English 104: The Rhetoric of Paranoia
Instructor: Anthony Ubelhor

Major Essay 1 Assignment
Advertising: The Selling of Anxiety

"Advertising has always sold anxiety, and it certainly sells anxiety to the young. It's always telling them that they are not thin enough, they're not pretty enough, they don't have the right friends, or they have no friends, they're creeps, or they're losers--unless they're cool. But I don't think anybody, deep down, really feels cool enough--ever. That's the nature of advertising, to keep you hungering for more of the stuff that's supposed to finally put you there, but never does."

--Mark Crispin Miller

If the day ever comes in which each of us looks in the mirror and smiles, delighted with the image we see, advertising companies would be out of business. Paranoia is an advertiser's stock-in-trade. At the root of all successful ad campaigns lies the notion that just a little bit more of this or that will make us more attractive, better liked, or more popular.

As consumers -- members of a consumer culture -- we have never been more free to create and re-create ourselves. We can consciously pick our lifestyle by choosing a vision of life and then purchasing the goods, services, and images to realize that vision. We buy and sell information, purchase personal styles through fashion, pay for educational and social enrichment.

But are there problems with the assumption that creating a life for oneself amounts to a series of purchases, as if this were the sum total of our being? Has the media so ingrained in us an identity as a "consumer" that we have no meaningful existence apart from the economic exchanges in which we partake? We like to think of ourselves as rational individuals, fully aware of the purchasing choices we make. But are we as rational about those choices as we like to think we are, or are we being driven by desires of which we are hardly aware, seeking satisfaction in a system that depends on our never being satisfied?

Keeping in mind our in-class readings and discussion, compose a 5-to-8 page essay that explores advertising and its' effects on you and American culture and society. You may pick one of the following options as the general topic of your paper.

Option 1: Paranoia and the Language of Advertising

Pick two or three ads from the same company, or from different companies selling similar products, then analyze how those ads might exploit the fears of their target audience. For example, you may want to show how advertisers exploit our fears of poor body image by tapping into our psychological need for attention, or our fears of being left out by tapping into our need for affiliation. Examine and explain the tactics used in the ad and the ad's effectiveness, then include your own commentary and/or criticism of the ads.

You must use at least two of the following articles as sources for your essay:

- Joanne Finkelstein, “Chic Theory”
- Jib Fowles, “Advertising's Fifteen Basic Appeals"”
- Thom Hartmann, “Corporations Claim the 'Right to Lie"”
- Kalle Lasn, “The Cult You're In”
- Martin Lindstrom, “I’ll Have What She’s Having.”
- William Lutz, “With These Words I Can Sell You Anything”
- Vance Packard, “Self-Images for Everyone”
- Vance Packard, “The Question of Morality”
- Jennifer Pozner, “You're Soaking In It”

Option 2: The Tactics of Advertisers

Drawing on arguments about the productive and manipulative power of advertising, write an essay about an ad campaign of your choice. Show how this ad campaign has the potential to help consumers develop a sense of the good life, as well as how it may distract from the realities of life. In your conclusion, suggest which tendency you find dominant in the campaign.

You must use at least two of the following articles as sources for your essay:

- John Calfee, “How Advertising Informs to Our Benefit”
- Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen, “Shadows on the Wall”
- Joanne Finkelstein, “Chic Theory”
- Martin Lindstrom, “I’ll Have What She’s Having.”
- Jib Fowles, “Advertising's Fifteen Basic Appeals”
- Jib Fowles, “The Surface of the Advertisement: Composed and Consumed”
- Vance Packard, “Self-Images for Everyone”
- Vance Packard, “The Question of Morality”

Helpful Hints

When analyzing ads be sure to consider the following questions:

- What product is being sold?
- How would you generally describe the ad?
- What are the messages? Are the messages the same as the products?
- What items, if any, are being associated with the product?
- What techniques are used to convey the messages?
- Who is the target audience and how do you know?

Don't spend much time describing details that will be obvious to me as soon as I look at the ad. Using an entire paragraph to tell me there's a green truck in a truck ad isn't very useful if I can figure that out for myself in a single glance. On the other hand, telling me that the green color of the truck is intended to

connect with images of green traffic lights elsewhere in the ad would be a good move, since I might not notice that on my own.

Tell me which magazine(s) etc. you got the ads from (Example: "Advertisements 2 and 3, both from the Oct. 24th issue of *Time*, demonstrate that...."). Note that sometimes, you can find interesting differences between advertisements for the same products in two different magazines.

Include a section in which you "step back" from the individual ads and connect the general trends you've seen to statements about American culture (e.g., "Why would the general public, most of which live in suburban areas, be so interested in four-wheel-drive vehicles?").

In addition to the ad's text, pay attention to images and their positioning in the ads. You can sometimes find that the words tell one story while the pictures tell an entirely different one.

Objectives

- To understand the structure of advertisements and their effects on target audiences.
- To understand advertising and the media as a cultural phenomena.
- To learn how to effectively use source materials as evidence in an essay.
- To learn how to use the MLA citation system for documenting sources.

Due Dates

Tue., Feb. 10: Peer draft. (bring 3 copies to class.)
Tue., Feb. 17: Final draft.

Submitting Your Work

Unit essays must be submitted in a plain, 2-pocket folder with your name and course and section number clearly written on the outside. Plastic folders or folders containing school logos will not be accepted. The following items must be included inside your folder:

- Final draft of essay, stapled, in a pocket by itself.
- First draft of essay I reviewed.
- Copies of all ads used in your analysis.
- Completed peer evaluation forms (group and individual).
- Essay grade sheet.

Penalties: Failure to turn in a peer draft on the due date will result in a one letter grade penalty on your final paper. Failure to turn in peer evaluations on the due date will result in a one letter grade penalty on your final paper. If late, your final draft will be docked one letter grade for each calendar day it's late. Folders missing any other of the above-mentioned items will be considered incomplete and will be docked one letter grade per calendar day late until all the items have been received.

Grading Criteria

When assigning grades, I reserve "A" for exceptional papers -- you do not get an A on a paper simply by addressing the paper topic in a standard way and avoiding mechanical errors.

Your essay will be graded according to the following three criteria:

Invention

- *Introduction and Thesis:* Are these components of your essay clearly written, easily identifiable, and effective in presenting the topic, discussing its significance, and providing direction to the paper as a whole?
- *Accuracy, Wording, and Research:* Have you used the required sources to support your argument, and do you express their concepts fairly and accurately? Have you integrated quotes smoothly? If you are paraphrasing, do you use your own words yet still remain faithful to the author's original meaning? Have you expressed your ideas clearly and concisely? Is the essay in your own words? NOTE: Failure to meet research requirements may result in an 'E' for the essay.
- *Criteria:* Have you clearly and defined necessary terms? Have you illustrated your criteria with specific examples and, if necessary, contrasting examples? Have you established ethical, logical, and/or emotional reasons (evidence) in support of your thesis?
- *Revision:* Are there substantial changes between the final version and the draft of the essay? Does your final version meet the length requirements? NOTE: Failure to meet the length requirements may result in a failing grade.

Organization

- *Beginning:* Have you offered an introduction in which you explain the issue and show why it is relevant? Have you presented a clear thesis that guides and unifies the essay?
- *Middle:* Are your paragraphs focused and well developed? Do your paragraphs contain topic sentences? Have you revised for clarity and worked on eliminating wordy, unclear, and/or repetitive areas in your essay? Have you included transitional words between sentences and paragraphs to make your ideas flow more smoothly?
- *End:* Do you offer a conclusion that does more than merely repeat your major ideas?

Style

- *Format:* Does your paper adhere to MLA format, including font and point size? Have you correctly cited from your sources and inserted a parenthetical citation after each quote? Have you introduced quotes in an effective way? Have you included a "Works Cited" page?
- *Tone:* Is your tone appropriate for the chosen audience?
- *Grammar/Sentences:* Is your paper free from grammatical errors such as sentence fragments, fused sentences, comma splices, mixed constructions, apostrophe errors, subject/verb and pronoun/antecedent disagreement? Is the essay free from spelling errors?