

Super Bowl LI: A Critical Marketing Blitz

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Super Bowl

The cost of a Super Bowl ad in 2017 was \$5 million on average for a 30 second television spot (Huddleston 2017). While still pricey, Super Bowl television ads have evolved steadily since Apple's breakthrough "1984" ad was developed and aired to support the launch the MacIntosh. While additional media outlets have emerged, ads aired during the Super Bowl continue to be an important outlet for marketers. "During the weeks preceding the game, there is a great deal of media interest in the advertisements, making the advertisements that run during the telecast a key aspect of the viewing spectacle" (Kelly & Turley 2004, p.399). Today, Super Bowl ads often enjoy a life that extends beyond the particular event and are used to support longer lasting and broader promotional campaigns, as well as to advocate for particular social concerns.

The Super Bowl represents a large platform for marketers to advertise products and services (Huddleston 2017). In 2017, advertisers leveraged Super Bowl LI as a critical social marketing platform. A number of Super Bowl ads were used to illustrate brand support for various social issues and concerns. Such ads were developed with the purpose of demonstrating advocacy and influencing policy and/or regulations. Examples of specific social issues highlighted and some of the associated ads follow: 1) immigration ("Born the Hard Way" ad for Anheuser-Busch and "Journey Begins" ad for 84 Lumber), 2) gender pay equality ("Daughter" ad for Audi), 3) diversity and inclusion ("We Accept" ad for Airbnb and "Its Beautiful" ad for Coca Cola).

Social Marketing

A definition of social marketing follows.

"Social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities" (Gordon 2011, p.90).

Social marketing has been increasingly used as a practice to increase awareness and bring about social and behavior change. "Growing and diverse social challenges are acknowledged to require social marketing interventions." (Beall, Wayman, D'Agostino, Liang, & Perellis 2012, p. 107). Examples of these challenges include various societal and global issues ranging from environmental sustainability to women's rights (Beall et al. 2012).

Social marketing is described as including "the use of marketing institutions, processes, principles and techniques and behavioural theories and models, to induce voluntary behaviour change" (Gordon 2011, p. 82). This framework has evolved to include of elements of critical reflection as well as policy and advocacy. Additionally, "the marketing concepts and techniques social marketers use to influence individual behavior change may also shape policy makers' behavior and bring about beneficial social outcomes" (Gordon 2013, p. 1525).

There are important additional demarcations relevant to the social marketing framework. They include: 1) critical marketing which is informed by critical theory and concerned with critical reflection of marketing theory and practice and 2) critical social marketing which is concerned with advocacy and policy (Gordon 2011). Specifically "social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities" (Gordon 2011, p. 90).

"Critical marketing is a conceptual cluster which involves the social and reflexive critique of marketing theory and practice. Critical marketing is strongly influenced by critical theory" (Gordon 2011, p. 90). Three of the learning tasks that comprise critical theory that are also relevant to critical marketing include: 1) challenging ideology – this includes questioning traditional values, myths, explanations and justifications that are personally advantageous to the majority, 2) unmasking power – this includes the realization of the availability and capacity

for individual and collective power for exerting influence and 3) practicing democracy – this includes practices such as, honoring diversity, recognizing the compatibility of ends and means and avoiding the temptation of bypassing the democratic process in reaching decisions, and learning forms of social and economic planning that benefit the collective (Brookfield 2005). Each of these three learning tasks can be applied to marketing theory and practice.

Critical social marketing represents “critical research from a marketing perspective on the impact commercial marketing has upon society, to build the evidence base, inform upstream efforts such as advocacy, policy and regulation, and inform the development of downstream social marketing interventions” (Gordon 2011, p. 90). Critical social marketing represents a research framework that not only allows for the examination of the impact of commercial marketing practices, but also seeks to offer solutions to problems (Gordon 2011).

Conclusion

The role of Super Bowl ads has evolved to occupy an important role within social marketing. During Super Bowl LI numerous ads sought to increase awareness of social challenges and to affect change. These ads directly addressed social and global challenges such as gender pay equality, immigration, and diversity and inclusion. Consequently, these ads provided examples of critical marketing and illustrations of multiple learning tasks associated with critical theory including: questioning traditional values, honoring diversity, and realizing the influence of individual and collective power.

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: ct.

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