Adcult is term coined by author James Twitchell. In a book by the same name, Twitchell explains the term describes the ways in which advertising represents, interacts with, and becomes popular culture.

It is important to keep in mind that Adcult does not try to answer the question of whether advertising is good or evil. It is a book about the place advertising has in culture, how it reflects the larger society, and how it eventually came to be the central institution of that society. He does this by exploring its history and its ever-present nature today. Twitchell also discusses the meaning society places in advertising, meaning he says that once was supplied by religion. Adcult also deals with the conglomeration of the advertising business and the eventual merging of advertising with news and entertainment.

Chapter One

Twitchell begins in the first chapter by stating that the average American sees 3,000 advertisements a day, in almost every location imaginable, including schools, movies, and urinals. However, the trade-off for having such great reach with advertising is a total lack of depth. The same average “man on the street,” a phrase coined by advertisers, according to Twitchell, only notices 80 of them. He reacts to 12. In fact, 40% of those polled cannot name one memorable commercial. When given these statistics, one must question why so much money is wasted on advertising (although, contrary to
popular belief about advertising’s expense, Twitchell points out that advertising costs only adds .006 cents to the cost of a can of Coke and 18 cents per $3,000 a car costs).

If faced with this paradox, many would answer that advertising, a powerful industry financially and thus politically, is forcing its own proliferation. Advertising is evil and out of control and cannot be stopped. Twitchell suggests a very different possibility: we like being advertised to. We like attention, being told we’ve “come a long way, baby” or we “deserve a break today.”

Twitchell explains that as years passed, our infatuation with advertising grew. It now permeates almost all aspects of our culture. Ads are now collected as art and sold as posters for college dorm rooms. Jingles, slogans, and characters have all become cultural touchstones. Two people taken at random from other sides of the country may have almost nothing in common, but both could probably recognize Tony the Tiger, sing the Kellogg’s jingle, and tell each other they are great. Ads are parodied on television (even in other ads!) and are the subject of news stories. They are reviewed, discussed, and treated as both entertainment and art.

After this introduction, Twitchell spends most of the first chapter dealing with advertising as an institution. It externalizes the cost of goods by selling a business an audience. Advertising is self-perpetuating, but it also unites and reflects society, thus perpetuating the larger culture.

People have always wanted things. However, apparently they do not know exactly what they want; advertising would not exist if they did. Advertising does not create desire, nor does it satisfy it; advertising just exploits it. It does not give us what we say we want or what scientists say we want; advertising gives us what we want. However, when one
considers the price difference between a pair of Pay-Less sneakers and a pair of Nike’s, it becomes clear that people don’t merely want things; they want meaning. Advertising infuses meaning into inanimate objects, much the way religion historically has. It’s not wine; it’s blood. They’re not sneakers; they’re Nikes. In this way, advertising can be seen as a running dialogue with the society at large about the meaning of products.

Twitchell mentions six characteristics which can describe advertising: 1) ubiquitous, 2) anonymous, 3) syncretic, 4) symbiotic, 5) profane, and 6) magical. 1) Advertising is everywhere. It has been growing in scope for years, at even faster rates since the ‘80s. Income tax booklets now contain advertising. 2) Advertising, like some religious texts, is anonymous. Few people even know what agency coined “the pause that refreshes;” maybe a handful could name the person. 3) It is also syncretic, meaning it layers itself on other cultures. Like Christians, who adapted pagan holidays, advertising is built around religious and national celebrations, popular culture, and even other ads. 4) Advertising has a symbiotic relationship with culture, which can be seen through sponsorship, the use of popular music in ads (and the occasional ad jingle crossing over into pop culture), and featuring of celebrities. Slogans and mascots change to fit the society. This same close relationship with the culture at large is one reason ads do not cross societies well. 5) Advertising needs to attract attention before it can try to sell a product. Profanity gets peoples attention. Jeans can be put on half-naked teenagers; they can be put on Michelangelo’s David; both are profane, and both have been done to sell pants. Twitchell includes repetition as a form of profanity also.

6) Advertising is magical in many ways. Twitchell draws many parallels between religion and advertising in this section. Both give shifting meaning to unchanging objects.
Both promise redemption. Modern, otherworldly mascots are descendants of the nymphs, gods, saints, and cherubs of religion. Some, such as Pegasus at the Mobil station and Hermes of FTD, are lifted directly from Greek mythology. These similarities are not surprising given the heavily religious upbringing of most early ad men. Bruce Barton of BBDO went on to write a book in which Jesus Christ attempts spread his message in the 20th century; he is, of course, an advertiser. It is not a huge stretch; both Jesus and advertising use parables, sell products, and work magic.

The commercial itself is the modern version of the morality play. The sin, guilt, and redemption of Christianity has become problem, anxiety, and resolution. Through prayer, God could offer help. Mascots are similarly invoked to solve the problems of mildew and halitosis.

Twitchell describes advertising as the educational system of capitalism, as well as the language, art, and pornography. Over time, the lines between high or modern art and folk or popular art (culture) have been blurred, and advertising has become intermingled in every layer, fueled by the conglomeration of media empires and the medium-crossing power of the internet. The Mona Lisa can be found on neckties. “Mack the Knife” went from folk song to jazz standard to ad jingle. Books like John Grisham’s The Client contain references to Dr. Pepper, Nike, Snickers, and Liquid Paper Corrector. Almost all touring art exhibits, sporting events, and tournaments are sponsored by huge corporations like Phillip Morris or IBM. Pop culture and advertisements themselves have transcended the boarder into fine art. The language of the people, replete with bad grammar, is in ads, and the language of ads have become the words of the people; one needs look no further than the Teflon president.
Twitchell ends the first chapter by discussing the history of agencies, the rise of conglomerations and unbundling. He mentions the Coke polar bear campaign, the first major campaign to turn to Hollywood in opposed to advertising agencies.

**Chapter Two**

The second chapter of *Adcult* deals with its delivery. He explains the growth of advertising as a way to get rid of surplus goods following times of war by differentiating and promoting branded products. He explains how one can now encounter ads at breakfast (cereal boxes), school (channel 1), shopping (ad tiles), using the computer (the internet), at sporting events (stadium name, endorsements), and taking a trip (taxis, busses). He also mentions trash and restrooms as places with advertising. Twitchell also notes proposed locations for ads that never got off the ground; these include subway token, dial tones, astronauts’ uniforms, and the bottom of golf holes.

Twitchell suggests we are heading towards a society in which all blank space is covered in ads. He says each intrusion into a new place is met the same way: outcry, tentative acceptance, assumption, expectation, and finally neglect. Twitchell points out all existing medium for advertising have strengths and weaknesses, then discusses the history of advertising with each.

Books were once home to advertisements, but the reign of the book as the popular medium did not coincide with surplus goods. Also, books are heavy and were expensive to ship. This is no longer an issue due to FedEx and UPS. While most authors have a no advertisement clause, Twichell found most large publishers would consider using ads to lower to price of their more costly books, such as textbooks. Smaller publishers were opposed to the idea.
Until the mid 19th century, advertising in newspapers was too expensive and there were too few branded products in surplus for them to contain much advertising. As printing became cheaper due to economies of scale, the popular medium of advertisement went from the handbill to the billboard to the newspaper. Advertising in newspapers started small, both in size and number. The need to court advertising has led many newspapers to increase ad space, give it better position in the paper, and go to color printing. Advertising even led to the creation of the jump so that readers would have to turn through pages of ads to finish the story on the front page.

There was a time when magazines were held in higher esteem then they are today, more along the lines of books. They were collected and treasured. Magazines had nationwide exposure, which advertisers desperately wanted once railroads made shipping goods across the country feasible. Magazines were initially reluctant, only publishing “reading notices” advertising books. The Civil War led to huge surpluses in goods like shoes, guns, and canned foods. This, combined with cheaper shipping prices and the stock crash of the 1890s, led Frank Munsey to turn his failing magazine around by cutting prices and increasing circulation through advertising.

Twitchell briefly mentions trade cards, the precursor to the modern day business card. A double-sided pocket billboard, these flashy ads were handed out on the street. They are the root of gift cards and post cards.

Like the Civil War led to surpluses of normal consumer goods, World War 1 led to a great surplus of technical goods. Kits were sold to hobbyist who wanted to make their own radio transmitter. Soon hundred sprouted up, all broadcasting on the save
wavelengths. Advertising came slowly to radio. In 1922, the first radio ad appeared for real estate in New York. Popular music overtook higher brow endeavors, and many popular bands were sponsored. College radio stations sold out to advertising. In the 1940’s, the importance of ad revenue was growing and CBS became the first station to track ratings. During World War 2, the war effort was advertised and a war council was formed, a forerunner to the ad council. During this time, radio also moved away from sponsorship of entire shows towards modern commercials.

Television is now the primary force of what Twitchell calls Adcult. Different shows promise to deliver different audiences to the advertisers; this makes tracking audiences very important. The A.C. Nielsen Company was formed to do just that, paying attention to demographics. As years passed, advertisers have targeted younger and younger segments of the population. More technologies are being developed to better track the audience, and agencies desperately want to combine this with purchasing behavior in order to get a much better read of the relationship between the two. This has not proved feasible so far. Luckily, technology also may grow in favor of the consumer, recognizing commercials and muting them.

Twitchell describes all television networks behaving as one, all shows in the same genre, all ads doing the same. There is a movement to blend entertainment and advertising into one package. The videos on MTV are stylistically indistinguishable from the commercials which surround them, which is little surprise consider music videos are just ads for albums. News shows feature ads presented as news segments, complete with anchors. Infomercials fill the late-night air waves.

**Chapter Three**
The third chapter of *Adcult* is entitled deals with what Twitchell calls the work of Adcult. These begins as a discussion of how hard it is to prove the actual impact of advertising, but is soon a history of subliminal advertising. The concept was invented by James Vicary, who swindled many media companies out of up-front money for subliminal advertising. Key followed with a scientific examination of the images hidden in ads.

Twitchell goes on to discuss the effects advertisers have on the content of news. This includes General Motors pulling ads when one of its cars did not make *Automobile Magazine*’s Top 10 list. ABC was the friendliest network to Ross Perot; they also earned almost three times as much in advertising from him. Bridal companies refuse to mention used dress sources. Tobacco companies have tried for years to hide the consequences of their product and were largely successful because of their advertising clout. Mercedes Benz even threatened to pull advertising from any magazine which does not look favorably on the German people.

Outside of this literal censorship by advertisers, there are also self censorship and implied censorship to consider. Most advertisers don’t make threats like the ones above. The strength of financial ties and the codependent nature of the industry have more to do with CBS is unlikely to do negative news stories on K-mart, with whom they have a marketing relationship. Newspapers are also very unlikely to write stories about how to shop for a house without a realtor, get a good deal on a new car, or denounce a chain restaurant. These papers know where their bread is buttered.

In 1952, advertising entered the realm of politics for the first time. A hard sell program for Ike Eisenhower’s run for president was devised by ad man Rosser Reeves.
Within a few years, Nixon chose an ad man as chief of staff, and politics traded in intellectual content for emotional appeals. Advertising has also been used for specific causes, including companies selling themselves as “environmentally friendly.”

In order to sell across the country, market to the masses, advertising often resorts to the use of stereotypes. Like they brand their products, advertisers brand consumers into types who can consume the same products for very different reasons. The VALS (Values and Lifestyles System) creates these brands of consumers; it includes actualizers, fulfilled, believers, achievers, strivers, experiencers, makers, and strugglers. Any person is likely to spend his or her life crossing between these categories, which are surprisingly useful in deciding who buys sports cars and who takes the bus.

Twitchell says advertisers must stake a claim in the market, regardless of whether it is true or even makes sense. They often do this within the archetypes of myths. As deities were one scene as distant, like us, and full of greater meaning, so too are celebrities now seen. The Eucharist fills Christians with Christ, and if you drink Gatorade, you can be like Mike. Advertising is actually one of the primary homes of Adcult; advertisers contribute five times as much money to a sporting event then the fans do. In fact, the popularity of golf and the lack of it for soccer has at least as much to do with how well each sport lends itself to endorsement and sponsorship as how interesting either is. The Superbowl and the Olympics have become the biggest advertising spectacles of our time.

The surplus of soap using vegetable oils led to the boom of the modern beauty industry. Solutions to problems people never knew they had, like b.o. and halitosis, were sold, largely to women who were entering the public sphere for the first time. Twitchell
describes this as the branding of gender. Now ads still tend to be offensive, but to whom depends on the target consumer.

One interesting way to see the effect of advertising is to see how it affects the calendar. This includes the daily calendar; the idea of different foods for breakfast was created by advertisers, as were the coffee break and the cocktail hour. The work week shifted from six days to five due to both drunkenness on Monday morning and the need to have an extra day a week on which to shop. Also, festivals of consumption occur throughout the year. Holidays can be identified with the products they sell. New Year’s, 4th of July, the Superbowl, St. Patrick’s day, and Halloween all sell alcohol. Cards and flowers are sold at Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. More people go out to lunch on Secretary’s Day than any other.

Chapter Four

The fourth chapter of *Adcult* is about what Twitchell refers to as the collapse of cultural hierarchy. Paintings, which are generally considered high art were once mass produced, collected by churches and private families. In the same way people buy Nikes instead of shoes, they bought Picasso’s instead of paintings. School’s sprouted up in order to meet market demand. These were the conspicuous consumption of the Renaissance. Demand ended, which was also the end of the Renaissance.

It is no surprise that artists came to work for advertising companies or that ads have come to be built on famous pieces of art. The Mona Lisa alone has been used to sell paint, spaghetti sauce, and even advertising space. Eventually, modern art, with the poster boy of Andy Warhol, became a fusion of the two. “Business is the highest form of art,” said Warhol.
Chapter Five

The final chapter of *Adcult* is Twitchell’s thoughts on the future of the industry. He depicts advertising as both a source of evil and the truest expression of man’s yearning. However, Twitchell thinks that the hey-day of advertising has come to an end. Overexposure to advertising has removed all the mystery from ads, which have become less and less about selling a product and more and more about grabbing the audience’s attention by any means necessary. The growth of parody on both television and in magazines is seen as a sign of advertising’s waning power. Advertising once had to push against cultural values, which made it flourish. Now it is our culture value.

Advertisers themselves are seen as hucksters. People rely on ads less and less when making purchasing decisions. People are shopping less. Sponsors have no proof advertising provides anything more than a short-term boost to sales. Consolidation and the ensuing globalization of American goods have not gone as well as most agencies had hoped. The internet has forever changed the way we look at media. The appearance of more unbranded generic goods has changed the industry. However, despite these concerns with advertising as a business, Twitchell has no doubt that advertising will continue to fill the other role which he has laid out throughout the book; in the future, as it does now and has in the past, advertising will function as a meaning system for objects and a source of cultural connectivity.