

Perception of Images in Advertising and Impact on Consumers' Lives

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Exhibit 1: Nikolai Yezhov was photographed walking with Stalin, but after he was shot in 1940, he was entirely edited out of the photograph

Introduction

In educated societies, the human brain has been trained to analyze text in a way that a reader is able to interpret writing as whatever he or she sees in the meaning of the words by analyzing the context in which the text was written. Through teaching people to read and analyze literature, the educated society has become more accustomed to picking apart the words they are reading. That same process, however, does not hold true for the human perception of images. Through societal norms, we have grown accustomed to accept images as truth without using the same analytical process to pick apart images in the way we do text. The human perception of “truth in images” plays a major role in the modern day trend of manipulating photographs. In this increasingly digital age, photographs can be manipulated to portray an illusion of whatever the manipulator wants the picture to be. This can be especially prevalent in print advertising, where the main goal is to influence the needs or desires of a consumer with persuasive images.

Given the premise that the humans process images as truth without taking the time to be critical, advertisers have a duty to present images in a genuine form in order to avoid falsely misleading a consumer. However, the basic foundation of advertising is its creatively persuasive nature. Consequentially, the end result of stimulating a desire in the consumer for a certain product justifies the means of advertisers using creativity to essentially “sell” their idea to the consumer. Hence, the consumer has an equally important duty to be more critical of advertisements as well as a responsibility for his/her own actions in response.

The dilemma is that modern day consumers are not engaging in being a critical audience of advertisements the way they should be. This uneducated consumer population creates the dilemma that consumers are being misguided by images and believe that the images are truthful, at a possible harm to themselves. The manipulation of images by advertisers not only mis-represents the truth, but also guides these un-trained consumers to believe an un-true statement about a product. This can lead to potential harm if consumers don't take a more active duty in evaluating images in advertisements more carefully and realize that advertisements are manipulative and persuasive by nature.

Therefore, the deontological standard of ethics lays somewhere between the duty of the advertiser to be aware of the human perception of "truth in images" as well as the duty of the consumers to be more educated and critical of how they analyze the advertisements presented to them in everyday life.

Psychological Perception of Images as Reality

"Visually the majority of us are still 'object-minded' and not 'relation-minded' ... the language of vision determines, perhaps even more subtly and thoroughly than verbal language, the structure of our consciousness." ²

Education in literature has created a more critical audience that interprets writing in a multitude of different ways. Imagine reading an article relating to modern day politics. Automatically, as a reader, we are taught to analyze the words for context and different implications of what the author is really trying to say. One might ask: "Who is writing it?", "What is their political stance and party affiliation?", "What do they want

me to learn?” and finally, “What am I going to take away from this?” After reading an article and analyzing the different ways it can be interpreted based on context, one can decide whether or not to agree with the author’s statements as they are going through this process and walk away with an educated decision to create his/her own viewpoint. However, humans have not been trained to evaluate images in the same analytical process. We have learned to accept a picture or photograph for what it is. We don’t take the time to step back and analyze the context of the picture, its ability to be manipulated, or the point of view the photographer is trying to portray. Society as a whole processes photographic images as truth and does not promote a skeptical and analytical viewing audience.

Recent evidence in perception and cognition demonstrates the importance of visual perception and that, “Our eyes are wondrous windows to the world. The last of our senses to evolve and the most sophisticated, they are our main source of information about the world, sending more data to the nervous system than any other sense.”³ In fact, the human brain processes images in a way that triggers emotion and instinctive interpretation of reality. Instantaneously, when presented with an image, the human brain has been taught to interpret the image as reality and react immediately with instinctive emotions. The way we interpret images as reality is explained in J. J. Gibson’s theory. He explains the concept of the “visual field” which is the process of light reflections coming into our eyes and the “visual world” which interprets these patterns of light as reality.⁴ In the “visual world” we interpret images as our own perception of reality without further analyzing the context. These images move freely from the visual field to the visual world without entering a stage of analytical processing.⁵

Furthermore, Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux's study suggests that we respond emotionally to viewing something before we can think them through.⁶ This study shows that the process of the brain works in such a way that signals coming into the eye travel to the thalamus and then to the amygdala (a part of the brain that plays a vital role in emotional responses) before a second signal is even sent to the neocortex.⁷ In more common terms, this simply means our brain works in a way in which we react emotionally to things we see before we are even able to think about them. Therefore, according to Gibson, images are presented to the brain and interpreted as reality, and as LeDoux suggests, humans automatically react with emotions. Summed up, the human brain has been trained to interpret images as reality while simultaneously reacting in an emotional sense. This triggers a problem when consumers stick to these initial instinctive emotional responses. What consumers should be doing is taking a step back and re-evaluating the situation more critically after the initial emotional reaction to give themselves time to process their thoughts more clearly.

Image Manipulation

In consideration of the human brain processing images as an interpretation of reality, the accurate depiction of images is important to maintaining an honest representation. In the increasing digital age, photo manipulation has become an increasingly popular way of re-formatting images to create a desired effect.⁸ Photoshop and other photo enhancing and editing programs have allowed people to take a photographic image and edit it in any way the creator desires. Layers can be manipulated to multiply numbers of people in the photograph just as easily as a human's

body can be airbrushed to display “perfection” or “beauty”.⁹ Also, selective cropping of photos can focus the image solely on what the creator of the photograph want the viewer to see. A picture of a nice quiet meadow can easily hide the toxic waste dump site that sits only a matter of feet away, creating a misleading illusion that the meadow is a clean and pure area. Furthermore, specific objects now can be selected and removed from a picture altogether. This type of editing is seen quite frequently in political propaganda. Nikolai Yezhov was photographed walking with Stalin, but after he was shot in 1940, he was entirely edited out of the photograph (see figure 1).¹⁰ This shows the ability to alter photographs of historic events simply because of political reasons. However, this type of alteration to photographs is looked down upon in the journalism realm. Los Angeles Times Photojournalist, Brian Walski, was fired after he combined two images into one single image which was posted on the front page of the newspaper.¹¹ This was a pressing issue because the readers of the newspaper interpreted this image as reality, when in fact it was manipulated and did not accurately portray the real image.

In the press, standards have been set on images to ensure their accuracy, because of the viewer’s reliance on the truth of the photographs. However, this controversy has also come up in advertising, especially real estate. Certain aspects of a home or its surrounding areas can be edited to make the property look more desirable and therefore sell better.¹² Power lines can be removed, colors can be made more vivid and dull parts of the house can be digitally touched up. Again, this idea of image manipulation would not be such an immense issue if the images were not interpreted as reality. However, since images are perceived to

be a reality, manipulation of the genuine content of those images creates dishonest and deceiving information to a non-analytical consumer.

The Powerful Impact of Images in Advertising

The fact that the brain processes images in a way that we react quickly with emotional responses¹³ means that the powerful effect public images can have on society and the individual need to be considered. Dr. Julianne Newton, a visual journalism professor at the University of Oregon, said, "Images affect memory, and behavior, and values. Images affect what you believe about yourself, about others, and about the world out there. Images are powerful, and visual ethics is about the appropriate use of powerful images."¹⁴ Consumers are exposed to images used in advertisements every day. Often times, these advertisements can create false beliefs about what society considers beautiful, "cool" or what "everyone else is doing". The concept of "self – identity image" ads explores the idea of the powerful impact advertisements have on an individual. These types of ads portray an image that the individual relates to or compares themselves with. They create an idealized image of a person who typically represents a user of the product.¹⁵ An example might be a "sex appeal" advertisement in which a thin, flawless, "beautiful" woman is portrayed in the picture, attempting to sell a product based on the association with the beautiful individual. Many women will relate to that image and see themselves as imperfect or needing to be more like the woman in the ad. This can produce potentially harmful psychological effects on the woman viewing the ad. This also creates a moral dilemma about the creation of the manipulated image, because the woman now will compare herself to a false image.¹⁶

The moral questions to ask when creating such an advertisement should be: whether or not the ad makes misleading promises, if it promotes false values, if it causes harm, and if it threatens the autonomy of the individual.¹⁷

The basic idea behind “self-identity image” advertising is that it is meant to create a feeling of association with the ad, and its powerful implications can cause a consumer to believe what is being presented to them. A woman might believe that if she uses the product, she too will fit this societal perception of “beauty”. These types of images can have a negative effect on an individual’s self esteem or create a mental illusion that he/she must conform to the pressures implied in the advertisement. Ann Marie Barry said:

“As unhealthy and unrealistic advertising images become more and more implicated in social ills, such as psychologically based but mentally manifested afflictions of anorexia and bulimia; as tobacco addiction increases among young adolescents, and well over 1000 people die every day of tobacco related causes, we still have only begun to realize how patterns in mass media first legitimize and then normalize socially destructive behavior.”¹⁸

A historical example of advertisements that negatively affected women was in cigarette ads. Gloria Steinem of the National Organization for Women Foundation stated, “Creating the idea that independence was attached somehow to smoking, or that it was a sign of rebellion to endanger your health, has been the main purpose of cigarette advertising.”¹⁹

In modern day, advertisements *do* have an increasingly powerful impact on individual consumers and the way they think. However, consumers are constantly allowing advertisements to affect their decisions and thought processes. This brings up the idea that it is both the responsibility of marketers *and* consumers to understand the amount of power that consumers are giving images. After their initial reaction to an ad, the consumer must realize what they are doing and step back from allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Also, advertisers need to be conscious of the possibility that images could have a large effect they have on a consumer's viewpoint.

Responsibility of the Advertiser

As a result of consumers identifying with images and perceiving them as reality, marketers have an ethical responsibility to present the images in a way that avoids falsely misleading a consumer to believe something that is not true. This type of ethical behavior is based on deontological ethics or the marketer's "duty" to have good intentions behind the creation of their advertisements as well as a "duty to society" to present images as facts. Deontological moral systems are characterized by the idea that in order to make the correct moral choices, we have to understand what our moral duties are. Furthermore, there is a need to evaluate what motivations are pushing actions and if these motivations have good intention.²⁰ "Marketing textbooks state that consumers buy a product in the hopes that it will move them some way from their "real self" to their "ideal self" (Beckman 1992)." ²¹ Once marketers realize this power to affect consumer's perceptions, they have a responsibility to present their advertising images in an honest way.

However, the basic foundation of advertising and marketing is to utilize creativity and innovation to stimulate a need in the consumer. Therefore, persuasive imaging and inventive messaging must be a contributing part to a marketer's efforts. Given this standard establishment of what it means to be a creative marketer, their artistic and influential nature must be present, but it must also be seeded in honesty and good moral intentions.

Consequentialist ethical theories base the morality of an action to be based on the consequences that result.²² In advertising, depicting an image in a manipulative way may result in consequences of a consumer identifying with false beliefs. For example, an image of a woman put into Photoshop and airbrushed to become flawless, may consequentially lead a woman consumer to believe that the product in the ad will help her become more like the woman in the image. However, in the creative realm of marketing, the end goal is to sell a product. Therefore, the end result justifies the means of stimulating these types of beliefs in a consumer. At this point, the duty switches over to the consumer to realize that in order to not subject oneself to be a "mean to the marketers end" consumers must learn to be more critical of what is actually being sold in the advertisement and what the actual context is of the image presented.

Duty of the Consumer

Beyond the duty of the marketer to depict an accurate portrayal of images presented to the public, the consumer has a much greater responsibility to become a more critical and analytical audience of advertisements. Like our earlier discussion on the extent to which readers analyze the context and meaning of written word, consumers need to

start to use the same type of analytical tools to view and process images. Although the brain reacts instinctively with emotions before we even have time to think about it, consumers need to take a step back and think through the situation after the first emotional response. You cannot control first instinct emotional responses. Our brain has been engineered in a way to react emotionally before we think to enable humans to survive in intense situations. However, after that initial emotional reaction, consumers can take a step back and actually think through what was presented to them and decide how they are going to ultimately react to the situation. Hence, consumers now have a certain duty to become more involved in dissecting advertisements after their first reaction. John Douglas Bishop²³ suggests that in “self-identity” image ads, the goal of the marketing strategy is for the product to become a “symbol” of an ideal person or ideal situation. If consumers are trained to be a critical audience, they can choose to accept or reject the symbolism. This is also largely due to the fact that the wide array of image ads available. This variety of advertisements allows the consumer to have the autonomy to choose which value to identify with. A consumer’s own self-will can direct the outcome of those types of decisions.²⁴ Furthermore, although people are exposed to advertisements on a consistent basis, ads do not have any authoritative power and therefore cannot restrict human free will to decide our own behaviors.²⁵ Humans still have the innate will to make our own decisions and interpretations. Therefore, a human has the ability to look at an ad and decide how to accept and interpret the image.

Lastly, if consumers are concerned with the way they are being affected by the images in advertisements, they have a responsibility to educate themselves on how to be more critical. Although it is difficult to decipher if the image was digitally manipulated, a consumer can still ask

themselves, “What is the message the marketers are trying to get me to believe?” “What are they *actually* selling?” or “Does this image accurately portray a realistic view of what the product can do or is it exaggerated for persuasive purposes?” Once a consumer is more conscious of the implications behind the advertisement, they can understand the context of the images in the same way readers understand the context of an article. It is therefore the responsibility of the consumer not to view themselves as “victims of the system” but to take proactive steps to learn more about the background of the message that an advertising strategy is trying to portray.

Recommended Actions

In a society where public service announcements are becoming more and more frequent, communities are becoming involved with educating people about important, widespread topics. Organizations and activist groups who aim to educate consumers need to step in and create ads that will stimulate awareness in the consumer. Much like how “Partnership for a drug-free America” (<http://www.drugfree.org/>) produces ads showing the negative effects of drugs, these types of public service ads can help educate consumers on how to be a more critical audience of advertisements. Once consumers are more aware of how to be a “smart audience”, they will be less susceptible to be easily manipulated by misleading ads. This will in turn help the advertisers learn to be more honest in the way they present images. If consumers are learning to be more critical, the advertiser will inevitably react and become more aware of being honest in the images they create.

Conclusion

Advertising has long been a creative way to influence consumers into thinking they want or need a certain product. This is done through images that a consumer processes as reality and emotionally connects with. This type of persuasive control in the hands of an advertiser should be grounded in moral and ethical responsibilities to portray their images with a certain amount of accuracy. This issue is prevalent in not only the realm of advertisements reaching consumers but also to images reaching people as citizens of a democratic society. Images are manipulated to stimulate a certain way of thinking in much of the political world as well. Political propaganda has the same goal as advertising: persuasive control. Images can be altered to promote a certain viewpoint or to gain support for a certain cause. However, a consumer and/or citizen ultimately need to be the decision makers on how they react to advertisements or political propaganda and the actions they take in response. When an image is put in front of a person, it does not take away from the natural autonomy humans have in decision making. If an individual is educated through public service announcements regarding the analyzing of advertisements or images, they can consciously *choose* not to accept an image as the ultimate truth and societal norm. The decision to be more critical and the responsibility to stop the amount of control images have on the society's values lay in the hands of the consumer or citizen themselves. Therefore, the strong power that images have had on an individual is a shared responsibility between the moral decisions of the advertiser or creator of the image as well as the necessary critical thought process of the individual.

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