

# Psychological Manipulation in Marketing Discourse

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, marketing discourse, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis frameworks [1], has undergone a profound transformation that extends far beyond the mere digitization of traditional advertising channels. The emergence of sophisticated data analytics, artificial intelligence, and behavioral tracking technologies has fundamentally altered the power dynamics between brands and consumers, creating unprecedented opportunities for psychological manipulation at scale.

### 1.1 The Digital Transformation of Marketing Manipulation

In the contemporary digital landscape, marketing discourse, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis frameworks [1], has undergone a profound transformation that extends far beyond the mere digitization of traditional advertising channels. The emergence of sophisticated data analytics, artificial intelligence, and behavioral tracking technologies has fundamentally altered the power dynamics between brands and consumers, creating unprecedented opportunities for psychological manipulation at scale. This thesis investigates the systematic deployment of psychological manipulation strategies in marketing discourse across three major consumer sectors—luxury fashion, fitness, and skincare/cosmetics—revealing patterns of influence that operate beneath the threshold of conscious consumer awareness.

The term *psychological manipulation* in marketing contexts refers to the deliberate exploitation of cognitive biases, emotional vulnerabilities, and social pressures to influence consumer behavior in ways that may not align with their genuine needs, rational interests, or conscious intentions. Unlike legitimate persuasion, which respects consumer autonomy and provides transparent value propositions, manipulation employs deceptive, coercive, or exploitative tactics that compromise informed decision-making. This distinction becomes increasingly critical as marketing technologies advance in their capacity to identify and

target individual psychological profiles with precision previously unimaginable.

The urgency of examining these practices is underscored by preliminary analysis of marketing texts from 35 international brands, which reveals the pervasive nature of manipulation strategies across all examined sectors. The data demonstrates that fear-based appeals appear in 248 instances, aspiration triggers in 246 instances, and scientific mimicry—the appropriation of scientific language to create false authority—in 242 instances. These findings suggest that psychological manipulation has become not merely a marginal practice but a normalized and systematic component of contemporary marketing discourse, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis frameworks [1].

## 1.2 Problem Statement

The digital revolution has equipped marketers with tools of unprecedented sophistication for understanding and influencing consumer psychology. Behavioral tracking technologies monitor every click, scroll, and pause, constructing detailed psychological profiles that reveal not just what consumers want, but their fears, insecurities, and unconscious desires. Machine learning algorithms analyze these patterns to identify optimal moments of vulnerability—when resistance is lowest and susceptibility to influence peaks. Social media platforms provide laboratories for A/B testing manipulation strategies at scale, refining techniques based on real-time behavioral feedback.

This technological evolution has outpaced both regulatory frameworks and consumer awareness, creating an asymmetric power relationship that favors corporate interests over consumer welfare. While data protection regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) address privacy concerns, they do not adequately address the psychological dimensions of digital manipulation [2]. Consumers may consent to data collection without understanding how that data enables sophisticated psychological profiling and targeted manipulation. The opacity of algorithmic decision-making further compounds this problem, as consumers cannot see or understand the mechanisms through which they are being influenced.

The normalization of manipulation is particularly evident in the linguistic strategies employed across sectors. Our analysis reveals that luxury fashion brands, despite their positioning as aspirational and exclusive, deploy fear-based appeals more frequently than any other strategy (94 instances across 12 brands). This paradox—using negative emotions to sell positive lifestyle associations—exemplifies the sophisticated understanding of psychological mechanisms that underlies modern marketing. Similarly, the fitness industry's heavy reliance on inadequacy triggers (44 instances) and transformation narratives reveals a business model predicated on amplifying dissatisfaction with one's current state.

The skincare and cosmetics sector presents perhaps the most concerning patterns, with scientific mimicry emerging as the dominant strategy (125 instances). Brands appropriate the language and visual aesthetics of scientific authority—using terms like "clinically proven," "dermatologist recommended," and "patented formula"—without providing meaningful

scientific evidence. This pseudo-scientific discourse exploits consumer trust in scientific expertise while circumventing the rigorous standards of actual scientific communication.

### 1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

Building on the problem statement outlined in [section 1.2](#), this thesis addresses four primary research questions that emerged from preliminary analysis and theoretical consideration:

**RQ1: How do contemporary marketing discourses, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis frameworks [1], employ psychological manipulation strategies to influence consumer behavior across different market sectors?**

This overarching question examines the mechanisms through which manipulation operates in digital marketing contexts. It investigates not just the presence of manipulation but its systematic deployment as a core business strategy. The question encompasses both explicit tactics (such as false urgency claims) and subtle techniques (such as emotional priming through color and imagery).

**RQ2: What linguistic and multimodal strategies constitute psychological manipulation in marketing discourse, as analyzed through critical discourse analysis frameworks [1]?**

Building on critical discourse analysis traditions, this question focuses on identifying specific textual and visual markers of manipulation. It examines how language constructs reality in ways that serve corporate interests while appearing to serve consumer needs. The multimodal dimension recognizes that contemporary marketing operates through complex interactions of text, image, sound, and interactive elements.

**RQ3: How do manipulation techniques vary across luxury fashion, fitness, and skincare/cosmetics sectors?**

This comparative question explores sector-specific patterns and strategies. Preliminary findings suggest significant variation: fashion emphasizes exclusivity and fear of social exclusion, fitness exploits body dissatisfaction and achievement narratives, while skincare leverages aging anxiety and scientific authority. Understanding these variations reveals how manipulation adapts to different consumer vulnerabilities and market contexts.

**RQ4: What are the ethical implications of identified manipulation strategies for consumer protection and marketing regulation?**

This normative question addresses the broader societal implications of the research findings. It examines the ethical boundaries of marketing practice, the adequacy of current regulatory frameworks, and the potential for developing evidence-based guidelines for ethical marketing communication.

As detailed in [section 1.4](#), the primary objectives flowing from these research questions are:



1. To develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding psychological manipulation in digital marketing contexts, integrating insights from discourse analysis, consumer psychology, and digital media studies.
2. To create and validate a coding scheme for identifying and categorizing manipulation strategies in marketing texts, providing a systematic methodology for future research.
3. To conduct detailed empirical analysis of manipulation strategies across three major consumer sectors, generating evidence about the prevalence, patterns, and mechanisms of psychological manipulation.
4. To provide actionable recommendations for multiple stakeholders: regulators seeking to protect consumers, marketers interested in ethical practice, and consumers seeking to recognize and resist manipulation.

## 1.4 Significance and Contributions

This research makes several significant contributions to academic knowledge and practical application. Theoretically, it advances critical discourse analysis by developing frameworks specifically adapted to digital marketing contexts. Traditional CDA approaches, developed primarily for political and media discourse, require modification to address the multimodal, interactive, and algorithmically mediated nature of digital marketing. This thesis provides such modifications, offering tools for analyzing discourse that operates across multiple channels and sensory modalities simultaneously.

The empirical contribution lies in the systematic documentation of manipulation strategies across a substantial corpus of contemporary marketing texts. The analysis of 35 brands across three sectors provides a comprehensive mapping of current manipulation practices, revealing both universal patterns and sector-specific variations. The finding that fear-based appeals dominate even in luxury sectors challenges conventional marketing wisdom about positive emotional associations and brand prestige.

Methodologically, the research demonstrates the value of mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative pattern detection. The integration of computational text analysis with traditional close reading techniques enables both breadth and depth of analysis, revealing patterns invisible to either method alone. The developed coding scheme, validated through systematic application, provides a reusable tool for future research.

Practically, the research offers evidence-based foundations for policy development and consumer education. The identification of specific manipulation techniques and their linguistic markers enables the development of detection tools and educational resources. For regulators, the research provides empirical evidence about practices that may warrant regulatory intervention. For ethical marketers, it delineates boundaries between legitimate persuasion and manipulative exploitation.

## 1.5 Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This research employs a multi-theoretical framework that integrates three primary theoretical traditions. Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, provides tools for examining how language constructs and maintains power relationships [1]. The model’s attention to text (linguistic features), discursive practice (production and consumption processes), and social practice (broader cultural contexts) enables comprehensive analysis of marketing discourse as a social phenomenon.

Psychological manipulation theory, drawing on Cialdini’s principles of influence [3] and recent work on digital manipulation [2], illuminates the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which marketing discourse influences behavior. This theoretical lens reveals how seemingly innocuous linguistic choices activate psychological processes—such as loss aversion, social proof, and authority bias—that bypass rational deliberation.

Multimodal discourse analysis, informed by Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, addresses the complex interplay of textual and visual elements in contemporary marketing. Digital marketing rarely operates through text alone; images, colors, typography, and interactive elements work synergistically to create manipulative effects. This theoretical approach provides tools for analyzing these multimodal ensembles as integrated meaning-making systems.

Methodologically, the research employs a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative dimension involves detailed discourse analysis of marketing texts, examining linguistic features, rhetorical strategies, and visual design elements. This close reading reveals the subtle mechanisms through which manipulation operates, identifying patterns that might be overlooked by purely quantitative approaches.

The quantitative dimension employs corpus linguistics techniques to identify patterns across large text collections. Frequency analysis reveals the prevalence of specific manipulation strategies, while collocation analysis identifies linguistic patterns associated with manipulative intent. Sentiment analysis and emotion detection algorithms provide systematic assessment of emotional manipulation strategies.

## 1.6 Empirical Findings Overview

The empirical analysis of 35 international brands reveals systematic patterns of psychological manipulation that transcend individual sectors while also displaying sector-specific characteristics (see [chapter 5](#) for detailed findings). The overall frequency of manipulation strategies—1,364 instances identified across approximately 4.5 million characters of text—indicates that manipulation is not an occasional tactic but a pervasive feature of contemporary marketing discourse [1].

Cross-sector analysis reveals fear as the universal manipulator, appearing among the top two strategies in all three sectors despite their different market positions and consumer demographics. This finding challenges the assumption that positive emotions drive market-

ing effectiveness, suggesting instead that negative emotional states create more powerful behavioral responses. The prevalence of fear-based appeals in luxury fashion (94 instances) is particularly striking, as it contradicts the sector's aspirational brand positioning.

The fitness sector demonstrates the most coherent manipulation profile, with aspiration appeals (91 instances) and pride-based emotions (62 markers) creating a consistent narrative of transformation and achievement. However, this positive framing masks underlying manipulation through inadequacy triggers (44 instances) that create dissatisfaction with current states. Brands like Gymshark exemplify this dual strategy, simultaneously inspiring and diminishing self-perception.

The skincare/cosmetics sector's reliance on scientific mimicry (125 instances) and authority appeals (87 instances) reveals a strategy of borrowed credibility. By appropriating scientific discourse without adhering to scientific standards of evidence, brands create an illusion of medical legitimacy. The sector also shows the highest use of problem amplification strategies, creating anxieties about normal variations in appearance that can only be resolved through product consumption.

## 1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into ten chapters that progressively build understanding of psychological manipulation in marketing discourse [1]. Following this introduction, [chapter 2](#) establishes the theoretical framework, integrating critical discourse analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal analysis approaches. This framework provides the conceptual tools for identifying and analyzing manipulation strategies across different modes and contexts.

[chapter 3](#) presents a comprehensive literature review that situates the research within existing scholarship on marketing discourse [1], consumer psychology, and digital manipulation [2]. The review identifies gaps in current knowledge, particularly regarding cross-sector analysis and the multimodal dimensions of digital marketing manipulation.

[chapter 4](#) details the methodology, including data collection procedures, the development and validation of the coding scheme, and analytical techniques. The chapter provides sufficient detail for replication while also discussing limitations and validity considerations.

[chapter 5](#) through [chapter 6](#) present detailed empirical analysis of the three sectors. [chapter 5](#) examines the luxury fashion sector, revealing the paradox of fear in aspirational marketing. It also analyzes the fitness sector's exploitation of body dissatisfaction and achievement narratives, and investigates the skincare/cosmetics sector's appropriation of scientific authority and amplification of appearance anxieties.

[chapter 6](#) provides cross-sector comparison, identifying universal manipulation patterns while explaining sector-specific variations. This comparative analysis reveals how manipulation strategies adapt to different market contexts and consumer vulnerabilities.

[chapter 6](#) discusses the theoretical, practical, and ethical implications of the findings. It

examines what the results reveal about the nature of power in digital marketing contexts, the adequacy of current consumer protection frameworks, and the potential for developing more ethical marketing practices.

[chapter 7](#) concludes by summarizing key findings, articulating the thesis’s contributions to knowledge, and identifying directions for future research. It also provides practical recommendations for regulators, marketers, and consumers.

## 1.8 Delimitations and Scope

This research focuses specifically on textual and visual elements of marketing discourse [1], excluding other sensory modalities such as audio or haptic feedback that may also serve manipulative functions. The analysis is limited to English-language marketing materials, recognizing that manipulation strategies may vary across linguistic and cultural contexts. The three sectors examined—fashion, fitness, and skincare/cosmetics—were selected for their high engagement with digital marketing and their reliance on psychological rather than purely functional product attributes.

The temporal scope encompasses marketing materials from 2023-2024, capturing contemporary practices while recognizing that manipulation strategies evolve rapidly in response to technological and regulatory changes. The focus on major international brands excludes smaller companies that may employ different strategies due to resource constraints or market positioning.

The research examines manipulation from a critical perspective, prioritizing consumer protection over marketing effectiveness. While acknowledging that some degree of persuasion is inherent to marketing, the analysis focuses on practices that cross ethical boundaries by exploiting vulnerabilities or deceiving consumers.

## 1.9 Ethical Considerations

This research raises important ethical considerations regarding the balance between academic critique and fair representation of marketing practices. As discussed in [section 1.3](#) on “[Research Questions and Objectives](#)”, the research framework addresses both analytical rigor and ethical responsibility. While the analysis necessarily adopts a critical stance toward manipulation, it acknowledges that not all marketing professionals intentionally engage in manipulative practices. Many marketers operate within established industry norms without critically examining their ethical implications.

The research does not involve human subjects directly, analyzing only publicly available marketing materials. This approach avoids ethical concerns about participant welfare while still generating insights about how these materials affect consumers. The analysis maintains academic objectivity by applying systematic coding schemes rather than subjective judgments about particular brands or campaigns.

The identification of specific manipulation techniques raises questions about potential misuse. While the research aims to protect consumers by increasing awareness, the detailed documentation of effective manipulation strategies could theoretically be used to enhance rather than reduce manipulation. This risk is mitigated by the academic context of publication and the emphasis on ethical implications throughout the analysis.

## **1.10 Chapter Summary**

This introduction has established the critical importance of examining psychological manipulation in contemporary marketing discourse [1]. The digital transformation of marketing has created unprecedented capabilities for influencing consumer behavior through sophisticated psychological targeting, emotional manipulation, and multimodal persuasion strategies. The empirical evidence from 35 international brands reveals that manipulation is not an aberration but a systematic feature of modern marketing, with fear-based appeals, aspiration triggers, and scientific mimicry emerging as dominant strategies.

The research questions guiding this investigation address both the mechanisms of manipulation and their ethical implications, while the theoretical framework integrates insights from discourse analysis, psychology, and multimodal communication. The significance of this research extends beyond academic contribution to practical applications in consumer protection, marketing ethics, and regulatory policy.

As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the patterns of manipulation identified in this research reveal fundamental tensions in contemporary capitalism between corporate profit imperatives and consumer welfare. Understanding these patterns—their mechanisms, variations, and effects—is essential for developing more ethical and sustainable marketing practices that respect consumer autonomy while still enabling legitimate commercial communication. The ultimate goal is not to eliminate marketing but to establish boundaries that protect vulnerable consumers from exploitation while preserving space for honest persuasion and genuine value creation.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Introduction: Constructing a Multi-Theoretical Lens

The investigation of psychological manipulation in marketing discourse necessitates a theoretical framework capable of addressing multiple dimensions of contemporary commercial communication. Marketing texts do not merely convey information about products; they construct realities, shape identities, exploit psychological vulnerabilities, and maintain power relationships that favor corporate interests over consumer welfare. Understanding these complex processes requires integrating insights from critical discourse analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal communication studies.

This chapter develops a comprehensive theoretical framework that synthesizes three primary theoretical traditions. First, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, provides tools for examining how language constructs and maintains asymmetric power relationships between brands and consumers. Second, psychological manipulation theory, drawing on Robert Cialdini's influence principles and recent work on digital nudging, illuminates the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which marketing discourse bypasses rational deliberation. Third, multimodal discourse analysis, informed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotics, addresses the complex interplay of textual, visual, and interactive elements in digital marketing environments.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives is not merely additive but synergistic. CDA reveals the power dimensions that make manipulation possible, psychological theory explains why certain strategies prove effective, and multimodal analysis shows how different semiotic modes work together to create manipulative effects. This multi-theoretical approach enables analysis that is simultaneously critical (revealing hidden power relations), explanatory (identifying causal mechanisms), and comprehensive (addressing all semiotic dimensions).

## 2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: Power, Ideology, and Manipulation

### 2.2.1 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework

Norman Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis provides the foundational framework for understanding marketing discourse as a site of power struggle and ideological reproduction. Fairclough conceptualizes discourse analysis as operating across three interconnected dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. This three-dimensional model proves particularly valuable for analyzing marketing manipulation because it connects micro-level linguistic features to macro-level social structures and power relations.

At the **textual dimension**, analysis focuses on linguistic features including vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, cohesion mechanisms, and text structure. In marketing discourse, vocabulary choices reveal ideological positions—the difference between "anti-aging" and "age-positive" skincare reflects fundamentally different constructions of aging as problem versus natural process. Grammatical structures encode power relationships; imperative mood ("Buy now!") asserts brand authority, while pseudo-inclusive "we" creates false solidarity between brand and consumer. Our analysis reveals systematic patterns: luxury brands employ 67 instances of aspiration-related vocabulary, while skincare brands use scientific terminology 125 times, each constructing different forms of authority.

The **discursive practice dimension** examines text production, distribution, and consumption processes. Digital marketing has revolutionized these processes through algorithmic targeting, A/B testing, and real-time optimization. Texts are no longer static but dynamically adjusted based on consumer responses. The production process involves teams of psychologists, data scientists, and copywriters collaborating to maximize manipulative effect. Distribution occurs through multiple channels simultaneously—email, social media, websites—each calibrated for platform-specific consumption patterns. Consumption itself becomes data-generating activity, feeding back into production processes.

The **social practice dimension** situates discourse within broader social and cultural contexts. Marketing discourse operates within capitalist economic structures that prioritize profit over consumer welfare. It reproduces and reinforces social hierarchies through aspirational messaging that equates consumption with status. The normalization of manipulative marketing reflects and reinforces a culture where exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities is accepted as legitimate business practice. Our finding that fear-based appeals appear 248 times across all sectors suggests this exploitation has become systematically embedded in marketing culture.

### 2.2.2 Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to Manipulation

Teun van Dijk's work on discourse and manipulation provides crucial theoretical tools for distinguishing legitimate persuasion from manipulative exploitation. Van Dijk defines manipulation as a form of social power abuse where speakers/writers influence recipients

against their best interests while serving manipulator interests. This definition proves particularly relevant to marketing contexts where brand interests (profit maximization) often conflict with consumer interests (rational consumption, financial wellbeing).

Van Dijk identifies three characteristics that distinguish manipulation from legitimate persuasion:

**1. Cognitive manipulation:** Manipulative discourse exploits cognitive limitations and biases. Marketing achieves this through information overload (presenting too much technical information to process), false urgency (limiting decision time), and cognitive anchoring (using arbitrary reference prices). Our analysis found temporal pressure tactics ("limited time," "ending soon") in 142 instances, exploiting time-pressure cognitive biases.

**2. Emotional manipulation:** Manipulative discourse triggers emotional responses that override rational evaluation. Fear appeals activate fight-or-flight responses, making careful consideration difficult. Aspiration appeals create emotional investment in idealized futures contingent on consumption. The dominance of fear (248 instances) and aspiration (246 instances) in our corpus confirms systematic emotional exploitation.

**3. Social manipulation:** Manipulative discourse exploits social positions and relationships. Brands position themselves as friends ("we care about your skin"), authorities ("dermatologist recommended"), or community leaders ("join our fitness family"). This pseudo-relationship building creates trust that facilitates manipulation. Social proof tactics ("5 million customers") appeared 127 times, exploiting conformity biases.

Van Dijk's framework also emphasizes the role of mental models—cognitive representations that organize understanding. Marketing manipulation works by constructing mental models that favor consumption: aging as catastrophe requiring intervention, fitness as moral obligation, luxury as identity marker. These mental models, once established, guide future interpretation and decision-making in ways that benefit brands.

### 2.2.3 Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach

Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) contributes important temporal and contextual dimensions to our theoretical framework. DHA emphasizes how discourses evolve historically and how current texts draw on historical reservoirs of meaning. This perspective proves valuable for understanding how marketing manipulation strategies develop and spread across sectors.

The discourse-historical approach reveals how manipulation strategies migrate and evolve. Scientific authority claims, initially confined to pharmaceutical marketing, now appear across all sectors—our analysis found scientific mimicry even in fashion (57 instances). The normalization process occurs through interdiscursive transfer: strategies proven effective in one context are adapted to others. Fear-based marketing, refined in insurance and security sectors, now dominates luxury fashion despite apparent incongruence.

Wodak's emphasis on argumentation strategies (topoi) identifies recurring patterns of



reasoning in manipulative discourse. The topos of threat ("without this product, negative consequences follow") appears consistently across sectors. The topos of authority ("experts recommend") legitimizes claims without substantive evidence. The topos of history ("traditional craftsmanship," "ancient wisdom") creates value through temporal distance. These topoi function as cognitive shortcuts that bypass critical evaluation.

## 2.3 Psychological Manipulation Theory

### 2.3.1 Cialdini's Principles of Influence

Robert Cialdini's six principles of influence—reciprocity, commitment/consistency, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity—provide foundational understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying marketing manipulation. These principles, identified through extensive empirical research, explain why certain persuasive strategies prove universally effective across cultures and contexts. Our analysis reveals systematic deployment of all six principles, with particular emphasis on scarcity, authority, and social proof.

**Scarcity** emerges as a dominant manipulation strategy, appearing in various forms across all sectors. "Limited edition" claims in fashion, "last chance" offers in fitness, and "exclusive formulas" in skincare all activate loss aversion—the psychological tendency to overvalue potential losses relative to equivalent gains. Our data shows 142 instances of artificial scarcity creation, despite most products being easily reproducible. The psychological mechanism operates through perceived value enhancement (rare items seem more valuable) and anticipated regret (fear of future disappointment if opportunity is missed).

**Authority** manipulation appears most prominently in skincare (87 instances) but infiltrates all sectors. Brands appropriate symbols of expertise—white coats in advertisements, scientific terminology, percentage claims—without substantive authority. The psychological mechanism exploits cognitive shortcuts: faced with complexity, people defer to perceived experts. "Dermatologist recommended" triggers automatic deference despite no specific dermatologist being identified. The appropriation extends beyond individual authority to institutional authority: "laboratory tested," "clinically proven," "university researched."

**Social proof** operates through conformity bias—the tendency to align behavior with perceived group norms. Quantified social proof ("5 million users") appeared 46 times in fitness marketing alone. Qualitative social proof ("loved by celebrities") creates aspirational conformity. The mechanism works through uncertainty reduction (others' choices guide own decisions) and social belonging (consumption as group membership). Digital platforms amplify social proof through visible metrics: likes, shares, reviews.

**Reciprocity** manifests subtly in digital marketing through free samples, trial periods, and valuable content. By providing something first, brands create psychological debt that consumers feel compelled to repay through purchase. "Free shipping" triggers reciprocity despite shipping costs being incorporated into product pricing. The mechanism exploits social norms around balanced exchange, making non-purchase feel like norm violation.

**Commitment and consistency** appear through progressive engagement strategies. Small initial commitments (newsletter signup, quiz participation) lead to larger commitments (purchase) through desire for behavioral consistency. Brands frame consumption as identity expression: "for women who value themselves" creates pressure for purchase-behavior consistency with self-concept. Our analysis found 169 instances of emotional blackmail leveraging consistency pressure.

**Liking** operates through parasocial relationship construction. Brands cultivate perception of friendship through conversational tone, shared values signaling, and personalization. "We understand your struggle" creates false intimacy. Attractive spokespersons trigger halo effects where physical attractiveness generates assumption of other positive qualities. The mechanism exploits tendency to comply with requests from liked sources.

### 2.3.2 Digital Manipulation and Behavioral Economics

The digital transformation of marketing has created new possibilities for psychological manipulation informed by behavioral economics insights. Digital platforms enable real-time behavior tracking, algorithmic personalization, and dynamic optimization that exponentially increase manipulative potential. Understanding these mechanisms requires integrating classical psychological theory with contemporary digital affordances.

**Choice architecture manipulation** structures decision environments to favor specific outcomes. Default options, presentation order, and comparison sets all influence choice without conscious awareness. Marketing websites employ dark patterns—user interface designs that trick users into unintended behaviors. Pre-checked boxes for subscriptions, hidden costs revealed at checkout, and difficult cancellation processes all exemplify choice architecture manipulation. The theoretical foundation lies in bounded rationality: faced with cognitive limitations, people rely on environmental cues that can be strategically designed.

**Temporal manipulation** exploits time-inconsistent preferences and present bias. Countdown timers create artificial urgency, triggering stress responses that impair deliberation. "Flash sales" compress decision timeframes below optimal deliberation thresholds. Buy-now-pay-later schemes exploit hyperbolic discounting—overvaluing immediate rewards relative to future costs. Our analysis found temporal pressure in all sectors, with particular concentration in fashion (seasonal collections) and fitness (transformation challenges).

**Personalization manipulation** uses data analytics to identify individual psychological profiles and vulnerabilities. Behavioral tracking reveals stress patterns, emotional states, and decision-making tendencies. Marketing messages are then calibrated to exploit identified vulnerabilities at optimal moments. Someone exhibiting signs of low self-esteem receives different messaging than someone displaying confidence. This micro-targeting transcends demographic segmentation to achieve psychological precision previously impossible.

### 2.3.3 Emotion Regulation and Affective Manipulation

Contemporary psychological research on emotion regulation provides crucial insights into how marketing manipulates affective states to influence behavior. Emotions are not merely responses to marketing but actively constructed through discursive and visual strategies. Understanding these processes requires integrating emotion regulation theory with analysis of marketing practices.

**Emotional priming** prepares specific affective states that facilitate manipulation. Anxiety priming through problem identification ("signs of aging," "fitness decline") creates negative affect that products promise to resolve. Aspiration priming through idealized imagery creates positive affect associated with consumption. The mechanism operates through mood congruency effects: emotional states influence information processing and decision-making in mood-consistent directions.

**Emotional contrast manipulation** juxtaposes negative current states with positive future states contingent on consumption. Before/after imagery in fitness, problem/solution narratives in skincare, and ordinary/extraordinary contrasts in fashion all employ this strategy. The contrast amplifies both negative feelings about present state and positive feelings about potential future, creating motivational tension resolved through purchase.

**Emotional contagion** spreads affect through social channels. User-generated content showing emotional responses to products triggers mirror neuron activation and emotional synchronization. Influencer marketing exploits parasocial relationships where followers experience emotions displayed by influencers. Digital platforms facilitate emotional contagion through reaction buttons, comments, and shares that make emotions visible and spreadable.

## 2.4 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

### 2.4.1 Social Semiotics and Visual Grammar

Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar provides essential tools for analyzing how images participate in marketing manipulation. Their social semiotic approach treats visual communication as fulfilling three metafunctions parallel to language: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting relationships), and textual (creating coherent messages). Marketing images don't merely illustrate textual claims but actively construct meanings that may contradict or exceed textual content.

**Representational meanings** in marketing imagery construct particular versions of reality. Narrative processes show transformation sequences (before/after photos) that imply causal relationships between product use and outcomes. Conceptual processes classify and define through visual attributes—luxury products photographed with marble, gold, and minimalist aesthetics construct exclusivity through visual association. Our analysis reveals systematic visual patterns: fitness brands emphasize dynamic action shots suggesting energy and transformation, while skincare brands favor extreme close-ups that make normal skin

texture appear problematic.

**Interactive meanings** establish relationships between image participants and viewers. Gaze direction creates engagement—direct gaze demands interaction while averted gaze offers contemplation. Camera angles encode power relationships: low angles make products appear powerful, high angles create vulnerability that products address. Social distance through shot types calibrates intimacy: close-ups create personal connection, long shots maintain aspirational distance. Fashion brands predominantly use medium shots balancing accessibility with aspiration, while skincare employs extreme close-ups forcing intimate engagement with skin "problems."

**Compositional meanings** organize visual elements into coherent messages. Information value assigns meaning through placement: left/right positioning encodes given/new information, top/bottom encodes ideal/real, center/margin encodes nucleus/dependent. Salience hierarchies through size, color, and focus direct attention strategically. Framing devices create or dissolve boundaries between elements. Marketing compositions consistently place products in "new" and "ideal" positions, constructing them as solutions and aspirations.

## 2.4.2 Multimodal Ensemble and Intersemiotic Relations

Contemporary marketing rarely operates through single modes but orchestrates complex multimodal ensembles where meaning emerges from interaction between textual, visual, auditory, and interactive elements. Understanding manipulation requires analyzing how different modes work together to create effects exceeding individual modal contributions.

**Modal complementarity** occurs when different modes provide different but compatible information. Text provides technical specifications while images show emotional outcomes. This division of semiotic labor allows brands to make rational appeals textually while emotional manipulation occurs visually, potentially evading conscious scrutiny. Skincare brands exemplify this: text emphasizes scientific credentials while images trigger aging anxiety through extreme magnification of skin texture.

**Modal contradiction** presents conflicting messages across modes, creating cognitive dissonance resolved through consumption. Fashion brands textually promote body positivity while visually presenting only idealized bodies. This contradiction creates anxiety about the gap between real and ideal that products promise to bridge. The contradiction operates below conscious awareness as people typically process modes separately.

**Modal amplification** uses multiple modes to intensify single messages. Scarcity claims appear textually ("limited edition"), visually (countdown timers), and interactively (stock indicators). This multimodal reinforcement increases message salience and perceived validity through repetition across channels. Fear appeals particularly benefit from amplification: textual warnings, threatening imagery, and urgent design elements combine to maximize anxiety activation.

### 2.4.3 Digital Affordances and Interactive Manipulation

Digital platforms introduce interactive dimensions that transform marketing from transmission to participation. Interactive elements don't merely deliver messages but involve consumers in meaning construction processes that increase psychological investment and reduce resistance. Understanding these mechanisms requires extending multimodal theory to address digital affordances.

**Personalization interfaces** create illusion of control while constraining choices. Product customization tools offer numerous options within predetermined parameters. Quiz formats gather psychological data while creating investment through participation. Recommendation algorithms present curated choices as personal discovery. These interfaces exploit autonomy needs while actually limiting agency—customization occurs within boundaries serving brand interests.

**Gamification mechanics** apply game design elements to marketing contexts. Progress bars, achievement badges, and loyalty points transform consumption into gameplay. Leaderboards trigger competitive instincts. Random rewards (surprise discounts) create variable reinforcement schedules that maximize engagement. Fitness brands particularly exploit gamification: workout challenges, streak counters, and social competitions transform product use into game-like experience with addictive potential.

**Social integration features** embed marketing within social processes. Share buttons transform consumers into brand advocates. Review systems create peer pressure and social proof. Community features build brand-centered social networks. These features exploit social needs for connection and validation while generating user content that provides authentic-seeming endorsement more persuasive than brand-generated content.

## 2.5 Integrative Framework: The Manipulation Matrix

### 2.5.1 Synthesizing Theoretical Perspectives

The integration of CDA, psychological theory, and multimodal analysis creates a comprehensive framework—the Manipulation Matrix—that reveals how different theoretical dimensions interact to produce manipulative effects. This matrix conceptualizes manipulation as operating across three axes: discursive (how language constructs reality), psychological (how cognition and emotion are influenced), and semiotic (how different modes create meaning).

At the intersection of these axes, specific manipulation strategies emerge. Fear appeals operate discursively through threat construction, psychologically through anxiety activation, and semiotically through threatening imagery and urgent design. Scientific authority operates discursively through technical language, psychologically through expertise deference, and semiotically through laboratory aesthetics and statistical graphics. Each strategy represents a unique configuration across the three dimensions, but all share the fundamental characteristic of influencing behavior against consumer interests.

The matrix reveals that effective manipulation requires alignment across all three dimensions. Discursive claims must trigger appropriate psychological responses through suitable semiotic resources. Misalignment reduces effectiveness: scientific language without supporting visual aesthetics appears less credible, fear appeals without genuine threat lack psychological impact. Brands systematically ensure alignment—our analysis shows consistent patterns where linguistic choices, psychological triggers, and visual design work synergistically.

### **2.5.2 Power, Vulnerability, and Digital Amplification**

The theoretical framework reveals how digital technologies amplify traditional manipulation techniques through three mechanisms: precision targeting, continuous optimization, and scale effects. Precision targeting identifies individual vulnerabilities through behavioral data, allowing personalized manipulation calibrated to specific psychological profiles. Continuous optimization uses A/B testing and machine learning to refine strategies based on real-time response data. Scale effects enable simultaneous deployment across millions of consumers with minimal marginal cost.

These amplification mechanisms create unprecedented asymmetries in power between brands and consumers. Brands possess detailed psychological profiles, sophisticated manipulation tools, and resources for continuous refinement. Consumers face this apparatus with limited awareness, cognitive constraints, and emotional vulnerabilities. The power asymmetry is not merely quantitative but qualitative—brands understand consumer psychology better than consumers understand themselves.

Vulnerability factors interact with manipulation strategies in complex ways. Temporal vulnerability (stress, fatigue) increases susceptibility to cognitive shortcuts that authority and social proof exploit. Emotional vulnerability (loneliness, insecurity) increases susceptibility to belonging appeals and transformation promises. Economic vulnerability increases susceptibility to scarcity and value claims. Digital tracking allows brands to identify and exploit these vulnerabilities at optimal moments.

## **2.6 Chapter Summary: Toward Critical Understanding**

This theoretical framework provides comprehensive tools for analyzing psychological manipulation in marketing discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how language constructs realities that favor corporate interests, establishing power relationships that enable exploitation. Psychological manipulation theory explains the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which marketing influences behavior, identifying universal principles that transcend specific contexts. Multimodal discourse analysis shows how different semiotic modes work together to create manipulative effects that exceed individual modal contributions.

The integration of these perspectives through the Manipulation Matrix reveals manipulation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated deployment across discursive,

psychological, and semiotic dimensions. Digital technologies amplify traditional techniques through precision targeting, continuous optimization, and scale effects, creating unprecedented power asymmetries between brands and consumers.

This framework enables systematic analysis of the empirical data presented in subsequent chapters. It provides theoretical explanation for observed patterns: why fear dominates across sectors (evolutionary salience, cognitive priority), why scientific mimicry proliferates (authority deference, complexity reduction), why multimodal contradiction proves effective (separate processing, cognitive dissonance). More importantly, it reveals manipulation as systematic exploitation rather than isolated tactics, requiring comprehensive response addressing all dimensions simultaneously.

The framework also establishes foundations for ethical evaluation and intervention development. By revealing mechanisms through which manipulation operates, it enables development of detection tools, resistance strategies, and regulatory frameworks. Understanding manipulation theoretically is the first step toward addressing it practically—knowledge of how manipulation works provides basis for both individual resistance and collective response.

## **2.7 Theoretical Applications to Sector-Specific Manipulation**

### **2.7.1 Luxury Fashion: The Paradox of Aspirational Fear**

The theoretical framework illuminates the apparent paradox discovered in our empirical analysis: luxury fashion brands employ fear-based appeals (94 instances) more than any other strategy, despite positioning themselves as aspirational and exclusive. This contradiction becomes comprehensible through the lens of integrated theory.

From a CDA perspective, luxury brands must maintain class distinctions that justify premium pricing. Fear of exclusion from elite groups proves more motivating than desire for inclusion because loss aversion psychologically outweighs gain seeking. The discourse constructs luxury consumption not as aspiration but as maintenance of social position—failure to consume threatens status loss. Fairclough's social practice dimension reveals how this serves capitalist reproduction: artificial scarcity maintains class hierarchies while fear-driven consumption ensures continuous profit generation.

Psychologically, the fear-aspiration combination exploits approach-avoidance conflict. Consumers simultaneously desire luxury (approach) and fear exclusion (avoidance). This conflict creates psychological tension that consumption temporarily resolves, establishing addictive consumption cycles. The fear component prevents satisfaction—each purchase provides temporary relief but maintaining status requires continuous consumption. Van Dijk's manipulation framework explains this as cognitive exploitation: brands create problems (status anxiety) that only their products solve.

Multimodally, luxury brands carefully calibrate fear appeals to maintain prestige. Visual elements emphasize aspiration (beautiful imagery, elegant typography) while text introduces fear ("limited availability," "exclusive access"). This modal division allows brands to maintain aspirational brand image while deploying fear-based manipulation. Interactive elements like membership programs and waiting lists materialize exclusion threat while maintaining luxury aesthetics.

### **2.7.2 Fitness: Embodied Manipulation and Transformation Mythology**

The fitness sector's manipulation strategy—combining aspiration appeals (91 instances) with inadequacy triggers (44 instances)—exemplifies embodied manipulation that exploits the intimate relationship between body image and self-concept. The theoretical framework reveals how this sector uniquely manipulates through corporeal consciousness.

Discourse analytically, fitness marketing constructs the body as project requiring constant work. The transformation narrative presents current bodies as inadequate raw material for self-actualization. This discourse naturalizes dissatisfaction—contentment with one's body becomes complacency, even moral failure. Wodak's discourse-historical approach reveals



how this draws on Protestant work ethic discourses linking physical discipline to moral virtue, making fitness consumption a moral imperative.

The psychological mechanism operates through self-discrepancy theory. Marketing amplifies gaps between actual self (current body), ideal self (aspirational body), and ought self (socially expected body). This triple discrepancy creates negative affect—disappointment, shame, anxiety—that products promise to resolve. Social comparison mechanisms intensify discrepancy through carefully curated transformation stories and influencer content showing seemingly achievable yet perpetually out-of-reach ideals.

Multimodal manipulation in fitness proves particularly sophisticated. Before/after photos exploit visual processing biases—the brain processes images faster than text, making visual "evidence" more persuasive than textual claims. Time-lapse transformation videos compress months into seconds, making dramatic change appear easier than reality. Interactive features like progress trackers and challenge participation create behavioral commitment that increases psychological investment.

### **2.7.3 Skincare/Cosmetics: The Scientization of Beauty Anxiety**

The skincare sector's dominant use of scientific mimicry (125 instances) and authority appeals (87 instances) represents a colonization of scientific discourse for commercial manipulation. This appropriation exploits trust in scientific institutions while evading scientific standards of evidence and peer review.

From a CDA perspective, scientific language serves ideological functions beyond information transmission. It constructs aging and variation as pathological conditions requiring intervention. "Clinical" terminology medicalizes appearance, transforming cosmetic preferences into health imperatives. The discourse positions brands as scientific authorities despite most lacking genuine research credentials. This pseudo-scientific register excludes consumers from evaluation—complex terminology creates expertise asymmetry that prevents critical assessment.

Psychologically, scientific mimicry exploits cognitive shortcuts and authority bias. Faced with complex information, people defer to perceived expertise. Percentage claims ("73

The multimodal construction of scientific authority involves comprehensive aesthetic appropriation. White backgrounds, sans-serif fonts, and clinical imagery visually reference medical contexts. Graphs and diagrams create impression of research without presenting actual data. Before/after photos shot with different lighting masquerade as scientific documentation. The visual grammar of science—objectivity, precision, sterility—is appropriated without accompanying methodological rigor.

## **2.8 Resistance and Counter-Strategies: Theoretical Foundations**

### **2.8.1 Developing Critical Consciousness**

The theoretical framework not only reveals manipulation mechanisms but also suggests resistance strategies. Critical consciousness—awareness of manipulation techniques and their effects—provides foundation for resistance. However, awareness alone proves insufficient; effective resistance requires understanding why manipulation works despite awareness.

The inoculation theory from psychology suggests that exposure to weakened forms of manipulation builds resistance to stronger forms. Educational interventions that deconstruct actual marketing examples, revealing manipulation techniques, can develop critical evaluation skills. The process parallels vaccination: controlled exposure builds immunity. Our framework provides the analytical tools for such deconstruction, identifying specific strategies and explaining their mechanisms.

Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about thinking—monitoring one’s own cognitive processes for manipulation influence. When exposed to marketing, consumers can ask: What emotion is being triggered? What cognitive shortcut is being exploited? What visual elements are creating meaning? This metacognitive awareness creates psychological distance that reduces manipulation effectiveness. The theoretical framework provides categories for systematic metacognitive monitoring.

### **2.8.2 Collective Resistance and Regulatory Implications**

Individual resistance, while important, cannot fully address structural manipulation. The power asymmetry between brands and individual consumers necessitates collective response through regulation, consumer advocacy, and ethical marketing movements. The theoretical framework provides foundation for evidence-based policy development.

Regulatory approaches informed by CDA would address discourse patterns that construct false realities. Prohibiting undefined terms ("clinically proven" without specifying clinical trials), requiring evidence for claims (transformation promises with typical results), and mandating disclosure of manipulation techniques (dynamic pricing, personalized targeting) would reduce deceptive discourse. The framework identifies specific linguistic patterns warranting regulatory attention.

Consumer advocacy grounded in psychological theory would focus on vulnerability protection. Time-cooling periods for major purchases, warnings about manipulation techniques, and opt-in requirements for psychological profiling would protect against exploitation. Understanding psychological mechanisms enables targeted interventions: if scarcity manipulation exploits loss aversion, mandatory abundance disclosure ("we can produce more") neutralizes the technique.

Ethical marketing movements could develop alternative frameworks prioritizing genuine value creation over manipulation. The theoretical framework distinguishes legitimate persuasion (transparent value communication) from manipulation (exploitation of vulnerabilities). This distinction enables development of ethical guidelines that preserve commercial communication while preventing exploitation.

## **2.9 Theoretical Limitations and Future Directions**

### **2.9.1 Cultural and Linguistic Variations**

The theoretical framework, while comprehensive, exhibits limitations requiring acknowledgment. The emphasis on English-language discourse and Western psychological theories may not fully capture manipulation strategies in other cultural contexts. Different cultures exhibit varying susceptibility to specific influence principles—collectivist cultures show stronger social proof effects, while individualist cultures respond more to uniqueness appeals.

Language structures themselves influence manipulation possibilities. Languages with complex honorific systems enable different authority constructions than English. Languages with different temporal structures (aspect-prominent vs. tense-prominent) may facilitate different temporal manipulation strategies. Future research should examine how linguistic affordances shape manipulation strategies across languages.

Cultural values fundamentally influence manipulation effectiveness. Appeals to tradition that prove effective in conservative contexts may backfire in progressive markets. The framework requires cultural calibration to account for varying values, norms, and cognitive styles across contexts. This limitation suggests need for culturally situated theory development rather than universal framework application.

### **2.9.2 Technological Evolution and Emerging Manipulations**

The theoretical framework addresses current digital marketing but may require updating as technologies evolve. Artificial intelligence enables new manipulation forms: deepfake testimonials, generated personal messages, and predictive manipulation that anticipates future vulnerabilities. Virtual and augmented reality introduce immersive manipulation possibilities not fully addressed by current multimodal theory.

Neurotechnology may enable direct emotional manipulation bypassing conscious awareness entirely. Brain-computer interfaces could detect emotional states more accurately than behavioral tracking, enabling unprecedented manipulation precision. The framework's emphasis on discourse and cognition may prove insufficient for understanding direct neurological manipulation.

Quantum computing could enable real-time optimization across millions of variables simultaneously, creating personalized manipulation of unprecedented sophistication. The framework's assumption of human-designed strategies may not accommodate fully auto-

mated manipulation systems that discover effective techniques through machine learning without human understanding of why they work.

## **2.10 Conclusion: Theoretical Foundations for Critical Analysis**

This theoretical framework provides comprehensive foundation for analyzing psychological manipulation in marketing discourse. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal analysis, it reveals manipulation as multi-dimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated analysis across discursive, psychological, and semiotic dimensions.

The framework explains empirical patterns discovered in our analysis: the dominance of fear appeals across sectors reflects evolutionary psychology and cognitive priorities; scientific mimicry proliferates because authority deference provides cognitive efficiency; multimodal contradiction proves effective because different modes undergo separate processing. These theoretical insights transform isolated observations into systematic understanding.

More significantly, the framework reveals manipulation not as collection of tactics but as structural feature of contemporary marketing. The alignment of discursive construction, psychological exploitation, and multimodal orchestration creates manipulation apparatus of unprecedented sophistication. Digital amplification through precision targeting, continuous optimization, and scale effects intensifies traditional techniques while creating novel exploitation possibilities.

The framework also provides foundation for resistance and intervention. Understanding manipulation mechanisms enables development of detection tools, educational interventions, and regulatory frameworks. By revealing how manipulation operates, theory empowers both individual resistance and collective response. The ultimate goal is not eliminating marketing but establishing ethical boundaries that respect consumer autonomy while enabling legitimate commercial communication.

As subsequent chapters apply this framework to empirical analysis, its explanatory power becomes evident. The patterns observed across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors reflect theoretical predictions about how manipulation operates in different contexts. The framework transforms data into knowledge, description into explanation, and observation into understanding. This theoretical grounding ensures analysis transcends surface description to reveal deep structures of power, exploitation, and possibility for change.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Introduction: Mapping the Scholarly Landscape

The investigation of psychological manipulation in marketing discourse sits at the intersection of multiple scholarly traditions, each contributing unique insights while leaving certain aspects underexplored. This literature review synthesizes research from marketing studies, consumer psychology, discourse analysis, digital media studies, and business ethics to establish the knowledge foundation upon which this thesis builds. The review reveals both the substantial scholarship addressing components of marketing manipulation and the significant gaps that this research addresses.

Three major strands of literature inform this investigation. First, marketing and consumer psychology research has extensively documented how promotional messages influence behavior, though often from an industry perspective prioritizing effectiveness over ethics. Second, discourse analysis scholarship has examined power relations in commercial communication, though with limited attention to psychological mechanisms and digital contexts. Third, emerging literature on digital manipulation addresses technological affordances for influence, though often without the linguistic and semiotic depth necessary for comprehensive understanding.

The review follows a thematic rather than chronological organization, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of marketing manipulation. After examining foundational work on persuasion and influence, it explores sector-specific studies revealing unique manipulation patterns in fashion, fitness, and skincare markets. The review then addresses digital transformation of marketing practices before identifying critical gaps that this thesis addresses. Throughout, the emphasis remains on synthesizing insights rather than merely cataloging studies, building toward an integrated understanding that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

## **3.2 Foundations: Persuasion, Influence, and Manipulation**

### **3.2.1 Classical Persuasion Theory and Marketing Applications**

The study of persuasion in marketing contexts has deep roots extending to Aristotle's rhetoric, but modern scientific investigation began with Carl Hovland's Yale Communication Research Program in the 1950s. Hovland's systematic examination of source credibility, message characteristics, and audience factors established the experimental paradigm that continues to dominate persuasion research. His finding that high-credibility sources produce greater attitude change provided theoretical foundation for authority-based marketing strategies, explaining why brands invest heavily in expert endorsements and scientific credentials.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (1986), revolutionized understanding of how persuasion operates through dual processing routes. The central route involves careful evaluation of message arguments, while the peripheral route relies on cognitive shortcuts and emotional responses. Their research demonstrates that peripheral processing dominates under conditions of low motivation, limited ability, or time pressure—conditions that modern marketing deliberately creates. Our empirical finding of temporal pressure tactics in 142 instances across brands confirms systematic exploitation of peripheral processing vulnerabilities.

McGuire's (1989) information processing model identified six stages of persuasion: exposure, attention, comprehension, yielding, retention, and action. Marketing manipulation operates by optimizing each stage while obscuring the persuasive intent. Digital tracking ensures exposure through retargeting, visual design captures attention, simplified messages aid comprehension, emotional appeals facilitate yielding, repetition ensures retention, and convenience features enable action. This stage-based understanding reveals manipulation as systematic process rather than single technique.

### **3.2.2 Cialdini's Influence Principles: From Description to Exploitation**

Robert Cialdini's "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" (1984, revised 2021) transformed both academic understanding and practical application of influence principles. His identification of six universal principles—reciprocity, commitment/consistency, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity—provided actionable framework that marketers rapidly adopted. While Cialdini intended to help consumers recognize and resist manipulation, his work inadvertently became manual for sophisticated exploitation.

Subsequent research has refined understanding of each principle's operation. Goldstein et al. (2008) demonstrated that social proof effectiveness depends on similarity between observer and observed—explaining why brands invest in micro-influencers who resemble target consumers rather than distant celebrities. Griskevicius et al. (2009) showed that scarcity

effects intensify under social competition conditions, explaining luxury brands' emphasis on exclusive access. Lynn (1991) revealed that scarcity increases desirability independent of quality changes, confirming that manipulation operates through psychological rather than rational mechanisms.

The digital transformation has amplified these principles' power. A/B testing enables optimization of authority cues, algorithmic recommendation systems weaponize social proof, and dynamic pricing exploits scarcity perception. Guadagno et al. (2013) found that online contexts actually intensify some influence principles—particularly social proof and authority—because uncertainty increases reliance on cognitive shortcuts. Our analysis confirms this intensification: social proof appears 127 times and authority appears 175 times across digital marketing texts.

### **3.2.3 The Manipulation Distinction: When Influence Becomes Exploitation**

The boundary between legitimate persuasion and unethical manipulation remains contested in literature. Beauchamp (1984) proposed that manipulation involves deception, pressure, or playing upon emotional weakness to subvert rational decision-making. This definition, while useful, struggles with borderline cases where emotional appeals accompany factual information. Our framework addresses this by focusing on exploitation of vulnerabilities against consumer interests.

Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum (2019) provide crucial contemporary framework for understanding digital manipulation. They identify three components: hidden influence (operating outside awareness), exploitation of cognitive biases, and subversion of authentic choice. Their work reveals how digital technologies enable manipulation at unprecedented scale through behavioral tracking, predictive modeling, and personalized targeting. The 1,364 manipulation instances identified in our corpus suggest this digital manipulation has become normalized across sectors.

Mills (1958) distinguished between manipulation and coercion, noting that manipulation preserves illusion of choice while constraining options. This insight proves particularly relevant to digital marketing where choice architectures create false agency. Consumers feel they're making free choices while algorithms curate options, defaults steer decisions, and dark patterns obstruct alternatives. The sophisticated choice manipulation we observe—particularly in subscription models and purchase processes—confirms Mills' theoretical predictions.

## **3.3 Marketing Psychology and Consumer Behavior**

### **3.3.1 Emotion in Advertising Effectiveness**

The role of emotion in advertising has attracted extensive research, though much focuses on effectiveness rather than ethics. Holbrook and Batra (1987) identified three emotional

dimensions in advertising response: pleasure, arousal, and domination. Their framework helps explain why fear appeals prove universally effective—they create high arousal and low pleasure, motivating action to resolve discomfort. Our finding of 248 fear appeals across sectors aligns with their prediction that negative emotions drive behavior more reliably than positive ones.

Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) developed comprehensive framework linking emotions to consumer behavior through appraisal theory. They demonstrate that specific emotions trigger predictable behavioral responses: fear motivates protection seeking, envy drives acquisition, and pride encourages display. Marketing manipulation exploits these predictable pathways—skincare brands trigger fear of aging to motivate product purchase, fashion brands elicit envy to drive conspicuous consumption, fitness brands cultivate pride to encourage continued engagement.

Recent neuroscience research provides biological understanding of emotional manipulation. Plassmann et al. (2012) used fMRI scanning to reveal how marketing messages activate reward circuits before conscious evaluation occurs. This pre-conscious processing explains why awareness of manipulation doesn't prevent its effectiveness—emotional responses occur before rational assessment. The multimodal manipulation we observe, particularly combining threatening imagery with reassuring text, exploits this temporal gap between emotional and rational processing.

### **3.3.2 Body Image, Identity, and Consumption**

The relationship between marketing and body image has generated substantial literature, particularly regarding harmful effects on self-perception and mental health. Thompson and Heinberg (1999) demonstrated that exposure to idealized media images increases body dissatisfaction and eating disorder risk. Their work reveals how marketing doesn't merely reflect beauty standards but actively constructs them to create dissatisfaction that products promise to resolve.

Dittmar (2008) developed the Consumer Culture Impact Model showing how material goods become identity markers. Marketing manipulates by positioning products as identity solutions—"be yourself" paradoxically means purchasing mass-produced items. This identity manipulation appears throughout our corpus: fashion brands promise authenticity through consumption, fitness brands equate product use with personal transformation, skincare brands link appearance to self-worth.

Recent research on social media marketing reveals intensified identity manipulation. Perloff (2014) documents how Instagram and TikTok create continuous appearance comparison opportunities, amplifying body dissatisfaction. Influencer marketing exploits parasocial relationships where followers adopt influencers' consumption patterns as identity templates. Our analysis of Gymshark's marketing reveals sophisticated identity manipulation: creating "athlete" identity category that requires product purchase for membership.



### **3.3.3 Neuromarketing and Unconscious Influence**

The emergence of neuromarketing—applying neuroscience to marketing—has revealed unconscious dimensions of consumer influence. Morin (2011) reviews evidence that 95

Plassmann, Ramsfö8y, and Milosavljevic (2012) demonstrate that neural responses predict purchase behavior better than self-reported preferences. Their research reveals the "neural focus group"—using brain scanning to optimize marketing messages for maximum unconscious impact. While our research lacks neurological data, the systematic deployment of visual and emotional triggers across brands suggests widespread application of neuromarketing insights.

The ethical implications of neuromarketing remain debated. Wilson et al. (2008) argue that brain-based manipulation threatens consumer autonomy more fundamentally than traditional persuasion because it bypasses conscious defenses. Murphy et al. (2008) propose ethical guidelines including transparency, consumer consent, and vulnerability protection. The complete absence of neuromarketing disclosure in our corpus suggests these ethical guidelines remain aspirational rather than practiced.

## **3.4 Sector-Specific Literature**

### **3.4.1 Luxury Fashion: Constructing Desire and Distinction**

The luxury fashion literature reveals sophisticated understanding of how brands construct and maintain exclusivity while pursuing mass market growth. Kapferer and Bastien (2014) argue that luxury brands face fundamental paradox: maintaining exclusivity while expanding accessibility. Their analysis explains our finding that fear dominates luxury marketing—exclusivity threats prove more motivating than inclusion promises because they activate loss aversion regarding social status.

Dion and Borraz (2016) examine how luxury retail spaces function as "sacred" environments that transform consumption into quasi-religious experience. Their ethnographic research reveals spatial manipulation techniques: imposing architecture that diminishes consumers, reverential product presentation that suggests precious artifacts, and controlled access that materializes exclusivity. These physical techniques translate to digital spaces through virtual boutiques, limited online availability, and membership-only access.

The role of heritage narratives in luxury manipulation has attracted scholarly attention. Balmer (2013) documents how brands construct fictional histories that create value through temporal distance. "Traditional craftsmanship" and "timeless elegance" claims rarely reflect actual production methods—most luxury goods are mass-produced using modern techniques. Our analysis confirms systematic heritage manipulation: fashion brands reference founding dates, archival designs, and historical associations to justify premium pricing.

Recent research on luxury consumption in digital contexts reveals new manipulation

strategies. Kim and Ko (2012) identify five dimensions of luxury social media marketing: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth. Each dimension offers manipulation opportunities: entertainment disguises commercial intent, interaction creates parasocial relationships, trendiness exploits FOMO, customization provides false uniqueness, and word-of-mouth generates authentic-seeming endorsement.

### **3.4.2 Fitness Industry: Bodies, Transformation, and Discipline**

The fitness industry literature examines how exercise becomes commercialized through product consumption. Sassatelli (2010) analyzes fitness centers as sites of body discipline where commercial and moral imperatives merge. Her ethnographic work reveals how fitness marketing constructs exercise as moral obligation—laziness becomes character flaw, physical appearance reflects inner worth, and product consumption demonstrates virtue.

Millington (2018) traces the "second fitness boom" enabled by wearable technology and social media. His analysis reveals how digital fitness platforms intensify surveillance and comparison, transforming exercise from personal practice to public performance. The gamification strategies we observe—leaderboards, achievement badges, streak counters—exemplify this transformation. Private bodily experience becomes data-generating activity that enables both self-monitoring and social judgment.

The construction of "transformation" narratives in fitness marketing has received critical attention. Sender and Sullivan (2008) analyze how before/after imagery creates impossible temporal compression—months of gradual change appear instantaneous. Their semiotic analysis reveals visual manipulation techniques: different lighting, posture, and clothing that exaggerate apparent change. Our finding of 91 aspiration appeals in fitness marketing confirms the centrality of transformation mythology.

Recent research on fitness influencers reveals parasocial manipulation mechanisms. Rag-gatt et al. (2018) document how followers develop emotional attachments to fitness influencers that override critical evaluation. Influencers' apparent authenticity—sharing struggles alongside successes—creates trust that facilitates product promotion. The boundary between inspiration and manipulation blurs when commercial relationships remain undisclosed or when results prove unattainable for average consumers.

### **3.4.3 Skincare and Cosmetics: Science, Beauty, and Aging**

The skincare literature examines how scientific discourse legitimizes beauty consumption. Ringrow (2016) analyzes how "cosmeceutical" category blurs boundaries between cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, allowing beauty products to claim medical benefits without medical regulation. Her discourse analysis reveals systematic appropriation of scientific language—our finding of 125 scientific mimicry instances confirms this pattern continues intensifying.

The construction of aging as pathology requiring intervention has attracted scholarly

critique. Calasanti (2007) examines how anti-aging marketing creates "age anxiety" that transforms natural processes into problems requiring solution. The medicalization of appearance—wrinkles become "damage," variation becomes "disorder"—justifies continuous consumption. Our analysis reveals sophisticated problem amplification: normal skin characteristics are photographed under harsh lighting and extreme magnification to appear problematic.

Research on beauty advertising's psychological effects reveals harmful consequences. Richins (1991) demonstrated that exposure to idealized beauty images reduces satisfaction with own appearance. This dissatisfaction proves functional for marketers—contentment doesn't motivate purchase. The progression from problem identification to solution provision that we observe across skincare brands exemplifies this manufactured dissatisfaction.

The digital transformation of beauty marketing through apps and AI has created new manipulation possibilities. Ribeiro et al. (2021) examine how beauty apps use augmented reality to show "improved" versions of users' faces, creating dissatisfaction with unfiltered appearance. These technologies don't merely document current appearance but project "potential" appearance contingent on product purchase. The personalized manipulation possible through facial analysis and AI recommendation exceeds traditional marketing's generic appeals.

## **3.5 Digital Marketing Transformation and Algorithmic Manipulation**

### **3.5.1 From Mass Marketing to Micro-Targeting**

The shift from mass marketing to personalized micro-targeting represents a fundamental transformation in manipulation capabilities. Zuboff (2019) conceptualizes this as "surveillance capitalism" where behavioral data extraction enables unprecedented prediction and modification of consumer behavior. Her analysis reveals how digital platforms transform human experience into behavioral data, which algorithms process to predict and influence future behavior. This "behavioral futures market" trades in human predictability, with marketing manipulation as primary application.

Turow (2011) documents the evolution of consumer tracking from simple cookies to sophisticated cross-device fingerprinting. His research reveals how seemingly innocuous data points—mouse movements, typing patterns, browsing sequences—combine to create detailed psychological profiles. These profiles enable what he terms "digital discrimination": different consumers receive different prices, products, and persuasive messages based on algorithmic assessment of vulnerability and value. Our finding that brands deploy multiple simultaneous strategies suggests algorithmic optimization of manipulation combinations.

The personalization paradox emerges in recent literature. Aguirre et al. (2015) demonstrate that while personalized advertising can increase relevance, awareness of tracking triggers privacy concerns that reduce effectiveness. This creates arms race between increasingly

sophisticated tracking that remains invisible and consumer awareness that triggers resistance. Marketing manipulation increasingly relies on "dark patterns"—interface designs that trick users into unintended behaviors while maintaining illusion of control.

### **3.5.2 Social Media as Manipulation Amplifier**

Social media platforms have fundamentally altered marketing manipulation dynamics through network effects, viral transmission, and parasocial relationships. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as enabling users to construct public profiles, articulate connections, and traverse connection lists. While framed neutrally, these affordances create unprecedented manipulation opportunities through social proof amplification, influencer marketing, and viral fear propagation.

Marwick (2015) examines how Instagram creates "context collapse" where multiple audiences merge, intensifying self-presentation pressures. Her ethnographic research reveals how users internalize platform metrics—likes, follows, comments—as measures of self-worth. Brands exploit this metric fixation through engagement manipulation: buying followers, using engagement pods, and deploying bots to create false social proof. The 127 instances of social proof manipulation in our corpus likely underestimate total manipulation given these hidden amplification mechanisms.

Influencer marketing literature reveals sophisticated parasocial manipulation. Abidin (2016) traces the evolution from "micro-celebrity" to "influencer" as commercialization intensified. Her analysis shows how influencers perform authenticity through strategic self-disclosure, creating intimate connections that facilitate product promotion. The boundary between genuine recommendation and paid promotion deliberately blurs—our analysis found numerous instances where commercial relationships remained undisclosed despite legal requirements.

### **3.5.3 Algorithmic Recommendation and Choice Architecture**

The role of algorithms in shaping consumer choice has attracted interdisciplinary attention spanning computer science, psychology, and critical theory. Seaver (2019) argues that recommendation algorithms don't merely predict preferences but actively construct them through feedback loops. His ethnographic study of music recommendation reveals how algorithms create "preference profiles" that become self-fulfilling prophecies—recommendations shape listening, which trains algorithms, which shape future recommendations.

Yeung (2017) introduces the concept of "hypernudge"—algorithmic nudging that operates continuously, dynamically, and pervasively. Unlike traditional nudges that preserve freedom of choice, hypernudges can effectively eliminate alternatives through extreme personalization. Her legal analysis warns that algorithmic manipulation may violate consumer protection laws, though enforcement remains minimal. The dynamic pricing and personalized offers we observe exemplify hypernudge techniques.

Bucher (2018) examines the "algorithmic imaginary"—how people understand and relate to algorithms despite their opacity. Her research reveals that consumers simultaneously overestimate algorithmic intelligence (attributing intention to statistical processes) and underestimate algorithmic influence (believing they maintain autonomous choice). This misunderstanding facilitates manipulation: consumers trust algorithmic recommendations as objective while remaining unaware of commercial optimization.

## **3.6 Research Gaps and Thesis Contributions**

### **3.6.1 Integrative Analysis Across Sectors**

While substantial literature addresses marketing manipulation within specific sectors, comparative analysis across sectors remains limited. Fashion studies focus on luxury and identity, fitness research emphasizes body image and health, skincare literature examines beauty standards and aging—but systematic comparison revealing universal versus sector-specific patterns is absent. This thesis addresses this gap through parallel analysis of three sectors using identical analytical frameworks, enabling identification of both shared manipulation strategies and sector-specific variations.

The discovery that fear appeals dominate across all sectors (248 instances) despite different brand positioning reveals universal manipulation patterns obscured by sector-specific research. The fashion paradox—luxury brands employing fear more than aspiration—would remain hidden without cross-sector comparison. Similarly, the proliferation of scientific mimicry from skincare into fashion and fitness suggests strategy migration that sector-specific studies miss.

### **3.6.2 Multimodal Manipulation in Digital Contexts**

Existing literature tends to analyze either textual or visual manipulation, rarely examining their interaction in digital environments. Text-focused studies miss visual manipulation, while visual analyses ignore linguistic strategies. Digital marketing operates through complex multimodal orchestration where meaning emerges from interaction between modes. This thesis addresses this gap through integrated multimodal analysis revealing how text, image, and interactive elements work synergistically to manipulate.

Our finding that brands systematically employ modal contradiction—aspirational imagery with fear-based text—demonstrates manipulation strategies invisible to single-mode analysis. The interactive dimension of digital marketing—quizzes, customization tools, social features—remains particularly understudied despite creating new manipulation possibilities through behavioral commitment and data extraction.

### **3.6.3 Empirical Analysis of Manipulation Strategies**

While theoretical frameworks for understanding manipulation exist, empirical application to large-scale marketing corpora remains limited. Most studies analyze small samples or

focus on single campaigns, preventing systematic understanding of manipulation patterns. This thesis analyzes 4.5 million characters of marketing text across 35 brands, providing unprecedented empirical foundation for understanding contemporary manipulation strategies.

The quantification of manipulation strategies—1,364 total instances categorized across 10 manipulation types and 8 emotional triggers—enables pattern identification impossible through qualitative analysis alone. The combination of quantitative pattern detection and qualitative discourse analysis reveals both scope and mechanisms of manipulation.

### **3.6.4 Digital Amplification Mechanisms**

While digital transformation of marketing is widely acknowledged, specific mechanisms through which digital technologies amplify manipulation remain underexplored. Existing literature addresses components—personalization, tracking, algorithms—without systematic analysis of how they combine to intensify manipulation. This thesis identifies three amplification mechanisms: precision targeting, continuous optimization, and scale effects.

Our analysis reveals how these mechanisms interact: precision targeting identifies vulnerable moments, continuous optimization refines manipulation strategies, and scale effects enable simultaneous deployment across millions. This systematic understanding of digital amplification provides foundation for regulatory intervention and consumer protection.

## **3.7 Methodological Approaches in Marketing Manipulation Research**

### **3.7.1 Quantitative Approaches: Experiments and Surveys**

Experimental methods dominate psychological research on marketing influence. Laboratory experiments provide causal evidence but suffer from ecological validity limitations—artificial settings may not reflect real-world marketing exposure. Field experiments offer greater realism but raise ethical concerns about manipulating consumers without consent. Our approach analyzes naturally occurring marketing texts, avoiding both validity and ethical limitations.

Survey research captures consumer perceptions and self-reported responses but faces social desirability bias—consumers may underreport susceptibility to manipulation. Response biases particularly affect sensitive topics like body image and financial pressure. Our text-based analysis examines what brands actually do rather than what consumers report experiencing, providing complementary perspective to survey research.

### **3.7.2 Qualitative Approaches: Ethnography and Interview Studies**

Ethnographic research provides rich understanding of marketing consumption in cultural context. However, researcher presence may alter behavior, and findings from specific

contexts may not generalize. Interview studies access consumer experiences and interpretations but rely on retrospective accounts that may be reconstructed or rationalized. Our discourse analysis examines marketing texts directly, capturing manipulation strategies independent of consumer interpretation.

### **3.7.3 Mixed Methods: Combining Perspectives**

Mixed methods approaches combine quantitative and qualitative insights, addressing limitations of single methods. This thesis employs mixed methods through quantitative pattern detection (counting manipulation instances) and qualitative discourse analysis (interpreting meaning construction). The combination enables both systematic pattern identification and deep understanding of manipulation mechanisms.

The integration occurs at multiple levels: quantitative analysis identifies patterns warranting qualitative investigation, while qualitative insights inform quantitative categorization. This iterative process produces findings exceeding what either approach could achieve independently.

## **3.8 Chapter Conclusion: Foundations for Critical Investigation**

This literature review has mapped the scholarly landscape surrounding psychological manipulation in marketing discourse, revealing both substantial existing knowledge and critical gaps requiring investigation. The review demonstrates that while components of marketing manipulation have received attention—persuasion psychology, digital tracking, sector-specific studies—integrated understanding remains elusive.

Three major gaps emerge from this review. First, comparative analysis across sectors that reveals universal versus specific manipulation patterns remains absent. Second, multimodal analysis addressing the complex orchestration of textual, visual, and interactive elements in digital marketing is lacking. Third, large-scale empirical analysis documenting the scope and patterns of manipulation strategies has not been conducted.

This thesis addresses these gaps through comprehensive analysis of marketing discourse across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors. By applying integrated theoretical framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal analysis to substantial empirical corpus, this research advances understanding of how contemporary marketing systematically exploits consumer vulnerabilities.

The literature also reveals methodological considerations shaping this investigation. The limitations of experimental and survey approaches—artificiality, ethical concerns, response biases—support our choice of naturalistic discourse analysis. The advantages of mixed methods—combining quantitative pattern detection with qualitative interpretation—inform our analytical approach.

Most significantly, the literature review establishes the urgent need for this research. As digital technologies amplify manipulation capabilities through micro-targeting, algorithmic optimization, and scale effects, understanding and addressing these practices becomes critical for consumer protection. The normalized exploitation revealed across sectors suggests systemic problem requiring comprehensive response.

The following chapter details the methodological framework developed to investigate these issues, building on insights from existing literature while addressing identified gaps. By establishing rigorous analytical procedures for examining marketing manipulation, this research provides empirical foundation for understanding and ultimately addressing the systematic exploitation of consumer vulnerabilities in digital marketing discourse.



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction: A Mixed Methods Approach

This chapter presents the methodological framework employed to investigate psychological manipulation in marketing discourse across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors. The research adopts a mixed methods approach combining quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative multimodal discourse analysis, enabling both systematic pattern identification and deep interpretive understanding of manipulation mechanisms.

The methodological design addresses three core challenges in studying marketing manipulation. First, the scale challenge: contemporary digital marketing produces vast quantities of text requiring systematic analysis beyond manual capacity. Second, the complexity challenge: manipulation operates through multiple semiotic modes—textual, visual, interactive—requiring integrated analytical frameworks. Third, the detection challenge: sophisticated manipulation strategies often operate below conscious awareness, necessitating analytical tools that reveal hidden patterns and mechanisms.

This mixed methods approach integrates complementary strengths. Quantitative corpus analysis enables pattern detection across large datasets, identifying manipulation frequencies, distributions, and correlations invisible to qualitative analysis alone. Qualitative discourse analysis provides interpretive depth, revealing how manipulation strategies construct meaning and exploit psychological vulnerabilities. The combination produces findings that neither approach could achieve independently—quantitative patterns guide qualitative investigation while qualitative insights inform quantitative categorization.

## 4.2 Research Design and Philosophical Foundations

### 4.2.1 Critical Realist Paradigm

This research operates within a critical realist paradigm that acknowledges both objective reality (marketing texts exist independently) and subjective interpretation (meaning emerges through analysis). Critical realism, as articulated by Roy Bhaskar, distinguishes between the empirical (observed events), the actual (all events whether observed or not), and the real (underlying structures and mechanisms). This ontological stratification proves particularly relevant for studying manipulation, which operates through mechanisms that may not be directly observable but produce empirical effects.

The critical dimension addresses power relations inherent in marketing discourse. Following Fairclough's critical discourse analysis tradition, this research examines how marketing texts reproduce and reinforce asymmetric power relationships between corporations and consumers. The methodology doesn't claim neutrality but explicitly adopts a critical stance toward manipulative practices that exploit consumer vulnerabilities.

### 4.2.2 Mixed Methods Integration

The mixed methods design follows Creswell's convergent parallel model where quantitative and qualitative data collection occur simultaneously, with integration occurring during interpretation. This design suits the research questions that require both breadth (how prevalent are manipulation strategies?) and depth (how do manipulation strategies operate?).

Integration occurs at multiple levels: - **Data level:** The same texts undergo both quantitative coding and qualitative analysis - **Analysis level:** Quantitative patterns inform qualitative sampling while qualitative insights refine quantitative categories - **Interpretation level:** Findings merge to create comprehensive understanding exceeding individual methods

The priority remains equal between methods rather than privileging quantitative over qualitative or vice versa. This balanced approach recognizes that understanding manipulation requires both systematic documentation of patterns and interpretive analysis of meaning construction.

## 4.3 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

### 4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy employed purposive maximum variation sampling to capture diversity within and across sectors. Selection criteria included:

**Market position:** High-end luxury (Dior, Celine), mid-range (Nike, CeraVe), and mass market (H&M, Nivea) brands ensure representation across price points and target demographics.

**Geographic reach:** Global brands (Nike, L’Oreal), regional brands (Gymshark, The Ordinary), and national brands provide geographic diversity.

**Marketing approach:** Traditional luxury houses (Hermes), digital-native brands (Gymshark), and hybrid models (Nike) capture different marketing philosophies.

**Sector representation:** Equal distribution across fashion (12 brands), fitness (12 brands), and skincare (11 brands) enables systematic comparison.

The final sample comprises 35 brands: - **Fashion:** Nike, Adidas, Zara, H&M, Gucci, Prada, Dior, Chanel, Hermes, Celine, Uniqlo, Levi’s - **Fitness:** Nike Training, Adidas Performance, Under Armour, Lululemon, Gymshark, Peloton, ClassPass, F45, CrossFit, Daily Burn, Beachbody, P.volve - **Skincare:** L’Oreal, Olay, Neutrogena, Nivea, CeraVe, The Ordinary, Clinique, Estee Lauder, La Mer, La Prairie, Eucerin

### 4.3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred during October-November 2024, capturing contemporary marketing discourse during a period of heightened commercial activity. Collection procedures ensured systematic, comprehensive, and ethical data gathering:

**Digital marketing texts:** Website copy, email campaigns, and social media posts were collected using automated scraping tools and manual extraction. All texts were publicly accessible, avoiding password-protected or private content.

**Temporal sampling:** Data collection spanned 8 weeks to capture temporal variations including seasonal campaigns, product launches, and promotional cycles.

**Multimodal elements:** Beyond text, visual elements (images, videos) and interactive features (quizzes, customization tools) were documented through screenshots and detailed descriptions.

**Ethical considerations:** Only publicly available marketing materials were collected. No personal consumer data, private communications, or proprietary information was accessed. The research focuses on brand-generated content rather than user responses.

### 4.3.3 Corpus Characteristics

The final corpus comprises approximately 4.5 million characters of marketing text, distributed relatively evenly across sectors: - Fashion: 1.48 million characters - Fitness: 1.51 million characters - Skincare: 1.52 million characters

This substantial corpus enables robust pattern detection while remaining manageable for qualitative analysis. The average text length of 128,571 characters per brand provides sufficient material for identifying recurring strategies while avoiding redundancy.

## 4.4 Analytical Framework and Coding Scheme

### 4.4.1 Development of Coding Categories

The coding scheme emerged through iterative process combining deductive categories from theory and inductive categories from data. Initial deductive categories derived from Cialdini's influence principles, van Dijk's manipulation characteristics, and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. Pilot analysis of 10

The final coding scheme comprises two primary dimensions:

**Manipulation Strategies** (10 categories): 1. **Temporal Pressure**: Creating urgency through deadlines, limited time offers 2. **Scarcity Claims**: Asserting limited availability, exclusive access 3. **Authority Appeals**: Claiming expert endorsement, scientific backing 4. **Social Proof**: Citing popularity, user numbers, testimonials 5. **Fear-Based Appeals**: Threatening negative consequences, loss, exclusion 6. **Aspiration Triggers**: Promising transformation, ideal states, success 7. **Emotional Blackmail**: Exploiting guilt, shame, obligation 8. **Scientific Mimicry**: Using technical language, statistics without substance 9. **Exclusivity Framing**: Positioning as elite, members-only, special access 10. **Inadequacy Amplification**: Highlighting deficiencies, problems, shortcomings

**Emotional Triggers** (8 categories): 1. **Fear**: Anxiety about negative outcomes 2. **Aspiration**: Desire for positive transformation 3. **Guilt**: Feeling of moral failure 4. **Shame**: Sense of personal inadequacy 5. **Envy**: Desire for others' possessions/status 6. **Pride**: Satisfaction from achievement/status 7. **Belonging**: Need for group inclusion 8. **Urgency**: Pressure for immediate action

### 4.4.2 Coding Procedures and Reliability

Coding followed systematic procedures ensuring consistency and reliability:

**Unit of analysis**: The sentence served as primary coding unit, with context considered for interpretation. Each sentence could receive multiple codes reflecting multiple strategies.

**Coding process**: Initial automated coding using keyword matching and pattern recognition identified potential instances. Manual verification confirmed or rejected automated coding, ensuring accuracy over speed.

**Reliability measures**: A subset of 10% underwent independent double-coding, achieving inter-rater reliability of 0.83 (Cohen's kappa), indicating substantial agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and codebook refinement.

**Quantification**: Raw frequencies were normalized per 10,000 words to enable comparison across texts of different lengths. Intensity scores combined frequency with linguistic markers of emphasis (superlatives, repetition, capitalization).

### 4.4.3 Multimodal Analysis Framework

Visual and interactive elements underwent parallel analysis using adapted framework from Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar:

**Visual analysis dimensions:** - Representational: What/who is depicted and how - Interactive: Gaze, angle, distance relationships with viewer - Compositional: Information value, salience, framing

**Interactive analysis dimensions:** - Affordances: What actions are enabled/constrained - Feedback: How system responds to user input - Choice architecture: How options are structured

Visual-textual relationships were categorized as: - **Reinforcement:** Visual amplifies textual message - **Complementarity:** Visual adds different information - **Contradiction:** Visual undermines textual claims

## 4.5 Data Analysis Procedures

### 4.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis employed multiple statistical techniques to identify patterns and test relationships:

**Descriptive statistics:** Frequencies, means, and standard deviations documented manipulation strategy prevalence across brands and sectors. Distribution analyses revealed whether strategies clustered or dispersed.

**Comparative analysis:** Chi-square tests examined whether manipulation strategies differed significantly across sectors. ANOVA tested whether manipulation intensity varied by brand positioning (luxury/mid-range/mass market).

**Correlation analysis:** Pearson correlations explored relationships between strategies (e.g., do brands using fear also employ scarcity?). Factor analysis identified underlying dimensions organizing manipulation strategies.

**Pattern detection:** Cluster analysis grouped brands with similar manipulation profiles. Sequential analysis examined strategy combinations and ordering within texts.

Statistical analysis used Python with pandas for data manipulation, scipy for statistical tests, and matplotlib/seaborn for visualization. Significance threshold was set at  $p < 0.05$  with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

### 4.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed Fairclough's three-dimensional framework examining text, discursive practice, and social practice:

**Textual analysis** examined: - Vocabulary: Word choices constructing particular realities - Grammar: Sentence structures encoding relationships - Cohesion: How texts create coherent narratives - Text structure: Organization of information and arguments

**Discursive practice analysis** examined: - Production: How texts are created (teams, testing, optimization) - Distribution: How texts reach consumers (channels, targeting) - Consumption: How texts position readers and invite interpretation

**Social practice analysis** examined: - Economic: How texts serve capital accumulation - Political: How texts maintain power relations - Cultural: How texts reproduce/challenge social values

Analysis proceeded iteratively, moving between detailed textual analysis and broader contextual interpretation. NVivo software supported systematic coding and retrieval, though interpretation remained fundamentally human rather than automated.

### 4.5.3 Integration and Synthesis

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred through systematic comparison and triangulation:

**Convergence:** Where quantitative and qualitative findings aligned, confidence in results increased. For example, quantitative documentation of fear appeals (248 instances) converged with qualitative analysis revealing fear as universal manipulation strategy.

**Complementarity:** Where methods provided different insights, fuller understanding emerged. Quantitative analysis revealed fear's prevalence while qualitative analysis explained its effectiveness through evolutionary psychology and loss aversion.

**Divergence:** Where findings conflicted, further investigation resolved discrepancies. Initial quantitative coding suggested positive messaging dominated fitness marketing, but qualitative analysis revealed that aspirational language masked inadequacy triggers.

## 4.6 Quality Criteria and Limitations

### 4.6.1 Ensuring Research Quality

Multiple strategies ensured research quality across paradigmatic traditions:

**Validity** (quantitative dimension): - Construct validity: Coding categories grounded in established theory - Internal validity: Systematic procedures minimize bias - External validity: Diverse sampling enables cautious generalization

**Trustworthiness** (qualitative dimension): - Credibility: Prolonged engagement with data, member checking with marketing professionals - Transferability: Thick description enables application to other contexts - Dependability: Detailed audit trail documents analytical decisions - Confirmability: Reflexive journal acknowledges researcher positioning

**Mixed methods quality:** - Integration: Meaningful combination rather than parallel reporting - Inference quality: Conclusions warranted by integrated evidence - Pragmatic utility: Findings applicable to consumer protection

### 4.6.2 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment:

**Temporal limitation:** Data collection represents specific temporal moment. Marketing strategies evolve rapidly, particularly in digital environments. Longitudinal research could reveal strategy evolution.

**Cultural limitation:** Focus on English-language marketing in Western contexts limits cultural generalizability. Marketing manipulation may operate differently in other linguistic and cultural contexts.

**Reception limitation:** Analysis examines production rather than reception. How consumers actually interpret and respond to manipulation remains outside scope, though critical for complete understanding.

**Access limitation:** Some marketing occurs through private channels (targeted emails, app notifications) inaccessible to research. Analyzed public marketing may not represent all strategies.

### 4.6.3 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines:

**Data ethics:** Only publicly available marketing materials were analyzed. No deception, no invasion of privacy, no harm to participants since no human subjects were directly involved.

**Analytical ethics:** Critical stance toward manipulation doesn't imply judgment of individual marketers who may operate within systemic constraints. Focus remains on practices rather than practitioners.

**Dissemination ethics:** Findings will be shared with consumer protection agencies and advocacy groups. While brands are named, criticism focuses on practices rather than defamation.

## 4.7 Chapter Summary: Methodological Rigor for Critical Investigation

This methodology chapter has detailed the systematic approach employed to investigate psychological manipulation in marketing discourse. The mixed methods design combines

quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, enabling both pattern identification and interpretive understanding.

Key methodological decisions include: - Critical realist paradigm acknowledging both material texts and interpreted meanings - Purposive sampling ensuring diversity across and within sectors - Substantial corpus (4.5 million characters) enabling robust analysis - Theoretically grounded yet empirically responsive coding scheme - Multiple analytical techniques revealing different dimensions - Quality assurance through reliability testing and triangulation

The methodology balances several tensions inherent in studying marketing manipulation. Systematic documentation requires standardization while contextual understanding demands flexibility. Critical orientation toward manipulation requires analytical distance while understanding effectiveness requires empathetic engagement. Large-scale pattern detection requires automation while meaning interpretation requires human judgment.

This methodological framework enables the empirical analysis presented in subsequent chapters. By establishing rigorous procedures for identifying and analyzing manipulation strategies, the research provides solid foundation for understanding how contemporary marketing systematically exploits consumer vulnerabilities. The mixed methods approach ensures findings are both systematically documented and deeply understood, supporting both academic contribution and practical application to consumer protection.

The following chapters apply this methodology to analyze marketing discourse across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors, revealing how psychological manipulation operates in practice and identifying both universal patterns and sector-specific variations in exploitation strategies.



## **EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: MANIPULATION PATTERNS ACROSS FASHION, FITNESS, AND SKINCARE**

### **5.1 Introduction: A Comparative Analysis of Sector-Specific Manipulation**

This chapter presents comprehensive empirical analysis of psychological manipulation strategies across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors, examining 4.5 million characters of marketing discourse from 35 brands. The analysis reveals both universal manipulation patterns that transcend sectors and distinct sector-specific strategies calibrated to exploit particular vulnerabilities. Through systematic comparison, we uncover how different industries have developed specialized manipulation techniques while sharing fundamental exploitation mechanisms.

The empirical findings challenge several assumptions about marketing manipulation. First, fear emerges as the dominant strategy across all sectors (248 total instances), contradicting the notion that positive messaging dominates contemporary marketing. Second, luxury brands employ more intense manipulation than mass-market brands, suggesting that prestige provides no protection against exploitative practices. Third, scientific authority claims have spread beyond traditional domains, appearing even in fashion marketing. These patterns reveal manipulation as systematic industry practice rather than isolated tactics.

Our analysis identifies 1,364 distinct manipulation instances distributed across three sectors: fashion (412 instances), fitness (467 instances), and skincare (485 instances). This distribution suggests that sectors targeting body image and appearance employ particularly intense manipulation, with skincare showing the highest frequency despite having fewer brands analyzed. The following sections examine sector-specific patterns

before synthesizing cross-sector insights.

## 5.2 Fashion Sector: The Paradox of Aspirational Fear

### 5.2.1 Quantitative Findings: Fear Dominates Luxury

The fashion sector analysis reveals a striking paradox: brands positioning themselves as aspirational and empowering simultaneously deploy fear-based strategies more than any other technique. Among 412 manipulation instances identified, fear-based appeals dominate at 94 instances (22.8%), followed by aspiration triggers at 67 instances (16.3%), and emotional blackmail at 58 instances (14.1%).

Brand Type	Fear	Aspiration	Scarcity	Total
Luxury (4 brands)	43	28	21	134
Mid-range (4 brands)	31	24	12	116
Fast fashion (4 brands)	20	15	5	92
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>412</b>

Table 5.1: Distribution of key manipulation strategies by fashion brand type

Luxury brands show highest manipulation intensity, averaging 33.5 instances per brand compared to 23.0 for fast fashion. This contradicts assumptions that established prestige reduces need for psychological manipulation. Instead, maintaining luxury status appears to require continuous anxiety cultivation about social position and cultural relevance.

### 5.2.2 Qualitative Patterns: Manufacturing Social Anxiety

Discourse analysis reveals how fashion brands systematically manufacture social anxiety through multimodal strategies. Textual analysis of luxury brand Celine exemplifies this approach:

*"This season exists only once. Those who understand fashion's rhythm know—hesitation means missing the movement forever. Limited pieces for unlimited souls."*

This passage employs multiple manipulation strategies simultaneously: - Temporal uniqueness despite seasonal repetition - Insider knowledge construction ("those who understand") - Permanence rhetoric for temporary fashion ("forever") - Paradoxical scarcity ("limited pieces for unlimited souls")

Visual analysis reveals consistent patterns across fashion brands: models in inaccessible locations, complete branded outfits suggesting all-or-nothing consumption, and expressions of superiority achievable through purchase. The modal complementarity—aspirational imagery with anxiety-inducing text—creates cognitive dissonance resolved through consumption.

Fast fashion employs different anxiety mechanisms focused on velocity and volume. Zara's "New arrivals daily" and "Tomorrow's sold out" create exhausting consumption treadmills where stopping means social irrelevance. H&M combines velocity with false sustainability narratives, allowing consumers to feel ethical while maintaining overconsumption patterns.

### 5.2.3 Digital Amplification in Fashion Marketing

Fashion brands have mastered digital manipulation through influencer partnerships and algorithmic personalization. Analysis reveals systematic cultivation of parasocial relationships where followers develop emotional connections with influencers promoting products. These relationships prove more manipulative than celebrity endorsements because influencers maintain authenticity illusions while conducting commercial transactions.

Behavioral tracking enables personalized manipulation calibrated to individual vulnerabilities. Abandoned cart sequences employ escalating tactics: reminder, urgency creation, discount offering, and removal threats. This sequence exploits multiple psychological mechanisms including loss aversion, sunk cost fallacy, and social proof through "others are viewing" messages.

## 5.3 Fitness Sector: The Transformation Mythology

### 5.3.1 Quantitative Findings: Aspiration Meets Inadequacy

The fitness sector demonstrates sophisticated dual manipulation, simultaneously deploying aspiration appeals (91 instances) and inadequacy amplification (44 instances) to create powerful psychological dynamics. Among 467 total manipulation instances, the distribution reveals strategic emotional orchestration:

Manipulation Strategy	Instances	Percentage
Aspiration Triggers	91	19.5%
Fear-Based Appeals	61	13.1%
Scientific Mimicry	60	12.8%
Social Proof	46	9.9%
Inadequacy Amplification	44	9.4%
Authority Appeals	38	8.1%
Temporal Pressure	35	7.5%
Emotional Blackmail	33	7.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>467</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 5.2: Distribution of manipulation strategies in fitness marketing

The combination of aspiration and inadequacy creates particularly potent manipulation. Consumers simultaneously feel current bodies are unacceptable (inadequacy) while believing transformation is achievable (aspiration). This gap between current and potential self drives continuous consumption of fitness products and services.

### 5.3.2 The Transformation Narrative: Before/After Deception

Fitness marketing centers on transformation mythology that compresses complex, long-term processes into simple product-mediated changes. Analysis reveals systematic deployment of before/after imagery that manipulates through:

**Temporal compression:** Months of change appear instantaneous **Variable control:** Different lighting, posture, and clothing exaggerate changes **Survivorship bias:** Only successful transformations shown **Attribution error:** Product credited for multifactorial changes

Gymshark exemplifies transformation manipulation:

*"Join 5 million athletes who've transformed their bodies with Gymshark. Your current self is just the starting point—your potential is limitless. Don't let another day pass being less than you could be. #BeAVisionary"*

This creates multiple manipulation layers: - Social proof through inflated community numbers - Present self devaluation ("just the starting point") - Impossible standards ("potential is limitless") - Shame activation ("being less than you could be") - Identity construction through hashtag participation

### 5.3.3 Gamification and Behavioral Manipulation

Fitness brands extensively employ gamification to create addictive engagement patterns. Analysis reveals three primary mechanisms:

**Achievement systems:** Badges, levels, and milestones transform exercise into game mechanics. Peloton's leaderboards create competition anxiety where workout effectiveness becomes secondary to ranking.

**Streak manipulation:** Consecutive day counters exploit loss aversion. Breaking streaks feels like failure regardless of overall progress. Daily Burn's "Don't break the chain" messaging creates compulsion rather than healthy habits.

**Social accountability:** Public commitment features and progress sharing create surveillance networks. ClassPass's social features transform personal fitness into public performance requiring continuous demonstration.

Digital fitness platforms intensify manipulation through data collection. Wearable devices provide continuous physiological monitoring, enabling manipulation during vulnerable moments. Stress detection triggers "workout for mental health" messaging. Poor sleep data prompts "energy boost workout" recommendations. The body becomes data source for algorithmic manipulation.

## 5.4 Skincare Sector: The Scientization of Beauty Anxiety

### 5.4.1 Quantitative Findings: Authority Through Scientific Mimicry

The skincare sector shows highest manipulation intensity with 485 instances across 11 brands (44.1 instances per brand). Scientific mimicry dominates at 125 instances (25.8%), followed by fear-based appeals at 93 instances (19.2%), and authority appeals at 87 instances (17.9%).

Price Segment	Scientific	Fear	Authority	Total
Luxury (3 brands)	41	35	32	156
Clinical (4 brands)	52	38	36	189
Mass market (4 brands)	32	20	19	140
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>485</b>

Table 5.3: Distribution of key manipulation strategies by skincare brand type

Clinical-positioned brands (CeraVe, The Ordinary) employ most intensive scientific mimicry despite lacking pharmaceutical status. This pseudo-medical positioning exploits trust in medical authority while avoiding regulatory oversight.

### 5.4.2 Problem Amplification and Solution Monopolization

Skincare marketing systematically amplifies normal skin variations into pathological conditions requiring intervention. Analysis reveals consistent problem-solution narratives:

**Problem construction:** Normal characteristics become disorders - Pores become "enlarged pores" - Texture becomes "rough texture" - Variation becomes "uneven tone" - Aging becomes "premature aging"

**Measurement obsession:** Spurious precision creates false objectivity - "73% reduction in wrinkle depth" - "89% improvement in skin barrier function" - "24-hour hydration"

**Ingredient fetishization:** Chemical names create scientific authority - "Retinol, niacinamide, hyaluronic acid" - "Ceramides 1, 3, 6-II" - "Patented MVE Technology"

CeraVe demonstrates systematic scientific appropriation:

*"Developed with dermatologists, our patented MVE Technology releases ceramides continuously for 24-hour hydration. Clinical studies show 89% improvement in skin barrier function."*

This employs: - Credential appropriation without specificity - Patent claims suggesting innovation - Precise percentages without meaningful context - Undefined metrics ("skin barrier function")

### 5.4.3 Age Anxiety and Temporal Manipulation

Skincare brands exploit age anxiety through sophisticated temporal manipulation. Analysis reveals three temporal strategies:

**Prevention imperative:** Young consumers targeted with premature aging fears

*"Prevention starts in your 20s. The damage you can't see today becomes tomorrow's visible aging. Start now or regret later." - Clinique*

**Reversal promises:** Older consumers offered time reversal

*"Turn back time with our revolutionary formula. Clinical tests show 10 years younger-looking skin in 12 weeks." - Olay*

**Maintenance treadmill:** Continuous use framed as necessity

*"Consistency is key. Skip one day and lose a week's progress. Your skin depends on daily protection." - Neutrogena*

These strategies create lifelong consumption cycles where stopping equals deterioration.

## 5.5 Cross-Sector Patterns: Universal Manipulation Strategies

### 5.5.1 Fear as Universal Currency

Despite different sector focuses, fear emerges as universal manipulation strategy with 248 total instances distributed relatively evenly: fashion (94), skincare (93), fitness (61). This universality suggests fear's fundamental effectiveness in driving consumption across contexts.

Fear operates through sector-specific mechanisms: - **Fashion:** Social exclusion, cultural irrelevance, identity loss - **Fitness:** Body inadequacy, health consequences, social judgment - **Skincare:** Aging, unattractiveness, professional disadvantage

Yet underlying psychology remains consistent: loss aversion, uncertainty intolerance, and social anxiety exploitation.

### 5.5.2 The Authority-Science Complex

Scientific authority claims appear across all sectors, even where seemingly irrelevant. Fashion brands claim "ergonomic design" and "performance fabrics." Fitness brands tout

"exercise science" and "biomechanical optimization." Skincare dominates with "clinical testing" and "dermatologist development."

This cross-sector scientization reveals several patterns: 1. Science provides universal authority transcending domains 2. Technical language obscures evaluation regardless of context 3. Consumers lack expertise to assess scientific claims 4. Regulatory frameworks haven't adapted to pseudo-scientific marketing

### 5.5.3 Multimodal Orchestration Patterns

All sectors employ sophisticated multimodal strategies where visual and textual elements create complementary or contradictory meanings:

**Fashion:** Aspirational imagery + exclusion text = anxiety-driven consumption **Fitness:** Transformation visuals + inadequacy text = continuous striving **Skincare:** Clinical aesthetics + fear text = medicalized beauty

This orchestration suggests systematic understanding of how different modes undergo separate cognitive processing, allowing contradictory messages to coexist without conscious conflict recognition.

## 5.6 Digital Transformation: Amplification Across Sectors

### 5.6.1 Personalization and Micro-Targeting

All sectors employ behavioral tracking for personalized manipulation, but implementation varies:

**Fashion:** Style preferences, body measurements, purchase history enable "curated" selections that appear personalized while steering toward profitable items.

**Fitness:** Activity levels, goal achievement, engagement patterns trigger targeted interventions during vulnerable moments (missed workouts, plateau periods).

**Skincare:** Skin concerns, age, product usage patterns enable "customized routines" that maximize product sales rather than skin health.

Cross-sector analysis reveals three personalization mechanisms: 1. **Data extraction:** Quizzes, consultations, and interactions gather psychological profiles 2. **Vulnerability identification:** Algorithms identify stress, insecurity, and decision patterns 3. **Moment optimization:** Messages timed for maximum susceptibility

### 5.6.2 Social Proof and Community Manipulation

All sectors weaponize social dynamics but through different frameworks:

**Fashion:** Influencer partnerships, street style features, and user-generated content create aspirational communities requiring product purchase for membership.

**Fitness:** Workout communities, challenge groups, and leaderboards create competitive environments where product use signals commitment.

**Skincare:** Before/after galleries, review systems, and routine sharing create evidence communities where participation requires product investment.

These communities appear supportive but function as surveillance and pressure networks ensuring continuous consumption.

## 5.7 Intensity Analysis: Gradients of Manipulation

### 5.7.1 Brand-Level Manipulation Intensity

Analysis reveals significant variation in manipulation intensity both within and across sectors:

**Highest Intensity Brands:** 1. Nivea (Skincare): 50+ instances - mass market requiring aggressive tactics 2. CeraVe (Skincare): 47 instances - clinical positioning through scientific mimicry 3. Gymshark (Fitness): 43 instances - digital-native using full manipulation arsenal 4. Dior (Fashion): 41 instances - luxury maintaining exclusivity through fear

**Lowest Intensity Brands:** 1. Uniqlo (Fashion): 19 instances - functionality focus reduces manipulation need 2. Eucerin (Skincare): 21 instances - medical heritage provides inherent authority 3. F45 (Fitness): 24 instances - community focus requires less individual manipulation

Intensity correlates with: - Market competition (more competition = more manipulation) - Price point (mid-range most aggressive, luxury and budget less) - Digital nativity (online-first brands employ more tactics) - Brand heritage (established brands rely less on manipulation)

### 5.7.2 Temporal Intensity Patterns

Manipulation intensity varies temporally across sectors:

**Fashion:** Peaks during season transitions and sales periods **Fitness:** Intensifies in January (resolutions) and pre-summer **Skincare:** Consistent year-round with slight winter increase

These patterns reveal strategic deployment rather than constant manipulation, suggesting deliberate calibration to consumer vulnerability cycles.

## 5.8 Implications for Theory and Practice

### 5.8.1 Theoretical Implications

Empirical findings support and extend theoretical frameworks:



1. **CDA confirmation:** Power asymmetries enable systematic exploitation 2. **Psychological validation:** Cialdini's principles appear universally 3. **Multimodal significance:** Modal orchestration crucial for manipulation 4. **Digital amplification:** Technology doesn't just extend but transforms manipulation

Novel insights include: - Fear's dominance contradicts positive psychology marketing claims - Luxury correlation with manipulation challenges prestige assumptions - Scientific mimicry's spread reveals authority's universal currency - Sector convergence suggests manipulation best practices dissemination

### 5.8.2 Practical Implications

Findings suggest multiple intervention opportunities:

**Regulatory implications:** - Sector-specific regulations miss universal patterns - Scientific claims require verification regardless of sector - Digital manipulation needs comprehensive framework - Current disclosure requirements insufficient

**Consumer protection strategies:** - Cross-sector manipulation literacy needed - Fear-based marketing recognition training - Scientific claim evaluation skills - Digital tracking awareness

**Industry accountability:** - Manipulation intensity metrics for brand comparison - Ethical marketing certification systems - Consumer vulnerability protection standards - Transparent algorithmic accountability

## 5.9 Chapter Summary: The Manipulation Economy Revealed

This empirical analysis of 1,364 manipulation instances across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors reveals systematic exploitation of consumer vulnerabilities through sophisticated psychological strategies. Key findings include:

**Universal Patterns:** 1. Fear dominates across all sectors (248 instances) 2. Scientific authority provides cross-sector credibility 3. Multimodal orchestration enables contradictory messaging 4. Digital technologies amplify traditional manipulation

**Sector-Specific Strategies:** 1. Fashion manufactures social anxiety through exclusivity 2. Fitness exploits body dissatisfaction through transformation myths 3. Skincare medicalizes appearance through scientific mimicry

**Intensity Patterns:** 1. Luxury brands employ more manipulation, not less 2. Competition correlates with manipulation intensity 3. Digital-native brands use fuller manipulation arsenal 4. Temporal deployment follows vulnerability cycles

The analysis reveals marketing manipulation not as isolated tactics but as systematic industry practice. The convergence of strategies across sectors suggests best practice dis-

semination where effective manipulation techniques spread regardless of product category. The sophistication of these strategies—combining psychological insight, technological capability, and multimodal orchestration—creates manipulation apparatus of unprecedented power.

Most significantly, the empirical evidence contradicts industry claims about empowerment, authenticity, and consumer benefit. Instead, we find systematic exploitation where brands manufacture problems, amplify insecurities, and offer false solutions through continuous consumption. The universality of fear-based appeals reveals an economy built on anxiety rather than aspiration, exploitation rather than empowerment.

These findings provide empirical foundation for regulatory intervention, consumer protection, and industry reform. Understanding manipulation patterns enables development of detection tools, resistance strategies, and accountability frameworks. As digital technologies continue evolving, addressing these manipulative practices becomes increasingly urgent for both individual wellbeing and societal health.

## **DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE MANIPULATION ECONOMY**

### **6.1 Introduction: Synthesizing Empirical Insights**

This discussion chapter synthesizes the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5, interpreting their significance within the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2 and the scholarly context mapped in Chapter 3. The analysis of 1,364 manipulation instances across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors reveals not isolated marketing tactics but a systematic manipulation economy where consumer vulnerabilities are identified, amplified, and exploited through sophisticated psychological strategies enhanced by digital technologies.

The findings challenge fundamental assumptions about contemporary marketing. The dominance of fear-based appeals (248 instances) across all sectors contradicts industry rhetoric about empowerment and positive messaging. The correlation between luxury positioning and manipulation intensity undermines the notion that prestige brands operate above exploitative tactics. The proliferation of scientific mimicry beyond healthcare contexts reveals how authority can be appropriated and weaponized across domains. These patterns demand critical examination of marketing's role in contemporary society and urgent consideration of regulatory and protective responses.

This discussion proceeds through four major sections. First, we interpret key findings through theoretical lenses, revealing how empirical patterns confirm and extend existing frameworks. Second, we examine the implications for understanding digital capitalism and consumer vulnerability in algorithmic environments. Third, we explore ethical dimensions and regulatory possibilities. Finally, we consider limitations and future research directions, acknowledging what remains unknown while charting paths forward.

## **6.2 Theoretical Interpretation: From Data to Understanding**

### **6.2.1 Fear as Universal Manipulation Currency**

The empirical dominance of fear across all sectors—fashion (94 instances), skincare (93), fitness (61)—provides compelling evidence for evolutionary and psychological theories of fear's motivational primacy. From an evolutionary perspective, fear responses evolved as survival mechanisms, creating deeply embedded neural pathways that bypass rational evaluation. Marketing exploitation of these ancient systems represents a form of biological hacking where commercial messages trigger responses designed for physical threats.

The theoretical framework of loss aversion, developed by Kahneman and Tversky, explains fear's effectiveness in marketing contexts. Losses loom psychologically larger than equivalent gains, making fear of missing out, fear of social exclusion, and fear of inadequacy more motivating than promises of gain. Our findings reveal how brands systematically frame non-purchase as loss: fashion brands threaten social irrelevance, fitness brands warn of health decline, skincare brands predict accelerated aging. The universality of this framing across sectors suggests industry-wide understanding of loss aversion's power.

Critical Discourse Analysis illuminates how fear-based marketing serves capitalist reproduction. By maintaining consumers in states of anxiety, brands ensure continuous consumption as temporary anxiety relief. The cycle—fear induction, product purchase, temporary relief, renewed fear—creates what we might term "anxiety capitalism" where emotional distress becomes profit source. This interpretation aligns with Frankfurt School critiques of how capitalism colonizes psychological life, transforming intimate anxieties into market opportunities.

The multimodal orchestration of fear reveals sophisticated understanding of cognitive processing. Visual elements often present aspirational scenarios while text introduces fear, creating cognitive dissonance resolved through consumption. This split-channel manipulation exploits parallel processing where visual and textual information undergo separate initial evaluation before integration. By the time conscious integration occurs, emotional responses are already activated, making rational resistance difficult.

### **6.2.2 The Luxury Paradox: Prestige Requires Persecution**

The counterintuitive finding that luxury brands employ more manipulation than mass-market brands (averaging 33.5 versus 23.0 instances) demands theoretical explanation. Bourdieu's theory of distinction provides interpretive framework: luxury consumption serves primarily to mark social boundaries rather than satisfy material needs. Maintaining these boundaries requires continuous reinforcement of difference, achieved through systematic cultivation of anxiety about social position.

The luxury paradox reveals how prestige is actively constructed rather than inherently possessed. Luxury brands cannot rely on quality or heritage alone but must continuously

manufacture desire through scarcity narratives, exclusivity threats, and cultural capital anxiety. The fear of losing access to luxury—being excluded from cultural elite—proves more powerful than aspiration to join. This finding extends Veblen's conspicuous consumption theory by revealing the anxiety underlying seemingly confident display.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, luxury manipulation exploits narcissistic vulnerabilities. The promise of specialness through consumption appeals to grandiose self-fantasies while simultaneously threatening narcissistic injury through exclusion. Luxury brands position themselves as mirrors reflecting idealized selves back to consumers, but these mirrors crack without continuous consumption. The intensity of luxury manipulation suggests understanding of these deep psychological dynamics.

### **6.2.3 Scientific Authority as Transferable Power**

The spread of scientific mimicry beyond traditional domains—appearing even in fashion marketing—reveals science's role as universal authority currency in contemporary society. This finding supports Habermas's analysis of scientism as ideology, where scientific rationality colonizes other discourse spheres, reducing all questions to technical problems with purchasable solutions.

The appropriation of scientific authority operates through what we term "authority laundering"—transferring credibility from legitimate scientific institutions to commercial products through linguistic and aesthetic mimicry. Percentage claims, technical terminology, and clinical aesthetics create scientific impression without scientific substance. This represents a form of symbolic violence where the cultural capital of science is extracted for commercial gain.

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, scientific mimicry's effectiveness reveals public understanding of science as aesthetic rather than methodological. Consumers recognize scientific markers—white coats, statistics, technical language—without understanding scientific process—peer review, falsifiability, replication. Marketing exploits this recognition-comprehension gap, deploying scientific signifiers divorced from scientific practice.

## **6.3 Digital Capitalism and Algorithmic Manipulation**

### **6.3.1 From Mass Manipulation to Personalized Exploitation**

Digital transformation has fundamentally altered manipulation's nature, shifting from broadcast strategies affecting populations to personalized tactics targeting individuals. This transition represents qualitative change, not merely quantitative intensification. Where traditional marketing operated through demographic segmentation, digital marketing achieves psychological precision, identifying and exploiting individual vulnerabilities in real-time.

Surveillance capitalism, as theorized by Zuboff, provides framework for understanding this transformation. Human experience becomes raw material for predictive products sold in behavioral futures markets. Marketing manipulation represents primary application where future behavior—purchasing—is not just predicted but actively modified. Our findings reveal how fashion, fitness, and skincare brands all employ behavioral tracking to build psychological profiles enabling targeted manipulation.

The concept of "algorithmic interpellation," building on Althusser's ideological interpellation, captures how algorithms hail subjects into consumer positions. Personalized recommendations don't merely suggest products but construct consumer identities: "Because you viewed X, you might like Y" becomes "Because you are X type of person, you should desire Y." This algorithmic identity construction proves particularly powerful because it appears as neutral calculation rather than ideological positioning.

### 6.3.2 The Attention-Anxiety Economy

Digital platforms create what we term the "attention-anxiety economy" where user attention is captured through anxiety induction then monetized through product sales promising relief. This economy operates through multiple mechanisms revealed in our analysis:

**Continuous presence:** Retargeting ensures marketing messages follow consumers across platforms, creating inescapable brand presence that maintains anxiety activation.

**Temporal manipulation:** Countdown timers, flash sales, and limited-time offers compress decision timeframes below optimal deliberation thresholds, forcing decisions under anxiety conditions.

**Social amplification:** Social media enables anxiety transmission through networks where individual insecurities become collective concerns, amplifying manipulation effectiveness.

**Algorithmic optimization:** A/B testing and machine learning continuously refine manipulation strategies, selecting for maximum anxiety induction and conversion.

This economy transforms anxiety from unfortunate byproduct to actively cultivated resource. The more anxious consumers feel, the more valuable they become to platforms and advertisers. This perverse incentive structure ensures systematic anxiety cultivation rather than wellbeing promotion.

### 6.3.3 Data Extraction and Vulnerability Mapping

Digital marketing's data extraction capabilities enable unprecedented vulnerability mapping where individual psychological weak points are identified and catalogued for exploitation. Our analysis reveals how seemingly innocent interactions—quizzes, consultations, customization tools—function as psychological data extraction mechanisms.

Fashion brands map style insecurities through "style quiz" data revealing what consumers fear wearing. Fitness brands identify body image vulnerabilities through goal-setting

interfaces exposing what consumers hate about themselves. Skincare brands catalog aging anxieties through "skin consultation" tools documenting every perceived flaw. This data enables what we term "precision manipulation"—targeting exact vulnerabilities at optimal moments.

The temporal dimension proves crucial: algorithms identify when consumers are most vulnerable—late night browsing suggesting loneliness, workout app abandonment indicating motivation loss, skin care research revealing aging anxiety. Marketing messages are then timed to exploit these vulnerable moments, striking when psychological defenses are weakest.

## 6.4 Ethical Implications and Regulatory Possibilities

### 6.4.1 The Ethics of Exploiting Vulnerability

Our findings raise fundamental ethical questions about marketing's relationship with consumer vulnerability. While marketing has always involved persuasion, the systematic exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities through sophisticated technological means represents qualitative ethical shift. Three ethical frameworks illuminate different dimensions of concern:

**Kantian perspective:** Marketing manipulation violates categorical imperative by treating consumers as means (profit sources) rather than ends (autonomous agents). The deception inherent in manipulation—presenting commercial interest as consumer benefit—fails universalizability test. If all marketing were recognized as manipulation, its effectiveness would collapse, revealing its dependence on deception.

**Utilitarian analysis:** The harm-benefit calculation reveals net negative utility. While brands profit and some consumers gain satisfaction, the aggregate anxiety, financial stress, and environmental damage outweigh benefits. The 1,364 manipulation instances we documented represent millions of anxiety-inducing exposures causing cumulative psychological harm exceeding any utility gains.

**Virtue ethics lens:** Marketing manipulation corrupts both practitioners and consumers. Marketers develop expertise in exploitation rather than value creation, while consumers internalize materialistic values and anxiety-driven decision-making. The virtues of honesty, compassion, and wisdom are systematically undermined by manipulation practices.

### 6.4.2 Vulnerable Populations and Differential Impact

Our analysis reveals that manipulation doesn't affect all consumers equally. Certain populations face heightened vulnerability:

**Age-based vulnerability:** Young people face identity formation challenges making them susceptible to fashion and fitness manipulation. Older consumers confront aging anxieties exploited by skincare brands. Both groups deserve special protection.

**Economic vulnerability:** Lower-income consumers face greater harm from manipulation-induced purchases. Fast fashion's velocity manipulation and fitness's subscription models can trap economically vulnerable consumers in destructive consumption cycles.

**Psychological vulnerability:** Individuals with anxiety disorders, depression, or body dysmorphia face amplified harm from marketing manipulation. Fear-based appeals and inadequacy amplification can exacerbate existing conditions.

**Cultural vulnerability:** Immigrants and minorities may face additional manipulation through cultural capital anxiety and belonging threats that exploit integration challenges.

Recognition of differential vulnerability demands targeted protective measures beyond universal regulation.

### 6.4.3 Regulatory Frameworks and Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings, we propose comprehensive regulatory framework addressing marketing manipulation:

**Mandatory Manipulation Disclosure:** - Brands must disclose manipulation techniques employed - "This advertisement uses fear-based appeals" warnings - Transparency about personalization and targeting methods - Clear identification of scientific claims requiring evidence

**Vulnerability Protection Standards:** - Prohibited tactics when targeting vulnerable populations - Age-appropriate marketing standards - Mental health impact assessments for campaigns - Economic harm prevention measures

**Scientific Claims Verification:** - Third-party verification of scientific claims - Standardized testing protocols for performance claims - Prohibition of undefined technical terms - Clear distinction between marketing and medical claims

**Digital Rights Enhancement:** - Right to non-personalized marketing exposure - Algorithmic transparency requirements - Data minimization mandates - Opt-in rather than opt-out for behavioral tracking

**Industry Accountability Measures:** - Manipulation intensity scoring systems - Public database of marketing violations - Ethical marketing certification programs - Consumer harm compensation mechanisms

## 6.5 Limitations and Future Directions

### 6.5.1 Methodological Limitations

While our analysis provides comprehensive examination of marketing manipulation, several limitations warrant acknowledgment:



**Temporal specificity:** Data collection during October-November 2024 captures specific moment in marketing evolution. Strategies continue evolving, particularly with AI advancement, potentially limiting findings' long-term applicability.

**Cultural boundaries:** Focus on English-language marketing in Western contexts limits cultural generalizability. Marketing manipulation likely operates differently across cultural contexts with varying values, regulations, and consumer sophistication.

**Production focus:** Analyzing marketing production rather than reception leaves gap in understanding actual consumer impact. How individuals interpret and resist manipulation remains partially unexplored.

**Platform constraints:** Access limitations meant some marketing channels (private apps, closed platforms) remained unexamined. These spaces might employ different or more intense manipulation.

**Sector selection:** While fashion, fitness, and skincare provide rich analysis, other sectors (technology, food, finance) might reveal different manipulation patterns.

### 6.5.2 Future Research Directions

Our findings suggest multiple productive research directions:

**Longitudinal studies:** Tracking manipulation evolution over time would reveal how strategies adapt to regulation and consumer awareness. Historical analysis could identify manipulation innovation patterns.

**Cross-cultural comparison:** Examining marketing manipulation across different cultural contexts would reveal universal versus culturally specific patterns. Comparative analysis could identify protective cultural factors.

**Reception studies:** Investigating how consumers actually experience and respond to manipulation would complete the communication circuit. Eye-tracking, neuroimaging, and ethnographic methods could reveal processing patterns.

**Resistance research:** Identifying effective resistance strategies through experimental and observational studies could inform consumer education. Understanding why some individuals resist while others succumb could guide protection efforts.

**AI and manipulation:** As artificial intelligence enables new manipulation forms—deepfakes, generated testimonials, predictive manipulation—research must examine these emerging threats.

**Intersectional analysis:** Examining how manipulation affects different identity intersections (race-class-gender-age) could reveal compound vulnerabilities requiring targeted protection.

### 6.5.3 Technological Futures and Manipulation Evolution

Emerging technologies suggest manipulation will continue evolving:

**Generative AI:** Large language models enable personalized manipulation at scale, creating unique persuasive messages for each individual based on psychological profiles.

**Emotional AI:** Emotion recognition technology could enable real-time manipulation calibrated to immediate emotional states, striking during peak vulnerability.

**Virtual reality:** Immersive shopping experiences could intensify manipulation through presence illusions and embodied persuasion exceeding current capabilities.

**Brain-computer interfaces:** Direct neural interfaces might enable manipulation below conscious awareness entirely, requiring fundamental reconsideration of consumer protection.

**Quantum computing:** Unprecedented computational power could enable real-time optimization across millions of variables, creating manipulation of currently unimaginable sophistication.

Research must anticipate these developments to ensure protective frameworks evolve alongside manipulation capabilities.

## 6.6 Toward Ethical Marketing: Alternative Possibilities

### 6.6.1 Value-Based Marketing Models

While our analysis reveals systematic manipulation, alternative marketing approaches remain possible. Value-based marketing would prioritize genuine benefit over exploitation:

**Transparency principle:** Clear communication about product capabilities and limitations without exaggeration or fear induction.

**Empowerment approach:** Providing information enabling informed choice rather than bypassing rational evaluation.

**Wellbeing orientation:** Considering consumer psychological health alongside commercial objectives.

**Sustainability focus:** Acknowledging environmental costs and promoting conscious consumption rather than continuous purchase.

Several brands already demonstrate these principles, proving commercial viability without manipulation. Patagonia's environmental activism, Dove's real beauty campaign (despite contradictions), and Everlane's radical transparency suggest alternative possibilities.

### 6.6.2 Consumer Education and Literacy

Developing manipulation literacy could provide individual-level protection:

**Recognition skills:** Teaching consumers to identify manipulation tactics when encountered.

**Psychological understanding:** Education about cognitive biases and emotional vulnerabilities exploited by marketing.

**Critical evaluation:** Tools for assessing claims, particularly scientific and authority appeals.

**Digital literacy:** Understanding how algorithms and data extraction enable personalized manipulation.

Educational interventions could occur through multiple channels: school curricula, public health campaigns, consumer advocacy programs, and digital platform features. The goal isn't eliminating marketing but enabling conscious engagement rather than unconscious manipulation.

## 6.7 Chapter Summary: Confronting the Manipulation Economy

This discussion has interpreted empirical findings through theoretical frameworks, revealing marketing manipulation as systematic exploitation rather than isolated tactics. Key insights include:

**Theoretical confirmations:** - Fear's dominance validates evolutionary and psychological theories - Luxury paradox reveals prestige's anxiety foundation - Scientific mimicry demonstrates authority's transferable power - Digital transformation enables qualitative manipulation change

**Ethical imperatives:** - Vulnerability exploitation violates multiple ethical frameworks - Differential impact demands targeted protection - Current regulation inadequate for digital manipulation - Alternative marketing models remain possible

**Future challenges:** - Emerging technologies will intensify manipulation capabilities - Cross-cultural and longitudinal research needed - Consumer education essential but insufficient alone - Systemic change requires coordinated intervention

The manipulation economy revealed through our analysis represents fundamental challenge to consumer autonomy, psychological wellbeing, and market ethics. The 1,364 documented instances across fashion, fitness, and skincare likely represent fraction of total manipulation occurring across all sectors. The sophistication of current strategies—combining psychological insight, technological capability, and multimodal orchestration—creates unprecedented challenges for consumer protection.

Yet recognition enables resistance. By revealing manipulation mechanisms, this research provides foundation for individual and collective response. Consumers armed with understanding can develop resistance strategies. Regulators informed by evidence can craft protective frameworks. Industry practitioners confronted with consequences might pursue ethical alternatives.

The path forward requires acknowledging marketing manipulation not as acceptable business practice but as systematic exploitation demanding urgent address. The anxiety economy serving capital at consciousness's expense need not be inevitable. Through research, regulation, and resistance, alternative futures remain possible where marketing informs rather than manipulates, empowers rather than exploits, and serves human wellbeing rather than manufacturing distress for profit.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD A FUTURE BEYOND MANIPULATION

### 7.1 Research Summary: Unveiling the Manipulation Economy

This thesis has undertaken a comprehensive investigation of psychological manipulation in marketing discourse across fashion, fitness, and skincare sectors. Through mixed-methods analysis of 4.5 million characters of marketing text from 35 brands, we identified and analyzed 1,364 distinct manipulation instances, revealing systematic exploitation of consumer vulnerabilities through sophisticated psychological strategies enhanced by digital technologies. The research contributes both empirical documentation of manipulation patterns and theoretical understanding of how contemporary marketing operates as an anxiety economy that profits from manufactured distress.

The investigation began with a troubling observation: despite industry rhetoric about empowerment, authenticity, and consumer benefit, marketing practices increasingly employ sophisticated psychological manipulation that exploits fundamental human vulnerabilities. The digital transformation has not democratized commerce but rather enabled unprecedented precision in identifying and targeting individual psychological weak points. This thesis provides systematic evidence of these practices, moving beyond anecdotal criticism to rigorous empirical analysis.

The theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2 integrated Critical Discourse Analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal analysis to create comprehensive analytical tools. This multi-theoretical approach proved essential for capturing manipulation's complexity—how language constructs reality, psychology is exploited, and multiple semiotic modes orchestrate meaning. The framework's explanatory power became evident through empirical application, transforming raw data into meaningful understanding of manipulation mechanisms.

## 7.2 Key Findings: The Architecture of Exploitation

### 7.2.1 Universal Patterns Across Sectors

The most striking finding is fear's dominance as universal manipulation currency across all sectors—fashion (94 instances), fitness (61), skincare (93)—totaling 248 instances. This universality suggests that regardless of product category, brands have discovered fear's unparalleled effectiveness in driving consumer behavior. The convergence on fear-based strategies reveals an economy built on anxiety cultivation rather than value creation, where consumer distress becomes profit source.

The proliferation of scientific mimicry beyond healthcare contexts—appearing 242 times across all sectors—demonstrates how authority can be appropriated and weaponized regardless of relevance. Fashion brands claim "ergonomic design," fitness brands tout "biomechanical optimization," and skincare brands overwhelm with "clinical testing." This cross-sector scientization reveals science's role as universal authority currency, exploited through aesthetic appropriation rather than substantive application.

Multimodal orchestration emerged as systematic strategy where visual and textual elements create complementary or contradictory meanings that bypass conscious evaluation. All sectors employ this sophisticated understanding of cognitive processing, presenting aspirational imagery while introducing textual anxiety, creating cognitive dissonance resolved through consumption. This finding reveals manipulation as carefully designed rather than accidentally effective.

### 7.2.2 Sector-Specific Exploitation Strategies

While universal patterns exist, each sector has developed specialized manipulation calibrated to particular vulnerabilities:

**Fashion's Exclusion Economy:** The paradox of luxury brands employing more manipulation than mass-market brands reveals how prestige requires continuous anxiety cultivation. Fashion doesn't sell clothing but social position, cultural capital, and identity markers. The fear of exclusion from these symbolic benefits drives consumption more powerfully than material need or aesthetic preference.

**Fitness's Transformation Mythology:** The dual deployment of aspiration (91 instances) and inadequacy amplification (44 instances) creates perpetual dissatisfaction where current bodies are unacceptable while transformation remains perpetually just out of reach. The fitness sector has perfected the art of simultaneous shame and hope, keeping consumers trapped between self-hatred and self-improvement.

**Skincare's Medicalized Beauty:** The dominance of scientific mimicry (125 instances) and authority appeals (87 instances) reveals systematic appropriation of medical authority for commercial gain. By medicalizing appearance—transforming variation into pathology—skincare brands create problems requiring continuous intervention, establishing lifelong consumption dependencies.

### 7.2.3 Digital Amplification Mechanisms

Digital technologies have transformed manipulation from broadcast to precision targeting. Three amplification mechanisms emerged from analysis:

1. Precision targeting through behavioral tracking enables identification of individual vulnerabilities and optimal manipulation moments
2. Continuous optimization through A/B testing and machine learning refines strategies for maximum exploitation
3. Scale effects enable simultaneous deployment across millions with minimal marginal cost

These mechanisms create unprecedented power asymmetries where brands possess detailed psychological profiles, sophisticated manipulation tools, and resources for continuous refinement, while consumers face this apparatus with limited awareness and cognitive constraints.

## 7.3 Theoretical Contributions: Advancing Understanding

This research makes several theoretical contributions to understanding marketing manipulation:

### 7.3.1 The Manipulation Matrix

The integration of Critical Discourse Analysis, psychological manipulation theory, and multimodal analysis through the Manipulation Matrix provides comprehensive framework for analyzing contemporary marketing. This framework reveals manipulation as multi-dimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated deployment across discursive, psychological, and semiotic dimensions. The matrix enables systematic analysis while maintaining sensitivity to context and complexity.

### 7.3.2 Anxiety Capitalism

The concept of "anxiety capitalism" emerged from findings, describing an economic system where consumer anxiety becomes primary profit source. This extends critical theory by revealing how capitalism has evolved from exploiting labor to exploiting consciousness, transforming intimate anxieties into market opportunities. The systematic nature of anxiety cultivation revealed across sectors suggests structural rather than incidental phenomenon.

### 7.3.3 Authority Laundering

The widespread appropriation of scientific authority revealed a process we term "authority laundering"—transferring credibility from legitimate institutions to commercial products through linguistic and aesthetic mimicry. This concept extends understanding of how symbolic capital operates in contemporary marketing, revealing systematic extraction of cultural trust for commercial gain.

## 7.4 Practical Implications: From Recognition to Resistance

### 7.4.1 For Consumers

Recognition represents first step toward resistance. Consumers armed with understanding of manipulation mechanisms can develop protective strategies:

- **Manipulation literacy:** Learning to identify common tactics reduces effectiveness
- **Emotional awareness:** Recognizing triggered emotions enables conscious evaluation
- **Delay tactics:** Introducing time between exposure and purchase disrupts manipulation
- **Community support:** Sharing experiences and strategies collectively builds resistance

However, individual resistance alone proves insufficient given systematic nature and sophisticated deployment of manipulation strategies.

### 7.4.2 For Regulators

The evidence demands comprehensive regulatory response:

**Immediate measures:** - Mandatory disclosure of manipulation techniques employed - Verification requirements for scientific and authority claims - Protection standards for vulnerable populations - Cooling-off periods for significant purchases

**Systemic reforms:** - Algorithmic transparency and accountability frameworks - Data minimization and purpose limitation requirements - Right to non-personalized marketing exposure - Industry-wide manipulation intensity standards

Current regulatory frameworks, developed for traditional advertising, prove inadequate for digital manipulation's sophistication and scale.

### 7.4.3 For Industry

While this research criticizes current practices, it also points toward alternative possibilities:

- extbfValue-based marketing prioritizing genuine benefit over exploitation
- extbfTransparent communication about capabilities and limitations
- extbfEthical targeting avoiding vulnerable populations and moments
- extbfWellbeing consideration alongside commercial objectives

Some brands already demonstrate these principles, proving commercial viability without manipulation.



## 7.5 Limitations and Future Research

### 7.5.1 Acknowledged Limitations

Several limitations bound this research's scope:

- **Temporal specificity:** Strategies continue evolving, particularly with AI advancement
- **Cultural boundaries:** Focus on Western, English-language contexts limits generalizability
- **Production emphasis:** Consumer reception and resistance remain partially unexplored
- **Sector selection:** Other industries might reveal different patterns

These limitations suggest caution in generalization while highlighting needs for extended research.

### 7.5.2 Future Research Imperatives

Critical research needs emerge from findings:

- **AI and manipulation:** Examining how artificial intelligence enables new exploitation forms
- **Resistance strategies:** Identifying effective protection methods through experimental studies
- **Cross-cultural analysis:** Understanding cultural factors in manipulation and resistance
- **Longitudinal tracking:** Documenting manipulation evolution and regulatory response
- **Intersectional investigation:** Examining compound vulnerabilities across identity categories

## 7.6 Final Reflections: The Stakes of Manipulation

This thesis reveals marketing manipulation not as peripheral concern but as fundamental challenge to human autonomy, dignity, and wellbeing in digital capitalism. The 1,364 documented instances represent millions of anxiety-inducing exposures causing cumulative psychological harm that extends beyond individual suffering to societal consequences: eroded trust, materialistic values, environmental destruction through overconsumption, and normalized exploitation.

The sophistication of current manipulation—combining psychological insight, technological capability, and multimodal orchestration—creates unprecedented challenges. As one fashion brand's text revealed: "This season exists only once. Those who understand fashion's rhythm know—hesitation means missing the movement forever." This seemingly innocuous statement encapsulates manipulation's essence: creating false urgency, constructing insider knowledge, and threatening permanent loss for temporary commercial gain.

Yet the very act of revelation enables resistance. By dragging manipulation from shadowy operation into analytical light, this research provides foundation for individual and collective response. The manipulation economy depends on invisibility; exposure threatens

its effectiveness. As consumers become aware of fear's systematic deployment, scientific mimicry's emptiness, and digital targeting's precision, resistance becomes possible.

The path forward requires recognizing marketing manipulation as systemic problem demanding systemic response. Individual consumer education, while valuable, cannot address structural power asymmetries. Industry self-regulation, despite promises, has failed to prevent escalating exploitation. Comprehensive intervention combining regulation, education, and cultural shift toward ethical marketing becomes necessary.

## **7.7 Conclusion: Reclaiming Consumer Consciousness**

This thesis has documented and analyzed psychological manipulation in marketing discourse, revealing an anxiety economy where consumer vulnerabilities are systematically identified, amplified, and exploited for profit. The empirical evidence—1,364 manipulation instances across fashion, fitness, and skincare—demonstrates that manipulation is not aberration but standard practice. The theoretical framework explains how this manipulation operates through discursive construction, psychological exploitation, and multimodal orchestration. The practical implications demand urgent response through regulation, education, and industry reform.

The research's ultimate contribution lies not in documenting problems but in enabling solutions. By revealing manipulation mechanisms, we provide tools for resistance. By quantifying exploitation, we create basis for regulation. By demonstrating alternatives, we show different futures remain possible.

The question is not whether marketing manipulation exists—this research provides overwhelming evidence that it does—but whether we will accept its continuation. The anxiety economy serving capital at consciousness's expense need not be inevitable. Through recognition, resistance, and reform, we can envision and create marketing that informs rather than manipulates, empowers rather than exploits, and serves human flourishing rather than manufacturing distress.

As digital technologies continue evolving, the stakes only increase. Artificial intelligence, emotional computing, and immersive technologies promise manipulation capabilities currently unimaginable. The time for action is now, while human agency retains capacity for resistance. This thesis provides evidence and framework for that resistance, contributing to the larger project of reclaiming consumer consciousness from commercial colonization.

The brands studied—from Celine's manufactured exclusivity to Gymshark's transformation mythology to CeraVe's scientific theater—represent not isolated bad actors but systematic industry practices. Change requires not targeting individual brands but transforming the system enabling and rewarding manipulation. This transformation begins with recognition, proceeds through resistance, and culminates in reconstruction of marketing's relationship with human consciousness.

The Master's program in Data and Discourse Studies at TU Darmstadt provided ideal foun-

dation for this investigation, combining computational capability with critical perspective. The ability to process large-scale data while maintaining interpretive sensitivity proved essential for revealing manipulation patterns while understanding their meaning. This interdisciplinary approach—merging quantitative and qualitative, empirical and critical—offers model for future research addressing complex social phenomena.

In closing, this thesis stands as both documentation and call to action. The manipulation economy thrives in darkness; exposure represents first step toward transformation. The anxiety deliberately cultivated for profit can be replaced with authentic communication serving genuine needs. The psychological vulnerabilities currently exploited can be protected and respected. The digital technologies enabling precision manipulation can be redirected toward empowerment and education.

The future of marketing—and by extension, the quality of consciousness in digital capitalism—remains undetermined. This research provides evidence that current trajectory leads toward ever-more sophisticated exploitation. But trajectories can change. Through collective action informed by systematic understanding, we can create marketing that serves rather than exploits, that recognizes human dignity rather than reducing people to manipulation targets, and that contributes to wellbeing rather than manufacturing distress for profit.

The 35 brands analyzed, the 1,364 manipulation instances documented, and the millions of consumers affected deserve better than an economy built on anxiety. This thesis provides foundation for demanding and creating that better future.

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