta-commentary on consumer culture, making them highly shareable. When someone shares an advertisement that criticises traditional advertising, they're not just promoting a product, they're signalling their own media literacy and sophistication. This turns the advertisement into a form of identity performance, where the act of sharing reinforces the consumer's self-image as a discerning individual.

Additionally, anti-advertising leverages the scarcity principle. In a world saturated with overly polished, aspirational marketing, blunt or self-deprecating messages stand out precisely because they're rare. This novelty effect triggers heightened attention and recall, making the brand more memorable than competitors who rely on conventional tactics.

However, the long-term sustainability of anti-advertising is still debated. There are several opinions on this. As more and more companies start adopting this style, its impact may diminish due to desensitisation. On the other hand, if companies start copying their own ads, the technique may lose its disruptive power. The future of anti-advertising lies in adaptive hybrid models – combining sincerity with humour or blending anti-marketing rhetoric with genuine value propositions.

In today's oversaturated media environment, anti-advertising has evolved beyond a mere marketing tactic into a cultural phenomenon. Its effectiveness stems from alignment with contemporary values – authenticity over artificial polish, with over glossy persuasion, and meaningful engagement over hard selling. By embracing self-awareness and humour while retaining its core message, a brand is becoming emotionally closer to the client. Yet this strategy requires precision. Like any powerful tool, anti-advertising loses impact when overused or executed without sincerity. The most successful examples prove the key concept: modern consumers resist overt persuasion but welcome brands that mirror their scepticism toward traditional advertising.

In conclusion, moving forward, the most resonant campaigns will merge clever subversion with genuine brand identity. The true power of anti-advertising lies not in shock value, but in fostering connection – transforming a conventional advertisement into a moment of shared recognition between a brand and audience. This is how marketing transcends promotion and becomes meaningful communication.

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