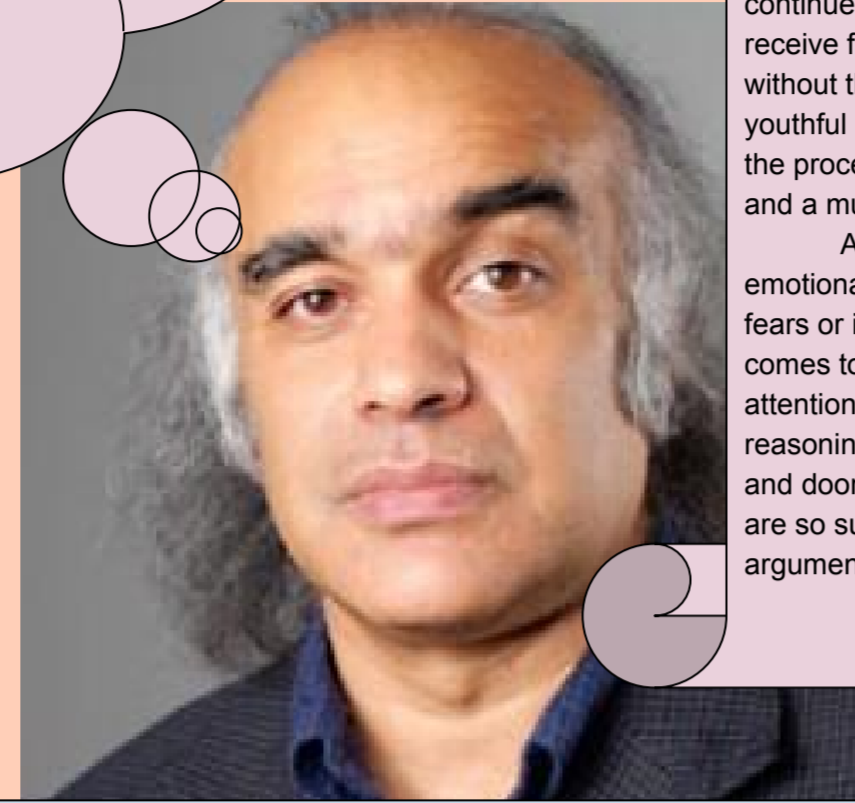




Sut Jhally, a University of Massachusetts, Amherst, professor who concentrates on cultural and media studies, argues that advertising is the most powerful and sustained form of propaganda in human history. He continues that if these images and materials go unchecked, the cumulative and cultural effects could be responsible for destroying the world as we know it. While I agree that propaganda and these materials have been a part of human life since ancient times, I disagree with Jhally that it could doom society. If advertisements and propaganda have lasted throughout history thus far, it is a testament to people being able to compartmentalise the good from the bad, negative materials that surround them day to day.

Advertisements and media campaigns are not new constructs. Egypt, Pompeii, and Ancient Greeks used papyrus and wood panels to spread the word about politics, commercial messages, and other propaganda. In current times, we see billboards and flyers, not unlike what our ancestors used, along with television advertisements, radio campaigns, and magazine spreads. We have merely increased the platforms on which we see discourse, sales, comparisons, and intrigue to a new product.



Jhally has the following beliefs in terms of a successful advertising campaign, series, or media presence: first and foremost, the ego and desires of the population are what drive markets. This means that if you lean into the aspects that flatter someone, play to their ego, and reaffirm their insecurities or most regarded attributes, your campaign will thrive. Secondly, he believes that a successful advertisement will make people believe that they are, and will continue to be, incomplete without the material good or feeling of unity one could receive from the product. For example, a luxury cosmetics brand might say that without their makeup setting spray, their look will be unfinished and not look as youthful and glowing as possible. Making a product seem like a key aspect to the process and final outcome solidifies the understand that it is indispensable and a must-have.

Along those same lines, Jhally believes that you must tap into the emotional state of a buyer to convince them. You almost have to play into their fears or insecurities, which goes hand in hand with the ego element. When it comes to fears or insecurities, markets will use any and all things to gain attention for their campaign and product. In this sense, there is definitely a reasoning for believing that advertisements can change the world as we know it and doom cultures and populations, but I believe that the majority of campaigns are so superficial, or have positive messages, and therefore do not uphold his argument.



For my first example, I found the Aerie campaign from American Eagle. Aerie is a lingerie brand that sells bras, underwear, loungewear, and pajamas. For several years, American Eagle was touted as a young adult brand similar to Aéropostale and Abercrombie and Fitch, but with less aggression and exclusivity in their brand model, behaviors, and clothing lines. Their product features bright colours, simple cut-and-sew tops, graphic decals and texts overlaid on fabric, and simple silhouettes.

When they first launched their lingerie branch, people were surprised. Their brand was a more wholesome store that veered away from anything scandalous and provocative, and the introduction of clad models in their catalogues and banner advertisements shocked many. Parents that were able to buy clothing for their children found their tried-and-true store to be perhaps not as appropriate for their kids.

The introductions of this new line catered to a new demographic, the more mature young adults, the college crowd, the comfortable and collected entry-level aged girl. They were attracted to the patterns, bright colours, simple silhouettes, and comfort factor, something the brand was known for. It was a very amicable transition from just tops, sweaters, and pants to the whole outfit from top to bottom.



Suddenly, the Aerie campaign took off. Girls who never felt like their bodies or ethnicities were appreciated found a home in the Aerie family. They saw models with scars, acne, frizzy hair, soft bellies, stretch marks, and squishy thighs. They saw themselves in the advertisements and felt beautiful and appreciated, and that feeling of comfort in the brands morals and feeling beautiful themselves as a result, led to incredible increases in sales, not just in the Aerie line, but in the store skews overall.

Jhally makes a point within his lecture that objectification is an easy way to sell to certain demographics. If you show thin models at Victoria's Secret, customers will not only want the product, but want to look like the women that are 'supposed' to wear it. They will see a 'Bombshell' model - sexy, tousled hair, beautiful makeup (but never too cakey), thin, sleek, toned bodies, and a carefree grin that emulates pure happiness and appeal. The campaigns make these women object of desire and myth, almost untouchable.

This store and campaign also reach a group that is not their demographic: men. It shows the women as objects and desire, but it also promotes a sense of intimidation. It portrays a woman that is out of their league but at the same time happy to be with you. They are successful, beautiful, and unapproachable but give you the sense that they might still smile at you from across the room. They're mysterious.

When the brand developed, they realised that their models had not changed, though. They still had the thin, beautiful, care-free, re-touched models they used for their shirts and general lines. Their business had not grown much, but had seen a bit of improvement.

During this time, body positivity was very much in the forefront of the American female buyer. They were finally offered options that actually fit their bodies, which already began to go against the principles that Jhally believes lead to a successful media strategy. Instead of using only thin, tall models which could make a larger woman feel inadequate and therefore not worthy of the brand, companies started using plus sized models; designers began creating lines specifically for larger women; advertisements now feature a skew of women in all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities. There was a positive correlation between these inclusive campaigns and the revenue of the companies.

Queue Aerie. Aerie observed this trend and, while their business was steady, it wasn't growing. They took a hint from these bustling new companies and their inclusive campaigns and decided to implement it into their brand. They began using both petite, tall, 'normal' (which I purposefully put in quotations), and plus sized women to promote their brand. They even went a step further; in typical fashion editorials, the model who is in the shot hardly ever looks like the model in the final commercial image. Her face has been airbrushed, arms thinned, butt plumped, and hair made shinier. They often will do Photoshop plastic surgery - a more symmetrical nose, bigger eyes, fuller lips, no acne, the list goes on. Aerie, however, only used unretouched photographs of their models in final media commercial images, campaigns, billboards, and hangtags.

I also think that the Red Bull Stratos campaign is a wonderful example of a campaign that is wholesome and does good, while at the same time promoting a company. Sports advertisements can be tricky - many times the men or the women in the ads are clad, sweaty, glistening young people that are in top physical shape. They are drenched in water or Gatorade or something similar, and look primed for action. They play hard and party harder.

Red Bull was a contender to that type of commercial. Red Bull is an energy drink that 'gives you wings.' They used to have advertisements that showed athletes crushing a can of the drink to get them ready to go. The company then moved into a softer touch and did minimal animated campaigns, such as one where a man is in trouble with the mafia. He is in a sticky situation, presumably about the 'swim with the fishes,' but he guzzles a Red Bull, the drink 'gives him wings,' and he flies away from the danger with a big smile on his face while the mobsters look defeated and distraught by their enemy slipping through their fingers. The take away was if you're in a pinch and need some help, Red Bull can give you a boost of adrenaline and get you through it. It worked well enough.

By: Valerie Caddell

They began shifting back to their sports roots after a year or two, though, but in a more subtle way. They used cameras like GoPro's to show the extreme sports that you could do with the help of a little drink of guarana. They took to the skies, to the seas, and to the plains. They showed extreme sports from BMX to swinging from a hot air balloon, but their most notable campaign was done with a weather balloon and a base jump artist, Felix Baumgartner.

Felix is a world renowned base jumper and free faller from Europe. He teamed up with Red Bull and came up with the idea to take a weather balloon high into the cusp of Earth's atmosphere in a tiny pod no larger than a port-o-potty, and fall - straight through the clouds, the skies, deploy a parachute, and land safely back on Earth and live to tell the tale.

This was huge for a number of reasons - this was a massive endeavor of human abilities, how far one would go to push the limits, and test of human strength. Not many men or women have the courage to do what Felix was planning to do.

This was also notable because of the scientific aspect. They recruited engineers from NASA, DragonX, and weather facilities to map the best climates, find the best location for the drop, create a weather balloon and pod for a man and his gear, employ a team of engineers and mission control and weather mappers to chart his course and monitor progress, safety, and incoming hazards.

It was also a press frenzy. It brought together two worlds that hardly get hand in hand notoriety - sports and engineering. The press loved the space aspect and the sport, the competitive nature and the Guinness World Record shattering possibilities. They set up press junkets, live streams of both mission control, the landing site, and a live feed from the weather balloon. It was so raw and real, that when mission control gave Felix the go ahead to jump, he paused, and mission control repeated their remarks. The audience, which was global and translated to several languages, understood that he was frightened beyond words. He was a man, standing in a little balloon pod, looking at the Earth below him as a target to land on. Somehow, he got the courage to jump.

I read once that Victoria's Secret does this for a reason. When men go into their stores to purchase lingerie for their significant others, the mass amounts of pink, red, lace, bras and panties are there to almost be a huge wall of overwhelming femininity. They use this against the men as a fear tactic, the men feel so uncomfortable that they just want to get in and get out as fast as they can. This helps the company because they can send a sales representative to just bombard them with different items and the men will just take it all so they can leave as soon as possible. This leads to higher sales and trends that men typically buy the most per trip compared to female shoppers. While this objectification and intimidation may work for Victoria's Secret, they have found in the past few years a decline in sales and revenue, forcing them to cut lines like swimwear and portions of their loungewear programs. Where they have failed, Aerie, a body-positive, empowering company, has gained momentum. This proves that although Jhally is observing tactics that may work for some companies, their impacts on society and cultures may be short lived, and that populations may not be doomed after all by the media and advertisements around them.

This also, apart from being a stunning spectacle of a man doing impossible stunts, was a highly branded event. Red Bull logos and tag lines were plastered everywhere - press and ID badges, the weather balloon, Felix's flight suit, his parachute, the cameras, the landing target, there was a superimposed Red Bull watermark on all feeds across cable and internet streaming. It was a huge publicity undertaking. This company was staking their reputation as an adrenaline beverage on one man trying to jump into an abyss while wearing a unitard with their logo on it. But he did jump. Felix Baumgartner free fell from 22.6 miles above Earth shattering all other previously held records. This was not done as gracefully as expected though, as he got caught in a deadspin fall that looked unrecoverable for nearly a minute. The panic was subtle but palpable. You could hear mission control frantically whispering but forcing calm demeanor knowing that they were being broadcast over a live feed around the world. Felix recovered though, and while his fall lost some mileage due to the deadspin, he still overcame boundaries and set new human achievement in sport.

When he landed, he fell to his knees and kissed the ground before doing a ceremonial fist pump into the air while drone video footage hovering above him captured the moment in HD. From every angle you could see him immense happiness, utter shock and disbelief, and the Red Bull logo plastered on every inch of the photo opportunity.

This moment was revolutionary. It was pure, it was hopeful, and it was wondrous. It showed that mankind could push to incredible heights and continue our leaps towards greatness, all the while being a branded marketing opportunity and selling a product. This entire whirlwind experience completely destroys Sut Jhally's argument that all advertisements doom culture. The growth, wonder, and accomplishment that came out of the Red Bull marketing team offices were all, arguably, a ploy to increase sales, revenue, and stock prices to make their shareholders happy. In this marketing extravaganza, it brought humanity (which I do not say lightly, this was a global phenomenon, not just an American cultural achievement) to new places and increased our desire to continue to grow and push the limits. This is one of the best examples I have seen of an advancement in the human population that has come not from war or strife or grief or despair, but from pure desire to achieve more, aim higher, and better ourselves.

While I can understand Jhally's beliefs that marketing campaigns, commercial advertisements, and media propaganda can be dangerous and cause irreparable damage, I believe this is a clear example of hyper cynicism. There will always be campaigns that make us bitter, upset, and while we may want to buy a product or believe an idea, we may not be proud of our desire to do so. But social understandings, developments in body positivity and loving yourself as you are, are becoming the new in-vogue messages to spread. People may call this political correctness or the desire to appeal to the soft, whiny millennial generation, but I think the Red Bull and the Aerie campaigns are great examples of human populations developing their cultures further and acknowledging niches, newly forming groups, and giving them recognition and a product they can relate to.

