The Mighty Image

Cameron Johnson

Although exposed to advertising every day, most Americans are unaware of how advertisements and commercials work in their everyday lives. Although ads and commercials seem harmless—or even absurd, as Cameron Johnson explains in the following essay—companies spend millions on advertising because it works. Johnson also explains the logic that keeps most people from seeing the effects of advertising in their lives. (Portions of Johnson's invention work are shown in later sections of this chapter.)

Begins with public resonance: by addressing a flawed way of thinking among many Americans.

To what degree are we independent, free, separate, in control?

Introduces the issue of images.

How do images influence our thinking?

Claims that most Americans don't realize the influence images have.

Brief analysis of images and their role in public behavior.

Spending habits suggest that images influence the way we think.

Develops a line of reasoning: millions of products get purchased after a slick marketing campaign; mainstream thinking is that images don't make people buy things; we should explore this logic further.

By the time we Americans are old enough to make hard choices (what to buy, what to wear, what to drive, where to shop, where to buy our degrees, and the like), we imagine ourselves as independent, free, separate, and in control. We like to see ourselves making our own decisions. And because we are attracted to such a self-image, we believe in it. We believe it is *true.* This belief requires us to dismiss the rhetorical power of images in our lives. In fact, most people argue adamantly that they are not influenced by advertising images, that what they purchase is the choice of their own coherent and impenetrable consciousness. Some may concede that images conjure up certain feelings. They may admit, "Those images really moved me" or "That picture brought out lots of feelings in me." But other than the occasional emotional poke, images, say most Americans, have no effect on their reasoning powers—and absolutely no effect on their behaviors.

This is a peculiar stance in a culture that is submerged in advertising images—ones that are highly successful at getting millions of people to wear, drive, buy, and even fight over the same things at the same time. A quick glance at America's spending habits (millions of products suddenly get purchased directly after a slick marketing campaign) reveals the tremendous power of a finely wrought image. Still, the mainstream argument against the power of advertising goes something like this: *Images do not make people buy things. They do not make kids do drugs. They do not make people buy blue jeans or tennis shoes. They do not make adults smoke cigarettes or buy cars or jewelry.*

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■ Writing Strategies ■ Exploring Ideas

Such statements have an obvious logical ring to them. Of course images do not *make* anyone buy anything. Pictures alone do not *make* people do things. But wait. We should explore this logic a bit further.

Pictures alone don't make people buy things. So, how does it work?

In the mainstream perspective, humans are *either* driven by media images or they are entirely independent thinkers. They *either* see something and buy a car or they decide not to buy a car. They *either* want a certain pair of blue jeans or they don't even imagine themselves wanting them. Such a perspective ignores the complexities of desire and the power of images. Of course, people do not simply run to the car lot and buy an SUV after seeing an ad in *Time.* But they consume the image and *the apparent value of the image.* When we see an image (whether it be a hairdo, a body type, or a vehicle), we also get an assumption about its worth in the culture. And this assumption stays with us. It molds into our sense of daily life. (This is, of course, why corporations spend millions of dollars to place images everywhere—so that our ideas about daily life naturally come to include the product or the image.)

Further analyzes the way images work in everyday life—explaining the complexity of how images influence thinking (debunking the oversimplistic view).

Consuming an image means consuming "the apparent value of the image."

Contrary to popular belief, humans are gregarious. We think and act in groups, according to historical trends. About every five years in America, kids laugh at what came five years earlier: "Look at that guy's jeans!" "Hey, check out the hairdo on her!" About every decade or so, certain social behaviors become extinct or come into favor: wearing hats, not wearing hats, getting married at 18, waiting to get married, having multiple sexual partners, being monogamous, and so on. And in the bigger spectrum of history, political consciousness changes: from thinking Indians should die to forgetting they exist, from thinking women should stay home and breed to celebrating female CEOs. How do these trends occur? How can a population make such tremendous shifts in belief in relatively short periods of time? Again, human beings don't think or make decisions in isolation. They decide on their hair, clothing, cars, homes, favorite colors, favorite body types, favorite drinks, and favorite pastimes according to the huge cultural menu of their time. Every important psychologist, anthropologist, and philosopher of the twentieth century taught us this: People do make free choices only insofar as they are free from overt oppression, *but they do not make choices that are free of culture.*

Broad cultural allusions help make connections for readers.

Why do certain behaviors become extinct or come into favor?

Uses questions *(How do . . . ? How can . . . ?)* to lead readers to the next point.

People choose from a cultural menu.

Sharp analytical points help make distinctions and reveal the role of images in everyday life.

Take, for example, the SUV craze in the United States. Certainly, we can point to various causes for the increased sales of

An extended example about SUVs to illustrate the previous point.

Reasons why people should want to buy an SUV.

Develops the extended example about SUVs.

Why SUVs aren't a logical choice.

Specific examples help to influence the readers' way of thinking.

With the groundwork laid in the previous two paragraphs, Johnson emphasizes the role of the advertising image.

How prevalent is advertising in our culture? To what extent does it overcome rational thinking?

Specific details from Toyota 4Runner ad help drive home the idea.

Points out the logical absurdity of the Toyota 4Runner ad, while acknowledging that the ad works.

SUVs over the past decade: more disposable income, cheap gas prices (relative to other industrialized nations). But given the tremendous escalation of SUV sales, we might assume that significant changes have occurred: dramatic increases in snow throughout the nation, the general depletion of the highway system, rampant mudslides from coast to coast, a sudden migration from cities to mountain hideaways, a dramatic increase in family size, a sudden discovery of free and accessible oil reserves, a sudden realization that SUVs save lives.

None of these occurred. But the opposite in each case has: People are generally moving to warmer climates and to cities; snowfall amounts are diminishing even in "snow belts"; family size is shrinking; oil is increasingly more expensive and coated in political stickiness; SUVs are involved in deadly rollover accidents; the nation is increasingly paved—perhaps the smoothest it's ever been in its paleontological history. And more roads go more places. Generally speaking, people have fewer reasons than ever to drive trucks, fewer reasons than ever to drive big people haulers, fewer reasons than ever to have four-wheel drive, fewer reasons than ever to own humungous, extra-large carrying capacity, super-low-gas-mileage vehicles. But the average suburban family is *more* likely to drive such a vehicle—one originally conceived as a tool for ranches or military operations.

Given the facts, we have to look at the mighty image. Given all the issues at hand (the history, the economics, the politics, the geography, the climate, the demographics), we must analyze what's most prevalent and powerful in our culture: advertising. Take, for example, a typical SUV ad, one for a Toyota 4Runner. The 4Runner descends a rocky cliff—a near-vertical drop—and rocky terrain stretches for miles into the background. The main text proclaims: "No intelligent life out here. Just you." (One wonders if Toyota's marketing executives are terribly ironic or terribly shortsighted.) At the bottom of the ad, a smaller message says, "Daily stops to the middle of nowhere." Certainly, most Americans live nowhere close to the middle of nowhere. Very few people will ever get to a place where they are surrounded by nothing but rocks, and even fewer will ever aim a truck down a cliff.

If we were to examine this ad and then assess the demographics of the buying public, we might guess that it's a joke—or an attempt to ruin Toyota. But the ad obviously works. It conjures up an

attractive un-reality for potential consumers. We also might guess that the ad appears in an outdoors magazine—perhaps *Ranchers Quarterly, Mountain Lion News,* or *Rock Slide Specialist.* But the ad appears in *Time*—a decidedly mainstream, middle-class periodical. The vast majority of its readers commute to work on urban streets and suburban highways—and descend the gradual paved slopes of parking garages. Given the distance between readers' actual lives and the ad's imagery, Toyota may have just as logically featured the landscape of Mars.

What other ads work by conjuring up "an attractive un-reality for potential customers"?

Reference to Mars points out logical absurdity.

But such an image leaves an impression. It resonates with our songs (". . . purple mountains' majesty . . ."); it appeals to our longing for escape; it captures our desire for solitude and security; it fits into our drive to scoff at nature. And when such imagery pounds the average citizen relentlessly, it begins to reside in the consciousness. It becomes familiar. Even though most Americans will never see the top of a mountain or careen down a cliff (on purpose), they can buy (into) the vehicle attached to the impression.

Advertising images appeal to our values, desires, and underlying beliefs—not our logical reasoning.

Further analysis: The repetition of advertising images has an impact on people's consciousness.

The image creates an *allure,* that is, an attractive association of the thing (ridiculously large truck) with a set of ideas (escape, individualism, America, majesty, power, etc.). That set of ideas can be entirely divorced from reality, entirely separate from the needs of everyday life. But everyday life doesn't matter, nor does the logic that it might yield. The mighty advertising image makes it all irrelevant.

Makes final connection between image and a set of ideas (values, beliefs, assumptions).

Writing Strategies

1. Describe Johnson's voice as a writer, and refer to several passages for support.
2. How does Johnson's introduction effectively lead into the rest of his essay?
3. Identify one concession Johnson makes, and explain how he uses it to further his own argument.
4. What does Johnson imagine his readers think, and how would he like to change their thinking?
5. Johnson concludes ¶8 by saying, "Given the distance between readers' actual lives and the ad's imagery, Toyota may have just as logically featured the landscape of Mars." How does (or doesn't) Johnson earn the right to make such a claim?