Adversaries of advertising: anti-consumerism and subvertisers’ critique and practice

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Adversaries of Advertising: 
Anti-Consumerism and Subvertisers’ 
Critique and Practice 
Eleftheria J. Lekakis (University of Sussex) 
School of Media, Film and Music, University of Sussex, Falmer, BN1 9RH, United Kingdom 

Abstract: 
Anti-consumerism is a rich and diverse field of advocacy and activism and has historically been studied in terms of its tactics, representations and ideologies. This paper presents an original contribution to this field through, first, its presentation of primary research conducted among subvertising practitioners in an international context. Subverting (aka culture jamming) can be both a movement and a set of tactics used by movements. As an emergent anti-consumerist social movement, it has been connecting individuals and collectives in transnational actions against advertising. Drawing on twenty-four interviews with subvertisers in seven countries, I illustrate their perspectives of advertising as a problem, as well as their practices as responses to that. I argue that their theory and practice of anti-consumerism goes beyond a for/against binary which regards advertising as an ideological enemy. Instead, they protest the deleterious effects of contemporary Habermasian ‘publicity’. Thus, the second contribution of this paper is in its application of a grounded theory approach complemented by framing theory to gain insights with respect to those, specifically in terms of public wellbeing, damage to democracy, and damage to the environment. To this set of problems, they offer solutions oriented towards critical pedagogy or policy change. Mobilising all tools at their disposal, from media production to media disruption, subvertisers are involved in the struggle against consumer capitalism, in both cultural and material terms. In their articulation of resistance narratives, and through their variant and often coordinated practices, subvertisers are united in a transnational anti-consumerist social movement. 

Keywords: subvertising, anti-consumerism, social movements, publicity, ideology, framing 

‘What’s wrong with advertising?’ 
This is an enormous question - there are so many things, from so many perspectives, that are wrong with advertising that it is hard to know where to start, or how to ever end. (magee, 2016: 17) 

In 2016, kyle magee produced a booklet unapologetically called what the f*#k do you do that for? outlining answers to all questions posed to him during actions against advertising
in Melbourne. Kyle has been posting anti-advertising bills and painting over advertising screens across the city’s public transport network for over a decade. In the booklet, he develops a first response to the ‘enormous question’ posed above; advertising nurtures consumerism, erases quality of life, spearheads environmental catastrophe, corrodes social trust, and increases the feeling of alienation in urban settings, while making the superrich insurmountably richer and the roots of inequalities deeper. Kyle is part of Subvertisers International, an emergent social movement against advertising ‘concerned with how commercial media is (sic) shaping our lives, and determined that the time to act is now’ (Subvertisers International, 2020a). The movement operates at the transnational level through annually coordinated activities and at the national level through advocacy, workshops and creative interventions.

Subvertising (aka culture jamming) is the act of subverting advertising to ‘correct’, distort or completely replace its meaning; it can be, as I argue, both a movement and a set of tactics to be used by movements. This study is among the first to conduct primary research with subvertising practitioners in an international context. Through a grounded theory approach, drawing on interviews with subvertising activists, I illustrate how they frame advertising as a problem and the solutions they advocate. I argue that their critique is informed and informative and allows for a conceptualisation of anti-consumerism beyond a for/against binary. Subvertisers do not protest advertising as a universal ideological enemy, but the effects of contemporary ‘publicity’ (Habermas, 1989). This paper aims to highlight the critique of advertising adversaries in relation to social and environmental justice. Heeding to the subvertisers’ calls, it supports a critical appraisal as a powerful industry, which produces and funds media content. First, I contextualize subvertising within studies of anti-consumerism and discuss it as a social movement in terms of tactics and ideology. The methodological approach comes next, followed by an analysis of subvertisers’ approaches and actions. The paper concludes with a summary of the critique of advertising as articulated and practised by its adversaries.

Anti-consumerism and Social Movements: Subverting Tactics and Ideological Binaries

Reviewing anti-consumerism in the west, Kim Humphery highlights the importance of observing and criticizing ‘the routine, if currently muted, excesses of consumer economies’ (2009: 3). I share this definition of ‘a field of alternative social and economic practices, a political stance and current, that traverses movements of various kinds’ (ibid: 109). Such movements can be discursive and/or material, sustained or spontaneous, individual or collective, formal or informal. Anti-consumerism is also an ideology shared by past and present social movements, but the extent to which it is a movement within itself remains debatable. For some, anti-consumerism is a movement; the founder of Adbusters, one of the most iconic culture jamming cases, calls culture jammers ‘a loose global network of media activists who see [themselves] as the advance shock troops of the most significant social movement of the next twenty years’ (Lasn, 2000: xi). Echoing that, Carty explores anti-sweatshop activism and ‘Culture Jammers’ as new social movements of flexible ties, enabled by developments in digital communication, that can ‘use micro-level forms of resistance to challenge macro-level trends’ (2002: 130). Kozinets and Handelman also posit that consumer movements are ‘particular kinds of social movements that attempt to transform various elements of the social order surrounding consumption and marketing’ (2004: 691). For others, critical practices of (anti)consumption have been emerging in parallel to the rise of the new social movements, but are rather forms of political participation geared towards market advocacy (Balsinger, 2010; Stolle and Micheletti, 2015; Colli, 2020). Subverting includes an assemblage of creative tactics, which can be mobilized by a range of agencies, from citizens to NGOs and social
movements. The boundaries of subvertising are porous, as it includes ‘small individual gestures [which] make it possible for everyone to find connections between the protest and their everyday lives’ (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013: 78). Such anti-consumerist action is possible from filling in empty speech bubbles stuck on outdoor advertising to lobbying against the expansion of digital advertising screens in public space. For Routledge, this is ‘a repertoire of actions and practices attuned to consumerist culture and mass-mediated images’ (2012: 431). Dubuisson-Quellier and Barrier (2007) argue that such tactics can allow for connections between social movements and help frame mobilizations and networks of activists in search of collective action against the market. Hence, the practice of subvertising varies, as do its rhetorical strategies (Harold, 2009); sometimes artists produce works that look exactly like professional advertisements or citizens produce works that look more like DIY cardboard posters. There is truth in both approaches.

Subvertising is both a movement and a set of tactics for movements. Subvertisers target advertising texts and spaces, aiming to expose skeletons in the closet of consumer capitalism (Jordan, 2002; Carducci 2006, in press). Historical examples include Canada-based Adbusters, its France-based sister organisation Casseurs de pub, US-based Billboard Liberation Front and Australia-based B.U.G.A. U.P. (Billboard Utilising Graffitists against Unhealthy Promotions). In addition to targeting advertising messages in outdoor spaces, subvertising also produces media and messages. I argue that Subvertisers International (first manifesting in 2017) is an emergent counter-hegemonic movement, while subvertising remains among the creative tools of anti-consumerist movements (Klein, 2000). Subvertisers International is a social movement, concerned with social and environmental justice and targeting advertising texts and spaces. It is organized densely through informal networks, enabled by digital technologies, but also by experience and knowledge in the field of anti-consumerism. Within it, there are core movement groups, which partake in the coordination of transnational action, while continuing their own activities at the local or national level. Loosely connected to it are agents partaking in ephemeral interventions whether individually or collectively.

As an anti-consumerist movement, subvertising rebels against the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’, a hegemony encouraging unsustainable addiction to consumer culture and acceptance of the ideology of transnational corporations and the transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2002). Hence, the question of ideology is central. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that anti-consumerism is connected to morality. Writing particularly of ‘revelation’ as characteristic of anti-advertising activist identity, they view the metaphor of ‘awakening’ as reminiscent of evangelical religious identity in which advertising adversaries are distinct to the duped consumers whom they are trying to awaken. Such a binary approach to anti-consumerism and the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ might be effective in terms of defending the former as a social movement. However, it also recreates a moral binary, which can be problematic and simplifying, as the practice of anti-consumerism is sometimes more about identity and community building, rather than an absolute goal of abstinence from consumer capitalism (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Chatzidakis and Lee (2013) directly challenge the study of anti-consumerism through the binary of ‘reasons for’ and ‘reasons against’ arguing that it conceals a complex continuum of resistant practices. Furthermore, the ideological binary (awakened vs asleep) is evident in much critique of culture jamming as an exclusionary medium, which addresses the enlightened, but patronizes the politically aloof (Carducci, 2006). However, as the analysis shows, subvertising can illustrate a sophisticated approach to pedagogy.

Culture jamming have mostly been explored textually; scholars have highlighted the importance of the ‘constitutive aspect of narrative’ (Atkinson, 2003: 164) and its power to delegitimize transnational corporations (Davis et al, 2016). Yet, subvertisers’ perspectives remain unexplored, particularly in their formation as a social movement. There have been
scarce studies of subvertising from a grounded theory perspective (Valor et al, 2016), though none known to the author in an international context. This paper fills this gap by contextualising subvertising within anti-consumerism, challenging the ideological binary of for/against advertising and discussing subvertisers’ perceptions and practices in the context of relevant theories. Emerging work from Dekeyser (2019) promises to provide up-close analysis of the inner workings of subvertising through a collaborative and immersive ethnography which provides unique insights on advertising power and recuperation and non-binary approaches to legality and civil disobedience. Choosing the perspective of a critical yet sympathetic researcher, I found myself listening to subvertisers’ life and work stories, celebrations and challenges, and hope to offer a rigorous reasoning as to why we need to take subvertising seriously, and look closely at its adversarial position to reconnect academic and activist approaches to societal, political and environment justice. In what follows, the richness of subvertisers’ responses to ‘what’s wrong with advertising’ and ‘what can be done to address this’ illuminates precisely that.

On Approaching Subvertising Methodologically

This study employs the interpretative approach of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) stemming from a sociological interest in the politics of consumption and extending into a critical questioning of advertising through fieldwork to discover subvertising practitioners’ perspectives. I first became aware of emergent adversaries of advertising through news of a subvertising campaign during COP21 in Paris (Lekakis, 2017). Gaining access was gradual, from connecting with Paris-based subvertisers to more agents of the network. A comprehensive review of available digital content, especially the well-documented work of Brandalism and their strategic allies, allowed me to identify possible interviewees. Sampling was in dynamic formation and constantly updated through snowball technique and my interactions with the field. This analysis is informed by continuous engagement with scholarship and reflection on material produced by subvertisers, events that I attended and developments in their practice (2016-2018). Upon the formation of Subvertisers International, engagement with framing theory for the analysis of interview material enabled an insight into the polymorphous network of individuals and groups involved formally or informally with them. Drawing on framing tasks to analyse interviews strengthens the re-conceptualisation of subvertising as a social movement.

Overall, I conducted twenty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews with subvertisers based in seven countries, questioning their motivations, tactics and targets (Table 1). With a few exceptions, the majority of interviews were conducted in participants’ workspaces or public spaces. Participants had the option of stating their name or choosing a pseudonym. Artists are addressed by their full name or alias, as per their personal choice which can also be political. As London-based artist Aida Wilde noted: ‘I think for me it was not important to know it was me but it was about to say you know what? Actually, there are women doing things too. Everything’s so male-driven.’

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

About one third of interviewees are connected to the transnational social movement Subvertisers International and most subvertisers are at least aware of each other while many have collaborated in campaigns such as No Ad Day (a transnational day of action against
Why protest advertising? A Diagnosis of Advertising

Broadly, subvertisers regard advertising as strategic communication geared towards the creation of consumer needs which, in turn, suppress political expression and participation, create stereotypes and recreates social stratification, while it spearheads environmental damage. Advertising is perceived as a system of persuasion, which negatively affects our emotional and ecological lifeworlds. This is an argument that several subvertisers take seriously in their artistic or advocacy practice. Their diagnosis can be broken down to three key elements:

1. **Creation of consumer needs**: Advertising relies on creating and manipulating consumer needs, thereby influencing their purchasing decisions. This process is often dishonest, as it fails to reveal the true costs and impacts of the products being advertised. Subvertisers see this as a manipulation of the public, leading to environmental and social harm.

2. **Recreation of social stratification**: Through the portrayal of certain lifestyles and values, advertising reinforces social hierarchies. Subvertisers argue that this not only perpetuates social inequalities but also obscures the real causes of environmental degradation.

3. **Widespread impact on lifeworlds**: Advertising affects not just our economic decision-making but also our emotional and ecological lifeworlds. It shapes our perceptions of the world, encouraging consumption-based lifestyles that are unsustainable and detrimental to the environment. Subvertisers see this as a breach of the public's right to a decent living environment.
different resistance narratives: damage to public wellbeing, damage to democracy, damage to environment.

First, damage to public wellbeing includes concerns such as those articulated by Kale Lasn (2000), who regards advertising as a form of visual or mental pollution. In New York, photographer Dusty Rebel wonders, ‘it’s just everywhere, it’s so overwhelming and it’s just forcing messaging down your throat everywhere and what do you get from it?’ In the same city, artist Jilly Ballistic states,

In and of itself, there’s nothing wrong with it. Advertising is remarkably ingenious and creative... Of course there is a fine line and a balance ... For instance, there is some advertising when you’re intellectually like “it’s horrific”. It’s an insult to people who are looking at it, their intelligence.

Apart from separating advertising as communication from the advertising system which draws on stereotypes and quick sells in the pursuit of eyeballs, Jilly here is identifying ‘horror’ in some advertisements, especially regarding race and gender politics. A member of Resistance is Female proclaims a lack of personal aversion towards advertising, but also notes the horrific presence of sexism in some advertising:

I’m not inherently against advertising, but I’m all about fucking with it as much as possible. It’s just good to fuck with shit, you know, call things to question. On the subway, they have these ads on the subway cars and there are these ones in particular that are really fucking horrible plastic surgery ads and you know they had one ad where there’s a woman holding like a pair of limes against her chest and she’s sad and then in the next -before and after- she was holding cantaloupes and she was smiling. So that kind of shit? Fuck them. That pisses me off so bad. I’ve got a daughter. And she’s smart, she’s doesn’t fall in with that stuff, but that kind of shit is fucking obnoxious. I’m sure they think that they’re fabulously funny bros... advertising in general, they’re putting it up there, it’s gonna get fucked with. (Abe Lincoln Jr)

Abe’s non-binary approach to advertising and subvertising as ideological enemies challenges previous studies on the binary opposition between for and anti-advertising (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). It also underscores the importance of addressing everyday sexism. Alarm by Trump’s public discourse and policies against women and minorities, the collective started replacing old phone booth panels with original artworks by female and queer artists from around the world. Their diagnosis is stifling sexism and gender-related discrimination and oppression. In line with Abe’s frustration, Art in Ad Places curators have recounted their aversion towards an aesthetic surgery billboard advertisement as the key motivation behind the campaign (Anapur, 2017). Advertising is, hence, not only seen as polluting, but as racialized and gendered. Gigi Chen, an artist connected to Resistance is Female, says:

I grew up in America as a Chinese girl. I noticed that I never saw people that looked like me growing up. I noticed that I still don’t see that a lot and as an adult I think it’s really funny, meaning like ironically funny. And as an adult I look at it and I go is it really that hard, I mean, come on, there are so many beautiful people in America, is it really that hard to get an Asian model, is it really hard to be conscious of things like that? ... I want to think about what it means, what are people trying to tell me when I don’t see anyone that looks like me.
Beyond visual and mental pollution, damage to public wellbeing includes critique of exploitation of creative and other forms of precarious labour. Artist Vermibus rages against advertising as the fuel of consumer society and the selling out of street art.

This consumer society is just like an octopus with tentacles, no? Tentacles of capitalism and ultra-consumerism is like just [makes usurping sound] everything. … The most creative people, they’re working in advertising, they’re not working as an artist. … you can fight your future being an artist and there are some that make it. And then there’s advertising saying “hey, how much do you want? Just how much? You want to work for Adidas?” … I mean you can see this in the street art world. … In New York there is a company that are making murals but with advertising. It’s not murals. It’s advertising. So they are painting facades and they’re very talented, they paint really well, but they work for advertising and I mean you cannot blame them, there’s bills to pay and all this but argh where is the limit?

The question of integrity within subcultural communities engaged in alternative politics is a key one, as Anne Elizabeth Moore (2007) has highlighted in *Unmarketable*, and not one where co-optation is always bad or detrimental to the community it encompasses. Yet, the dynamics between brandalism (brand vandalism) and ‘mocketing’ (mock marketing), as she puts it, are involved in an interplay where the outcomes of their clash are not always black or white (Moore, 2007; Lekakis, 2017). Resistance is Possible and Vermibus, despite fuelling frustration about co-optation, precisely relies on that possibility.

Further exposing labour exploitation in advertising industries, Parisian citizen Fabien Tipon & Co documents the precarious workers who install advertising during a daily commute (Figure 1):

I also try to get the reality of the business. For example, I take a picture of the people that put those advertisements on the wall to say look, they come with an old car, they have no money… I speak with this guy. He is paid, you know, nothing. He has to drive all Paris with all the advertisements in his own car and put them everywhere. And he said “I have to put them on the wall faster than Paris can clean them”. So this is the reality. It’s not the advertisement on the wall that says you can be really beautiful if you have this. No, that’s not the reality. The reality is the poor guy that is paid nothing to put the message on the wall. It’s not a dream. It’s just a shitty world and shitty work for big companies.

For subvertisers, advertising poses a threat to public wellbeing in both material and symbolic terms.

Secondly, damage to democracy is a key element of subvertisers’ critique. Subvertisers International propagate that ‘commercial advertising is negatively affecting the world that we live in’ and that ‘world-wide, commercial advertising is invading our public spaces and co-opting our media in an effort to promote the endless consumption of goods, services and brands’ (Subvertisers International, 2020b). Their critique regards the engendering of public interest (Habermas, 1989) by the global dominance of advertising which alongside other cultural industries has replaced ‘critical publicity’ with ‘manipulative publicity’ (Calhoun, 1992: 178). The advertising industry is, hence, blamed for the detriment of ‘publicity’ and further refeudalisation of the public sphere; ‘advertising revenue has more impact on
programming than democratic ideals’ (Papacharissi, 2002: 19). Rumbo has similarly argued that ‘advertising messages legitimate consumerism by controlling a mass-media industry that is virtually devoid of space for the articulation of dissenting views’ (2002: 129). In the age of data-driven advertising, threats to democracy remain relevant (Einstein, 2016; Hardy, 2018; McGuigan, 2019). As Le Turnip suggests, advertising adversaries are ‘frustrated by the cage of corporate advertising’. The Brighton-based citizen diagnoses advertising as an ill system of media funding responsible for propaganda and misinformation and skewing public interest towards the interest of elites. Comparable is the Melbourne-based citizen’s diagnosis that ‘for-profit advertising is psychologically and politically damaging’ (magee, 2016: 13). As Kyle continues, ‘mainstream media is [sic] dominated by for-profit companies (funded by advertising) that distort and corrupt our politics’ (ibid). Subvertisers highlight constant threats to democracy. Another citizen notes:

At the heart of democracy is access to public space for like communication and dialogue with your fellow people and we don’t have that so therefore democracy is flawed at its core. So that was a huge part of it, in order to have a healthy democracy we need to be able to express ourselves and have ownership over public space and if our public space is continually getting taken over by these corporations then we don’t have public space! (Clea)

Similarly, a key figures from Glimpse says:

A big critique of advertising is that it treats people as consumers, not as citizens, and if you’re told you’re a consumer that’s very disempowering and it means that you think your role in life is to buy things and to respond to things rather than to create, participate, and play an active role. (James)

Further underlining public pacification through advertising, artist Maha Al-Asaker says ‘your eyes get used to your environment very fast that you don’t question things’. The stifling of political expression and participation as resulting from the dominance of the ‘manipulative publicity’ of advertising messages is thus another element to the diagnosis of subvertisers.

Thirdly, damage to the environment is mentioned both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, it refers to how the media, operating in a marketized environment, prioritize and promote consumer capitalism (Lewis, 2013). Le Turnip acknowledges this challenge; ‘when we talk about politics or environmentalism, whatever, people think it’s serious, political or they’re not interested’. This also testifies to the deleterious effects of ‘manipulative publicity’, which silences environmentalism. Similarly, for artist Sara Erenthal, advertising equals brainwashing, as ‘it’s all about how do we brainwash you to not stop thinking about this product? It’s consumerism … and they’re good at it.’ Consumerism fosters productivism and productivism results in climate change. This also echoes Carty’s assertion that ‘it is very difficult to mobilize against global capitalism on the basis of anti-consumerist ideology in that consumerism is the most successful ideology of all time’ (2002: 140). Again, the extent to which publicity fosters environmental degradation is a key theme in subverting practices. Yet, unabated by the possibility that the ‘culture-ideology of consumerism’ is too big to be meaningfully contested, subvertisers continue to pursue their goals, which are discussed later. Khaled (R.A.P.) makes an explicit connection between environmental justice and struggles against advertising:

Social justice is a very important thing for me because I’m from the South. I’m Tunisian and I’ve lived in Egypt so, the misery of the poor people of the world, I’m very
connected to this. But ecology for me is something more important because when you
don’t have the planet, when you don’t have a place to live normally you can’t do social
justice… when you are against this consumer society you are against advertising
because the advertising system is in the hands of the oligarchy and the oligarchy [use]
advertising to tell people “consume consume consume”. So, it’s a big problem and it’s
the propaganda of our system today. … I’m always fighting against climate change but
[to fight] against advertising is the key to change the system.

Environmentalism is a strong motivation for groups such as R.A.P. who are connected
to environmental NGOs or Consume Hasta Morir who coalesced through a confederation of
Spanish environmental NGOs (Ecologistas en Acción). For other subvertisers, environmental
consciousness is an ‘obvious’ (Vermibus) motivation that informs their artistic or advocacy
practice. During COP21, artists offered their labour to promote alternative environmental
messages to Paris streets. Subvertisers’ diagnosis of advertising is centred on three types of
resistance narratives in defence of wellbeing, democracy and environmentalism. Jordan Seiler
interrelates these concerns and highlights how media outlets do not report on:

How fucked we’re getting by advertising and the shit deals and the sort of robbing of
our attention and the psychological issues, social issues, environmental issues that are
caued by advertising and getting people to understand that is really important because
it makes me mad that we’re being taken advantage of. And then I also think that
performing in public space and doing things that show alternative ways to use public
space in fun interesting ways really gets people excited too. So, it’s sort of like a two-
pronged attack, you like teach them that either they’re getting robbed because the
advertisers are running away with a shit ton of money or they’re also getting beaten in
the process because they’re left psychologically somewhat damaged and more inclined
to carry ruining the environment and not care about the people that surround them.

For subvertisers, the advertising industry promotes consumerism and unhealthy lifestyles. In
global neoliberal cities (London, Berlin, Buenos Aires, New York, Paris, Madrid, Melbourne,
São Paulo), advertising is the cultural dress of public space and advertising power
inconspicuously installs itself in everyday life; hence, understanding the practices that contest
it allows for an understanding of its production (Dekeyser, 2019).

What to do about it? Prognosis of Advertising

Solutions to the problem of advertising are multiple, with the key aims being the
fostering of critical citizenship through public pedagogy, as well as the regulation of public and
digital space through policy. This section explores subvertisers aims through Duncombe’s
(2016) framework of desired outcomes of artistic activists as imminent cultural shift, ultimate
cultural change, imminent material impact, ultimate material result. Several subvertisers seek
ultimate cultural change goals. Pedagogy is often a key driver of culture jamming (MiIlstein
and Pulos, 2015). For founding member of Consume Hasta Morir, the aim is to provide a
framework for citizens
to connect things… To look for the material origin of the things. Because we need to
know what is behind the roots of the things. Social roots, historical roots, environmental
roots. (Isidro)

Since the early 2000s, Consume Hasta Morir have produced over five hundred
subvertisements, the Malababa magazine, numerous books, exhibitions and public
performances, as well as a sixty-minute documentary. In their latest book, Manual de
Comunicación para la Ciudadanía Organizada (Jiménez Gomez and Olcina Alvarado, 2017),
key members offer a strategic perspective of communication for social change, informed by
their experiences. Subvertising is only a tactic of movements, they argue, and a technique for
relative creativity featuring tools for groups to reach consensus in terms of communicating
their anti-consumerist struggle. The group is also connected to Subvertisers International, and
thus form part of a transnational movement, while also coordinating local actions. R.A.P. also
produce resourceful contributions to the subvertising movement, such as a directory of all
related concepts and groups (R.A.P., 2020b). In addition, they produce teaching material for
educational institutions:

We try to create pedagogical kits to give to teachers and schools to criticize advertising
because now you have only one pedagogical kit and it’s done by advertisers and
teachers can teach the advertisers’ way to criticize advertising, so it’s not ours. So we
want to create that kit. (Lobotom)

Pedagogical aims are also found in groups such as Adbusters. According to their creative
designer:

Part of my work is to go to teach at this activist centre, to tell people that work with
design, photography and communications and social media “let me tell you about the
Yes Men, let me tell you about why Harvey Milk got elected not using the gay cause,
but the day-to-day sort of cause, and let me tell you about the anti-G8 meetings when
people start catapulting teddy bears into the riot police and what scene that creates. Why
haven’t you dressed as Pokémon and go to fight the cops? Where is that narrative?” …
Because an image of a Pokémon being beaten up by the police in Brazil will go around
the world … So, I was telling them about Beautiful Trouble, to read Beautiful Trouble,
to go to the website and kind of dig in, I always tell them about Adbusters and Dark
Matter, The Rules and interesting sort of collectives that try to work their way through
how we create new narratives. Is it a video? Is it a prank? Is it a pie in the face? Is it a
banner? … Advertising industries are working with that but maybe we need more, you
know? I think school is a great place to start, to remind students how this is so importan
(Andy)

Despite their different approaches, subvertisers seek a broader public pedagogy, not always as
the enlightened few, but as experienced allies. While their approaches to pedagogy range from
producing manuals on organising, documentaries about anti-consumerism, advertising
education material and media pranks, their tactics reflect their non-hierarchical values.

Ephemeral interventions in urban space also aim for imminent cultural shift. For the
Glimpse collective, ‘the cultural value we are trying to encourage is remembering that the best
things in life are free’ (James). Artistic collectives such as Commission Anti-Pub, Art in Ad
Places and Resistance is Female challenge advertising texts and spaces by replacing them with
déjà tournements or original artworks. During Nuit Debout, the Commission Anti-Pub set up the Atelier Anti-Pub in a Paris square.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Every Saturday afternoon, floor signs to the Atelier invited participants to pop-up subvertising workshops (Figure 2), where they had the opportunity to look at or tamper with 48” x 69” advertisements (Figure 3), in a participatory process of public pedagogy.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Once posters had been ‘detourned’, collective members re-installed them nearby (Figure 4).

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Across the Atlantic, similar actions targeted advertising as ‘sexist oppression’ (hooks, 1984) aiming to make intersectional feminism, queer & Trans empowerment visible in public space. Both Resistance is Female and Art in Ad Places arose in response to Donald Trump’s election and invited artists to submit works to be installed in advertising spaces. An artist explains the aim of these subverting installations:

People see things and then they talk about them. If you have a really interesting poster, a really interesting image, a really interesting logo they will talk about it. We are a visual society, right? … It’s like a soft sell. It's going, hey, think about that a little bit. Think about what you believe in. it’s like a nudge. (Gigi Chen)

Another artist also aims to deliver empowerment messages to

everyday women who are just going by, having their day, whatever, and for them to be caught off guard in a way that is like “oh wow this is actually women coming together to share this message”… you know, just to give them a little push and inspire them, you know? (Sara Erenthal)

Over two years, interventions by Resistance is Female spread across New York City. Alongside Art in Ad Places, such initiatives work towards imminent cultural change, where the replacement of advertising by art aims to inspire or empower passers-by. Again, this suggests that subvertising is not always against advertising, but seeks ‘artfully to invent new visions for the future’ (deLaure and Fink, 2017: 7).

Subvertisers also aspire to imminent material impact or ultimate material change. Vermibus suggests that to remove advertising from public space:

You don’t need any talent, you don’t need any key, I mean yes you need a key, but you can do it without any key. My mother was part of this year’s No Ad Day, it’s true! And she was just removing advertising like this, you know! … She’s not going to open a lightbox, she’s fifty-something, she’s old for that. But she is into taking off the advertising in public space.
Imminent material impact can also manifest as advocacy for policy change. Résistance à l'Agression Publicitaire, Brandalists for London and Special Patrol Group have all called for a ban of advertising in public space. Khaled (R.A.P.) argues for policy that targets digital advertising screens:

I think that we will have a campaign … and the objective will be to forbid digital screens advertising in the streets. It’s very important, it’s like GMO food. So we will have to say “ok stop this in public spaces”. It’s the first thing, the important thing that we will do. And we will fight against … advertising, more and more against it … we have to win many fights against it and it will help people to be empowered and to have faith in themselves.

Fabien Tipon & co also aims for advertising regulation by addressing the mayor of Paris through Twitter. Concerning ultimate material change, subvertisers call for the divestment of advertising as a main source of media funding. Subvertisers International call for ultimate cultural and material changes regarding control over advertising activities, support towards democratic media institutions, transparency in corporate behaviour and sustainable vision for future policies. Kyle is an advocate of the abolishment of advertising from media and public spaces:

If outdoor advertising was abolished across the world right now, the power structure would remain the same. Our politics would still be dominated by the richest 1%. … So I feel like this movement only really has any realistic chance of radically altering the political system if it raises its ambitions and says we want the end of for profit media systems, we want the end of media funded by advertising, we want a democratic media system. We want our streets to be free of advertising.

Dusty Rebel also comments on corporate regulation:

I mean, I understand its purpose to a degree, but to the point that you can’t turn away from it and you don’t get anything in return, like you don’t get cheaper subways, or free telephones or city bikes, now you have bicycles with a bank’s name on them, but you still pay, I guess it’s subsidized, I don’t know whatever, it’s just, corporations have to be kept on a really short leash cause they will take everything.

It is important to note is that the call to ban advertising is not based on subvertisers’ personal aversion to it, but critically connected to their diagnoses. As Jordan underscored, ‘we’re not just about getting rid of advertising, but creating a more engaging participatory city is really what this is about and therefore advertising has to go’. RJ offers a vision of a more democratic use of advertising space:

I would love to see all that subway advertising infrastructure turned over to public art and non-profit advertising basically [be]cause I don’t think that telling people to go to the botanical gardens or the Met which is free to New Yorkers is psychologically damaging.
Thus, informal collectives or campaigns tend to employ subvertising to promote social justice or social values. Formal established groups undertake actions such as media education, advertising regulation and environmental advocacy.

The present study is not without its limitations. Understanding the critique of subvertisers could further involve exploring their bountiful media production and resourceful media strategies. Future work could engage with media practices of subvertising activists. Furthermore, due to practical constraints, the analysis presented here is mostly drawn from interviews with activists in a North American and European context. These activists are aware of this and seek to connect with groups in non-Western contexts. Yet, subvertising as a social movement might be a phenomenon that precisely manifests in late capitalism. So, it might be crucial to identify it as such and draw on subvertisers’ concerns to warn against the proliferation of advertising in public spaces and imaginaries. The exploration of the efficacy of subvertising as a social movement which has been outside the remit of this analysis could also be further explored. Subvertisers acknowledge the challenges faced by the movement in light of changing practices in the advertising industry, which have even more deeply transformed the public sphere. There are also recognize the successes; visibly, due to campaigning by groups such as R.A.P., the city of Grenoble banned all commercial street advertising and is planting trees in their place (European Commission, 2020), while invisibly, subvertisers contribute to the long-term debate on the ethics of advertising.

Conclusion

While many studies have explored subvertising discourses and resistance narratives in culture jamming, this is among the first to provide an insight into the theory and practice of subvertisers as advertising adversaries. A grounded theory allows for the connection of multiple long-standing issues in advanced consumer capitalism to subvertising activism. Subvertising launches upon the erosion of public space, critiques and reclaims that before pasting its own commentary and vision for the future. The analysis is complemented by framing theory to identify the problems and solutions related to advertising as a dominant cultural industry. Subvertisers diagnose cultural, economic and political consequences of advertising and employ different methods, from crowdfunding campaigns to civil disobedience, to respond to these. Some go to the streets, some take to their screens, most do both, several are connected with other initiatives on broader issues of social, political or environmental justice and all express a concerted adversarial position to advertising. Some go to the streets, some take to their screens, most do both.

Subvertisers walk the tightrope between a cultural and systemic politics of consumption, two types of anti-consumerist critique (Humphery, 2009). As a cultural politics, subvertising employs art and creative tactics to challenge norms in public space and public life. A notable example from Art in Ad Places is the installation of Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s artworks for Stop
Telling Women to Smile, a street art project addressing gender-based street harassment. As a systemic politics, subvertising is about advocacy for legislation, and addressing economic inequality. Subverting, as an anti-consumerist movement and set of tactics, advocates for critical advertising pedagogy and policy. Contrary to an ideological critique of subvertisers as activists against advertising, this study also argues that a binary approach to consumer research as ‘reasons for’ and ‘reasons against’ does not enlighten the rationales and motivations of subvertisers. Mobilising all tools at their disposal, be they removing advertising from public spaces, tweeting to inform the city’s mayor of illicit advertising practices, recuperating posters from bus stop advertising panels, producing critical advertising guides, documentaries or organising public workshops, subvertisers are involved in the struggle against consumer capitalism, both in cultural and material terms.

Notes

1 Kyle abstains from capitalization and other grammatical expectations (magee, 2016: 16). Respectful of his choice, I do not capitalize his name in this article.

References


**Notes on Contributors**

Eleftheria Lekakis is senior lecturer in media and communications at the University of Sussex where she teaches on the topics of globalisation, promotional culture, humanitarian communication and media and social change. She has published a monograph on the politics of ethical consumption, and other works on consumer activism in relation to political participation and nationalism, as well as alternative economies and media activism. Recently, she has co-edited a volume on the intersections of art, law and power.
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