The author of *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, Arthur Asa Berger, is professor emeritus of broadcast and communication arts at San Francisco State University, where he taught from 1965-2003. Berger received his Batchelor of Arts in 1954, from The University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It only took Berger two years later to receive his Masters degree, in 1956, from The University of Iowa. Then in 1965, Berger completed his education at The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and received his Ph.D. His areas of concentration during his time in school were media criticism, cultural studies, humor, and communication theory.

Berger could be considered one of the forefathers of studying popular culture. In 1973, Berger produced his first book, *Pop Culture*. In a time, when popular culture was rarely talked about or considered, Berger understood its importance and knew how it can influence American advertising. Berger has become a well-known figure in analyzing advertising’s influence on American society, and is a preeminent scholar in the field of American popular culture studies. In just over 30 years, Berger has published over 60 books. To name a few of his books they are, *Seeing is Believing An Introduction to Visual Communication, Media Analysis Techniques, Cultural Criticism, Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics, and Essentials of Mass Communication*. His latest book, published in 2005, *Shop ‘til you drop: Consumer Behavior and American Culture* is considered one of his finest achievements.

To gain specific insight into writing *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, Berger was granted a visiting professorship from the Advertising Education Foundation to spend three weeks at Goldberg Moser O’Neil advertising in San Francisco.
In the book *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, Berger develops his own theories as to how advertising influences Americans’ purchasing. The main point of this book can be broken up into three main areas, “To teach readers how advertising works, to suggest how advertising has affected American society and culture, and to help readers learn how to interpret and analyze advertisements and commercials (Berger, xv).” One area of concentration in the book that Berger focuses on is our resistance to advertising. Many people who consider themselves “ad-proof” are actually influenced unknowingly by advertising just by looking at their purchase behaviors over time. Berger writes, “Advertising is an important part of our culture, and many of our ideas and notions have been influenced by the enormous amount of advertising we are exposed to as we grow up (Berger, xiv).”

Advertising affects consumers differently, and to those who think they are not influenced by advertising, Berger thinks otherwise. Berger suggests the average person in America can be subjected to 15,000 commercial messages each day (Berger, 101). Another important fact about advertising is that it is always around us, one can not escape it. If one typed the word “advertising” into the search engine Google, 35,800,000 web sites will show up that have the word or mention the word “advertising” in them (Berger, xiv). Berger examines in *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture* in further detail the affects of advertising on consumers, society, and American culture. He also discusses the system that is used by marketers to segregate consumers’ demographic, psychographic, and geographic information. This book also analyzes the famous “1984” Apple ad, and breaks it down to help readers see the commercials underlying message; plus, the reason why it became the second best commercial among all ads in the year 1984. Finally, Berger deals with the topics of sex and advertising, political advertising, market research (utilizing the VALS 1 and VALS 2 methods), and advertising in American’s culture.
Advertising in American Culture

The world of advertising is continually growing, and is especially on the rise in American society. In the United States, “Advertising is a $200 billion industry (Berger, 1).” The cost to create an average commercial is anywhere between $300,000 and $400,000, with most of that money going towards television production costs. For example, in one of the famous “Got Milk” commercials Berger breaks down the costs that were included in the production of this campaign. On just television production alone it cost $281,000 (Berger, 2). It is also important to keep in mind that the production of a commercial does not include medium purchases. So, airtime for a commercial or an advertisement can run into the hundred thousands to millions of dollars.

Advertising is around us continually, whether we like it or not. However, there is not a clear-cut method that can show why a consumer exactly purchased a certain product because they saw an advertisement about it. Advertising does help consumers gain information about products, and could lead to a purchase decision. There is a method that many social scientists have used to see advertising’s psychological influence on people. Berger uses the Social-Psychological Model to explain that just because a person sees an advertisement it does not lead to any decision-making. “This approach, which often is quite sophisticated in terms of research design, frequently indicates that advertising has little or no effect on respondents” (Berger, 13). Berger goes on to use the post hoc, ergo propter hoc argument. This argument says that, “Just because “Y” follows “X” does not mean that “X” caused “Y” (Berger, 15).” To further explain, just because John sees a television commercial for beer and then drinks a beer, it does not mean the commercial made him do it.
Throughout this book Berger uses the phrase, “Running it [an advertisement] up a flagpole to see if anyone salutes.” What he means by this statement is the idea of corporations and organizations spending millions of dollars to run advertisements in the huge world of media, and then seeing if consumers will respond to the messages being delivered (see if anyone salutes). These companies assume people are irrational when it comes to spending. This may be true, given the fact that many Americans today are more concerned with materialistic wealth. Berger uses Sigmund Freud’s idea of the human psyche: the id (“I want it now”), the superego (“don’t do it”), and the ego (mediates between the id and the superego) to help explain consumers’ psychological behavior playing a large role in a purchasing decision.

“Advertisements appeal to id elements in our psyches and our desires for gratifications of all kinds (“I want it now”), and seek to avoid the strictures of the superego (“you can’t afford it and you don’t need it”) and the mediating efforts of the ego (Berger, 14).”

Finally, Berger discusses commercials as being the most powerful form of advertising (in his opinion). Commercials do have an advantage over newspaper and radio advertising. With commercials the elements of sound, lighting, acting and superb writing all combine to create-what Berger calls it—“mini-dramas.” Berger also identified several characteristics that commercials contain to increase their persuasion: Heroes and heroines, sexuality, humor, fun, people with success, and then finally the reward factor. The reward is seen when one purchases a various product, and have the feeling that he/she “deserves” this product and have worked hard for it. The rise of television commercials has truly shaped Americans way of life, given the fact that the average person watches “More than three and one-half hours per day (Berger, 22).”

Commercials have become a “teleculture” and is now “The most important enculturating and socializing force operating society (Berger, 22).”
Consumer Cultures

Advertising is a part of American society and continues to shape consumers decisions from the foods we eat to our political choices. Berger tries to simplify advertising and its influence on Americans by using a cultural criticism approach. “Cultural criticism makes use of psychoanalytic theory, literary theory, Marxist theory, sociological theory, semiotic theory, and various other theories, methodologies, and disciplines (Berger, 25).” In today’s society there is vast production of products that are made available to people. Advertising plays a large role in coaxing consumers to make purchases of these products. As Berger mentioned before, advertising is always around us, and as Americans we are exposed to more advertising than any other country; because of the amount of television we watch, and the hours of media we use (Berger, 26).

Berger discusses that the consumer culture has become privatistic; the focus is upon personal consumption, not social investment for the public good. The name of the “game” is to try and “get as much as you can” (Berger, 27). Having success also means obtaining more material things, and putting them on display for everyone to see. Berger says it best, “What you can afford becomes the means of determining [what] you are (Berger, 34).” Berger uses a theory from political scientist, Aaron Wildavsky that there are actually four consumer cultures, instead of the one. It is dependent upon one’s certain beliefs and values, and only works for cultures in a democratic society. Wildavsky breaks up the cultures into four categories: hierarchical/elitist, individualist, egalitarians, and fatalists.

Hierarchical/elitists believe in the need for hierarchy in societies, but feel a sense of obligation to those below them. Individualists feel that individuals are basic and that the role of the government should be minimal –protecting against crime and invasions and maximizing
possibilities in the business world. Egalitarians believe that everyone has certain needs that have
to be looked after by government. Finally, fatalists are at the bottom of the totem pole, and have little economic, purchasing, or decision-making power (Berger, 38-9). It is important to note that Wildavsky says that, “Members of these four political cultures or consumer cultures don’t recognize that they are members of one of these groups; that is, they probably aren’t aware of their existence (Berger, 39).” Placing individuals into groups like these can help scientists figure out shopping patterns. Berger explains, “There is an inherent logic behind the shopping that people do and, furthermore it is shoppers, or consumers, who ultimately dictate what will be sold (Berger, 40).” It is also known that by placing consumers into one of these four groups an understanding of consumer consumption, and why people buy what they buy can be found.

The Marketing Society

It is significant to mention that the “United States spent $200.3 billion on all forms of advertising in 1998, and all other countries combined spent $218.4 billion (Berger, 101).” Americans are more prone to advertising, because of the amount of media we consume. Another example that shows how much is spent on advertising in the United States, Berger gives a rough figure that, “Advertisers spend around $800 per person in the United States on advertising, and advertisers spend around $40 per person in all other foreign countries (Berger, 102).” To help marketers segment their target audiences they have created a classification system to deal with the various types of consumers in American society. These factors were at first based on simple demographic factors such as: age, race, religion, gender, geographical region, and zip code. This became known as the VALS 1 typology. The VALS typology was developed by SRI International, a company that focuses on people’s lifestyles rather on demographic statistics.
VALS is actually short for Values and Lifestyles. Later, marketers developed a second method for segmenting target audiences based on more detailed descriptions of consumers. The categories are based on income, education, health, and the strength of a consumer’s desire to purchase something. The VALS 2 typology “focuses upon matters [which] involved in consumer decision making (Berger, 108).”

VALS 1 focuses on nine categories of consumers: Need Driven (Survivors and Sustainers), Outer-Directed (Belongers, Emulators, and Achievers), Inner-Directed (I-Am-Me’s, Experientials, and Societally Conscious Individuals), and Integrateds. Need Driven consumers are known as “money restricted” and have a hard time just affording their basic needs. The group is divided into two categories: Survivors and Sustainers. Survivors are “old, poor, and out of the cultural mainstream (Berger, 105).” Sustainers are the exact opposite, “they are young, crafty, and on the edge of poverty but want to get ahead in the world (Berger, 106).”

Next, the Outer-Directed group is consumers that typically live in Middle America, and want others to feel positive about them. They are put into three subcategories: Belongers (conservative, conventional, and not experimental in their tastes), Emulators (mobile, status conscious, competitive, and want to make it big), and Achievers (the leaders of society, successful in their professions, and have a status of comfort, fame, and materialistic values). “Outer-directed consumers make up about two-thirds of the adult population in America (Berger, 106).”

The third major group is Inner-Directed consumers. These people are more concerned about themselves than of the opinions of others (just as the name of the group implies). There are three subcategories for Inner-Directed people: I-Am-Me’s (young, narcissistic, exhibitionist, inventive, impulsive, and strongly individualistic), Experientials (known as an older group of the
I-Am-Me’s, and are concerned with inner growth), and Societally Conscious Individuals (believe in simple lifestyles, support causes like environmentalism, consumerism, and conservation). Shockingly, this group made up around 28 percent of the U.S. adult population in 1990, and has probably grown since then (Berger, 106). Lastly, the Integrateds is the last subcategory that focuses on psychological maturity, tolerance, assuredness, and a self-actualizing philosophy. They only make up about 2 percent of Americans, but they also tend to be “highly influential and they may function as what might be described as “‘taste opinion leaders’ (Berger, 107).”

The VALS 2 typology was developed to further enhance market segmentation, and give marketers a better sense into the lives of consumers. This system was also developed to help match consumers to what they can afford. “Wanting to buy something is only one step; consumers have to be able to afford what they want (Berger, 108).” There are eight categories that make up the VALS 2 typology: Actualizers, Fulfilleds, Achievers, Experiencers, Believers, Strivers, Makers, and Strugglers. Actualizers are “successful individuals with a great deal of money, and are concerned with their image (Berger, 108).” Fulfilleds are practical and value functionality and durability in products they purchase. “They tend to be mature, financially comfortable, and satisfied with their lives and situations (Berger, 108).” Achievers are more “career-oriented and value stability, structure, self-discovery, and intimacy (Berger, 108).” Experiencers are young, impulsive, and enthusiastic who love to spend money. They are also considered to be risk takers. Believers are “highly principled conservative consumers who purchase well-known brands (Berger, 109).” Strivers are similar to achievers, but do not have as much money. They focus more on the approval of others, and greatly desire their opinions. Makers are like experiencers and are active, “with much of their energy going into various forms of self-sufficiency such as fixing a car or canning vegetables (Berger, 109).” Finally, Strugglers
are similar to the *Survivors* group from VALS 1, and they struggle to make ends meet. Berger does offer up an argument to the VALS 2 system in that it assumes rationality. “It assumes that people won’t purchase things they can’t afford, and on the other hand, that people won’t purchase things that are ‘‘beneath them (Berger, 109).’’” For example, poor people won’t “dress rich” and vice versa; which is an appropriate argument considering the amount of people in debt in America. People will continue to use credit cards, and purchase large homes, expensive clothes and nice cars even when they can not afford them. This brings up some other ways marketers can identify consumers; by using zip codes, magazine choices, and breaking up specific age groups like teenagers.

An interesting statistic that marketers use to break down target audiences is through zip codes. Berger uses Michael Weiss, author of *The Clustering of America* and developer of zip code typology to explain this research technique. Weiss concluded in his book that people with the same zip codes tend to have similar lifestyles. In fact, “Weiss has developed a typology of forty different lifestyles – each of which is quite different from all the others – with relatively little overlap (Berger, 110).” Just to give a few examples with zip codes, 94025 (Atherton, C.A.), Weiss gives the nickname of “Blue-Blood Estates,” and in 94301 (Palo Alto, C.A.) is known as “Money and Brains” (Palo Alto is where Stanford University is located).

Another way to segment consumers, according to Yankelovitch Partnership (a well-known marketing and research company located in Westport, Connecticut) is through the publications consumers read. “The publications that consumers read, especially the magazines they like, are a better indicator of consumer behavior than demographic factors such as age, marital status, gender, and residence (Berger, 112).” The Yankelovitch group made up some marketing typologies that fit with the names of magazines/publications consumers read. For
example, *Home Engineers* read magazines like *Family Circle* and *Woman’s Day*. Another example is the group, *Real Guys*, men who typically read magazines based on their hobbies like *Popular Mechanics*. The group *Ethnic Pewneps* (*People Who Need People*) is consumers that are interested in celebrities and identify with them; they read magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and *Sporting News*. Men and women can be associated with this group. The last two groups, *Information Grazers* and *Armchair Adventurers* are readers of magazines with intellect, who love information, and love reading about adventure (just not actually doing anything adventurous).

Yankelovitch Partners’ marketing typecast system can be compared with the VALS techniques, because both systems put consumers into groups with catchy names to help distinguish their behaviors. The reason why marketers use these classification systems is because, “[They] are basically interested in consumer behavior, so they always reduce groups of people to various consumer categories (Berger, 114).” Berger does write that all these techniques are not entirely the perfect system to query about consumers purchasing behavior. “All we can get from marketing research are correlations between some factor or factors and consumer behavior (Berger, 114).”

One target audience that Berger writes is gaining market buying power, and increasing their consumption is teenagers. According to 1998 statistics, there are 30 million teenagers living in America. “In 1997 these teenagers spent around $4 billion on clothing, cosmetics, and various other kinds of fashion items (Berger, 114).” A market research company in Northbrook, Illinois known as, Teen-Age Research Unlimited specializes in teenagers’ consumption habits. Teen-Age Research Unlimited has too come up with a typology that teenagers can be placed into four categories. The categories are: *Influencers* (those who are quick to embrace fashion trends, and
influence spending habits of other teenagers), *The Edge Group* (members continually change their looks in an attempt to be anti-fashion and drop their fashion looks when influencers adopt them), *Conformers* (most teenagers are in this group, which use popular brands to enhance their self-esteem), and *Passives* (those who are not interested in using fashion as a statement or a means of fitting in). The interesting fact about teenagers, also known as Generation Y, that marketers are taking notice in is the amount of income they possess. “American children 6 to 14 years old are believed to have about $6 billion in discretionary income (Berger, 116).” Amazingly, the $6 billion figure is from 1990; no doubt this amount has increased considerably. This shows that marketers need not only focus on advertising to adults, but also the rising youth of America. The buying power they already have will only increase when they become adults.

Overall, reading *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture* was an enjoyable read, and was arranged into layperson terms. The author, Arthur Asa Berger, puts the logistics of advertising in simplistic form. It was obvious Berger used much of his knowledge of the consumer culture and the advertising world to piece together an interesting and informative book. Most critics of the book said it was a “down to earth” read, and very enjoyable. However, some areas in the book seemed to be repetitive, and over simplified. Reading about the breakdown of the “1984” Macintosh commercial, and also how to analyze print advertisements and political ads was enjoyable. The book was a very quick read with only around 170 pages (10 chapters) of material, but the back of the book has a glossary of terms that can be helpful for advertising students. I think all advertising majors should take the time to read this book, because you can gain much information about what advertisers really do. Finally, Berger gave some starting salary figures of a few advertising positions, from the account executive to the CEO. I thought it to be helpful for advertising students to see what their major can give them if they work hard enough.
Work Cited