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Influence of Popular Television Programming on Students' Perception about Course Selection, Major, and Career

KRISTY TUCCIARONE

The goal of this study was to understand how undergraduate students perceive the advertising industry and its careers based upon portrayals in the two most recognized television programs featuring an advertising agency – *Mad Men* (2007-present) and *Trust Me* (2009-2010). The proposed research question was “How is the advertising industry portrayed and what are the implications of these portrayals for students’ course selection, major, and career?”

This qualitative study used the theoretical framework of cultivation theory, the research perspective of symbolic interactionism, and the research method of focus group interviewing. Cultivation Theory was used because it examines the effect of television messages and how one’s reality is defined; symbolic interactionism was used to discover what meanings are found in the data; and focus group interviewing was used to understand the attitudes and experiences of the undergraduate participants. The method of focus group interviewing was used because it encourages participants to speak freely, creates a synergistic group effect, and promotes interaction. Based upon the television portrayals, the research participants perceived the advertising industry and its careers as concerned with personal issues at home and with a spouse, partner, or ex; agency relationships that displayed conflict, stress, frustration, and anger; and

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agency relationships in conflict with the boss. Portrayals of agency offices were also analyzed. However, personal issues seemed to take precedence over work.

Practitioners of advertising education, if they do not already, need to care about what television communicates about their profession because television often "...reflects societal views...and it has the potential to influence societal perceptions" (Duncan, Nolan, and Wood 38). In addition, practitioners of advertising education need to care about television's portrayals of the advertising industry because television communicates to college students. Television programs feature a main character with a specific career, which offers an "insider" look at a specific career and industry. Two, television's portrayal of advertising may not be consistent with the "real" industry. Laker contends that "Many students know very little concerning careers or positions they are interested in and subsequently many of them make academic and career-related decisions that are not based on reality" (63). Three, students searching for courses and ultimately a major, which will result in a career after graduation may use the media for explanation as the media has the ability to sway interpretation of various careers (Laker). Furthermore, practitioners of advertising education need to understand the media's portrayal, as the industry may look attractive to career seekers because it is growing at an exponential rate as a result of the rapidly changing media landscape (Advertising Age; The Creative Group). Finally, as advertising practitioners and educators, one of our responsibilities is to inform students about the industry and the careers. Therefore, this will be "...beneficial to both the students and society if we can ensure new entrants are making informed choices about life-influencing career and degree decisions" (Crampton, Walstrom, and Schlabach 226).

To date, no article has been published that addresses the advertising industry in television programs and its pervasiveness; only the role of film has been examined. Tucciarone revealed how films portray the advertising

industry and its careers based upon six Hollywood films. Using the qualitative research method of focus group interviewing, the following themes emerged: competitive and cut throat, stealing other's ideas, think tank, creative, researching target audience and product, synergy, selling, fun and exciting, hierarchy, lots of money to be made, somewhat mental (crazy), perfection, paid to party, luxurious and glamorous, lying and deceitful, sleazy and slimy, flexibility and freedom, and client rules. This study and the previous study are related because they seek to examine how popular culture may influence viewers' perception of the advertising industry and its careers.

Portrayals of the advertising industry and its careers in mass media (e.g., television) are areas that lack research. It is important to note that the television programs *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* were selected based on the plot, the setting, and significant recognition by the undergraduate participants.

Influence on Course Selection

There are several influencers on course selection. Previous research suggested that parents, friends, faculty advisor, faculty members, course catalog description, and "others" are major influencers on course selection (Kerin, Harvey, and Crandall). Seiler, Weybright, and Stang conclude that course/instructor evaluations influenced course selection. Additional influencers on course selection are personal interest, course content, compatibility with major (Babad) and instructor reputation (Leventhal, Abrami, Perry, and Breen). The medium of television, an unexamined social force for the portrayal of the advertising industry, may also affect students' course selection. Regarding television's pervasiveness, Michael Novak notes, "Television is a molder of the soul's geography. It builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectations. It does so in much the same way that school lessons slowly, over the years, tutor the unformed

mind and teach it how to think” (qtd. in Vivian 183). Comstock, in *Television in America* wrote, “Television has become an unavoidable and unremitting factor in shaping what we are and what we will become” (123). Furthermore, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes conclude that one’s attitudes can be “...influenced through exposure to mass mediated messages, particularly via television” (459). As a result of these influencers, it would seem selecting appealing courses and declaring a major that resides with one’s passion would be evident.

However, as of 2012, 80 percent of freshman reported being confused and uncertain about their career aspirations, which was hindering them from declaring a major (Simon). The reason for this confusion is attributed to the ever-changing landscape of corporate America and the continuous evolution of jobs; new job titles, such as homeland security, cyberforensics, and brand ambassador. Institutions of higher learning must adapt the curriculum to the evolving marketplace to keep curriculum relevant. Keeping the curriculum relevant means adding new academic programs as well as modifying current ones. It also means that students are even more uncertain about declaring a major, because of the abundance of academic choices. For example, some institutions, such as the University of Michigan and Arizona State University offer an astounding 250 majors (Simon). Institutions attempt to guide students with course and major selection by offering orientation sessions that acquaint students with the institution and student services, provide an informal conversation with faculty members, help them plan a career, and in general, tutor them in skills to survive college, but the downfall is that the sessions are optional (Pascarella and Terenzini) and students may not benefit from this new knowledge.

Furthermore, and critically, when students enter institutions of higher learning they are “...given considerably more control and responsibility in selecting their courses than they previously had in high school” (DellaGioia). Hagedorn, Maxwell, Cypers, Moon, and Lester whose

research analyzed students' dropping and adding of courses, contended that students lack a better understanding of the courses they wish to enroll in and thus, are not making "...more rational choices" (481).

As a result, students may turn to a familiar source of information to make sense of course and major selection – the mass media. What has changed about mass media is branded content. Branded content is a relatively new form of advertising, which blurs distinction between advertising and entertainment by fusing the two elements together to create entertainment content. Entertainment content is used in film, video games, music, Internet, and television and is well received by those aged 18-34. Branded content in television dramas, such as *Mad Men* and *Trust Me*, can lampoon the advertising industry and its careers because the content "...uses a narrative structure, character development, and offer[s] an experience..." (Wiese) about the advertising industry while incorporating familiar brands, such as Dove and Rolling Rock.

Given the images displayed on television, is viewers' reality influenced by what they view? Mae Jemison, the first black female astronaut, studied science in college after watching Lieutenant Uhura in *Star Trek*. Similarly, Nelson Andrews earned a criminal justice degree after being influenced by the case-solving detectives in *Scooby-Doo* (Arenofsky). *I Love Lucy* episodes inspired Shari Cohen, senior partner and managing director of the advertising agency Mindshare. Cohen said, "That show made me realize I wanted to work in television" (qtd. in Linnett ps2-s2). Tim Taylor pointed to a more factual program, *NOVA* by Public Broadcasting System, which influenced his course selection and major. Taylor said, "It presented programs on physics and physical science" (qtd. in Arenofsky 6). Taylor is a chemist for Dial Corporation and invents cleaning products (Arenofsky). Undergraduate public relations students shared that mass media influenced their course and career expectations because the career was portrayed in the media as glamorous (Bowen). Similarly, undergraduate business students rated television or

movie portrayal of the occupation as the most important information source when selecting their major (Crampton, Walstrom, and Schambach).

More recently, forensic science television programs (i.e., *CSI*) have had an effect on campus. “Enrollment in forensic science educational programs across the U.S. is exploding” (Houck). At Honolulu’s Chaminade University, enrollment in the forensic science program grew from 15 students to 100 students over four years (Houck). West Virginia University echoes similar spikes in its forensic science program; the program “...has grown from four graduates in 2000 to currently being the third largest major on campus, with more than 500 students in the program” (Houck).

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The contemporary media effects theories most recognized for understanding the effects of television are cultivation theory, gratification and uses theory, and social learning theory. (Campbell, Martin, and Fabos). Uses and gratification theory examines what audiences will do with the media messages, as opposed to the effects of the message. The theory also attempts to understand what gratification viewers receive from the media message (Anderson and Ross). Bandura’s social learning theory contends that people learn from one another by observation, imitation, and modeling. Cultivation effect does not attempt to understand what audiences do with the media messages or what audiences learn; rather, it is concerned with the effect of the media messages and how one’s reality is defined. Thus, the theory most applicable to this study is cultivation effect because the study seeks to understand how students define a reality about the advertising industry and its careers based upon portrayals in the

popular television programs *Mad Men* and *Trust Me*, as well as understand how that reality influences course selection, major, and career.

Cultivation theory suggests that watching television over a period of time will “cultivate” the audience’s perception of reality. The theory applies to both light and heavy television viewing because “...even light viewers live in the same cultural environment as most others who do watch television” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli). In addition, even the smallest effects of television viewing can have an effect on one’s reality. Shanahan and Morgan define cultivation further: “The process within which interaction through messages shapes and sustains the terms on which the messages are premised” (12). In addition, Gerbner adds, “Cultivation is what a culture does” because “culture is the basic medium in which humans live and learn” (249). Television communicates to viewing audiences through the images and the actor’s dialogue. A communicative interaction occurs when viewers respond to the televised message. Hence, watching a television program is considered interacting, while the entertainment industry has control over the mass reception of the cultural stories (television) (Shanahan and Morgan). Gerbner, Gross, and Melody contend that television “...not only [satisfies] but shape[s] a range of attitudes, tastes, and preferences. It provides the boundary conditions and overall patterns within which the processes of personal and group-mediated selection, interpretation, and image-foundation go on” (567).

Research Perspective

The interpretivist process provided the perspective for this research project. Interpretation enables the researcher to untangle webs of meaning that develop when participants are exposed to and interact with different people, places, and ideas. Interpretation answers the question, “What are the meanings in the data?” (Gay and Airasian). Geertz contends that interpretation “...illuminates the meanings and conceptual structures that organize a subject’s experience” (27). More precisely, interpretive

interactionism was applied to this research study, because it combined symbolic interactionism and interpretive inquiry (Blumer; Denzin). The combination highlighted a thorough understanding of interpretive thought and the presence of symbolic undertones.

Interpretive interactionism is critical to the construction of reality as humans do not have direct access to reality (Denzin; Mills). Without direct access to reality, humans must interpret experiences that they encounter. According to Denzin, "Reality...is mediated by symbolic representations, by narrative texts, and by televisual and cinematic structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world" (x).

Methodology

Interviewing in focus groups was the qualitative research method used to understand the proposed research question (How is the advertising industry portrayed and what are the implications of these portrayals for students' course selection, major, and career?). Focus group interviewing was selected for several reasons. One, this method encourages subjects to speak freely, completely, and without criticism about their "...behaviors, attitudes, and opinions they possess" (Berg 111). Two, focus group interviewing creates a "synergistic group effect," which lends to greater ideas, analysis, and discussion about the given topic (Berg 112). Three, and most important, this method is based upon interaction. "Meaning and answers arising during focus group interviews are socially constructed rather than individually created" (Berg 115). It is imperative to use focus group interviewing in this study because the process of selecting a course, a major, and a career, like the focus group process, occurs socially (i.e., symbolic interactionism).

The researcher, serving as the focus group moderator, explained the research project to the undergraduate participants as well as how the focus groups would operate. In addition, the undergraduate participants were

told their responses would be recorded for analysis purposes by the researcher. First, the researcher asked the undergraduate participants to write down television programs they recalled that portrayed the advertising industry and its careers. In addition, the research participants were asked to recall television programs of which they had previously viewed multiple episodes or an entire season. In total, the research participants recalled seven television programs that in some aspect portrayed the advertising industry and careers. The undergraduate participants recalled *Bewitched* (1964-1972, ABC), *Bosom Buddies* (1980-1982, ABC), *Thirtysomething* (1987-1991, ABC), *Melrose Place* (1992-1999, FOX), *Two and a Half Men* (2003-present, CBS), *Mad Men* (2007-present, AMC) and *Trust Me* (2009-2010, TNT). Out of these television programs, the most popular and most recognized programs among all the undergraduate participants were *Mad Men* and *Trust Me*. Since *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* had an advertising plot, the setting occurred in an advertising environment, and the television programs had significant recognition by the research participants, these programs were the only ones discussed and analyzed to uncover patterns of meaning (e.g., portrayals). To elicit the most discussion about television programs' portrayal of the advertising industry and influence on course selection, major, and career choice, the researcher crafted a series of discussion questions:

1. How is the advertising industry/careers portrayed in these programs?
2. Explain if you are more likely to enroll in advertising courses after viewing portrayals of the industry in television programs?
3. Explain if advertising portrayals in television programs affect choice of major, which would influence your career outlook.

4. After watching programs that showcase aspects of the advertising industry/careers, what are you learning?

To effectively engage in focus group interviewing and to elicit the most discussion possible to probe for patterns of meaning, the number of research participants allowed per focus group was eight to ten (Moriarty, Mitchell, and Wells). Thus, there were total of seven focus groups. The final data set was 70 undergraduate students.

Participants

Undergraduate participants enrolled in the Introduction to Advertising course spring 2009 and fall 2010 were selected for this study, because they were interested in the subject of advertising. Age and nationality were not considered in this study due to the population of students at this public, 4-year university in Missouri. The university is a robust institution with a rich population of students, which offers more generalizability of the study findings.

Analysis and Results

The data was analyzed by the researcher using the recorded discussions of the research participants. The researcher used systematic analysis by "...analyzing the content of the statements made by the subjects during the focus groups" (Berg 124). More specifically, the researcher bracketed the data from the research participants. The portrayals of the advertising industry (the phenomenon) were held up close for inspection (Berg). According to Berg, bracketing "...unmasks, defines, and determines the phenomenon's basic elements and essential structure" (124).

The salient findings are discussed to reveal how the two most recognized advertising programs aired on television portray the advertising industry and its careers. Both *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* shared

similar portrayals. However, *Mad Men* ranked less favorable by the research participants as a result of the time period *Mad Men* was set – the 1960s. To elicit rich descriptions from the research participants, a series of discussion questions were asked by the researcher. Following is the analysis based upon the undergraduate participant responses to the discussion questions.

- How is the advertising industry/careers portrayed in these programs?

The research participants analyzed portrayals of the advertising industry and its careers in *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* as concerned with personal issues at home and with a spouse, partner, or ex; agency relationships that displayed conflict, stress, frustration, and anger; and agency relationships in conflict with the boss. Portrayals of agency offices were also analyzed. However, personal issues seemed to take precedence over work. Furthermore, and critically, even though both *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* shared similar portrayals, *Mad Men* ranked less favorable by the research participants as a result of the time period *Mad Men* was set – the 1960s.

According to the research participants, the 1960s reflects portrayals of drinking, smoking, sex outside the marriage, and male dominance in the workplace. One participant explained: “Consider the fact that *Mad Men* happened in the 1960s may explain why advertising was underplayed compared to other aspects, such as smoking and drinking. However, I was able to see some aspects of advertising aside from smoking and drinking, such as the interaction between agency and clients, how research is conducted, and branding.” Another female participant commented about male dominance at the advertising agency in *Mad Men*: “I did not like how advertising was portrayed in *Mad Men* and especially the women. Women were not properly treated back then. Women had little or no voice and their ideas were not taken seriously for the most part.” A male participant shared a similar thought, “There are some portrayals of *Mad*

Men that I question would happen today, such as drinking in the office and the womanizing.” Another participant echoed positive comments about *Mad Men*, and he said, “Although the characters had many personal issues, their creativity and work ethic was exciting and influenced me.” According to a research participant, *Trust Me* showed a more realistic side of an advertising agency and that hard work is involved: “I think it showed a good balance of hard work, fun, and how personal lives can interfere with business (e.g., Sarah’s relationship with husband and inter-office relationship between Tony and Denise).” Another participant explained, “Personally, I found *Trust Me* to portray the advertising industry as stressful – working with others, inter-office conflicts, fighting for accounts (heck, fighting for an office with a window), meeting the needs of the client, and creating an attention-getting campaign.”

- Explain if you are more likely to enroll in advertising courses after viewing portrayals of the industry in television programs?

A female participant said about *Mad Men*,

Honestly, viewing the portrayals of the industry on television did not inspire me to want to enroll in more advertising courses because it simply did not give me full details about advertising. The employees in the show were usually playing around or not giving their all to projects (e.g. males’ attitude toward the lipstick account). The only employee who inspired me to take an advertising course was Peggy, because she was one of the first women in the agency to land a promotion to junior copywriter – very empowering.

Mad Men also had an influential effect on a male participant: “The show persuaded me into exploring more about the advertising industry through my course work. I would be lying if I said that watching *Mad Men* didn’t

get me excited about the industry.” *Trust Me* further reinforced one female participant’s belief about the industry: “The program is entertaining, but also seems to present the real atmosphere of an advertising agency – hard work along with frustration. *Trust Me* also depicts creative people, and I consider myself to be such a person, so yes, I would enroll in more courses with a copywriting emphasis.” An enthused female participant explained,

After watching the seventh episode of *Trust Me*, I couldn’t wait to take more advertising courses. Before watching the show, I really had no clue about the different ad jobs and the hierarchy of an agency. I never have considered which position I would like, because I didn’t understand the job descriptions. Now, I have a much better sense of the different ad jobs, and I hope to work my way up to creative director and beyond.

- Explain if advertising portrayals in television programs affect your choice of major, which would influence your career outlook.

After watching season one of *Trust Me*, a participant explained that advertising portrayals in television programs do affect major and career outlook:

More and more students are getting their ideas and beliefs of the workplace from TV shows. TV shows offer an easy avenue for students to see examples of specific industries. Many students follow a certain career path because of how well it is portrayed on TV. TV shows commonly show the good qualities of a character’s life such as money, sex, and leisure as a result of his/her occupation. As a result, viewers want the same life. I think for many kids (I’m talking about myself), TV shows offer a look into working environments that they would never get to see.

One female participant concurred about advertising portrayals in television as influential: “Who wouldn’t want the lifestyle of Don Draper? He has everything. He has a cool job, good pay, head of his department, he gets along with most of co-workers (except Peter), and he is friends with his boss.”

One participant shared that television programs have been influential on her career outlook since she was a young girl: “I think people (kids included) go into certain fields because of what they see in movies and on television. When I was younger I wanted to be a marine biologist because of the movie *Free Willy*.” Another male participant echoed similar sentiments about mass media’s influence, “Consumers of the mass media are swayed by such representations; some may think that all colleges are like *Animal House* and every ghost is Patrick Swayze.”

In some research, participants’ television programs are not influential when choosing a major and career outlook, but the programs do invite an interest. “No, TV shows do not affect my major selection. I love shows such as *Law and Order*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *House* but seeing those shows do not make me want to be a detective or a doctor. I think TV shows are a good way to have a look into things that you’re not doing for the sake of curiosity. The only thing TV portrayals would do for me is spark an interest to find out more,” expressed one participant. Another participant shared a similar thought: “No, watching television shows spikes my interest to take a course or two in the subject. But, just to pick my major because of a TV show...I wouldn’t do that.”

- After watching programs that showcase aspects of the advertising industry/careers, what are you learning?

“Although I find the industry interesting, I am learning that advertising is for young people with little responsibilities – it’s too fast paced,” declared a non-traditional student after viewing season one of *Mad Men*. Another female student commented about her learning experiences from *Mad Men*,

“By becoming an executive in advertising, I will get to work in big cities like New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago.” Regarding *Trust Me* one participant explained, “I was learning through the entire show, as I was putting myself in the scenarios and envisioned what I would have done differently and possibly more effective. Of course, I understand that the show is a drama but being that it is a drama then a comedy allowed the show to offer a variety of conflicts that prepared me for the ones in real life one day.” An excited male participant shared,

Here is coolest part about *Mad Men* and *Trust Me*, interwoven in the personal issues, stress, and conflict I was able to see real ad work like recording a radio commercial for a lipstick account, understanding the impact of the law on cigarette sales for Lucky Strikes, re-branding Menken’s department store, researching Right Guard, developing a campaign for a steel company, tailoring a savings account toward a man’s private life, creating a campaign for American Airlines after a plane crashes, writing a tagline for a cruise line, squeezing out a presidential nominee, writing taglines for Arc Mobile, researching and developing the Big Idea for Dove, designing the theme for the Olympics, pitching the Rolling Rock account – man, this is exactly what I want to do.

Discussion

The topic of television and its ability to cultivate audience's perceptions of reality is nothing new to the field of mass communication. Whether the information communicated via television is accurate or inaccurate, it provides a lens of insight about how to act, behave, dress, and feel (Winterstein and Page). What is new about mass media is branded content. Branded content in television dramas is effective for promoting industries (i.e., higher learning) and brands (i.e., courses and majors), because of its

ability to integrate the message seamlessly into the story while sharing an intended message with the viewer. Television dramas, such as *Mad Men* and *Trust Me*, can lampoon the advertising industry and its careers because the content "...uses a narrative structure, character development, and offer[s] an experience..." (Wiese). The critical aspect of branded content is willingness to share the content with others. The looming question: Was the content from *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* shared? Indeed, "...many, many people tweeted about the president's reference to 'Mad Men'. The *Mad Men* reference about equal pay for women inspired 33,555 tweets per minute" (Marshall). *Trust Me* inspired content sharing as viewers were directed to a dedicated web site to the "Be A Creative Director" promotion (Chief Marketer).

Branded content is meant to be shared, just like the process of selecting college courses and ultimately declaring a major; the process is not in isolation, it is a collaborative process done with others. This process of collaboration is the new era of advertising because "...brands are interacting with publics" (Goodson). As a result of this new era of advertising, it is urgent to understand how undergraduate students define a reality about the advertising industry and its careers based upon portrayals in the popular television programs *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* as well as understand how that reality influences course selection, major, and career.

Given the analyzed portrayals, the majority of the research participants said these programs would prompt them to enroll in advertising courses. One research participant explained: "I think any type of portrayal, even if exaggerated a bit, is better than being completely blind about what goes on in an advertising agency. By watching various depictions of the industry and the careers, I am able to decide if I would even want to take ad courses and be involved with such an industry." Even the students who said that viewing portrayals of advertising and its careers would not prompt them to enroll in advertising courses did admit that *Mad Men* and *Trust Me* did pique their curiosity to the point that they would seek more

information about advertising. One student shared, “For me, watching episodes of *Trust Me* intrigues me and makes me more curious.” Students were a little more cautious when selecting a major because of these programs, especially *Mad Men* because of the 1960s time period. The students could relate to the work, but not the drinking, smoking, sex outside the marriage, and male dominance in the workplace. One student expressed his thoughts about popular television programs’ effect on his major: “I would never make a major decision based on a television program. That is not to say that television is not a springboard for ideologies and interests. In all fairness to television, it does make me want to investigate further into the field as I am now more inclined to look at the creative side of the industry.” Only one student said these programs would not affect her choice of major. As a non-traditional student, she perceived the industry as one for “young” people.

Television, just like advertising, has durable staying power. According to the Media Comparisons Study of 2010, television reached nearly 90 % of people 18 and over every day. More specifically, *Mad Men* drew record-breaking audiences with 2.7 million viewers during the Season 6 finale; AMC’s highest rated show (Reuters), and *Trust Me* debuted with 3.4 million viewers (Frankel); and these viewer totals do not include shared content. Television has the power to provide insights about subjects, people, and places that may have been relatively unexplored by the viewing audience. As young adults seek options about college courses that will ultimately determine their major and career choice, it is advantageous for advertising practitioners and educators to understand the messages communicated on the “tube” about the industry and its careers. As practitioners and educators, we can capitalize on popular culture's reality by challenging students to think critically and investigate situations.

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