The Aspiration Window

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Understanding and shaping people’s aspirations is the stock in trade of advertising. From helping you ‘work, rest and play’ to saving the planet, advertising now seems to have something to say about every conceivable human goal. So, it’s a subject we knew we’d address ever since we released our ‘Gut Instinct’ white paper in 2018. ‘Gut Instinct’ used ground-breaking experiments from cross-cultural psychology to show that people working in advertising and marketing intuitively interpret and experience the world differently to large swathes of the population.

People in our industry tend towards an analytical thinking style - seeing the world as a straight line: focused on individuality, and experiencing the world as discrete, dichotomous and predictable. This contrasts with the holistic thinking style of the mainstream - seeing the world as a circle: focused on context and understanding the world as relational, connected, complex and difficult to predict.

In 2019, ‘The Empathy Delusion’ revealed a gap between the moral intuitions of advertising and marketing people and the mainstream. Again, we found that people in our industry are at the individualistic end of the spectrum, failing to acknowledge the ‘binding ethics of community’ that play such a significant role in the lives of the mainstream.

Then Orlando Wood picked up the baton. Embracing these ideas, in ‘Lemon: How the advertising brain turned sour’, Wood linked left brained (i.e. analytical) thinking to a persistent decline in the effectiveness of advertising over the last 15 years, and argued that right brained (i.e. holistic) advertising was the answer.

The weight of evidence is building. Marketers and advertisers simply see the world differently from other people. ‘Lemon’ has laid down a creative and executional challenge to advertisers and marketers. But it would be a mistake to think that we can simply choose to do different advertising. We think it’s much deeper than that. The advertising and marketing industry is part of a wider individualistic and elitist milieu that is difficult to transcend. So, that brings us to the central question in this white paper - given what we now know about the analytical thinking styles of people working in advertising and marketing and our empathy delusions, can we even understand the aspirations of the mainstream?

Methodology

Pre-Covid – February 2020
Quantitative survey of 2,001 nationally representative UK adults and 200 interviews with advertising & marketing professionals

Mid-Covid – April 2020
Quantitative survey of 1,029 nationally representative UK adults and 150 interviews with advertising & marketing professionals

The advertising and marketing professionals were broken down as follows:

Business type

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency/Service provider</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Owner/In House</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studio/Production</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Owner</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. Freelance)</td>
<td>36%</td>
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Job role

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand &amp; Marketing</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design &amp; Production</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art &amp; Copywriting</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning, Strategy &amp; Insight</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account/Project Management</td>
<td>31%</td>
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This white paper addresses the differences between the advertising and marketing industry, and the modern mainstream (n=1,143).

The modern mainstream is defined as the middle 50% in terms of household income (£20k-£55k) and represent over 50% of brand buyers across 3,500 brands.
“The window is formed from an individual’s cognitive world, her zone of ‘similar’, ‘attainable’ individuals. The individuals who populate my window are the individuals who determine my aspirations.”

DEBRAJ RAY

The Aspiration Window: an holistic view of human goals

Ray is concerned with the big important questions i.e. understanding the conditions of poverty and formulating policy to alleviate it. However, the holistic framework that he uses includes two concepts that are useful to us in our more esoteric exploration of how advertising and marketing can engage more effectively with the mainstream.

The Capability to Aspire

Drawing on the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai we can see that, whatever our reference point, (e.g. the poor, the UK mainstream or the people who populate the advertising and marketing industry) there is no level playing field when it comes to aspiration. Everyone’s aspirations are determined by their social and economic status, and the resources and social capital that we have at our disposal. Just as our cultural, economic and educational experiences determine our thinking style (i.e. analytical or holistic), our cognitive world determines the scope and composition of our aspirations. Quite simply, some people are more able to aspire than others.

Aspirations Gap

Ray defines the aspirations gap simply as ‘the difference between the standard of living that’s aspired to and the standard of living that one already has.’ Crucially, it is the scale of this gap that determines future behaviour. Aspiration failure arises if the gap is too narrow or too wide: there is little incentive to make the effort to achieve goals if they are too close to our current situation, and there’s also little incentive if the gap between current living standards and aspirations is too wide. In order to motivate action, aspirations need to be realistic and attainable given the starting point of the individual. As Ray puts it:

“The aspirations window must be opened, for otherwise there is no drive to self-betterment. Yet it should not be open too wide.”
Of course, the idea that people are influenced by social comparison and the lifestyles of others is nothing new - it’s one of the cornerstones advertising! But, if our aspirations are determined by our experiences, this has profound implications for the practice of marketing.

So we ask two main questions:

01
Can advertising and marketing people understand the mainstream if the, relatively privileged, social and economic status they enjoy simply gives them more capacity to aspire?

02
Can advertising align with mainstream aspiration if people in the industry and sections of the population are looking at the world through different aspiration windows?

In this white paper, we’ll argue that the aspiration gap between people working in advertising and marketing and the mainstream is too wide, and this inevitably leads to advertising that is too often wide of the mark.

But first we need to address the elephant in the room - hasn’t the Covid-19 crisis changed everything?
Back in March 2020, we were all ready to launch The Aspiration Window. We’d completed the fieldwork and had started to write our white paper - and then, Covid-19 happened. It wasn’t difficult to imagine the questions that would arise if we simply pressed ahead and launched the study. How should we think about aspirations in the time of coronavirus? Has the crisis changed everything? We faced the real risk of being written off as ‘pre-crisis’. So, we doubled down and repeated the fieldwork during the first peak of the pandemic in the UK. By adding another wave, (with others planned as the pandemic and the economic shock unfolds) we created a pre-mid crisis comparison. As a result, we believe we’ve ended up with a much stronger story to tell. But let’s be clear, this is not another coronavirus tracker. So, it’s worth starting with a few observations about how the advertising and marketing industry is interpreting the crisis, and where our research sits in the debate.

There’s an old saying about never wasting a good crisis. For those looking to transform the marketing and advertising industry (from any standpoint), Covid-19 seems like the ideal ‘moment of change’. On the face of it, there’s much in the behaviour change literature to support this ambition. Indeed the ‘moment of change’ framework confirms that exogenous events, that disrupt existing habits and norms, provide a significant opportunity to encourage the adoption of new behaviour. (NB. the literature also suggests that new behaviour may not be sustained because people embrace change on the expectation that they will be able to revert to ‘normal’ at a later date).

Following the wholly deserved success of ‘Lemon’, Orlando Wood has become the champion of right brained thinking in advertising. As such he has been frequently called on to comment on the ‘reset’ in human values and motivations that many assume has taken place since the Covid-19 crisis began. Indeed, in recent publications and webinars, Wood appears to concur by stating that he has observed a ‘shift in attention’ and ‘a heightened sense of empathy’ amongst the general public in the first months of the crisis. Based on the tracking of ads aired during lockdown by System 1 (the research agency where Wood is Chief Innovation Officer), he has tentatively suggested that ‘the right brain has woken up’.

There’s much to unpack here. It’s certainly true that our industry’s tactical response to the lockdown has produced a great deal of advertising focusing on themes like ‘togetherness’ (perhaps to the detriment of distinctiveness and originality). But we don’t have to look far to see the persistence of left brained thinking in the way the marketing and advertising community has responded to the crisis. And it is not clear that the crisis has caused any ‘reset’ in the fundamental drivers of human behaviour.
First, we’d argue that analytical/left brain thinking styles are manifest in our industry’s interpretation of, and response to, the crisis. Let’s consider a couple of examples:

**The Addiction to prediction:**
Since the start of the crisis, readers of marketing industry press and social media have been inundated with predictions. As soon as lockdown started, the UK market research industry leapt into action. Within days we had a choice of over 50 coronavirus trackers all striving to define the ‘new normal’ and our post-Covid future.11

It strikes us that many of these predictions simply serve to reveal the relative privilege of those working in our industry.

**The end of office working?**
Setting aside the fact that lockdown wasn’t an option for around 50% of workers (e.g. bus drivers, delivery drivers, care workers etc.), the reality is that many people’s homes are simply not suitable for home working.

**The boycotting of brands and retailers that are judged to have transgressed our moral standards?**
For many, the ravages of long-term unemployment and the accelerated death of our high streets are far bigger concerns.

Our industry’s reaction to the crisis also reveals our analytical thinking and our determination to see the world as a straight line. Our industry seems to embrace an even more atomised society (e.g. increased working and shopping from home) while many ordinary people lament the erosion of the last vestiges of community and shared experience.

“*Ineradicable uncertainty is now a fact of life... Once you accept that no-one knows the future, possibilities proliferate*”13

MARGARET HEFFERNAN

In her new book ‘Uncharted’ Margaret Heffernan shows that the ‘addiction to prediction’12 is part of a wider cultural shift in 21st century economies and societies. Driven by the growing dominance of Silicon Valley across public policy and business, there’s a growing belief that we can anticipate and control the future.

Launched in the UK in March 2020, Heffernan’s book isn’t about the Covid-19 crisis and she doesn’t adopt the language of cross-cultural psychology that we use in this whitepaper. There’s no references to analytical and holistic thinking styles. But her analysis shows quite clearly that the UK is experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic as a left brained crisis. Our hubristic belief in efficiency and prediction (e.g. just in time supply chains) distracts us from planning for the unexpected and makes our society more fragile as a result. Think about how the UK government’s messaging emphasised ‘protect the NHS’ before ‘save lives’. Heffernan sums up the challenges and opportunities of 21st century life on the dustjacket to Uncharted: “*Ineradicable uncertainty is now a fact of life... Once you accept that no-one knows the future, possibilities proliferate.*”

Viewed through this lens, advertising and marketing people can be seen to be part of an analytical culture that is pervasive across all business and government. We cling to our ‘illusion of control’ and we find it very difficult to accept that no-one knows the future.
Everything will change/Nothing will change:

If you work in our industry, it seems you must pick a side on everything, including the impact of Covid-19. In a recent article for Marketing Week, Mark Ritson criticised “the pornography of change” around the crisis. However, his prediction that ‘nothing will change’ doesn’t seem any more down to earth. Again, on both sides, we see the analytical thinking style, the insistence on categorisation and the crowding out of nuance and complexity.

It brings to mind Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’ - a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing. Our industry tends to reward the hedgehogs. And that’s why you find few people in the industry admitting that they have no idea what’s going to happen!

So, as we get into our data, we’d like to emphasise a couple of important points: We are not predicting anything – we don’t know how behaviour will change over the long term. Our story is about learning from the recent past and the present. It’s about how the basic values and drivers of human behaviour endure. It’s about how people in the advertising and marketing industry and people in the mainstream continue to experience the world differently, even as everything appears to change around us.

It brings to mind Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’ - a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing. Our industry tends to reward the hedgehogs.
We returned to a selection of the frameworks that we used in ‘Gut Instinct’ and ‘The Empathy Delusion’. Whilst the Covid-19 crisis and lockdown has required us all to adapt our behaviour, the following four examples show there has been no reset of basic values or rewiring of human nature or, indeed, an eradication of the polarisation and political division that blighted public discourse before the crisis.

Modern Mainstream Advertising & Marketing % agreeing that each foundation is relevant when deciding something is right or wrong

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Modern Mainstream</th>
<th>Advertising &amp; Marketing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care Harm</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness Reciprocity</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Group Loyalty</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority Respect</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity Sanctity</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
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We measured marketing and advertising people and the mainstream on the same moral foundations framework we used in ‘The Empathy Delusion’. The results are consistent with our data from July 2019 - people in our industry continue to place significantly less emphasis than the mainstream on what Jonathan Haidt defined as the ‘binding ethics of community’. This tells us that we are still using different ethical and cultural settings to large swathes of the population.

This tells us that we are still using different ethical and cultural settings to large swathes of the population.
Revisiting the Dictator Game from ‘The Empathy Delusion’, we found that Brexit still fuels polarisation and discriminatory behaviour in the UK. And people in advertising and marketing are still caught up in this. People in our industry are just as likely to discriminate against someone who voted the opposite way to them in the 2016 EU referendum. 82% of ‘Remainers’ in our industry would be willing to share £50 equally with a fellow ‘Remainer’. Only 57% would be willing to share equally with someone who voted leave in the referendum.

As with our research in 2018, we again asked our marketing and advertising sample to estimate the values of the mainstream. We found they were way off. They simultaneously underestimate self-direction, universalism and benevolence, and overestimate the mainstreams focus on hedonism, achievement and power. It’s clear from this most recent data that a fundamental empathy gap endures even as advertising tailored to the crisis herds around messages of ‘togetherness’.

We went back to a framework we used to measure mainstream values. The World Values survey is used to map cross-cultural differences across 67 countries. As can be seen in fig 1.5, mainstream values in April 2020 are more or less exactly the same as they were in July 2018.

Basic values have not changed

A fundamental lack of empathy

FIG 1.2
% of Remainers choosing to share 50/50

Identity neutral benchmark

In-Group
Remain vs Remain

Out-Group
Remain vs Leave

Source: Reach Solutions/YouGov 1 April 2020
Base: UK Adults who voted ‘Remain’ in the EU referendum (n=432)

FIG 1.3
% of Leavers choosing to share 50/50

Identity neutral benchmark

In-Group
Remain vs Remain

Out-Group
Remain vs Leave

Source: Reach Solutions/YouGov 1 April 2020
Base: UK Adults who voted ‘Leave’ in the EU referendum (n=454)

FIG 1.4
% of Advertising & Marketing choosing to share 50/50

Identity neutral benchmark

In-Group
Remain vs Remain

Out-Group
Remain vs Leave

Source: Reach Solutions/YouGov 1 April 2020
Base: Advertising & Marketing who voted ‘Remain’ in the EU referendum (n=98)
We’ll keep making the same mistakes

So, all of the themes we’ve built in ‘Gut Instinct’ and ‘The Empathy Delusion’ still apply. And, essentially, all of the results of our pre and mid-Covid waves of research on aspirations have also remained remarkably consistent. For this reason, we will not be making comparisons between the two waves in this white paper. Our data certainly offers a challenge to the hyperbole of the ‘everything has changed’ narrative. But let’s be clear, we are not saying ‘nothing will change’. The social and economic context in which we seek to satisfy our goals has changed radically (at least in the short/medium term). But people have not been rewired by Covid-19. The basic drivers of human behaviour endure. And we fully expected to see the cleavages between advertising and marketing people and the mainstream persist as we explored people’s aspirations. Let us explain why.

The basic drivers of human behaviour endure. And we fully expected to see the cleavages between advertising and marketing people and the mainstream persist as we explored people’s aspirations.
The Class Ceiling', Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison show that advertising is one of the most elitist professions in the UK. Using data from the ONS Labour Force Survey, they show that social mobility is a myth. Despite a heightened focus on diversity issues in recent years, advertising, like many professions, continues to under-represent people from working class and 'intermediate' backgrounds. This is exactly the pattern we find in our own data. A staggering 70% of our advertising and marketing sample grew up in a household where the chief income earner was social grade AB. This is compared to just 29% of the modern mainstream. The privileged composition of the marketing and advertising profession is further reinforced when we look at how people from AB backgrounds over index across all strata of our industry. The point here is that lack of social mobility and access to our profession consolidates the privileged outlook of marketing and advertising. This isn’t about what you do for a living now, it’s about what your parents did for a living and quite possibly what their parents did for a living too.

Quite simply, the social, cultural and economic experiences of people in our industry are not representative of the mainstream. And these differences are reinforced and hardwired over generations. Quite simply, the social, cultural and economic experiences of people in our industry are not representative of the mainstream. And these differences are reinforced and hardwired over generations. This is the social and cultural context with which we approach our exploration of aspirations. We are the elite, but we don’t even know it. As we’ve shown in our previous studies, people in our industry, just like everyone else, are not conscious of how these differences manifest in our day to day perceptions and behaviour. We simply don’t realise that we view the world differently. Let’s consider one example.

The average salary in advertising is £47,500, and the average marketing salary ranges from £42,000 to £63,000 depending on the sector. The average personal income in the UK is just over £23,000. In this study, we asked our advertising and marketing and mainstream samples to position themselves on the ‘rich/poor staircase’ with 0 being poorest and 10 being richest. Our mainstream sample rated themselves an average of 4.8 and those in advertising and marketing at 5.5. So, advertisers and marketers know they are a bit better off than other people. But people in our industry are still firmly positioning themselves in the middle with everyone else. We then asked people where they aspire to be on the staircase, and once again we see a similar pattern for both samples - 7.0 for the mainstream and 7.7 for those in advertising and marketing.

Note that the aspiration gap is the same for marketers and the mainstream. No one wants to be right at the top. Everyone wants to move about 2 rungs up the ladder. The problem is that people in our industry are way off on their estimation of where they are right now (they are already near the top!) and, therefore, where others are starting from. Recall our earlier discussion of the aspiration gap. Too narrow and it causes aspiration failure. Too wide and it causes aspiration failure. People in advertising and marketing appear to have the calibration all wrong. It’s very difficult to connect with the mainstream if you don’t know where the middle is and you continually pitch too high.
Building on Ray’s Aspiration Window framework, our first hypothesis was that the relative privilege that advertising and marketing people enjoy will translate into a higher capacity to aspire than the mainstream. We explored this by adapting a framework developed by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum²¹. The ‘Capabilities Index’ is based on the acknowledgement that aspirations are socially determined. It measures aspirational capacity based on people’s subjective economic, educational and cultural experiences.

These results diagnose where the extra capacity lies – people in our industry enjoy greater scope for self-expression, self-actualisation, creativity and leisure. This might explain why our twitter feed is full of industry people baking sourdough bread during the lockdown! But there is a deeper message here. Crucially, people in advertising and marketing tend to rate themselves higher on what may be called ‘post-materialist’ or ‘super materialist’ experiences. Essentially, the basics of material well-being such as health, an adequate home and income are covered, meaning there's more focus on enriching the quality of life.

We also find that people working in advertising and marketing score much higher than the mainstream on ‘internal locus of control’ i.e. having a strong sense of personal agency and sense that ‘what happens to me is my own doing’. Again, this is consistent with the broader academic literature. Internal locus of control is correlated with higher social and economic status. To put it simply, the relatively privileged environment that people in advertising and marketing find themselves in means we have more options in life and a stronger sense that we can achieve things. Again, if we simply project this stronger aspirational capacity and sense of personal agency directly into our work, we are bound to miss the mark in engaging the mainstream.

As hypothesised, we find that people in our industry have much greater capacity to aspire, scoring much higher on the capabilities index:

### The index asks people to rate their subjective life experiences in a number of areas:

- **Active social life and recreation**
- **Creative expression**
- **Physical health**
- **Feeling safe in your local area**
- **Mental health**
- **Love and support of family and friends**
- **Freedom of expression**
- **Influence on decisions made in your local area**
- **Autonomy and personal agency**
- **Experience of discrimination**
- **Access to adequate housing**

### Responses to the individual statements within the framework reveal an interesting trend in differences in capabilities between our two samples:

- **'I am free to use my imagination and express myself creatively’**
  - **Modern Mainstream**: 54%
  - **Advertising & marketing**: 72%

- **'I enjoy a wide range of recreation activities’**
  - **Modern Mainstream**: 31%
  - **Advertising & marketing**: 48%

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Having shown that people in our industry have more aspirational capacity than the mainstream, our next questions were ‘how do we focus this additional capacity? Do we have different goals and aspirations from the mainstream?

There is an extensive academic literature on the content of people’s life goals. The Aspiration Index was developed out of Ryan and Deci’s highly influential self-determination theory and focuses on exploring the relative strength of intrinsic aspirations and extrinsic aspirations.

Intrinsic goals are about satisfying core human needs and doing things that are personally meaningful or valued ‘as an end unto itself’ (i.e. love, relatedness, empowerment, growth). The journey and the process is important.

Extrinsic goals are external to the self. They are focused on the outcome, a prize at the end of the journey and are motivated by some kind of external validation of self-worth such as the approval of others or material signs of status (i.e. money, image, fame).

We created a bespoke bank of statements that were representative of the UK population’s general life goals and some of the current preoccupations of marketing and advertising. We then asked our two samples to rate the importance of each statement.

Our data shows that everyone is motivated by intrinsic aspirations – and there is very little difference between people working in our industry and the mainstream. This is hardly surprising, who doesn’t need love, relationships and personal well-being?!

Extrinsic motivations are rated as less important (for everyone). However, we also find that people in marketing and advertising put significantly more emphasis on these – an index of 130 versus 100 for the mainstream. By looking at responses to some of our statements, we can see just how much the goals of advertisers and marketers diverge from the mainstream:

Here, we are making a similar argument to the one we made with the moral foundations framework in ‘The Empathy Delusion’. Advertisers and marketers balance competing motivations differently from the mainstream (i.e. moral settings are aligned with the mainstream on harm and fairness, but dial down the binding ethics of community). Similarly, for aspirations, advertisers and marketers are aligned with the mainstream’s intrinsic goals (love, relatedness etc.) but dial up the relative importance of personal fame, image and money.
As we have argued previously in 'The Empathy Delusion' and 'Gut Instinct', the real problem is not that advertising and marketing people are different from the mainstream, it’s that these differences are linked to a profound market orientation problem. Advertising and marketing people see and interpret the world differently and, despite the abundance of market research, behavioural data and ‘insight’ at our disposal, we are persistently bad at estimating the basic values and drivers of mainstream behaviour.

So how good are people in the industry at estimating the aspirations of mainstream audiences? The answer is no better than they are at estimating any other facet of mainstream values or behaviour that we have tested over the last two years.

We find that advertising and marketing people wildly overestimate the importance of extrinsic aspirations to the mainstream. Where the mainstream give extrinsic aspirations a cumulative importance rating of 3.8 (out of 10), people in marketing and advertising predict that the mainstream would give aspirations relating to fame, money and image a rating of 7.4.

But incredibly, our data reveals the extent to which we in the industry misjudge mainstream aspirations – believing them to be far more motivated by extrinsic aspirations than we are ourselves. This represents a profound aspiration gap.

The full extent of this market orientation problem is revealed when we consider some specific statements. We’ve already shown that advertising and marketing people place more importance on extrinsic aspirations (fame, money and image etc.). But incredibly, our data reveals the extent to which we in the industry misjudge mainstream aspirations – believing them to be far more motivated by extrinsic aspirations than we are ourselves. This represents a profound aspiration gap.

The Aspirations Gap: we wildly overestimate mainstream focus on fame, image and money

FIG 2.1

Mean score importance out of 10

Modern Mainstream extrinsic aspirations

3.8

Advertising & Marketing estimation of mainstream extrinsic aspirations

7.4

To have my name known by lots of people

14%

25%

63%

To be unique and stand out from the crowd

28%

47%

57%

To have a high-status job and earn lots of money

28%

47%

82%

To have many expensive possessions

11%

18%

68%

To keep up with the latest trends and fashions

17%

30%

75%

Source: Reach Solutions/Inhouse51. Base: Modern Mainstream (n=148) Advertising & Marketing (n=205)
This highly materialistic view of ‘the good life’ is reinforced by one further contrast between the mainstream and those working in advertising and marketing.

We asked our mainstream sample to rate their overall quality of life. We then analysed these ratings by household income. The results show that, generally, ratings of quality of life increase with household income. But, note that the line is rather flat, with relatively small differences in quality of life between those on low incomes and high incomes, until we get to household incomes of £100,000 per year or more (i.e. ‘the 1%’).

We then asked advertisers and marketers to estimate the quality of life of people at different income levels. As the much steeper line in Fig 2.3 shows, people working in advertising and marketing see a much stronger relationship between income and quality of life. This results in them dramatically underestimating the quality of life over everyone earning up to £50,000 per year (approximately 77% of the population!) whilst simultaneously overestimating the quality of life of the highest earning 10%.

Source FIG 2.3: Reach Solutions/house51. Base: Modern Mainstream (n=145) Advertising & Marketing (n=205)

From ‘Gut Instinct’, via ‘The Empathy Delusion’ and now ‘The Aspiration Window’ we find the same basic pattern being reinforced time and time again. Advertisers and marketers diverge from the mainstream on every major psychological, behavioural and attitudinal framework that we have explored (i.e. cognitive biases and thinking styles, basic human values, empathy, moral foundations and now aspirational capacity and motivation).

This is hardly surprising when we consider the evidence from ‘The Class Ceiling’. Supported by our own data, it shows a lack of social mobility into the industry and how unrepresentative our industry’s workforce is of the mainstream population.

But the crucial problem is not one of difference per se. It’s that every time we identify a difference between the mainstream and advertisers and marketers, we also find a problem of market orientation - an empathy gap or an aspiration gap that ruthlessly exposes our industry’s basic lack of understanding of mainstream people.

In ‘Gut Instinct’ and ‘The Empathy Delusion’ we’ve offered several examples of how these gaps in perception and understanding manifest in the day to day practice of marketing:

- **Targeting ourselves:** unconsciously or consciously calibrating advertising and marketing outputs to a group (e.g. ABC1 18-34) that sees the world as we do

- **Hyper Targeting:** an analytical fixation with technology enabled personalisation that ignores the importance of holistic cognition, context and social proof in mainstream decision making

We won’t rehearse these arguments in detail here. But, we’d like to return to another current fixation of advertising and marketing: social virtue marketing strategies.
If anything, Covid-19 seems to have amplified the social virtue narrative. Many in our industry seem to assume that it is self-evident that ‘doing good’ will be an increasing source of competitive advantage for brands as the crisis unfolds, and in the post-Covid world that follows.

IAn Inconvenient Truth: No-one believes social virtue influences buying, not even advertisers and marketers!

If anything, Covid-19 seems to have amplified the social virtue narrative. Many in our industry seem to assume that it is self-evident that ‘doing good’ will be an increasing source of competitive advantage for brands as the crisis unfolds, and in the post-Covid world that follows.

We decided to ask some straightforward questions about social virtue to find out what was going on. The key was to frame our questions to advertisers and marketers in exactly the same way as they were framed to the mainstream. We were not interested in their professional opinion - we wanted to know what they thought as ordinary members of the public.

First, we asked the mainstream and our advertising and marketing sample to rate how much they trusted ‘brands and advertisers to act in a socially responsible way’. As Fig 2.4 shows, trust is low with just 15% of the mainstream and 20% of our industry giving brands and advertisers a score of 7 or more out of 10.

Here we see the first evidence that the mainstream, and marketers and advertisers themselves, put little faith in social virtue messaging.

We then asked our mainstream and advertising and marketing samples what factors were important to them in making purchase decisions.

We find that social virtue related considerations are a low priority for the mainstream with just over 1 in 10 giving factors like ‘a brand’s position on social issues’ or ‘political stance and affiliations’ a role in their buying decisions.

However, the real blow for social purpose advocates comes in the response of advertisers and marketers to the same question. 71% of people working in advertising and marketing don’t reference ‘concern for environment issues’ when buying, and over 80% don’t consider other social virtue factors such as ‘position on social issues’ and ‘political stance and affiliations’.

“More work that is originated directly in response to, or out of, an increasing connection to communities and culture – with brands driven by purpose connecting behaviour and belief to help customers and see where they can play an authentically useful role, beyond just selling.”

ETE DAVIES, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ENGINE

1https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/why-covid-19-change-adsland-works/1679629

Source FIG 2.4: Reach Solutions/resaw/st1. Base: Modern Mainstream (n=143) Advertising & Marketing (n=205)
To complete the picture, we asked our advertising and marketing sample to estimate which factors were important to the mainstream. As Fig 2.5 shows, advertisers and marketers don’t believe this stuff matters to the mainstream either.

\[\text{Modern Mainstream} \quad \text{Advertising & Marketing} \quad \text{estimation of drivers of mainstream buying}\]

The ‘inconvenient truth’ for social virtue advocates is that, even at the height of the Covid-19 crisis, it’s good old fashioned attributes like value for money, reliability, product and service quality and customer service that are top priorities for the mainstream and for advertisers and marketers too.

\[\text{Modern Mainstream} \quad \text{Advertising & Marketing} \quad \text{estimation of drivers of mainstream buying}\]

The major driving force behind virtue strategies is not the needs of the mainstream, it’s the assumptions and needs of the people in the advertising and marketing industry. Let’s not forget, we are an elite subset of the population. Most in the mainstream remain motivated by materialism (simply because they have less stuff and don’t take it for granted).

\[\text{The Empathy Delusion}\]

Does our latest research contradict this? Part of the answer lies in the definition of ‘materialism’ i.e. ‘a value-system relating to the desire for fulfillment of material needs (such as security, sustenance and shelter) and an emphasis on material luxuries in a consumerist society.’

Using this definition, we can see that our data on aspirational capacity and extrinsic goals points to a difference of focus between the mainstream and people who work in advertising and marketing. Everyone is a materialist in the sense that they prioritise basic material needs for security, sustenance and shelter. However, we know that the relatively privileged social and economic status of people who work in advertising and marketing gives them more aspirational capacity. This additional headroom may enable them to enjoy virtue signalling as a ‘luxury’. But our data shows that marketers and advertisers acknowledge that social virtue is not a main driver of consumption.

\[\text{Modern Mainstream} \quad \text{Advertising & Marketing} \quad \text{estimation of drivers of mainstream buying}\]

\[\text{The Aspiration Window}\]

Source Fig 2.5/2.6: ReachSolutions/Issue61. Base: Modern Mainstream (n=1143) Advertising & Marketing (n=205)
Cognitive Dissonance?

Definition: Cognitive dissonance refers to a situation involving conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. This produces a feeling of mental discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviours to reduce the discomfort and restore balance.

We’ve shown that advertisers and marketers place more importance on extrinsic motivations (fame, money, and image) than the mainstream. But there is extensive evidence in the literature linking extrinsic and materialistic aspirations to lower levels of wellbeing and happiness.

So, perhaps social virtue is simply something that helps advertisers and marketers feel better about themselves and what they do? We reduce the mental discomfort of pushing fame, money and image all day by reimagining our work as purposeful and socially responsible.

Perhaps this is how the narrative around social virtue is sustained? We don’t believe it is a key driver in buying decisions. But the new orthodoxy flourishes because it fits the psychological needs of people who work in advertising and marketing.

Of course, here we are being deliberately provocative. We offer this hypothesis to illustrate our overarching theme. Advertisers and marketers are humans. Social norms, culture and emotion play just as big a part in our decision making as anyone else’s. If we don’t acknowledge that our view of the world is inherently biased, then we can’t hope to close the gaps that we have identified in this research.

So, perhaps social virtue is simply something that helps advertisers and marketers feel better about themselves and what they do? We reduce the mental discomfort of pushing fame, money and image all day by reimagining our work as purposeful and socially responsible.
from ‘Gut Instinct’ via ‘The Empathy Delusion’ to ‘The Aspiration Window’, over 3 years and 3 white papers, our eclectic approach has used frameworks from cross-cultural psychology, anthropology, sociology and economics. We’ve used implicit research techniques and traditional survey research. We’ve used behavioural experiments, economic games and resource dilemmas. We’ve interviewed almost 7,500 people in nationally representative samples of the UK population and over 700 marketers and advertising people from across the UK. We’ve measured response as the culture wars fuelled by Brexit played out, and pre and mid lockdown in the current Covid-19 crisis.

The evidence we have presented is robust and consistent. Advertising and marketing is an elitist profession and its work is conditioned by the privileged social and economic status enjoyed by the people who work in our industry. In every framework and context we have explored, this creates a profound disconnect between ad land and the mainstream audiences that we are trying to engage and influence.

In ‘Gut Instinct’ this was manifest in the divergent thinking styles and basic values of the mainstream and people who work in advertising and marketing. In ‘The Empathy Delusion’ we highlighted the differences in moral foundations that drive the empathy gap. ‘The Aspiration Window’ provides an accessible framework for understanding how the divergent social and economic experiences and cognitive worlds occupied by people in our industry, translates to a gap in understanding the mainstream’s day to day live goals and aspirations.

The aspiration window is open too wide. The extra capacity to aspire enjoyed by people in advertising and marketing and its focus on materialism, fame, money and image causes us to persistently miss the mark in capturing what really matters to the mainstream.

Given the consistency of our findings, we make no apology for returning to some familiar themes in our recommendations.

Our Conclusions

Be part of their cognitive world

Crucially, the people working in our industry grossly overestimate their ability to transcend their own aspiration window. Our industry is bad at understanding mainstream aspirations. That’s why trying to explicitly capture ordinary people’s life goals in messaging is such a risky and hubristic endeavour.

In ‘The Empathy Delusion’ we referenced the economist John Kay and his argument that many of our goals in life are achieved indirectly or obliquely. The evidence from ‘The Aspiration Window’ reinforces the value of an oblique approach. The best way for advertising and marketing elites to access the ‘cognitive world’ of the mainstream is by association. Simply being present in the contexts where ordinary people find a ‘zone of attainable and similar individuals’. Places where there is trust and a community of shared values and where there is ready alignment with intrinsic motivations like love and relatedness. Mass media and broad targeting is the best way to access the holistic, cognitive world of the mainstream.
Build brands ‘holistically’

One consequence of the misunderstanding of mainstream aspirations is that marketers and advertisers tend to gravitate towards (social) media where the currency is the expression of extrinsic and materialistic aspiration. Social media influencers literally build their personal brand and their value to advertisers by connecting fame, money and image. The pursuit of extrinsic aspiration via social media also results in hyper targeted advertising.

Since we published ‘Gut Instinct’ and ‘The Empathy Delusion’, there is a growing consensus that you simply can’t build brands effectively using hyper targeting. See, for example, Bob Hoffman on ‘Why Online Ads Haven’t Built Brands’ where he provides a highly readable summary of Kevin Simlers’ arguments that brands are built by tapping into ‘common knowledge’ and shared cultural meaning.

Recipients of hyper targeted online advertising have no idea what other people in their aspiration window have seen. In this highly atomised world, there’s little scope for common knowledge and shared cultural meaning. Of course, all these points are connected and take us back to our overarching theme that bands are built holistically, not analytically. Or in Orlando Wood’s terms, right brain advertising is more effective than left brain advertising.

We began this white paper by rejecting the idea that the Covid-19 crisis had rewired the mainstream. But our analysis does highlight a key principle for marketing in the time of Covid. We’ll say it again, our data shows that marketers and ad people are not good at predicting the values and aspirations of the mainstream (and herding around obvious and generic messages like ‘togetherness’ during lockdown doesn’t count!). So, effective marketing and advertising in this crisis, or any other time, is less about honing a perfect message that captures the zeitgeist, (the exceptions merely prove the general rule) and more about being mentally available and developing common knowledge in as many relatable contexts as possible.

“For a fact to be common knowledge among the group, it’s not enough for everyone to know it. Everyone must also know that everyone else knows it. In other words, part of our purchasing calculation is not just our belief that X is an acceptable product, but our expectation that other people believe this brand is acceptable because they know what we know”

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And finally—you can’t magic a new window

We concluded ‘The Empathy Delusion’ with an appeal for more diversity in our industry. Six months later ‘The Class Ceiling’ was published and provided a timely reminder of the elitism and lack of social mobility that persists in our top professions including advertising.

Our research on ‘The Aspiration Window’ brings the importance of addressing these issues into even sharper relief. If our cognitive world, values and aspirations are to a large extent socially determined, we simply need to build more diversity into our industry.

As JP Hanson noted recently in Marketing Week:

“Diversity is not about a brand purpose temporarily enforced by the zeitgeist. It is about improving the odds of strategic success and ultimately winning in the marketplace.”

Diversity is finally making its way to the top of our industry agenda. But there remains a significant blind spot around social class.

You’ll find precious few mentions of class and social mobility in the equality and inclusion policies of any leading profession. And people of working-class origin are rarely featured or celebrated in the rapidly expanding coverage of diversity issues in our trade or mainstream media. Our data shows that thinking styles and values correlate strongly with social and economic status. So, we simply can’t achieve cognitive diversity if we ignore social class.

There’s also a significant challenge here for the market research industry and the role of the ‘insights’ it generates. In principle, research should provide the mechanism that widens or narrows the aspiration window to capture our target audience. But the persistent gaps we identify in the basic understanding of the mainstream suggest this just isn’t happening.

The famous quote from David Ogilvy comes to mind about marketing executives using ‘research… as a drunkard uses a lamp post - for support, rather than for illumination’.

Ogilvy was lamenting marketing executives’ reluctance to use their own judgement and experience. But our data shows that mere mortals can’t magic up a new aspiration window to fit each audience they are seeking to engage. Only by building genuinely diverse and socially representative workforces will we improve our window on the world. Suffice to say, until we achieve greater workforce diversity, (i.e. represent all of the biases) we may be condemned to making the same mistakes time and again.
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