

Ethics

of Marketing and Advertising Strategies in the 21st century

Vincent Wilmet (BID - B00784879)

Introduction:

Marketing and advertising in particular are based on the idea of influencing consumers. Many modern strategies rely on influencing (manipulating) customers unconsciously to consume more. It is here that I raise the unethical concerns many others have voiced about the intentional manipulation of ignorance for (self) gain. This has been hotly debated, even back to [Plato's allegory of the cave](#), or [utilitarian white lies](#), but ultimately teeters the fence of determinism and free will. If we are making (unconscious) decisions to purchase, consume, or promote products, where is the ethical boundary and who is responsible?

Drawing from personal experience and peer discussions, I will look into the psychological tactics of marketing executive strategies that I have noticed thus far, then look into the ethical framework for context. I plan on also drawing from the examples of beauty (shampoo, lipstick, clothing advertisements) and user interfaces (UX/UI, colors, doom-scrolling and notifications). Why do these products claim they can solve the problems (we don't know) we have?

The Beauty of Subliminal Advertising

Take the example of shampoo, lipstick or clothing advertisements. I have been exposed to these everywhere: on YouTube, between TF1 programs, on the Metro, and blaring from my grandmother's radio. In modern commercials we rarely see the product until the last few seconds when we discover how *"this product will solve the issues explored in these inconvenient situations"*. To be more concrete, take the example of [this Pantene shampoo commercial](#) I vividly remember. The short video takes 58 seconds out of the 1 minute ad to explore the double standards that many women face at work. Where a man would be called persuasive, women are called pushy. A man is the boss, a woman is bossy. A dad working late is dedicated, a mom doing the same is selfish. Of course, Pantene's aim is to sell shampoo, and not necessarily to end workplace discrimination or change the way people view professional women. Though, somehow, by buying this miracle product, gender biases will be solved forever.

Another example can be seen in [Dove's attack](#) on the harmful effects of social media's physical dysmorphia on children. Similarly, we can't tell it is a Dove ad until the last 4 seconds of a 1 minute commercial, and yet if you buy this product that alters your body and cleanses your hair to look like the blue-eyed model, these "harmful effects" are solved. Dove is exacerbating the very problem they think they are solving.

There are many other hundreds of commercials like this, with ranging ideological topics from [Black Lives Matter](#), to [Toxic Masculinity](#), to every Pink Capitalist logo rebranding during Pride Month. The point is to note here, is by subliminally pairing a product with an issue, a consumer hopes to find solace in the fact that by buying this (material) product they can take a stand against an (ideological) oppressor. The product has lost its association with interaction between the self and the material good, and instead transitioned to become an association between an ideology and the self. Marketing executives are no longer selling products, instead they are selling ideologies.

However, this is nothing new. Selling a product via "a form of advertising in which branded goods and services are featured in a production that targets a large audience." is commonly called [Product Placement](#). Also known as "embedded marketing" or "embedded advertising," product placements are typically found in movies, television shows, personal videos, radio, etc.. For example, James Bond famously drove Ford cars, which tied the idea of "cool" with The Mustang. This new association allowed Ford to sell the idea of looking "cool". The same is done by Pantene, Dove, [Apple](#) and others, in their modern advertising so that their customers can look like the idea of "beauty", "empowered" or "active" respectively

Ethical literature surrounding this psychological tactic of marketing backs up the claim that this is psychologically manipulative. Balasubramanian in 1994 explains that because the actual content/ideological narrative is the primary focus of the consumer, product placement serves as subliminal advertising to supplement the primary narrative. In TV shows, when the protagonist reaches for a soda, the viewers think nothing of it. But if it is clearly a Coca-Cola bottle, in order to be more like our idealized character, we can not be drinking Pepsi. D'Astous and Chartier did a study in 2000 to determine the fact that because product placement is not perceived as an aggressive advertising campaign, tends to lead to less psychological defensive reactions of consumers, which also is a main objective of subliminal advertising. By breaking through these walls and making it into the subconscious, advertisers

can change the rate at which consumers value the brand and recognize its logo to hold positive attributes.

As Michael Jacobson, the Executive Director of *The Center for Science in the Public Interest*, pointed out, “Product placement is so subtle that it is probably generally perceived subconsciously or subliminally. Viewers just don’t think about the possibility that they are being advertised to” In persuasion the persuader bluntly appeals to argument and reason. The person under persuasion is well aware of the logical reasoning and evidence presented to him/her, and thus he/she has a choice to accept or to reject the argument based on a fair assessment. However in manipulation, the so-called “persuasion” is stealthy and subliminal. The person being influenced does not have the awareness described above, and thus his/her freedom of choice is violated. By this definition, product placement is manipulation rather than persuasion. The actor or actress does not explicitly endorse the product. Instead, the product and the actor/actress are shown side by side. Through this type of classical conditioning, a positive association between the product and the actor/actress is built.

Of course, many people fear that product placement can subliminally manipulate them against their will, because it is so often hard to clearly identify it as advertising. These concerns are amplified again if we are not talking about consumers in general, but particularly vulnerable groups such as children, since knowledge of marketing tactics and advertising is not developed [until age 8](#) or later. In fact, it seems that the natural presentation and seamless implementation of product placement might lead to less defensive reactions. Due to this and because product placement is often not consciously processed, it can be seen as subliminal advertising.

If the consumer recognizes the manipulation attempt, he usually will mentally protect himself against it and not react positively to the respective marketing tactics. With subliminal advertising, marketers hope to circumvent this problem by concealing the influence attempt in a way that the consumer can not recognize and take precautions against it. One would therefore specifically target only the subconscious mind, as at this state of mind, people are not aware of advertising stimuli and their effects.

This is what lead the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to declare subliminal advertising [“contrary to the public interest.”](#) I am also against this kind of advertising, as it creates norms of behavior that prey on customer’s weakness and uncertainty (their looks,

identity groups, and fundamental values) by presenting an unaffiliated token of what the ideology is really supposed to represent.

To explain further my idea, I will raise a number of examples I have experienced.

“If you were a good boyfriend, who was committed to a lifelong relationship with your fiancée, you’d get her the diamond ring and wear these clothes”. This is an excerpt from a conversation between family friends that I was a part of. Yet, this thinking doesn’t help to have a healthy relationship. It creates insecurity and doubt. A tension in a relationship that can only be solved by doing what the marketers say even if it’s not actually what one wants or what’s good for the relationship. These campaigns will raise doubts, and exacerbate fears such that the only artificial panacea is their product. If the fiancée was truly committed to the long term success of the relationship, he would set up an education fund for his kids, or use the ring money towards a nursery room in the apartment.

There is a silver lining though. With the diamond ring, or flowers, however, it's absolutely not about the diamond ring. It's about "if you can afford to waste a lot of money on really ridiculous stuff just to make me happy, it's an inkling that you might be able to financially care for me forever".

This system is ALL over nature, by the way. The feathers of the peacock show the potential female "look how strong I must be in order to drag around these huge and completely pointless feathers and still have survived this long".

Of course, the need to be financially supported stems from all the marketing and the imagined stuff you know you will be wanting in the present and future, unaware that even just a fisher has pretty much everything you could want, if you're willing to settle for less.

I've watched situations in high end bars (never experienced, that would have been hilarious) where the man tried to approach a woman and she was like "Sweety, for me to even TALK to you, you buy me a 500€ Champagne bottle right now and put it beside me, THEN we can talk." There's nothing about champagne here. It's about "if you are willing to spend 500€ on a woman not knowing in the slightest where this is going, you're willing and able to spend MUCH more once you're in love". For both the bad (gold digging exploitation) and the good (commitment to uncertainty exploration).

Nonetheless, this stuff gets especially awful when you realize it's legal, and common practice to hire child psychologists for marketing campaigns. The kids don't even have the intellectual capacity to defend themselves... they can't even discern between an ad and programmed content before 8yrs old... Some companies go out of their way to create tension in the family dynamics such that the only resolution to make "everyone happy" is to "buy the damn toy".

Another good example I've picked up on are the "what's near me" algorithms, which are framed as a "I'm helping you tool", but are actually increasing isolation. Because we must think about who would use such a service: someone who's new to the area, doesn't yet have friends that can make recommendations and hasn't been in the community long enough to explore. As a result, the algorithm enhances this by explaining: don't trust yourself, don't go out and explore, don't make friends, just take our recommendations (which are sponsored and the main driving force behind why such algos are pushed into you/along with data collection) as gospel and trust that it is empirically the best choice.

So again, the nearest coffee shop or restaurant is actually just a product of who can market the best to you, and as a side effect actively undermines the reliability of your community, human curiosity to explore, and self confidence to make decisions.

Conclusion:

The tension between free will and determinism is scorched by marketing executives strategies to implement subliminal messages to get their customers to cave into their uncertainty and purchase the product who can "solve" the ideological problems that society raises when in reality the product does things far from this.

Amazon keeps offering me kindle books first when I search for a book. But I don't have a kindle, nor want to buy one — I've always liked physical books more. However, through enough exposure, and this idea that buying a kindle will help me save money and convenience , I start to doubt myself.

And honestly, it's tiring to have to fight these algorithms and psychologists day in day out. I wake up, buckle my pants, and take a slow stroll just to be ceaselessly harassed with violations of privacy, security, disordering, etc. To put it succinctly, Amazon doesn't sell me what I want, it sells me what it wants me to want, which I eventually begin to want.

Bibliotography

Lee, Mira and Ronald J. Faber (2007), "Effects of Product Placement in On-Line Games on Brand Memory," *Journal of Advertising*, 36 (4), 75–90.

Balasubramanian, Siva K. (1994), "Beyond Advertising and Publicity: Hybrid Messages and Public Policy Issues," *Journal of Advertising*, 23 (4), 29–46.

D'Astous, Alain and Francis Chartier (2000), "A Study of Factors Affecting Consumer Evaluations and Memory of Product Placements in Movies," *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 22 (2), 31–40.

Broyles, Sheri J. (2006), "Subliminal Advertising and the Perpetual Popularity of Playing to People's Paranoia," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 40 (2), 392–406.