

Christmas 2019 and the power of advertising

All the indications are that we will continue to spend - General Election and Brexit uncertainty or not...



A scene from John Lewis' Christmas 2019 ad (Image: John Lewis & Partners)

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Long before the dying embers of the last firework of Bonfire night rained down upon this Brexity and fractured land, it was clear that the nation's retailers were gearing up for the Christmas run in.

Indeed, as the digital display on the giant Christmas tree outside my local ASDA told me on November 4 there were only 51 "sleeps" until the big day.

Yes, all the major players are in position.

Coca Cola has announced the [venues for its annual truck visits](#) and while the world waited for the John Lewis annual advertising tearjerker to appear yesterday, ASDA, Argos, Iceland and the usual suspects had all released their own efforts almost two weeks before.

As I've [written elsewhere](#) this is now an annual event keenly anticipated. The major retailers see Christmas as the primary time to capitalise on the willingness of the public to spend money and this seems entirely natural in our consumer led society.

As a whole, companies spent [a record £5.6bn](#) on seasonal advertising in 2016 and according to [the Advertising Association](#), UK businesses will spend £6.8bn this year, which is again up 4.7% on 2018.

The substance and style of the TV ads from Sainsbury's and co does not vary much from year to year. The onus is always on giving rather than receiving and of course children are central to the narrative.

In this year's [ASDA spectacular](#), two children see their drab street lit up with the wonders of Christmas via "Santa's magic". What's interesting here is that ASDA is not concerned with trying to sell us particular products. What it really wants to do is insinuate that it not only understands the meaning of Christmas (family, happiness, the magic of giving) but also that the brand is utterly central to the enjoyment of it all. Put another way, no ASDA no Christmas.

All the commercials seek to make buying central to the Christmas experience without showing anything actually being purchased. On an associative level, the idea is to make Marks & Spencer et al an indispensable part of the Christmas experience and to suggest that their brand can provide for all eventualities.

But the big question with advertising is always: Does it work?

We all like to think we are immune to its influences, but as [Craig Inglis](#), customer director at John Lewis & Partners and chairman of the Marketing Society, has [stated](#): "We make just over £8 [profit] for every pound we spend so the Christmas ad campaigns are hugely profitable. The returns are long term as well; we see the continuing impact. The £7m we spend is dwarfed by our competitors. We punch well above our weight."

And all indications are that we will continue to spend this Christmas, General Election and Brexit uncertainty or not.

Bobatoo.co.uk the online insurance advice company recently surveyed 7,00 UK citizens and found that the majority of people (27% of respondents) will be spending between £300 and £500 on gifts this Christmas, while 16% said they would be setting their budget at less than £200.

The majority of respondents said that they would be spending in the region of £100-£200, but there was a 48% rise (in comparison with the survey conducted last year) in the number of people spending over £400 on food, drink and decorations. Also reported was a 22% fall in the number of people spending less than £100, which suggests that UK consumers are planning on spending more this year.

So we spend and yet everywhere we look there is debt and poverty. [Recent figures point to](#) 350 people declared bankrupt every day. As of June this year, the average debt per adult in the UK was calculated at £31,232 and in 2019 thus far, the Citizens Advice Bureaux has dealt with 2,527 new debt problems every day.

As is increasingly obvious, homelessness and rough sleeping are the shameful conditions of all British towns and cities with the Office for National Statistics stating there were 726 deaths of homeless people in England and Wales registered in 2018.

This should be simply unacceptable, and the tragedy of this Christmas is the widening gap between the haves and the have nots.

From Christmas ads to 'deepfake' videos...

Victoria Derbyshire's BBC current affairs programme on Tuesday morning included an item by Catrin Nye on "deepfake" videos.

They can be defined as when artificial intelligence technology (AI) is used to merge created material onto already existing footage.

Thus, there is the opportunity to present content that never actually happened; people can be made to look like they are saying and doing things that they did not do or say.

So, as created by AI think-tank [Future Advocacy](#), we saw footage of a created version of Boris Johnson enthusiastically endorsing the Prime Ministership of Jeremy Corbyn and a created version of Mr Corbyn state that he "urged all members and supporters of the Labour Party to back Boris Johnson to continue as our Prime Minister".

Throughout the feature, Future Advocacy explained their artifice and [Stephen Fry was moved to tweet](#) that, “this kind of thing will only get more and more accurate, less and less detectable. Lip-synch issues will be ironed out... be afraid, wary, worried, vigilant, determined: follow and support [@FutureAdvocacy](#)”.

I [wrote here about deepfakes](#) a few weeks ago and I’m inclined to agree with Mr Fry on the serious issues we may face in the not so distant future. That said, I’m also increasingly aware of how incredible actual political communication has become without their presence.

During an almost surreal start to the election campaign period a week ago, we were treated to the spectacle of former Labour MPs [Ian Austin and John Woodcock endorsing](#) Boris Johnson over Mr Corbyn while recent Tory cabinet minister [David Gauke said](#) on the Today programme there were are “a lot of traditional Conservative voters who feel politically homeless. Many of them will vote for the Lib Dems...and they are right to”.

Then yesterday I saw the Conservative’s [first party political broadcast](#), heralded on its website as “Boris Johnson’s hilarious election advert”.

Loosely modelled on Vogue magazine’s conceit of having various celebrities (on video) being asked 73 questions by disembodied unnamed interviewer, we see Johnson amble amiably around what is presumably Tory HQ, fielding questions as “hilarious” as “Fish and Chips or roast dinner?”

I imagine for those unfamiliar with the Vogue style that it is all highly discombobulating.

In response to the question, “What’s the most surprising thing you’ve found about PM?”

Mr Johnson replied, arm waving, “I was pretty incredulous the other day when I found I couldn’t actually get a Thai curry to deliver to Number 10... security was too tight”.

This is patently ridiculous but is also indisputably part of Mr Johnson’s manufactured style.

[Boris Johnson's election broadcast shows he thinks we're stupid | Will Hayward](#)

Performances such as this draw attention away from policy scrutiny.

As his former boss, [Dominic Lawson, wrote in the Sunday Times last week](#), you can call Mr Johnson's attitude and behaviour many things - arrogant, entitled and even amoral. But it has a "primordial appeal to voters impatient with the inertia of politics as usual".

The Tory strategists who believe this to be true depend on the media in general to concentrate on their leader's personality traits and idiosyncrasies, which they believe play well with the electorate.

It's clear from opinion polls that a significant proportion of voters also appear to see Johnson as a man of action, free from the constraints which bedevil ordinary politicians and a man made to "get things done".

That is the important thing - not the evidence which suggests that in reality nothing at all has really been done. Perhaps Mr Lawson is right, Mr Johnson is "a proven liar"... but a trusted leader.

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