There’s a certain magic in buying your first item, especially with money raised through hard work. Yet as you swipe your gleaming card for the first time, you become the newest unaware victim to the carefree world of material desire. In this world, each item competes with its neighbors for your attention; transmitting images into your mind of what could be—with this product—through emblems and videos that permeate every part of your life. Despite this subliminal invasion, the feelings of responsibility and satisfaction sweep through you, providing an illusory material happiness. Advertisers know this feeling, and their job is to focus on it and elaborate upon it; creating a flood of ads to keep the illusion alive and in doing so, promote consumer culture. However, if we respond to the negative effects of advertising by increasing our awareness, improving our relationships and shifting our focus from economic growth to prevention, we may be able to escape our fates. Ads pollute our vision in obvious ways, but the more subtle influences they’ve had on our less literal vision have affected our views of what we need to save for the future—from ourselves to the future of the planet.
Increasing public awareness of the thousands of ads distributed to society on a daily basis would allow people worldwide to stop and appreciate just how many ads there are and how they affect their lives. Some ways that Jean Kilbourne, author of Can’t Buy Me Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel, believes this can be accomplished are by teaching media literacy in schools, counter-advertising advertisements, and, once educated about them, avoiding exposure to ads whenever possible. Media literacy and counter-advertising would increase awareness in both children and adults to create a world full of people who value their own realistic opinions towards products and the companies they represent. According to Statista, advertisements have become so culturally engrained that we actually share them on our own; the chart-topper of their statistic on the number of online shares for certain ads was Android’s ‘Friends Furever’ advertisement, reaching 271,080 shares via social media including Twitter and Facebook. This means that avoiding ads is almost impossible; in order to do so, we’d have to avoid our friends, going to major sports games, looking at any billboards and store signs as we drive, and completely disregard commercials from all screens and speakers.

In order to improve our social lives and escape the influence of advertising on them, people need to improve their relationships without the crutch of products. According to Sut Jhally, producer of Advertising and the End of the World, “advertising tells us that the way to happiness and satisfaction is through the consumption of objects”, so we cannot expect to fulfill our social desires through products alone. Therefore, we should attempt to create meaningful relationships instead of psychological dependencies upon products. Otherwise, we will continue to rely on a car to feel accepted at school, cigarettes to be “cool” to so-called friends or, as in Sut Jhally’s example from the video, a remote control to attract a pretty girl. Many people think that because they’re happy with their lives, nothing needs to be changed. However, if “the real sources of happiness, social relationships, are outside the capability of the marketplace to provide [then]… a world that stressed and built the institutions that would foster social relationships, not endless material accumulation [is the solution to finding true instead of material happiness]” (Sut Jhally). Then, if happiness is not derived from materials, then we should attempt to change our focus from collecting money for materials to preserving our futures.
Social– Not Economic Change

As a society we need to respond to the ads by shifting our focus from economic expansion to prevention. To do so, we need to prevent the depletion of the world’s resources. Sut Jhally argued that “our environment is suffering from the effects of ads everywhere [because] people keep buying cars that run on fossil fuels that they [are made to] think are cool [and] never complain about houses made cheaply so they break in a few years and have to be fixed or even torn apart due to their being unsuitable to natural destruction.” The shift to renewable resource-based fuel and fortification of our fundamentally unsafe homes shouldn’t have to be made cool by ads to be made; it should be a logical step towards the protection of our planet. Our robust culture is already on its way to ads taking center stage; products are referenced in pop songs, commercials limit the time we can watch our shows, even art features advertisements- take Andy Warhol’s famous Campbell’s soup can. Additionally, we must prevent the status of our social issues from worsening due to the placement of more value onto products than onto profound change in society. Jhally proved that ads have infiltrated our political views by pointing out that “in the stories of advertising, political freedom itself is offered by access to an immense accumulation of commodities… [and analyzing] a famous Wen-
Consumer culture should no longer be tolerated by our unaware, unhappy and economically focused population. Sut Jhally and Jean Kilbourne would both agree that becoming aware is easy: just pay attention to your surroundings and catch yourself if you begin to believe an irrational and unrealistic outcome portrayed in an ad will be gained by buying a good or service. Real happiness can be achieved, but only through real interactions between us human beings and a confidence in our society. Give back to the planet our consumer culture has led us to take so much from through environmental endeavors that will preserve our limited resources. Certainly, these actions will lead not only to the prevention of further social deterioration at the hands of consumer culture, but also to the salvation of our future.

Sources