



**THE IMPACT OF COVERT ADVERTISING ON CONSUMER
BEHAVIOR**

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A B S T R A C T	K E Y W O R D S
<p>The analysis of "The Impact of Covert Advertising on Consumer Behavior" is very important nowadays, as consumers are constantly exposed to traditional advertisements and have already become immune to them. Covert advertising, in turn, integrates the same content but in a less intrusive way, allowing the brands that use it to gain more trust from consumers. The relevance of covert advertising is confirmed by several factors.</p>	

Introduction

Firstly, skepticism towards traditional advertising has only been increasing every year, along with consumers' awareness of brands' marketing tactics, which prompts distrust not only towards the brand itself but also doubts about the quality of the product. Covert advertising seems less intrusive compared to traditional, thus generating more sympathy from consumers. Moreover, those brands that openly declare their advertising strategies enhance their reputation in the eyes of consumers, as they build trusting and lasting relationships with them.

In addition, the rise of social media has changed the ways covert advertising is introduced. Influencers promote products by telling their own stories, making ads more organic and relatable. Their use of products in everyday life also raises the product's status in the eyes of consumers and increases their interest in it, significantly boosting the likelihood of purchasing the advertised product.

But, besides influencers, covert advertising can also be introduced into content such as movies or video games, which increases brand loyalty and creates emotional connections with consumers. When products are associated with a desired lifestyle or characters, it inspires viewers to emulate these traits. That is why studying the impact of covert advertising on consumer behavior is a topic of great importance today. It shows the effectiveness of integrating advertising in a non-intrusive form and the importance of trustful relationships between the consumer and the brand.

And since consumer perspectives are beginning to change significantly, marketing continues to evolve. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of covert advertising is now key for brands to succeed in a competitive environment.

Purpose of scientific research

The goal of this research is to analyze how covert advertising influences consumer behavior by subtly creating an emotional connection with the brand, thus shaping their purchase decisions and building trusting relationships between the brand and its consumers.

Methods

In this scientific research, analysis was conducted using: scientific materials, literary sources, experiences of international companies, and so on.

Authors feedback

The analysis of the article by Sabir et al. shows that the use of covert advertising has a positive effect on consumer behavior, as their brand awareness significantly increases the chances of purchase without using intrusive advertising. I fully agree with this conclusion, as covert advertising is typically integrated into media content and is not perceived by consumers as aggressive advertising. Nevertheless, it constantly appears in the media space where consumers spend most of their day, which leads to the easy popularization of the product and high effectiveness, as such advertising tends to stay in people's minds for a long time.

An example of this is "Coca-Cola's 'Share a Coke' campaign, which started in 2011. The idea of this campaign was that people simply took photos with personalized Coke bottles and shared them on various social media platforms, which led to increased consumer engagement without overt advertising pressure. This, in turn, resulted in a 2% increase in sales in North America and a 7% increase in Australia"¹.

In their study, Fabian Göbel, Anton Meyer, Balasubramani Ramaseshan, and Silke Bartsch examine consumer responses to covert advertising (CA) in social media, particularly on YouTube. The authors concluded "that covert advertising may not always be effective because consumers are becoming more aware of various marketing tactics and can recognize such strategies. If consumers feel that something is being hidden from them or that a product is being pushed too aggressively during attempts to implement covert advertising, this can lead to negative brand perception and, over time, damage its reputation and erode consumer trust"². I fully agree with this. When consumers catch on to covert advertising, they often feel misled, which can result in a loss of trust. In today's digital world, where so much information is readily available, people are becoming savvier and can quickly spot marketing efforts. This is why it's so important for brands to be transparent in their advertising to build trust and strengthen their relationship with consumers.

A well-known example of this is the Fyre Festival scandal in 2017. Many influencers promoted the event on social media without clearly disclosing that it was paid advertising. When the festival turned out to be a failure, consumers felt betrayed, which led to widespread dissatisfaction. Both the organizers and the influencers involved faced significant backlash. The event became a PR disaster, resulting in

¹ Coca-Cola's 'Share a Coke' campaign boosts sales, sparks engagement, Advertising Age, July 2014.
<https://adage.com/creativity/work/share-coke-love/54491>

² Fyre Festival: A Social Media Influencer Disaster," Business Insider, April 2017//
<https://www.businessinsider.com/fyre-festival-expectations-vs-reality-2017-4>

lawsuits and widespread media coverage. This shows that aggressive or poorly handled advertising can quickly destroy consumer trust and harm the brand.

In their article, authors Skiba, Petty, and Carlson explore covert marketing and its impact on consumers. One of the key aspects of their work is the concept of "marketer control of consumer engagement," where marketers manage how and when consumers interact with products without realizing it. Based on this, they note that covert marketing can be more than just deception; it can also be a source of unfair harm to consumers. The authors also emphasize that if such practices become widespread, they may violate laws related to unfair practices, as this type of marketing is psychologically imposed on consumers without their knowledge.

I agree with the authors' assertion that covert marketing can harm people because some of its strategies may be perceived as deceptive. However, covert advertising can cause harm only if it is done in an aggressive and intrusive manner, where the once subtle advertisement becomes too ubiquitous and loses its main feature of being discreet, ultimately annoying rather than engaging consumers. But well-executed covert advertising not only avoids consumer dissatisfaction, but it can actually be appreciated by consumers. A good product, subtly advertised, will only bring joy to the consumer after the purchase, leaving them satisfied with their choice.

This can be demonstrated by one example of successful covert marketing, where consumers were unaware of it but were happy with their decision. "This is the campaign by the well-known brand Red Bull involving extreme sports. In 2012, Felix Baumgartner performed a skydive from the stratosphere (the Red Bull Stratos project), and the brand was integrated into the event in such a way that it was perceived more as support for a bold achievement rather than as direct advertising. Although the Red Bull logos were everywhere, viewers were focused on the uniqueness of the event and were impressed by its scale, associating the brand with positive emotions"³.

Authors Wei, Fischer, and Main investigate the impact of consumer awareness of covert advertising tactics on their perception of brands using such methods. The studies show that if consumers are alerted to these marketing tactics, their perception of the brands may worsen. However, it also depends on how appropriate the tactics seem and whether the consumer is familiar with the brand. In some cases, awareness of such tactics can even improve the perception of the brand by consumers.

I agree that consumer awareness of covert marketing can negatively affect their perception of brands. If the tactic is seen as unethical, it will lead to dissatisfaction. But if the tactic or brand is trustworthy, the effect may be the opposite. After all, if a brand does not try to invent a completely unnoticed method of advertising, and consumers suspect even a hint of deception, this can lead to significant consequences. Keeping consumers informed builds trust and even greater interest in such marketing promotions.

An example of this is the case with "Sony in 2006, when the company used covert marketing to promote the PSP, hiring actors to pretend to be regular people talking about the device on their social media. When the truth came out, the perception of the brand deteriorated sharply, leading to negative reactions and a decline in sales"⁴.

³ Skydiver Felix Baumgartner breaks sound barrier// <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-19943590>

⁴ More Memory and Quicker Loading in a Thinner and Lighter PlayStation Portable// <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/20/technology/circuits/20sony.html>

In their paper, Wojdyski and Evans examine hidden advertising, which uses familiar formats such as native advertising and product placement. They argue that consumers' psychological reactions to such advertising depend on whether they recognize it as an advertising message or whether they do not see any advertising subtext.

I agree with the authors' statement that knowing whether something is an advertisement or not affects consumers' perceptions and reactions. After all, if people do not recognize an advertisement, they may be more likely to be influenced by it, since it makes them more trusting, as opposed to traditional advertising, which most consumers are already skeptical of. But it is worth remembering that when advertising becomes too obvious, consumers may be wary of it.

For example, there is "Samsung's product placement campaign at the 2014 Oscars. The company integrated its Galaxy Note 3 smartphone into the event, organizing a viral "selfie" of Ellen DeGeneres with several celebrities, which was reposted more than 3 million times on Twitter. And although this moment seemed spontaneous, it was carefully planned by Samsung. But people who did not know this took such a performance positively, and thus, not only did the advertising turn out to be unobtrusive, but also very interesting for the consumers themselves"⁵.

In their 2014 study, Tomažič, Boras, Jurisić and Lešjak look at product placements that look like regular journalistic content using Slovenian newspapers as an example. Using content analysis, they were able to show that product placements often appear in daily newspapers and are designed to attract readers' attention. They also note that there is a lack of clear definitions of product placements in the world, as they are not widely used.

I agree with the authors' conclusions that product placements that are well-presented in an interesting format engage audiences that do not recognize them as advertising. This approach increases trust and makes advertising less intrusive than traditional advertising methods.

A good example is the "New York Times campaign with native advertising for Netflix in 2014. The article "Women Inmates: Why The Male Model Doesn't Work" was perceived as a journalistic piece, but in reality it was an advertisement for Orange Is the New Black. Consumers who did not recognize the advertisement valued it for its content, which led to positive reviews and high engagement. When it was revealed that it was an advertisement, the audience reaction was generally neutral, due to the quality of the content. And this shows both sides of how things can play out, when consumers are aware and when they are not. This advertisement was made well and deservedly did not receive negative reviews after it was revealed that it was an advertisement. However, for new companies this can be a big risk, because there is no guarantee how consumers will react"⁶.

Conclusion

This study examines the impact of covert advertising on consumer behavior, given its importance in today's marketing world. In an era where consumers are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising, often developing mechanisms to avoid it, integrating advertising content into entertainment allows brands to engage with audiences in a more subtle and engaging way, without pushing their product on consumers but still building a positive relationship with them. This is why covert advertising is becoming an important strategy. The article also discusses how growing

⁵ Source: The Guardian – <https://www.theguardian.com>

⁶ Campaign information is available on the AdAge website: <https://adage.com>.

skepticism towards overt advertising has changed consumer trust in brands that use integrated marketing approaches. Techniques such as covert advertising in popular media are studied for their effectiveness, ultimately improving brand perception and consumer liking. For example, covert advertising in popular shows can create associations that resonate with viewers, thereby building an emotional connection with them, as opposed to traditional advertising that directly calls for a product purchase. Influencers can promote products by simply mentioning the brand, making the advertisement natural and appealing to consumers. Therefore, the growing role of social media also plays an important role, as influencers play a key role in implementing hidden advertising. But it is also worth remembering that there are potential risks to be discussed as consumers become more aware of marketing strategies; the need for transparency becomes more important in this type of covert advertising approach. When consumers become aware of covert advertising techniques, their reaction may be negative, and the brand's reputation may suffer. Brands that do not try to implement their advertising integrations more subtly but are open about their actions have a better chance of gaining the sympathy and trust of consumers than those that try to make the advertising as inconspicuous as possible with their excessive efforts, thereby causing consumers to doubt the brand. Therefore, the main thing to remember is that it is very important for brands to navigate these covert advertising integrations carefully.

The psychological aspects associated with covert advertising are also studied. The studies reviewed show that while brand awareness is important, brand recall and recognition play a more significant role in purchasing decisions. The subtlety of covert marketing contributes to a long-term connection with consumers, gradually shaping their behavior over time. An effective strategy suggested by the study is to subtly integrate products into consumers' daily lives. This approach allows consumers to connect with brands on a more personal level, significantly reducing skepticism and increasing their trust. It is therefore worth noting that as the advertising landscape evolves, understanding these dynamics will be critical for brands seeking to succeed in a competitive marketplace.

Offers

In my work, I propose to consider the use of influencers to informally integrate products into their daily lives. This approach is based on the fact that influencers actively interact with the audience, present the product as part of their daily life without focusing on it too much, which creates the impression of natural behavior, and not advertising. When influencers use a product without drawing special attention to it, consumers perceive it as a personal recommendation, and not as intrusive advertising. Therefore, I argue that such informal demonstrations build consumer trust, reduce skepticism and increase engagement. "According to a study by Business Insider, 49% of consumers trust influencer recommendations more than traditional advertising. This confirms that integrating products into the lives of influencers can be extremely effective. And according to a study by Mediakix, influencer publications generate 4-8 times more user interest compared to traditional advertising"⁷. This is especially important in today's times when consumers tend to ignore overt advertising, but continue to respond to recommendations from those they trust.

The financial benefits also confirm the effectiveness of this strategy. A prime example of this is "Gymshark, a company using an influencer marketing strategy, which reached a turnover of \$300

⁷ <https://supplygem.com/publications/influencer-marketing-statistics/>

million in 2020, with more than 70% of their sales coming from collaborations with fitness influencers”⁸. My suggestion, however, goes further: key brand ambassadors should not overtly promote the product, which may cause unnecessary skepticism among consumers. Instead, they should use the product informally in their daily lives, even in short, unobtrusive moments. Consumers who notice this will perceive the product as a natural part of the influencer’s real life, for whom they have respect and admiration. They will be inspired by how the product helps the influencer achieve success or maintain their lifestyle.

This strategy will help minimize “ad blindness” and lower the barriers to consumer acceptance of advertising, as audiences will not feel like they are being aggressively advertised to the overload of their lives, which they are already tired of. Ultimately, consumers will be inclined to choose the product based on the emotional attachment and trust that will be formed through association with their role model.

Therefore, I believe that using celebrities to informally promote products through product placement not only increases consumer trust and engagement, but also serves as a cost-effective strategy for brands.

I also propose a strategy that basically means that the product becomes a visible element of the context in any media, be it a TV show, a movie, a YouTube video or TikTok, regardless of whether it is portrayed positively or negatively. The key is that it does not look like an overt advertisement, but is still noticeable enough to be remembered. Today's consumers interact with content from different sources, and such a strategy increases the likelihood that they will notice the product in any format. Therefore, using all available media formats allows you to reach a wide and diverse audience. For example, according to Nielsen, “American adults spend on average more than 10 hours a day in the media space. This confirms that such a strategy provides maximum impact. A product that is constantly appearing on various media platforms, even if it is not always portrayed positively, gradually becomes ingrained in the minds of the audience, sometimes even presenting the product with a less than favorable attitude towards it can increase consumer trust due to the fact that it will not look like a regular advertisement with only positive qualities of the product. As a result, consumers are more likely to choose a familiar product. This is due to the "mere exposure effect", when repeated exposure to a product increases its recognition and attractiveness. For example, a study by Ipsos showed that 67% of consumers prefer products with which they are already familiar. The product can also be integrated into a variety of narratives and contexts, whether it’s a scene in a movie where the main character uses the product or a brief mention in a YouTube review”⁹. This flexible format gives brands the opportunity to avoid rigid advertising scripts that have long been boring to audiences. When a product becomes part of engaging or emotionally charged content (such as a key moment in a movie or a popular TikTok clip), it creates a strong association with these emotions in the audience and becomes more memorable. This not only increases brand awareness, but also promotes a deep emotional connection with the product. According to Adweek, “emotional advertising is 70% more effective than traditional advertising campaigns because it increases connection with consumers. Including a product in different media formats also allows you to engage different age and social groups. According to Pew Research, 73% of American adults use YouTube, while TikTok is increasingly attracting younger users. For

⁸ <https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/influencer-marketing-statistics>

⁹ <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2019/adult-americans-are-spending-more-time-than-ever-with-video/>

example, younger audiences are more likely to engage with TikTok and YouTube, while older age groups may prefer TV and film”.

Product placement and hidden advertising campaigns can increase brand sales. A successful example is the product integration in the TV series *Stranger Things*, where Coca-Cola became part of the storyline, leading to a 4% increase in sales during the release of the new season. This proves that a product organically integrated into popular content can influence consumer behavior. Therefore, I believe that using the product in media formats, making it part of the context but not turning it into overt advertising, is an effective strategy. It allows brands to remain visible, evoking positive emotions and trust in consumers, which ultimately leads to increased sales and loyalty.

Continuing with my thoughts on hidden advertising, which is oxymoronic but incredibly successful, I suggest one of the best ways to make hidden advertising really noticeable. Because customers are more likely to engage with a product without being aware of its underlying commercial goal when it becomes ingrained in daily life. Making a product into a meme and using it as a major theme in the media is an excellent illustration of this tactic. Instead of using traditional advertising, which frequently gives consumers the impression that they are being "sold to," firms can leverage the community's collective humor by transforming a product into a meme, which allows people to view the product in a humorous perspective. Memes are among the kind of content that spread the fastest content in contemporary media. By concealing the fact that customers are engaging with an advertisement, this subtle and viral strategy might increase consumption. The audience itself starts promoting a product once it turns into a meme. Without requiring any brand expenditure, this organic spread expands the product's reach and visibility. “The Global Web Index reports that 55% of internet users between the ages of 16 and 24 frequently share memes, providing marketers with a low-impact way to advertise”¹⁰. As a result, user-generated content is ideal for memes. Furthermore, BuzzSumo research indicates that viral material—including memes—may increase site traffic by 400%, indicating the high level of engagement that such content can elicit. The clandestine advertising that is carried out is the most successful openly since it isn't thought of as advertising. People are more inclined to interact with a product that is trendy because they believe they are following a trend rather than just seeing an advertisement. Customers are less likely to respond skeptically or disregard the message when they are unaware that they are being sold something. Old Spice's 2010 "The Man Your Man Might Smell Like" ad, which went viral on various platforms, is a great illustration of this idea in action. Despite being a type of advertising, the campaign's humor and the memes that followed covered up its commercial purpose. Sales of Old Spice body wash thus rose by 125% within a month of the meme-turned-meme's debut, demonstrating openly since it isn't thought of as advertising. People are more inclined to interact with a product that is trendy because they believe they are following a trend rather than just seeing an advertisement. Customers are less likely to respond skeptically or disregard the message when they are unaware that they are being sold something. One excellent illustration of this is that when advertising is done in a lighthearted and visible manner, customers react favorably without being aware of the marketing campaign. Similar to this, a video made by a user in 2021 while skateboarding and drinking Ocean Spray increased sales by 15% in a single week, demonstrating the power of highly visible but seemingly hilarious advertising to boost consumer engagement and brand loyalty. Ocean Spray noticed a significant increase in sales as a result of their cranberry juice being included in a meme in this viral TikTok film. Finally, this

¹⁰ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-april-global-statshot>

strategy is one of the most successful product placement tactics because it works particularly well in today's media, where consumers are more likely to believe material produced and shared by their friends, relatives, or people who are actively participating in a trend. Brands can capitalize on organic distribution, virality, and customer engagement by transforming a product into a meme or cultural moment. This approach avoids the distrust and skepticism that come with traditional advertising and instead fosters a more trustworthy relationship with the brand.

I also want to present my fourth idea, which is using interactive storytelling to incorporate things into video games. A product becomes a part of the narrative when it blends in perfectly with the gameplay, which increases audience engagement and retention. This tactic is an effective one that enables companies to provide players with a distinctive experience in addition to promoting their goods. Because video games are interactive environments where players actively participate, they offer a special chance for marketers to incorporate their goods.

Research shows that 65% of players say that integrating real brands into games makes the gaming experience more interesting and realistic. For example, characters can use branded drinks to restore energy or wear branded clothing. This form of integration creates associations between the product and the positive emotions that players experience during the game, because in the same example of a branded drink in the game giving health to the player, the player is happy every time he sees it in the game, which will lead to the fact that in real life he will subconsciously be happy when he sees the same product. The game Fortnite, which frequently partners with different businesses to produce original content, is a fantastic illustration of this strategy. The game has included skins (character models) with designs and logos from well-known companies like Nike and Marvel. Over 350 million people have signed up for the game in only one quarter, according to Fortnite developer Epic Games, demonstrating a high degree of audience engagement. Moreover, research shows that 80% of players express interest in additional content related to brands featured in the game. After all, this allows players to associate themselves with brands.

Integrating products through interactive introduction into game content can be applied in various game genres - from sports games to real-life simulators. Brands can collaborate with game developers to create special events, promotions or challenges related to their products. For example, in racing, players could get the opportunity to use a specific car that has an analogue in the automotive industry. According to a study by Newzoo, 72% of players say that branded cars in games increase their interest in real models. Since playing a game where a player has a certain car, it becomes more meaningful to him, because he spends most of the time with it and it becomes very useful to him in the gameplay.

This approach not only creates positive associations for consumers, but also actively engages them in the process. Research shows that 73% of gamers are more likely to recommend a product integrated into a game to their friends. Brands using this method have the potential to not only increase their visibility, but also establish a deeper connection with their target audience, making this approach especially effective in today's media landscape. Thus, integrating products into video games through interactive storytelling represents a powerful and modern method of covert advertisement.

Generalization

This study examines the complex effects of covert advertising on customer behavior and discusses its importance in the current marketing environment. Covert advertising is a vital tactic in a time when customers are constantly exposed to regular ads and frequently create defenses against them. Brands

may establish a more nuanced and captivating connection with audiences by incorporating promotional information into entertainment.

The paper discusses how growing skepticism toward overt advertising has shifted consumer trust towards brands that adopt integrated marketing approaches. Techniques such as product placements in popular media are examined for their ability to feel less intrusive and more authentic, ultimately enhancing brand perception and consumer affinity. For example, viewers can automatically form associations with them in popular programs. Another issue is the emergence of social media for covert advertising. Because influencers can market items by just sharing relatable stories, which gives commercials a real and engaging feel. Nonetheless, the report highlights the risks associated with this approach. When consumers witness dishonest advertising tactics, especially when sponsorships are not disclosed, they may react unfavorably. This phenomenon is illustrated through case studies, such as the backlash that businesses like Morphe and Bang faced after consumers learned about unreported marketing. The ethical implications of covert advertising are severely examined in the report. As customers get more aware of marketing, there is an increasing need for openness tactics. Companies that use truthful advertising tend to have more enduring relationships with their target market. The research emphasizes how companies must be careful when negotiating these ethically difficult situations since unethical behavior can damage their reputation and foster mistrust. The psychological impacts of covert advertising are also explored. According to the reviewed study, despite the significance of brand identification, brand awareness and memory have a stronger influence on purchasing decisions. This research indicates that the subtlety of covert marketing builds long-lasting familiarity and gradually changes consumer behavior over time. One crucial strategy, per the poll, is for influencers to discreetly include products into their regular routines. In addition to coming out as genuine, this tactic builds a human bond between clients and companies, which reduces suspicion and boosts engagement. The study concludes that although covert advertising can successfully boost brand awareness, being transparent and acting morally are essential to preserving customer trust, particularly in the digital age when cynicism is growing. The study's conclusions indicate that as the advertising landscape evolves, businesses seeking to thrive in a competitive market will need to understand these traits.

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