

MATERIALI\$M: AT WHAT CO\$T?

Produce. Promote. Consume. Repeat.

From billboards to Instagram posts to the morning news, the phrase “Sponsored by” is inescapable. Now more than ever, scrolling through social media has gone from entertainment and interpersonal connection to a marketing strategy. People’s impressionable attention can be swayed to promote corporate goods and services, contributing to an increasingly materialistic society.

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Grant Blackburn
economics teacher

The attention economy

The ubiquity yet subtlety of modern advertising sways the public’s desires towards corporate benefit, according to economics teacher Grant Blackburn.

“When I was [younger], I used to think I was impervious to idle advertising and that it didn’t affect me,” Blackburn said. “Because advertisements have gotten so sophisticated, it was hard for me to realize that I was being persuaded.”

Advertising’s ability to embed its messages into people’s daily lives is part of its persuasive power, which

prompts people to consider a product or service marketed as beneficial.

“Advertising works best when it’s not forced upon people, when it gets you to say ‘yes’ to yourself,” Blackburn said.

The purpose of advertising is to promote and sell commercial goods and services. However, with the influx of advertising opportunities in the digital age, the product that is now being sold is people’s attention, a concept known as the Attention Economy.

“The Attention Economy is simply trying to commodify attention as a way to make money,” Blackburn said. “It understands that our attention is limited and finds ways of dealing with that.”

Social media has played a critical role in the evolution of marketing strategies. By selling users’ data to third-party businesses, social media platforms craft algorithms that target each user with a precise, individualized collection of advertisements.

“It’s a lot easier for [companies] to have all of the control,” Blackburn said. “They have all of our data. They have all of the resources.”

Producing, selling and buying products builds a foundation for America’s economic system, especially in the technology-oriented Silicon Valley environment.

“We now look at products as the salvation for our lives and livelihoods more than ever before,” Blackburn said. “The lifeblood of capitalism is getting us to buy [stuff].”

Slippery slope

Having been inundated with advertisements on social media, junior Evie Barclay has learned to purchase products with intention. Barclay said she has realized that long-term fulfillment and satisfaction do not stem from the excess consumption of material objects.

“It’s always exciting to buy something new and get that refreshing feeling of having something shiny, but it is a slippery slope,” Barclay said. “When that shine fades, I just want another new item.”





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According to the American Psychological Association (APA), many people gravitate towards materialistic values in the form of compulsive shopping and overconsumption to appease their anxiety, insecurities and lack of fulfillment.

“The whole human experience reflects our need to fill a gap,” Barclay said. “I think shopping is just one means of doing so.”

Many corporations base their marketing strategies on people’s inclination towards materialistic values. As social media has become a crucial marketing platform, brands have shifted their focus towards influencer-based advertisements to promote their products.

“[Influencers’] social media is like a store window,” Barclay said. “What they choose to put out is what they want people to see.”

According to a Forbes article, “The Importance Of Influencer Marketing In The ‘New Normal’ Digital Sphere” (2021), consumers often perceive influencer marketing content as more authentic and relatable because they trust peer recommendations.

“[Influencers] narrow their niche so that people who like that niche will follow them, and they’ll have an audience of like-minded people,” Barclay said.

While influencer marketing is an appealing way for brands to make money, Barclay has learned to be more conscious of advertising’s influence on her spending habits.

“I don’t find that those ads enormously impact me because I’m very aware of their intention, and I try to analyze why I’m buying,” Barclay said.

The psychological conveyor belt

Psychology teacher Chris Farina said that push and pull factors can contribute to people’s appeal to materialistic lifestyles. Push factors are internal impulses such as anxious habits that inform your decisions, and pull factors are external influences such as corporate agendas that sway your behavioral patterns.

“You might have your own desire to purchase things because

they’re tangible, they’re really concrete and they can give you a sense of immediate gratification,” Farina said. “[Corporations] are going to push their advertisements to suggest that they would provide you with some degree of benefit, enjoyment or happiness. [People] are on this conveyor belt where they constantly chase after new objects.”

Rosy retrospection is a psychological phenomenon in which people tend to perceive the past more positively than the present. For this reason, Farina explained that experiences can be a source of long-lasting contentment as opposed to the immediate gratification received from material possessions.

“[Researchers] usually find that people who prioritize purchasing stuff versus purchasing experiences have a lower sense of well-being, mental health or self-reported happiness compared to the group that prioritizes spending their time and money on experiences,” Farina said.

Beyond rosy retrospection, Farina said that human connection is often an essential component of positive, memorable experiences and a significant contributor to people’s happiness.

“We know that one of the single greatest things that contributes to an individual’s well being is their relationships with other people,” Farina said. “Having something that promotes relationships is often going to bring you a greater degree of happiness than something that’s just focused on your own individual consumption,” Farina said.

The happiness that stems from purchasing a new product is fleeting, Farina said he recommends finding a deeper source to one’s fulfillment, a sense of meaning beyond materialistic values.

“You should figure out the things that really matter to you,” Farina said. “Spend your time and effort picking the best version of those things.”

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psychology teacher

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Evie Barclay
junior