

PSYCHOLOGICAL MANUPULATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA ADS

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ABSTRACT

While, this has become a practise for businesses to connect with consumers, it also raised alarm bells about the psychological exploitation of end-users on social media. This paper investigates the emotional appeal to providing social media ads with targeted and personalized content to be transferred to consumer behaviour. By using psychological tricks appeal to emotion, human insecurities, the pursuit of pleasure and happiness or the desire to fit into society advertisers manipulate users' fears to make them buy. The paper starts with a look at advertising psychology and explains that human emotions are fundamentally engaged in the decision-making process. It explains how social media platforms facilitate such manipulation through algorithms and data analytics that allow for ads to be targeted via granular individual-level information using emotional appeals. Here, several emotional vulnerabilities in the form of FOMO, body image issues, low self-esteem, and social validation seeking are researched, each an exploitation point for ad copy to inspire an emotional response or increase purchase. In this respect, the paper reflects quite a list of manipulative strategies advertisement players use to enhance emotional engagement, including: emotional targeting, neuromarketing, scarcity appeals, and storytelling. Although they might be effective in terms of attracting interest on the side of customers, such manipulative strategies contain many ethical issues, specifically concerning implications for already vulnerable target groups: youth and people with mental health issues. Arguing that current law and regulation cannot provide any check on manipulative practices, the paper examines the legal and regulatory framework in place for digital advertising. By stressing the need for greater regulation, increased transparency, and the education of the consumer to protect against emotional exploitation, this paper finally brings forth a balanced approach toward consumers without hindering technological advances in the advertising world.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological manipulation is a social influence technique aimed at changing the behaviour or perception of others through deceptive or underhanded tactics. It is often employed to gain control, advantage, or power over individuals, exploiting weaknesses like

insecurities, emotions, or cognitive biases²⁴⁵⁹. As it is, advertising is one area that cannot be escaped in this society and even more in social media platforms. Firms and companies are always in search for new ways to reach out to

²⁴⁵⁹ Study
<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/law/forensic-science/psychological-manipulation/>

smarter,

consumers which are more efficacious, more emotional purchasing often and unfortunately becomes the inner goal of selling. This covert strategy preys on the deficiencies and aspirations of people bringing about quite a brilliant albeit morally grey marketing policy. One of the most utilized emotions by marketers is fear and anxiety. These marketers invade concerns regarding one's health, beauty and one's position in society. It is common to appeal to consumers and instil a fear of missing out (FOMO). Pushing the notion that the present product is so hot and should not be missed if people are to be fashionable because the next time the fashion will be different. The beauty and the fashion industry in particular usually add to these insecurities by applying unachievable 'idealise' measures and persuade people to buy products that will make a difference with the standard pictures they see in the adverts. On top of that, status symbols have been turned into a commodity – spending on luxury goods is promoted as an increase in self-image, increasing the validation hunger in people. This seems to be even more effective with celebrity endorsements and testimonials, which imply that the consumers can enjoy the use of the products in an elite or 'in-the-know' way. What is unique about this manipulation now is the ability to use advanced psychographics due to tracking people's behaviour online. Companies record the history of viewers, what they did, their preferences and construct ads that appear targeted and relevant but are actually weaponized against vulnerabilities. It is rather common that people think that this kind of engagement is really helpful and appreciate ads in so-called 'personalized' form, not understanding what is behind it. Unfortunately, proposed legal instruments, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines, simply focus on updating laws rather than clearly identify the harms caused by these tactics to the emotional-psychological wellbeing of consumers. Most people therefore still do not

realize the extent to which their feelings are manipulated, demonstrating an urgent problem which requires addressing further on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A.A. Shahyrova's, 'PSYCHOLOGICAL METHODS OF MANIPULATION IN ADVERTISING'²⁴⁶⁰ reveals the variety of psychological methods used in advertising to manipulate consumer behaviour. This work traces the history of advertising and the development of this mechanism as a powerful influence on the public consciousness, particularly in Russia. Also, when writing this paper, the linguistic form of manipulation was considered, which consists of the fact that the developer of the advertisement chooses words so that the client makes the right conclusion without even realizing it. The author referred to the method with which they can manipulate emotions – advertising guilt, self-satisfaction, or childhood memories. He raises the question of the immoral part of various methods and notes that there are too many opportunities for manipulation, and this goes against respect for the buyer's personal opinion. This study explains the methods of the integrative impact of advertising on a person and is aimed at understanding how business interacts with the individual.

David Vrtana and Anna Krizanova's, 'THE POWER OF EMOTIONAL ADVERTISING APPEALS: EXAMINING THEIR INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND-CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP'²⁴⁶¹ talks about the influence of emotional advertising appeals on consumer purchasing behaviour and brand relationships. The authors of this study also show that commercials designed to provoke emotions, such as the case in the world cosmetics industry (cosmetic ads evoke a higher degree of emotional bonding with brand names). In fact, the research indicates that emotional

²⁴⁶⁰ A.A. Shahyrova's, 'Psychological Methods Of Manipulation In Advertising',

²⁴⁶¹ David Vrtana And Anna Krizanova's, 'The Power Of Emotional Advertising Appeals: Examining Their Influence On Consumer Purchasing Behaviour And Brand-Customer Relationship', sept 6, 2023

appeals drive impulse buys and brand loyalty. These emotional tactics have a more favourable influence on younger consumers and a less favourable, negative impact on older consumers. The paper underscores the need for emotional advertising practices that resonate with contemporary concerns – and a broader shift in how businesses use emotions, prioritizing them to rational appeals. While the study confirms that emotional advertising works to influence consumer choices, it is done in an ethical way.

Tapan Kumar Panda and Kamallesh Mishra's, DOES EMOTIONAL APPEAL WORK IN ADVERTISING? THE RATIONALITY BEHIND USING EMOTIONAL APPEAL TO CREATE FAVORABLE BRAND ATTITUDE,²⁴⁶² delves into how emotive appeals in advertising can help form positive brand attitudes. The authors explore consumer attitudes and intentions to purchase in emotional responses (joy, fear, nostalgia). This source claims that emotional advertising works best for products which strong emotions and the desire to enjoy ourselves. A study by Sheehan, who is a Professor at W.P Carey School of Business, contrasts the place of rational vs. emotional appeals, arguing that for most products one cannot provide sufficient logical reasons to be considered effective in advertising as to infer proper reasons may also be suspect. Emotional connections account for a lot more in brand loyalty than rational appeals. Emotional bonding creates the most impact on consumer behaviour. The article concludes by stressing the importance of matching emotional appeals with the category under consideration in order to improve campaign performance.

SCOPE

The scope of this research paper is to examine how present-day marketing activities, particularly on social media platforms, exploit emotional weakness like anxiety, stress, and

insecurity in customers to affect their behaviour. The study will detail the numerous strategies employed, including fear of missing out (FOMO), the perpetuation of unrealistic 'ideal' standards, the promotion of status symbols, and the use of trusted expert opinions and testimonials to manipulate the mental states of customers. It will also look into the use of personal data matched with the user's search history in the delivering of the ads that the illusion of convenience will further steer the buying process. Moreover, the research will centre on the moral aspects of these activities, stressing the subconscious exploitation that is often a blind spot to customers. In addition, the paper will closely monitor the enforcement of watching the existence of the general data protection regulation and the federal trade commission guide lines against such, and scrutinize the failure in dealing with the emotional manipulation in digital advertising. The whole research intends to make people more alert of the psychological means used in targeted advertising and to fight for the guarantee of stronger legal and ethical rights of customers in the digital world. It will also reflect the broader issues of the consumer rights and ethical advertising.

HYPOTHESIS

- 1.Targeted advertising based on consumer data such as search history and online behaviour takes advantage of their emotional vulnerabilities without their knowledge.
- 2.Use of FOMO (fear of missing out) and Unrealistic ideal standards promotes the harmful practice of comparison and leading to people buying in a hurry in order to avoid exclusion or being left behind.
3. Unethical Psychological manipulation is not sufficiently addressed by the current GDPR and FTC regulatory architecture opens doors for either direct or indirect abuse of consumers by advertising companies.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

²⁴⁶² Tapan Kumar Panda And Kamallesh Mishra's, Does Emotional Appeal Work In Advertising? The Rationality Behind Using Emotional Appeal To Create Favorable Brand Attitude, jan 2023.

1. The consumers are not aware that digital ads are the ones that use their emotional vulnerability, such as fear and insecurity, to cost their buying decisions. This lack of knowledge leads to a situation where consumers make choices based on manipulated feelings, rather than real necessities.
2. The advertisers are using such emotions like FOMO, social status, and unrealistic standards of beauty, which drive the imaginations of the consumers and makes the consumers perceive the goods as requiring satisfaction that is difficult. This insecurity leads to a state of overuse of goods which stems from emotions being used to manipulate people instead of them making rational choices.
3. Correctly done ads enabled by AI that seem like they can do all the work for us make customers feel that they are in control, but in reality, this freedom is fake because of the personalized and emotional-based incentive.
4. The present ones that are digital advertising regulations such as GDPR and FTC guidelines do not properly handle the ethically wrong emotions in targeted ads. Therefore, advertisers can use this loophole to target consumer psychologies rather than human protection laws and create a negative ad effect on individuals, without any oversight.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify how advertisers play on emotions like fear, anxiety, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), and insecurities to change behaviour – and to name what kind of tactics are being used against environmentalists by targeting our emotional weak points.
2. To concentrate on targeted advertising by using the personal and consumer data from search history which leads to ads which affect emotions of users more

accurately and makes them buy if emotional are pitted in correct way.

3. Examining whether regulations, for example (GDPR and the Federal Trade Commission guides), protect consumers from emotions used in advertising. It will further investigate possible weaknesses in these frameworks where they have not managed to halt the circumvention and manipulation of high-quality scientific evidence.
4. Its recommendations will be used to build a case for how we can enhance consumer insights, bolster regulatory frameworks and drive an ethical agenda around advertising in the digital space so consumers are less at risk of this covert emotional manipulation.

METHODOLOGY

This is doctrinal research blends insights from academic journals, online resources, and original ideas to explore psychological manipulation in social media ads. Academic journals laid the groundwork by sharing existing research and theoretical frameworks related to psychological manipulation in social media ads. These scholarly sources shaped the theoretical foundation and guided our study's direction. Online websites and resources were also tapped into. They provided up-to-date data, statistics, and practical examples relevant to psychological manipulation in social media ads. These real-world applications and case studies complemented the academic insights. Moreover, my study incorporates original ideas and hypotheses. These emerged from combining information from various sources and personal observations. In summary, my methodology combines academic theory, practical examples, and fresh ideas to offer a comprehensive analysis and understanding psychological manipulation in social media ads.

FINDINGS

The use of psychological strategies has been prominent in advertising for a long time. In

the earlier part of the 20th century, concepts from Sigmund Freud about unconscious desire entered advertising strategies, giving them access to more sensitive emotions and psychological needs. Techniques included emotional appeals, cognitive biases, and social influences that would form modern advertising. The emotional appeals, which include fear, happiness, or nostalgia, are built so that a consumer instantly responds in a most powerful way. For instance, a consumer may be attracted to an ad because of the fear of missing out or loss aversion that causes action for a consumer. Meanwhile, social influence, such as celebrity endorsements and reviews, enhances consumers' trust in the product and perceived value of it. Emotions bypass logical thinking. It is from this that brands establish long-term associations that are retained in a customer's mind. For example, where sentimental music or striking visuals are used in advertisements, consumers tend to form greater bonds with brands. Such an emotional bond will trigger a long time after consumers have viewed the advertisement decisions. Emotional association is important in building brand loyalty and recall.²⁴⁶³

Advertisements through social media uses targeted personalized data and influence the consumers indirectly. Unlike the broad brush used by traditional advertising, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter approached user behaviour using algorithms and data mining. Therefore, brands are able to deliver ads based on an individual's search history, preferences, and demographic data. This way, the ad impression that results is also more personalized and emotionally engaging to the audience, often making it hard for the user to realize they're being used. Social media is interactive- through likes, shares, and comments-which enhances emotional engagement. Positive feedback from the user's social network amplifies the impact of an ad,

making it more top-of-mind and trustworthy. i.e., users are even more likely to engage with ads their friends liked or have shared, thereby increasing emotional bonding to the brand. One interesting case study is in political advertising on social media, such as Facebook, where various studies have confirmed that emotional appeals for campaigns significantly affect people's voting habits. The Cambridge Analytica scandal reflects this very well: it shows how emotional targeted manipulation can influence the perspective behind public decisions.²⁴⁶⁴

Social media ads often exploit emotional vulnerabilities such as fear and anxiety. For example, it regularly targets fear of missing out (FOMO) with ads highlighting limited time or specific studies, increasing client anxiety and urgency to buy. Another common target is the insecurity associated with body photography, fitness or low vanity, with ads selling unrealistic beauty standards or products promising short fixes. Advertisements which promise happiness and fulfilment through cloth goods, finely implying that acquiring positive products or existence leads to success or social recognition.²⁴⁶⁵ Finally, brands tap into the human need for social belonging and use social proof (likes, shares) and community-oriented messaging to make people overlook experiences unless they engage with certain brands or properties. This manipulation taps into deeper emotional desires and pushes clients to make impulsive choices.

Social media ads use several strategies to control emotions. Emotional focuses on using artificial intelligence and data analytics to detect users' emotional states and deliver ads for that reason, maximizing engagement. Utilizing knowledge from neurology, neuromarketing creates commercials that evoke strong emotional responses in viewers, increasing their recall value and potency.

²⁴⁶³ Connor Brooke, The Psychology of Advertising: Definition, History and Techniques, Dec 1, 2023, <https://www.business2community.com/marketing/advertising-history-of-psychology-attracting-consumers-0123606>

²⁴⁶⁴ Ron Sela, Persuasive Advertising: How Ads Shape Consumer Behaviour, Aug 23, 2024, <https://www.ronsela.com/persuasive-advertising/>

²⁴⁶⁵ Ceren Hayran, A threat to loyalty: Fear of missing out (FOMO) leads to reluctance to repeat current experiences, Apr 30, 2020, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0232318>

Another tactic is scarcity and urgency appeals, when producers employ different or time-limited offerings to create a total fear-based selection, such as FOMO (fear of running out). Emotional storytelling and narrative techniques are also powerful tools. By expressing beliefs, goals, or challenges that are similar to those of their target market, manufacturers can emotionally connect with consumers through the telling of gripping stories.²⁴⁶⁶

Advertisements may use manipulation emotionally and be highly unethical when vulnerable groups such as adolescents or people with psychological disorders are involved. When selling products, advertisers exploit the insecurities of body image or FOMO (fear of missing out) to increase the anxiety, depression, or consumer guilt of a population. The ads create unhealthy comparisons and unrealistic expectations that translate to long-term psychological damage. There is some acceptable emotional persuasion, but when the cost of this emotional impact on consumers eclipses the benefits, the line between ethical persuasion and unethical manipulation is crossed.²⁴⁶⁷

There are laws all over the world that protect consumers against misleading or manipulative advertising. But the Federal Trade Commission of the U.S. regulates digital advertising through ensuring claims to be true. Similarly, consumer privacy under EU's General Data Protection Regulation and the use of data require consent, which indirectly restricts emotionally manipulative personalized advertising. However, many argue that even current regulations do not capture the subtlety of emotional manipulation. Self-regulation by social media is part of the action but not deemed comprehensive enough to actually limit harmful ad practices.

²⁴⁶⁶ A Place of Hope, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): Social Media's Contribution to Anxiety Disorders, Oct 22, 2023, <https://www.aplaceofhope.com/fear-of-missing-out-fomo-social-medias-contribution-to-anxiety-disorders/>

²⁴⁶⁷ Pedal, Harnessing the Emotional Impact Of Advertising For Greater Success, sep 8,2023, <https://www.pedaladvertising.com/blog/emotions-in-advertising-and-digital-marketing>

SUGGESTIONS

1. Kickstart public awareness campaigns that inform people of the manipulative advertising tactics in digital environments. For example, in order to make better choices and know when they are being manipulated, consumers need to know how their fears, FOMO and insecurities are leveraged.
2. The FTC and data protection authorities should develop unique standards highlighting the abuse of emotional manipulation in digital advertisements. The law needs to be stronger, must still work to protect personal data, but it also should not enable companies to leverage consumer emotions for profit – then get a free pass and just pay the penalty.
3. Digital platforms have to admit to the usage of emotional targeting methods on its ads. This would allow consumers to better grasp the depths of how their behaviour and emotions are being manipulated.
4. Encourage companies to adhere by standards that promotes ethics and not exploiting human vulnerabilities for profit; Communications activities and corporate social responsibility interventions, measured as Public Affairs Activity Levels (SCALE), that support voluntary codes of conduct for responding to deceptive practices may reduce overarch manipulative strategies and foster healthier consumer relationships.
5. Pushing for more academic and independent research on how emotional manipulation in advertising affects people over the long-term, using these data to develop evidence-based policies and strategies for protecting. This is the type of research that may help to recognize novel types of psychological manipulation and evaluate their impacts upon consumer well-being.

LIMITATION

- 1.This research could not cover the vast field of psychological manipulation in advertising because of its time-sensitive nature. The mechanisms of emotional manipulation run

deep, and a broader study will be necessary to capture the complexity of advertising manoeuvres separated by channel and industry

2.The research was more dependent on the online sources, journal articles and on existing literature available instead of primary data collection. These resources provide critical insights, but the absence of firsthand interviews, surveys or case studies with impacted consumers means that they rely on pooled data and may not comprehensively cover up-to-date practices or consumer-driven narratives.

3.The articles were written a while ago, and since then, the landscape of digital advertising has changed swiftly; some of the strategies or limitations addressed may have changed even further. The study is based on secondary material, which may refer to an outdated or erroneous reference.

4.In general, a lot of the research was done with Western participants, and this may colour what trust cues are most effective. Other country's advertising laws and cultural differences may not be covered by this paper, which might result in a less comprehensive understanding of the topic worldwide.

5.The research confines itself to psychological and legal domains. Still, we could (and arguably should) approach it from a sociological or ethical angle – to avoid slipping into fan theories and offer at least one other logical level that can explain how advertising works its magic on our emotions and society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Through the means of emotions such as fear, anxiety, the fear of being left out, or the promotion of unrealistic 'ideal' standards, advertisers consciously coerce buyers into acquiring goods. Most consumers are clueless about how their browsing patterns and digital behaviour, classified as search history, are utilized to deliver personalized ads. This leads to their perception of convenience being created,

however, in reality, they are being nearly physically persuaded and do not even know it. This type of manipulation is particularly troubling because it takes advantage of emotional vulnerabilities which end in decisions based rather on rational judgment but on deep-seated insecurities. A large number of consumers are of the opinion that they are making independent decisions, yet they tend to ignore the fact that they are the objects of the psychological tricks. Regrettably, the existing digital advertising frameworks lack adequate measures to counter such manipulation. While regulations like GDPR are mainly devoted to the safety of personal data, they are not effective in controlling the moral use of emotional data for commercial gains. Raising consumer awareness should be the first step to this. People need to know what is being done against them in a reality so that they can become more informed decision-makers and recognize when their feelings are being used. For this purpose, educational campaigns on digital literacy that highlight the fundamentals of how targeted advertising works and affects people psychologically can be conducted with the help of digital literacy campaigns. Moreover, regulatory frameworks must be more forceful to ensure that digital advertising stays ethical. Regulatory authorities should enforce standards that specifically bar emotional manipulation and when companies breach these principles make them be responsible. The fact that advertisements openly mention when and how emotional targeting is used will, in turn, lead customers to become more autonomous in their choices is something brought to light as well. In conclusion, the conspiracy of psychological manipulation in advertising requires consumer education and enforcement of stronger regulations. Only through these combined forces can we be able to shield consumers against emotional exploitation in the digital era, which per se would create space for more ethical advertising that respects consumer autonomy and emotional well-being.

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