

Sell Everything

By Bryan Koo

A few years ago, while watching a boxing match on TV, I noticed a beer advertisement written on the back of one of the boxers. The one with the ad on his back won the match, but I could not feel any respect for him. Then a few months later, there was news about a twenty-year-old web designer named Andrew Fischer from Omaha, Nebraska who auctioned his forehead on eBay as advertising space. The image of someone having a corporate advertisement tattooed on his or her forehead for three months was beyond absurd—it was almost comical. However, several months later, I heard that one woman did the same thing with her breasts. Then it stopped being funny. Of course, it is fine for anybody to have Xbox ads written on his or her forehead, but that does not mean that it should be morally or socially acceptable.

It is commonly thought that America is saturated with commercialism. Even when I had a very small grasp on any social issues—besides the fact that there were not enough holidays in a year and that I could not watch R-rated movies—I noticed that there were too many advertisements on American TV. Having spent most of my time growing up in Korea, where no TV program is interrupted by commercials before it ends, American TV was intolerable to me even at the age of eight. I noticed that there were at least three commercial breaks for each thirty-minute cartoon episode I watched during my summer stay at my cousin's house in Chicago. As I grew up and learned about various social issues, especially in America, I developed a very shocking theory of why soccer is popular everywhere in the world but America. Compared to popular sports such as football or basketball, both of which have three breaks between each quarter on top of six time-outs, soccer does not have enough breaks in the game for commercials during broadcast.

Whereas this argument on why professional soccer is not popular in America is just a theory, there are more solid examples of how commercialism has shaped our lives. It has reached the extent that some ads manage to become part of our culture. I have lived in America for only five years, but I have sung the Subway commercial song many times with my friends on bus rides, and I have also incorporated key lines from various TV commercials such as “Trix are for kids” and “priceless” into many of my jokes. This does not mean that I like advertising these products. In fact, it does not even mean that I like these products. However, it is not an overstatement to say that by casually quoting or imitating advertisements, I myself have been advertising all of these products. It is not my intention to help these companies make more money on top of all the ads plastered over public and private areas, but that is exactly what happens when a normal consumer encounters a captivating advertisement. As a matter of fact, that is exactly how the advertisers want consumers to react. No matter how entertaining or captivating these ads are, it is disconcerting to think that we are being constantly manipulated by corporate advertisers.

It is not only the commercials that we are exposed to through the media and the flyers put up by companies all over our free space. Oftentimes, commercial products themselves infiltrate our lives so well that they blend into our lives as something that we cannot reject. For example, there are quite a few cases where the brand name of the product actually replaces the generic name of the product, such as Kleenex, La-Z-Boy, Roller Blades, Polo shirts, Band-Aids, Q-Tips, and the list goes on. Ever since the industrial revolution, most of the products for everyday use have been

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made by big companies, and because of that, it is unavoidable that those big companies, whether they intend to or not (although they most likely do) exert a certain control over consumers' lives. No matter what a company does, if there is a product that everybody uses, the brand name will be ingrained in consumers' heads and eventually it will replace the actual product name and we know that has happened in American society from many familiar examples.

But I go and look back at Andrew Fischer auctioning his forehead and I notice the difference between the ways that advertisements have encroached upon our lives. The latter, rooted commercialism in American life is something inevitable in an industrialized society. As mentioned, this phenomenon is suppliers' natural influence over consumers. But consumers do benefit from the suppliers and their products. After all, these companies have earned the influence over the public by manufacturing satisfying products; satisfying enough that they become part of the culture.

On the other hand, what Andrew Fischer did was not an acceptance, but an intrusion of commercialism into society. He was brilliant for being the first of his kind, making \$37,000 for having Snorestop ads on his forehead, but this only produced numerous copycats. It is uncertain whether this will become a new part of pop culture. If it does, it will be a dreadful future with all those in need of fast cash having Trojan ads tattooed on their foreheads. At some point, having ads on people's foreheads might be acceptable, just as singing along with TV commercials or calling products by the brand name is acceptable. However, right now, it is not. Furthermore, Andrew Fischer's decision was a voluntary act to become a tool of corporations, whereas the ingrained commercialism in society was not a result of a non-corporate entity's action. And this is one thing that we, as consumers can prevent. Advertisers can captivate us with memorable ads, and companies can make us love certain products, and we cannot help that. However, we should never voluntarily promote the corporations, because it should be the privilege of only the products and companies that earn consumers' love that get to be part of people's culture.