

Round and Round: Advertising Imagery and the Cycles of American History

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First, assume that a common denominator in advertising imagery is the presence of the fashion, music, and political symbols of the target's youth. Second, assume that trends in American politics, and thus American culture, experience 30 year cycles. If we take these two assumptions to be fact, and analyze trends of the past, we can predict trends of the future, both in American culture and advertising imagery. In order to elucidate this concept, I will first explain Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s theory of cycles in American history. That done, I will examine the idea put forth by Joyce Wolburg that music popular during the target market's teen years is most familiar, most liked, and provokes memories most often. When it is obvious that the cycles of history affect advertising imagery, I will predict the face of advertising in the year 2010.

Schlesinger examines the idea of cycles in American politics. He tells of a continuous shift between public purpose and private interest. Why the shift? Schlesinger reminds us that human are never content with the current situation. Quoting Kant: "Give a man everything he desires and yet at this very moment he will feel that this *everything* is not *everything*."¹ Because people can not be satisfied for very long, political change is always waiting in the wings.

So, change is inevitable, but when does it occur? Schlesinger postulates — on the basis of writings by such philosophers and political analysts as Alexis de Tocqueville, Augustus Comte and John Stuart Mill — that the American political cycle is largely affected by the "generational experience."² The generation is seen as a period of time wherein, as Mill says, "a new set of human beings have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and taken possession of

¹ Hirschman, A. O. Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action (Princeton, 1982) p. 11.

² Schlesinger, Arthur Jr. The Cycles of American History (1986) p. 29.

society.”³ Although generations overlap chronologically, there are certain boundaries such as common experience, which creates common views and outlooks, says Schlesinger.⁴ He sees the generation as a span of thirty years after coming of political (and consumer) age. For fifteen years, the fresh-faced group challenges the authority of the generation in power. Once they gain that political power and position, they spend the next fifteen years enacting political change that mirrors that of their own youth, thirty years earlier. At the end of their thirty years, the next generation steps up to take its place and begin the process of change once again.

The next question is, where is the proof? If we look at the history of twentieth century America, we see Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the 1900s, two presidents who asked America to lift its ideals above material things and take action to preserve democracy. Warren G. Harding brought Americans weary of this idealism to a conservative restoration in the 1920s. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman (who formed their ideals from Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, by the way) created the New Deal and the Fair Deal in their times of power, the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, Walter Lippmann wrote, “this country and the Western World had had all the dynamism, all the innovation, all the crusading that human nature can take.”⁵ Thus began the Eisenhower years, when as in the 1920s, the focus became private interest rather than public purpose. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson brought commitment to the public good back to America in the 1960s. As the 1980s neared, again the political climate became one of conservatism and private interest. Although Jimmy Carter was elected as a Democrat, his administration was peppered with conservative aspects, paving the way for Ronald Reagan and

³ Mill, J. S. A System of Logic, Book VI, ch. x § 3.

⁴ Schlesinger p. 30.

⁵ Lippmann, Walter “Today and Tomorrow,” New York Herald Tribune, 5 January 1954.

George Bush. Although Schlesinger introduced his theory before Bush's election, it is interesting to note that Clinton's election in 1992 helps to fulfill his 30-year cycle postulate.

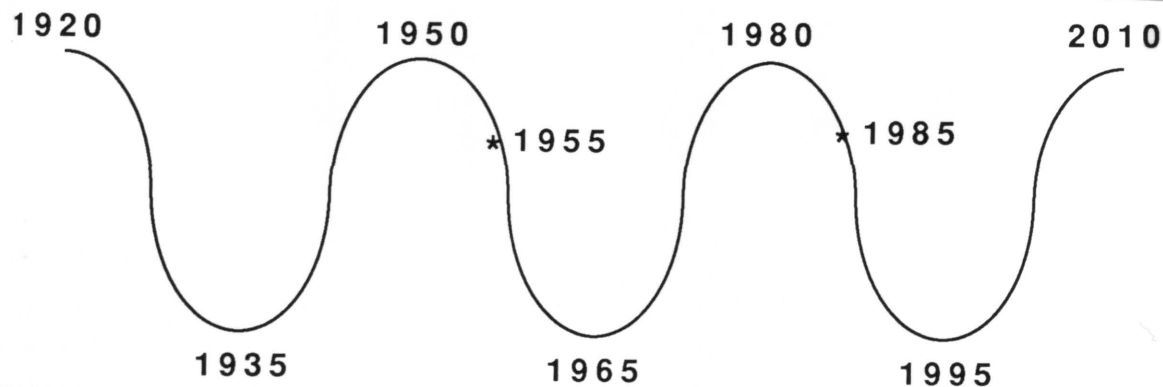
So what does this have to do with advertising? Well, if we agree that politics have a lot to do with culture, quite a bit. A simple look at the fashion and music of the 50s and 80s, compared to that of the 60s and 90s can quickly illustrate the cycle between conservatism and dynamism. As with politics, every thirty years we see a more conservative style of dressing and music. (See Exhibit A)

EXHIBIT A

YEAR	FASHION	MUSIC
1950s	Homogeneity, pastels, low hemlines, minimal makeup, conservative, establishment	Marty Robbins, Perry Como, Bill Haley and His Comets
1960s	Capri pants, bell bottoms, high hemlines, diversity, color/pattern mixtures	The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, The Grateful Dead, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young
1970s	Loud colors, extreme makeup, big shoes, big clothes, glitter, leather, gold jewelry	The Doobie Brothers, The Bee Gees, Led Zeppelin, Neil Young, Sister Sledge
1980s	Homogeneity, fluorescents, pastels, low hemlines, less makeup, high collars	Hall and Oates, Duran Duran, Culture Club, Tiffany, New Kids on the Block
1990s	Diversity, big clothes, high hemlines, extreme <u>or</u> minimal makeup, bright colors	Nirvana, Dee-Lite, PJ Harvey, Lenny Kravitz, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Green Day

Although the styles and musicians are not identical in the 1950s and the 1980s, they are very similar in essence. Also, in the 1990s, the styles are often permutations of those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many musicians popular in the past (Led Zeppelin, George Clinton, Jimi Hendrix, The Beatles) are receiving regained interest in the 1990s. Referring to Exhibit B, we see the cycles in the recent past, present, and near future.

EXHIBIT B



The stars at 1955 and 1985 indicate the leading edge of the generation. For instance, in 1980, those people on the cutting edge of fashion and music were mirroring that of 1955. If we follow this argument, one can assume that 1970 is the leading edge in reference to 1995. A simple look at current trends affirms this assumption. Therefore, in the face of these arguments, the obvious assumption is that those on the cutting edge of trends in 2010 will be reflecting the climate of 1985.

In order to predict what advertising will "look" like in 2010, we must first look at the present state. What imagery do advertisers use to attempt to create awareness, interest, desire and action in their target markets?

Joyce Wolburg, in her thesis, *Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love?*, attests that many advertisers use music in order to elicit the desired response from their audiences. The dilemma is what kind of music to use. Wolburg conducted a study to analyze the relationship between liking, familiarity and evocation of memories and the age of the audience on the music's release date. The study concluded that music from the audience's teen-age years (more specifically, 13 to 16) is most well liked, evokes more memories, and is more familiar.⁶ However, only 48% of the respondents responded favorably to the commercialization of their liked music, while 43% responded negatively.⁷ This figure, while a warning to advertisers to act more carefully in choosing musical selections for commercials, does not change the fact that they *will* use that music.

Music and fashion are closely linked as we saw in Exhibit A. If political and world events follow this same structure, we can see that the "best" choice for imagery in advertising will come from the music, fashion, politics, and world events of the target market's teen-age years. However, this applies best to the target market that corresponds with the generation in power. For example, it would make little sense to attempt to trigger nostalgia in Generation Xers (18-29 year olds) in 1995 by utilizing the music of the mid-1980s, because they are currently at a stage where that era is considered "corny" rather than sentimental.

Following these arguments, one can predict an approximation of the look of advertising to the generation coming into power in 2010. That generation will be today's Generation Xers, born between the years of about 1966 to 1977. As stated earlier, their teen years would be in the mid-80s. At the same time, the leading edge in the 2010 climate would be a reflection of this same period. Thus, much of popular advertising imagery will be drawn from the many times

⁶ Wolburg, Joyce *Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love?* (University of Tennessee, Knoxville 1992) p. v, vi.

⁷ Ibid. p. vi.

mentioned sources (music, fashion, politics and world events) of 1985, plus and minus two to three years.

The music of Hall and Oates, Duran Duran, and countless one-hit wonders will be heard on television and radio commercials for high-ticket items such as cars and electronics (more commonly purchased by this age group). Haute couture models will be seen in argyle knee socks, shaker sweaters, and even Madonna-inspired lace gloves and fluorescent headbands (Of course, as with all recent permutations of "retro" looks, a slight change in style will be involved to make the items seem "new."). Video clips of Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Moamar Khadafi will seem much less like possible real news and much more like humorous/somber looks back at the time when the target was forming its political ideals. Space shuttle launches and the fall of the Berlin Wall will bring a nostalgic tear to the eye of the up and coming generation, and that tear will be squeezed into profit, if the advertiser is wise.

It would be easy enough to lay out all the trends of the mid-80s, but the best way to sketch a picture of this period is to simply describe the teenager of the time: With headphones plugged into her Walkman, the teenager of 1985 fairly bounces down the street, Boy George's voice filling her ears. "Karma, karma, karma, karma, karma chameleon, you come and go..." Her Forenza shaker sweater, just bought from that brand new store, The Limited, lies under a couple of long strands of large fake pearls. An unmatched pair of earrings dangle from her pierced ears. The girl shifts her eyes, fringed with purple lashes, to her Swatch watch and realizes it's almost time for the new John Hughes movies to start at the Cineplex. As Cyndi Lauper wails through her headphones, she heads to the mall to watch her favorite actress, Molly Ringwald, play yet another plasticine character in a formulaic film.

Although this is not an all inclusive description of this generation's teen years (the earlier 80s and later 80s were very different in terms of music and styles), it is fairly representative of the early teen of 1985. This image will recur, probably around 2010, possibly in the young people who will be up and coming in 2040, likely in the advertising imagery of the day.

Advertisers want to use imagery that calls to their target markets. What else has the effect of the memories of our teen years? As we have seen, if we look to the popular music, fashion, politics and world affairs of the year our target market was, say, sixteen, we will find a wealth of imagery that will touch our desired consumer. We have seen that these images are linked to trends that cycle every thirty years. With this knowledge it is less than difficult (though not exactly easy), to select effective images for our selected target and even predict the future of trends in society and in advertising.