

# System Over *Lebenswelt* in Communicative Action: Inner Mechanisms of the Institutionalisation of Advertising

MARIANA GARDUÑO

Universidad Panamericana, School of Media and Communications, Augusto Rodin 498, Ciudad de México, 03920, México

Email: [lgarduno@up.edu.mx](mailto:lgarduno@up.edu.mx)

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Drawing from Habermas' distinction between the system and life-world, the article explores and analyses how advertising operates within both domains, influencing not only the institutional structure but also everyday social interactions, thus providing the framework for the institutionalisation of advertising as a social actor and force in contemporary society. Using Super Bowl commercials to explain the way that they reflect and shape dominant cultural values, and based on George Ritzer's McDonaldisation, Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, Manuel Castells' social capital and power dynamics, and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and habitus, the article examines how advertising has evolved beyond its commercial role to become a central institution that shapes behaviours, identities and cultural norms. It highlights the role of advertising in reinforcing social power and cultural capital, which can be identified by the data driven personalisation, narrative control and standardisation that brands use to leverage their power through their commercial narratives. It also addresses critiques of the institutionalisation of advertising which provides an understanding on how advertising functions as a powerful institution that reflects and shapes social realities in the digital and mass consumption era.

**Keywords:** communicative action, institutionalisation of advertising, social power in advertising, surveillance capitalism, symbolic capital, McDonaldisation of advertising, narrative control, Super Bowl advertising, social capital

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary advertising has evolved from being a sole mechanism for product awareness and promotion to a social phenomenon that helps shape behaviours, values and beliefs amongst its viewers and consumers. This article theoretically analyses the institutionalisation of advertising as a social force that influences the construction of cultural reality in modern society, particularly through their promotion in worldwide sporting events that showcase advertising creativity and product awareness such as the Super Bowl.

Advertising has moved beyond its commercial role to become a key social institution that regulates and shapes cultural meanings, consumer behaviour, and individual identities. Advertising has become institutionalised in contemporary society, using for the main

theoretical perspectives: 1) McDonaldisation, 2) surveillance capitalism, 3) social capital and its construction and 4) power dynamics reproductions, therefore to be an agent that helps the system impose itself over the Habermas' life-world.

The aim of this article is to question how these four concepts work together as mechanisms to impose the system over life-world, therefore institutionalising advertising practices provides a framework to understand the highly standardised, efficient, predictable and controlled process that advertising follows to create highly effective messages. In this context, surveillance capitalism operates within this system using massive amounts of data gathered and obtained from users to optimise and personalise advertising. Within this model, advertising uses this data to target individually and leverage social capital and social digital capital where consumer and viewers interactions with brands are exploited by companies, gaining more power by inserting themselves in cultural associations, through aesthetics, ideas and identities, building their own prestige and reputation to maintain and increase their symbolic capital.

The examples in this analysis are selected Super Bowl commercials that represent the event in how it has become a platform for observing how advertising functions nowadays as a social institution. Super Bowl commercials represent the top tier for advertising and creative techniques showcasing and reflecting the dominant cultural values, also by reshaping these values in a circular way. They become a cultural and mediating phenomenon that transcend the sale and promotion of different products, by helping them to determine how to represent identities and establish power relations between brands and consumers.

Through an exemplification of their narrative and symbolic elements, it examines how brands construct their messages and reinforce cultural values. The analysis is grounded on the combination between the concepts provided by Ritzer (2020), Zuboff (2019), Castells (2012) and Bourdieu (1986), allowing an interpretation of the institutionalisation of advertising within a context of mass consumption.

It also aims to provide a different view on how advertising, far from being a commercial and marketing tool, profoundly operates as a social institution that deeply impacts contemporary life. Through the exemplification of selected Super Bowl commercials, it seeks to open a space for questioning how brands and companies, as well as the creative teams involved in their creation, shape our social reality and define aspects of our culture and social relationships.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Habermas' concept of life-world refers to the everyday social context in which communicative action takes place where the institutional order meets structural components of this life-world (Baxter 1987: 46). Advertising, as part of the life-world, plays a key role in shaping cultural values and everyday interactions, influencing how individuals understand and interpret their social reality through mediated communication, in line with Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. The rationalisation of the life-world can only happen in the world itself and through communicative language and mutual understanding (Pignuoli Ocampo 2016: 168), therefore, advertising messages serve as the communicative mediation, while being institutionalised through advertising in itself.

Advertising has evolved from being a commercial tool to becoming a social institution with a significant impact on contemporary culture and individual's lives. For example, TikTok, initially a user-driven platform, is now a stage to assert brand presence, thereby institutionalising a space that was once considered more informal and user-centric (Obreja 2024: 2).

This institutionalisation can be framed in four perspectives throughout the concepts of McDonaldisation, Surveillance Capitalism, Social Capital and Power Dynamics, and Symbolic Capital to explain its role in contemporary advertising.

George Ritzer's (2010) McDonaldisation theory provides a foundation for understanding how advertising has adopted a logic of standardisation, efficiency and control, that homogenises creative approaches, culture views and diversity amplitude, seen in the final outcomes of the commercials. This can be observed in advertising through the use of predictable and standardised formats and narratives that reinforce values such as success, competition and happiness (Ritzer 2010).

Shosana Zuboff (2019) offers a critical approach through the discussion of surveillance capitalism, revealing how advertising uses and takes advantage of personal data provided by consumers to personalise commercials in increasingly stealth and sophisticated ways, raising ethical concerns about individual autonomy. In this context, advertisers and advertisements are directly and indirectly linked to surveillance practices, as interactions on social media, digital platforms and devices are monitored to provide data and improve advertising strategies and market bottom lines (Zuboff 2019).

Different ecosystems adopt technologies like AI to support sustainable business models (Chin 2024: 10). In this context, effective advertising becomes a key success factor, with the narrative power of widely broadcasted events like the Super Bowl amplifying its impact. This reinforces the use of advertising as a tool for driving business models, strengthening its role as a social institution. As a result, there is a need to establish ethical understanding on the use of surveillance practices and monitoring. The relationship between privacy implications and AI marketing (Saura 2024: 10). On the other hand, also offering and benefits in surveillance capitalism, such as personalisation or valuable services in return, free access, and personalisation (Königs 2024: 122).

By using Manuel Castells power dynamics reproduction (2012), a perspective on how advertising contributes to the construction of social power relations through social capital can be determined. Brands and companies seek to consolidate their position within social hierarchies by gathering social capital, which reinforces their influence, authority and power in society. This concept manifests through the control of narratives that legitimise and strengthen the social power of brands. By associating themselves with the dominant values they gain predominance and prestige, enhancing their ability to maintain their position within power structures (Castells 2012).

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), with his theoretical contributions on social institutions, analyses how the advertisements work to reinforce social inequalities and norms, by promoting certain and specific lifestyles and values. Super Bowl commercials contribute to shaping public discourse and brand awareness by delimiting and reinforcing existing power hierarchies (Bourdieu 1986). There is more room for new fields of capital as Bourdieu delimited in the fields, in the form of digital prosumption and content creation (Verwiebe, Hagemann 2024: 7).

## **DISCUSSION ON THE MECHANISMS USED IN INSTITUTIONALISED ADVERTISING IN SUPER BOWL COMMERCIALS**

Super Bowl is the advertising platform to integrate American culture, as entertainment in a digital world (McAllister, Galindo-Ramirez 2017: 58) due to cultural, social and economic impact. Super Bowling is the set of observations of the effects that it has on American culture (Hopsicker

2017: 25), and easily scaled to global references. Even though there are more challenges and new forms to get brand recognition in-game advertising (Chaney 2018: 312), SuperBowl still has the annual event characteristic that gathers viewers around the world to watch and comment on the game and ads.

Framework for selecting and analysing Super Bowl commercials consisted in the following: 1) adherence to principles of efficiency, predictability, calculability and control following standardised patterns commonly seen in advertising; 2) data influence on content to target specific demographics or groups; 3) foster or features of celebrities, influencers or peer to peer influence; 4) cultural significance through associations, identities, values or imagery. The Criteria for the analysis are 1) target audience, 2) central message or cultural and social themes, and 3) status and values positioning. The commercials chosen for the study are from the main industries of vehicles, alcoholic beverages and technology. This analysis connects to the content, structure, efficiency and impact of Super Bowl commercials, offering a rich perspective on their broader cultural significance.

**The first mechanism is to standardise advertising for efficiency and predictability.** George Ritzer (2010) develops the concept of McDonaldisation, which describes how the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control have spread to various social institutions, including advertising. In terms of the Super Bowl, commercials exemplify these principles as they are crafted and conceptualised to maximise their best impact in the shortest possible time with the least failure outcome for the brand.

Ritzer's (2010) concept of McDonaldisation highlights how modern advertising has adopted these principles. A clear example can be found in Doritos' 'Crash the Super Bowl' campaign, where consumers created ads by following predictable and calculated formulas, effectively strengthening the emotional connection between the brand and its followers. This commercial has been adapted yearly to accommodate different trends, visuals and target audiences for more than a decade. In the campaign, viewers are asked to submit their own proposal for the commercial, the winners earn a million dollars and the opportunity to have their ad broadcasted during the event.

Another example can be seen in Budweisers commercials through the years, in which by using the same formula for Clydesdales ensure an emotional follow up with their consumers and also a formula for creative success that proved successful for at least two decades. This set of commercials, aired since 1991, was selected for its recurrent use of the Clydesdales as the main characters that convey specific brand values and identity for beer products in advertising (Rice 2016: 238). This approach allows brands to standardise their advertising strategies, reducing uncertainty and maximising message effectiveness in a limited time frame (Ritzer 2010).

A more recent example of this phenomenon is Hyundai's 'The Chase' (2017), which uses humour in an action driven narrative to capture viewers' attention. This commercial aligns with the concept of McDonaldisation by following a predictable format that combines humour and technology (CGI) to create a quick and emotional connection with viewers through entertainment (the ad showcases a bear chase in a wildlife scenario only to demonstrate the main features of the vehicle), while maximising advertising efficiency. According to Ritzer's framework, this commercial demonstrates how contemporary advertising relies on standardised formulas not only throughout the creative process, but in the production of fully cinematographic narratives to ensure that the message is efficient and memorable (Ritzer 2010).

**The second mechanism is to model consumer behaviour through data usage.** Shoshana Zuboff (2019) introduces the concept of surveillance capitalism, which describes how

large technology companies and platforms use personal data and information to predict and model consumer behaviour. With this model, advertising not only promotes products via tailored targeting strategies, but also leverages the data collected to personalise messages, favour product visualisation and make them more effective. These technological companies and platforms gather large amounts of information about users and their behaviour, allowing them to generate advertising campaigns designed to meet consumers' specific interests and needs, making the advertisements more persuasive, available, and harder to avoid (Zuboff 2019).

Although Super Bowl commercials are broadcast to mass audiences in a specific time frame (yearly from late January through early February), the digital interactions that precede or follow, such as comments or mentions on social media and digital platforms, are carefully monitored. This enables them to tune in their advertising strategies more precisely, influencing and determining consumer decisions through constant surveillance for later control. Digital platforms do not only record and save immediate reactions from users and viewers, they also analyse long-term data to optimise future interactions, reinforcing the cycle of surveillance and behavioural manipulation (Zuboff 2019).

The social control that emerges from surveillance capitalism undermines individual autonomy, as consumer choices are increasingly shaped by the data and information gathered and collected by these platforms. Zuboff argues that this model not only predicts behaviour but also actively modifies it, creating a loop in which brands continuously optimise their strategies based on consumer surveillance. This process raises significant ethical concerns about privacy, as consumer decision making becomes subordinated to the commercial interests of large tech corporations (Zuboff 2019) and worldwide brands in this scenario of institutionalised advertising.

As an example, in Google's 'Loretta' (2020), the company uses its smart assistant to show how technology can help an elderly man remember significant moments with his late wife, Loretta. The commercial illustrates how technological platforms not only store and manage personal data, but also transform it into tools and solutions to shape the user's emotional experiences. By presenting a narrative where technology exists to ease the relation between connections and intimate memories, the commercial normalises and legitimises the use of technology to access deeply personal information, in which a common practice is that the same user is the provider.

This example targets a specific demographic and highlights how surveillance capitalism, through the collection and exploitation of individual data, intervenes in everyday life while simultaneously manipulating behaviour and perceptions through technological personalisation (Zuboff 2019).

**The third mechanism is to build social capital to leverage brand power.** Manuel Castells (2012) argues that power is exercised through the control of communication and the accumulation of social capital. This social capital is built by creating narratives that appeal to values, emotions and aspirations of individuals. Super Bowl commercials are a first-hand example on how brands attempt and succeed to establish deep emotional connections with their audience by using stories that reinforce the brand's symbolic capital (Castells 2012).

With this, it can be emphasised that the most successful brands are those that control media narratives, embedding themselves in social and cultural conversations to strengthen their legitimacy. By creating emotional bonds with viewers and consumers, brands accumulate social capital and build social meaning, which assures power in contemporary society (Castells 2012).

Through Super Bowl commercials, brands leverage massive exposure to control narratives and reinforce their social capital, shaping not only their consumer's preferences, but also identifying cultural identities that can be visualised while legitimating predominant values, such as inclusion, individual success, sustainability and social causes.

With Microsoft's 'We All Win' (2019), it can be exemplified how the brand showcases an accessible gaming console for people with disabilities, highlighting an inclusive gaming experience for all. The commercial can be also analysed within the framework of social and symbolic capital, as Microsoft uses the inclusion message and brand value to strengthen its legitimacy in contemporary society with an emotional connection with a more diverse audience and consumers, aiming for an impact in and beyond product sales (Castells 2012).

This ad, which focuses on the creation of adaptive technology for people with disabilities, builds social capital by promoting values of community, empathy, and shared progress. By positioning itself as a brand that fosters social good and inclusivity, Microsoft strengthens its brand power as a social actor, not as a tech company, boosting the brand's symbolic capital by creating emotional and relational ties beyond its products, fostering deeper engagement with its consumer, illustrating Castell's concert that power is derived from cultural and symbolic connections.

**The fourth and final mechanism is to increase symbolic capital and habitus through cultural and identitarian insertion in their messages.** Pierre Bourdieu (1986) introduces the concepts of symbolic capital and habitus to explain how advertising reinforces social structures. Symbolic capital can refer in this context to the prestige or status that brands and companies can accumulate by associating themselves with specific cultural meanings. Super Bowl advertisements construct narratives that build and maintain prestige by aligning them with contemporary and current values. In this way, brands acquire symbolic capital that extends beyond the initial commercial exchange (Bourdieu 1986).

The habitus, understood as the internalised dispositions that will guide consumer practices, is reinforced through the repetition of symbols and advertising narratives in campaigns and brand communications. Super Bowl commercials have presented for years certain lifestyles as desirable, shaping consumers' purchase decisions and perceptions of what constitutes success or social belonging, according to the latest trends, and in this case, novel ones. Advertising, therefore, contributes to the reproduction of a consumer habitus that reinforces social hierarchies and legitimises brands' status within the social field (Bourdieu 1986).

Super Bowl ads strengthen social hierarchies by accumulating symbolic capital. Brands participating in this event seek not only to sell products but also to acquire symbolic capital by associating their products with powerful social meanings, relevant to audiences, each year, with more diverse demographics, consumer interests, and individual and social values.

An example of this is Budweiser's 'Born the Hard Way' (2017), which tells the story of the immigration of the company's founder, Adolphus Busch. The narrative of immigration, acceptance, perseverance and success in the context of immigration can be analysed through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic and social capital, as the brand aligns and maybe makes a political statement aligned with values such as diversity. This association enhances its social prestige by adapting to shifts in American cultural values, which carry a deep significant weight that can be related to identity and heritage, reinforcing its cultural relevance and emotional resonance with its audience.

**With these four mechanisms working for the system in Habermas' life-world, advertising serves as a social institution.** The combination of these theoretical perspectives

reveals that advertising in events like the Super Bowl functions as a social ritual that reinforces dominant values. Ritzer (2010) suggests that commercials are part of a 'cathedral of consumption', where the act of consuming becomes ritualised, while Zuboff (2019) demonstrates how surveillance capitalism personalises and manipulates this process. Castells (2012) argues that brands accumulate symbolic capital by controlling media narratives, and Bourdieu (1986) explains how advertising reinforces habitus and power structures through symbolic capital.

The institutionalisation of advertising, viewed through Ritzer (2010), Zuboff (2019), Castells (2012) and Bourdieu (1986), shows how advertising has transcended its original promotional role to become an institution that regulates, shapes and organises behaviours and values in contemporary society. Super Bowl commercials exemplify how advertising operates through standardisation, surveillance, the accumulation of social and symbolic capital, and the reproduction of habitus. This transforms consumption into a social ritual, solidifying its role as one of the most powerful institutions in modernity.

Using the concept of ideology as an example, ideological representations within the life-world offer a foundation for social systems and actors to legitimise their actions (Gray 2020: 352). In the context of advertising, especially during high-profile and popular events like the Super Bowl, these representations play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing societal values and ideologies, allowing brands to influence and resonate with a wider audience while accommodating themselves to different cultural and social trends and demands.

## CRITIQUE ON THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF ADVERTISING

The process of advertising's institutionalisation, where brands have influence on the life-world, reflects the dynamics of symbolic power, narrative control, and the reproduction of social and cultural capital in a consumer society (Castells 2012; Bourdieu 1986). Super Bowl commercials, beyond their commercial intentions, simulate and reinforce cultural realities, solidifying advertising's status as a powerful social institution in modern times. Below are three key critiques of the institutionalisation of advertising:

**1. Normalisation of social roles.** Institutionalised advertising reinforces social roles and hierarchies by naturalising and neutralising certain power structures. Representations in advertising often reflect and perpetuate inequalities of gender, class and race rather than challenging them, institutionalising these behavioural patterns as normal or desirable (Bourdieu, 1986). Judith Butler (2007) explores how 'gender performativity' reinforces social norms through the repetition of roles and behaviours in the media.

A clear example of this is the Always 'Like a Girl' (2015) ad, which, while created to deliver a message for girls with a strong insight about being who you are, also capitalises on social movements like feminism to increase the efficiency of the message delivered to viewers (Ritzer 2010). By presenting a narrative that challenges gender stereotypes, the commercial in fact commodifies the feminist discourse, using a critical social movement to create a commercial slogan. This contributes to the normalisation of power structures that perpetuate these inequalities, subtly reinforcing the very norms it appears to question.

**2. Criticism as a commercial strategy.** Criticism of advertising and its practices is often absorbed or vanished by the advertising industry itself, transformed into new commercial strategies born from the same critique faced by the brand. Rather than being a force for change, criticism is neutralised by being integrated into the advertising message, thereby reducing its transformative potential. Jürgen Habermas (1984), in his theory of the colonisation of the life-world, argues that institutions, including commercial ones, invade social and personal spaces,

imposing market logic on areas that should remain independent of consumption. Naomi Klein (2000) further discusses how brands have learned to absorb criticisms through 'ethical branding', turning social criticisms into marketing opportunities.

An example of this absorption or neutralisation is the Gillette 'The Best Men Can Be' (2019) commercial, in which the brand utilises the #MeToo movement to redefine and pivot its traditional commercial message that highlighted the masculine role for decades. While the commercial attempts to address toxic masculinity and promote a more positive version of masculinity, it also uses this legitimate social critique for a marketing strategy. In doing so, the campaign does not radically transform the underlying structures, but instead uses criticism as a tool to generate relevance and connect with contemporary cultural trends.

**3. Control of cultural and social narratives.** Advertising has evolved into a key social institution that controls and shapes dominant cultural narratives. According to Ritzer (2010), through standardisation and repetition, advertising imposes simplified visions of social life, while selecting which predominant values and desired behaviours should be promoted. This reinforces Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus, in which brands not only reflect social hierarchies but also normalise and perpetuate them. Stuart Hall (1980) discusses how media frames cultural narratives, influencing how consumers interpret them.

An example on how this control influences the debates that could emerge in some topics, Super Bowl commercials, like T-Mobile's (2022), use celebrities and humour to project an optimistic view of technological connectivity, while ignoring critical debates about privacy and control. In this way, advertising not only informs or entertains but also defines cultural structures and priorities and reinforces the normalisation of their use among viewers.

This process of narrative control consolidates the symbolic power of brands, transforming consumption into a central cultural act. Advertising not only impacts economic decisions but also shapes how contemporary societies understand their values and identities. Through massive events like the Super Bowl, brands reinforce a social order that promotes certain lifestyles and behaviours, reproducing and legitimising the consumer system. The power of brands as cultural storytellers demonstrates how advertising has moved from its commercial role to become a determining force in the construction of social reality (Castells 2012).

## LIMITS

This paper focuses on the institutionalisation of advertising and a proposal on the mechanisms it uses to influence the system over life-world, limiting its scope of analysis to ads aired between 2010 and 2024. While it incorporates theoretical perspectives, it is limited to Western cultural values and the unique context that the Super Bowl provides as a media event. It does not explore advertising in non-Western contexts or other major ritualised forms of advertising in other sporting events, focusing the discussion on how advertising operates as a cultural institution.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, it has been described how advertising has evolved from a marketing tool to become a central social institution in contemporary society. This process of institutionalisation has transformed how brands, consumers and societies interact, not only economically but also in cultural and symbolic terrains (Ritzer 2010; Bourdieu 1986). Advertising as an institutionalised practice is no longer limited to making products or services



available to consumers, it works as a mechanism of social control, a vehicle for transmitting values, and a space for negotiating identity and power relations (Zuboff 2019; Castells 2012).

Advertising has strengthened its role as a social institution capable of shaping both individual experiences and collective values. This slow process of institutionalisation evidenced how advertising dominates public space and how its narratives slowly integrate into social relationships, identities, and power structures (Bourdieu 1986; Ritzer 2010). Future research on advertising can develop on how these dynamics will continue to evolve with technological breakthroughs in response to advertising's growing capacity to control and shape society (Castells 2012; Zuboff 2019).

The institutionalisation of advertising, exemplified in the Super Bowl ads, exemplifies the tension between the system and the life-world described by Habermas, as it operates within the system driven by economic and market rationality, inscribing themselves in collective rituals and shared cultural meanings, thus building and shaping societal values, mediating as a powerful institution between system efficiency and everyday lifestyle. Habermas, in his theory of Communicative Action, describes how the system, embedded in a capitalist and bourgeois framework and mediated through communication media, ends up colonising the life-world. However, it does not detail the mechanisms through which this colonisation unfolds. This paper proposes to examine how these mechanisms construct a path for what Habermas defines as the colonisation of the life-world by the system, specifically through the institutionalisation of advertising as a cultural and communicative power.

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MARIANA GARDUÑO

## Sistemas dominavimas prieš *Lebenswelt* komunikacinio veiksmo kontekste: vidiniai reklamos institucionalizavimo mechanizmai

### *Santrauka*

Remiantis Jürgeno Habermaso skirtumu tarp sistemos ir gyvenamojo pasaulio, straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip reklama veikia abiejose srityse, darydama įtaką ne tik institucinei struktūrai, bet ir kasdieniui socialinei sąveikai, taip sukurdamą pagrindą reklamos, kaip socialinio veikėjo ir jėgos, institucionalizavimui šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje. Naudojant „Super Bowl“ reklamas, siekiama paaiškinti, kaip jos atspindi ir formuoja dominuojančias kultūrinės vertybes. Remiantis George'o Ritzerio makdonaldizacija, Shoshanos Zuboff prižiūrėjo kapitalizmo, Manuelio Castellso socialinio kapitalo ir galios dinamikos bei Pierre'o Bourdieu simbolinio kapitalo ir įpročio sampratomis, tiriama, kaip reklama išsivystė už savo komercinio vaidmens ir tapo pagrindine institucija, formuojančia elgesį, tapatybę ir kultūros normą. Pabrėžiamas reklamos vaidmuo stiprinant socialinę galią ir kultūrinį kapitalą, kurį galima atpažinti pagal duomenimis grindžiamą personalizavimą, pasakojimo kontrolę ir standartizavimą, kai prekės ženklai naudojami, siekiant panaudoti savo galią per savo komercinius pasakojimus. Be to, nagrinėjama reklamos institucionalizavimo kritika, kuri leidžia suprasti reklamą kaip galingą instituciją, atspindinčią ir formuojančią socialinę realybę skaitmeninėje ir masinio vartojimo eroje.

**Raktažodžiai:** komunikacinis veiksmas, reklamos institucionalizavimas, socialinė galia reklamoje, prižiūrimas kapitalizmas, simbolinis kapitalas, reklamos makdonaldizacija, naratyvo kontrolė, „Super Bowl“ reklama, socialinis kapitalas