In 2006, São Paulo introduced a ban on all public space advertising, as a movement to reduce visual pollution (Rohter, 2006). This ban, and others like it, have led to a growing debate on whether such bans are beneficial or even ethical. In this paper I shall be identifying advertising bans similar to that in São Paulo and reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the ethical implications brought about by such bans.

More recently, there has been growing support for public space advertising bans. Grenoble, a French city removed more than 300 ad locations to open up public spaces and plant trees (euronews, 2014); and numerous activist groups such as AdBlock in Bristol (AdBlock Bristol, 2021), campaign for the removal of public space ads. The goal of these bans and campaigns is to reduce visual pollution, however, banning all public space advertising has a few disadvantages. It may put small local businesses at a disadvantage, as they may not have the resources to compete with larger companies in online and media advertising, and therefore rely on public space advertising outside their place of business. Furthermore, advertisement has become so ingrained in our societies that it acts as a form of city identity. Tourists and visitors get a feel of a city they are in through the adverts that are on display, so much so that in some places, such as Time Square in New York city and Shibuya in Tokyo, the billboards are a form of tourist attraction. Therefore, clearing a city of public space advertisement makes a city lose some of its aura, making it a bland concrete jungle. To add to this, public ads such as billboards are viewed to be less intrusive compared to TV ads (Sharvitt, Vargas, & Lowrey, 2004). Therefore, banning public space ads would not help reduce people's perception of ad clutter or advertising overload, since the ads that are perceived to be more intrusive (e.g.: TV, radio, and online ads) would still exist. Lastly, ads pertaining to public awareness and education may reach more people when all forms of media are utilised. For instance, charities like the Samaritans post their ads in public spaces where people are most likely to be in need of help, and in some cases, people can only be reached through public space advertising. Therefore, a ban on public space ads could prevent some people from receiving vital information and help.

This having been said, regulating the placement of ads and banning ads in particular places, has the advantage of clearing nature spots and city green spaces such as parks and beaches as well as ensuring that cities are not cluttered with ads.

On another note, these policies and bans have some ethical issues. According to the Canadian Charter of rights section 2(b): Everyone has the freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication (Canadian Government, 1982). The protected expression also includes commercial advertising therefore, a ban on public space advertising can be viewed as an infringement of this right.

In summary, a few places in the world, such as São Paulo and Grenoble have implemented advertising bans in order to reduce visual pollution. This ban is good for clearing green city spaces and natural scenery that is being blocked by outdoor ads but is not relevant or beneficial for all city settings. It instead puts small local businesses at a disadvantage and removes some of the city's aura. In addition to this, these bans are also on the verge of infringing upon people's freedom of speech and expression.

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