

Depends on the Consequences: Measuring Consumer Attitudes Towards Persuasive Marketing

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Abstract

Academic discussion about the ethics of marketing typically focuses on the role such practices can play in undermining human autonomy through manipulation of the consumer's decision-making processes (cf. Arrington, 1982; Crisp, 1987; Cunningham, 2003; Rudinow, 1978; Sneddon, 2001; Waide, 1987). However, researchers have not explored these issues from the perspective of those who may be targeted by such messages. In this study we employ an experimental approach to selectively probe consumer attitudes towards manipulative marketing, focusing specifically on how their views on the use of manipulative marketing tactics may change depending on how they feel about the consequences these tactics will bring about. In study 1, we isolate the selective impact of two specific variables on the evaluation of marketing tactics: 1) the persuasiveness of a marketing campaign, and 2) the consequences of the marketing campaign. Our results indicate that people are generally consequentialist in their evaluation of marketing advertisements, and that the persuasiveness of a given campaign only impacts its ethical judgment when it produces negative consequences. We also discuss ongoing and future work, which aims to build upon, and extend these findings by directly examining how perceived manipulation influences ethical judgments.

Keywords: Marketing, Ethics, Persuasion

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Introduction

Consumer autonomy is a crucially important subject requiring urgent attention due to the rapidly accelerating potential of marketing technologies to shape consumer needs, wants, and behaviors. Owing to the vast amounts of increasingly robust data that is being analyzed through increasingly sophisticated algorithms, models for consumer behavior are becoming more detailed and more effective every day. By combining purchase data and digital data with personality science, companies gain a monumental psychological advantage, while consumer protections against these powerful mechanisms of influence lag behind.

The 2016 American Presidential Election brought this reality to the forefront. During that campaign, Donald Trump's election team hired UK-based Cambridge Analytica to help move the needle on his campaign. The company created a simple survey, which was eventually taken by over 270,000 people. Using predictive analytics, they then used the data to derive a unique OCEAN personality profile for each person (AP, 2018).

Exactly how much influence Cambridge Analytica had over the 2016 election is difficult to quantify. Nonetheless, their work provides a preview of the likely future of advertising, which will become increasingly granular and personal and involve considerable accuracy and precision. The prospect of consumer manipulation has never been greater, and the tools for such manipulation have never been more widespread. However, it is unclear how consumers view these threats or how they generally feel about the risk that their decisions may be shaped by forces about which they have little advance knowledge.

We define manipulation as the “attempt to motivate another’s behavior by undermining what the agent believes is his/her audience’s normal decision-making process.” (Sher, 2011, p. 100). Unlike some earlier attempts, this definition has the virtue of not excluding the possibility that someone might be manipulated into pursuing goals they already have (cf. Rudinow, 1978). We assume that, when it comes to their consumption choices, most individuals would express a first preference for being motivated through rational persuasion, with the use of coercive force lying at the opposite extreme and various other forms of manipulation falling somewhere between the two.

The modern consumer environment bears a close resemblance to political elections. However, in the consumer space, the goal is not to persuade a voter to choose a political candidate, but to persuade a consumer to purchase a specific product or service.

The success of a marketing tactic (branding, advertisements, etc.) is defined by its ability to persuade. Persuasion is key to making the value exchange work. We argue that the persuasive effect of any given marketing tactic is not binary, but rests on a continuum comprising a simple scale with a range from 0 to 10. A factor scored as a 0 has no effect on future behavior, while a 10 means has a guaranteed effect on future behavior. At the far right of the spectrum, a person is guaranteed to undertake a desired behavior as a direct result of an ad; at the far left, the marketing tactic has no impact on whether or not the desired behavior occurs.

We argue that this spectrum can help contextualize the ethical conversation surrounding manipulative marketing. At what point along this spectrum of persuasiveness will

consumers perceive it as being likely to involve means that should be considered unethical? Proponents of individual autonomy (e.g. Prior 1960) are immediately uncomfortable with the idea that a marketing tactic could have deterministic impact on their behavior. However, research has not yet been directed towards understanding where on the spectrum consumers will tend to draw the line between permissible and impermissible means of persuasion.

Our research represents a first move towards clarifying the answers to such questions, and is motivated by three observations: 1) the sheer persuasiveness of a marketing tactic poses a potential threat to consumer autonomy, 2) we know very little about how consumers themselves view this threat, or under what circumstances they even view it as such, and 3) being as persuasive as possible (short of lying or threatening consumers) is core to the entire disciplines of marketing and sales. Given the potential for tension to arise among this combination of factors, there are many opportunities for future research. The goal of this project relates to the second observation: we aim to identify and understand the attitudes that consumers generally hold towards advertising involving stronger or weaker persuasive effects, and when (if ever) they will perceive a threat of manipulation given these effects. In particular, we focus on identifying how, if at all, the assessment of these risks depends on the desirability of the potential consequences that will follow from being persuaded.

While any answers we might receive to these questions is necessarily preliminary at this early stage, they provide an indication of how consumers view 21st Century threats to autonomy, and to what extent their objections to it are potentially mediated by the prospect of better or worse consequences that may follow as a result of their persuasion.

Methodology

Study 1 presents respondents with a series of scenarios in which marketing messages leading to positive or negative consequences for the consumer will change their preferences with varying degrees of probability. This allows us to measure variance in participant attitudes towards the raw persuasiveness of marketing messages given the consequences. Study 2, in progress, is assigned to a different group of respondents and repeats the same scenarios, but places responsibility for changes in consumer behavior on being zapped with a “marketing ray gun” rather than the persuasiveness of the marketing messages themselves. Since being “zapped” into holding new preferences is a clear case of manipulation, this allows us to directly measure variance in participant attitudes towards manipulative marketing practices given the consequences.

Study 1 employed a 3 x 2 design, with three levels to each of two variables (persuasiveness: low, medium, and high; and consequences: positive, neutral, and negative). For example, a scenario for positive consequences/low persuasiveness reads as follows:

Company X designed a marketing campaign aimed at people who typically value healthy eating. The campaign is designed to persuade these people to buy their product: A healthy snack. Previous research has indicated that this campaign is only moderately persuasive: 10% of people who did not already intend to buy the product will now buy it.

After reading each scenario, subjects were asked to rate the degree to which they felt it would be morally wrong to run this campaign. 50 Native-English speaking participants were recruited via Qualtrics and were compensated \$5 each for their participation.

Results and Discussion

The results from Study 1 indicate two primary findings. The first is that people are largely consequentialist in their judgements of these campaigns. Increasing persuasiveness did not in itself increase moral condemnation ($F = (1,119) = 3.2, p = 1.8$). However, to a significant degree ($F = (1,119) = 5.01, p = .03$) disapproval grew progressively higher as the consequences shifted from negative to positive. We also observe that persuasiveness and consequences interact. People are significantly ($F = (3,238) = 6.23, p = .01$) more against highly persuasive campaigns when (and only when) the campaigns produce negative consequences.

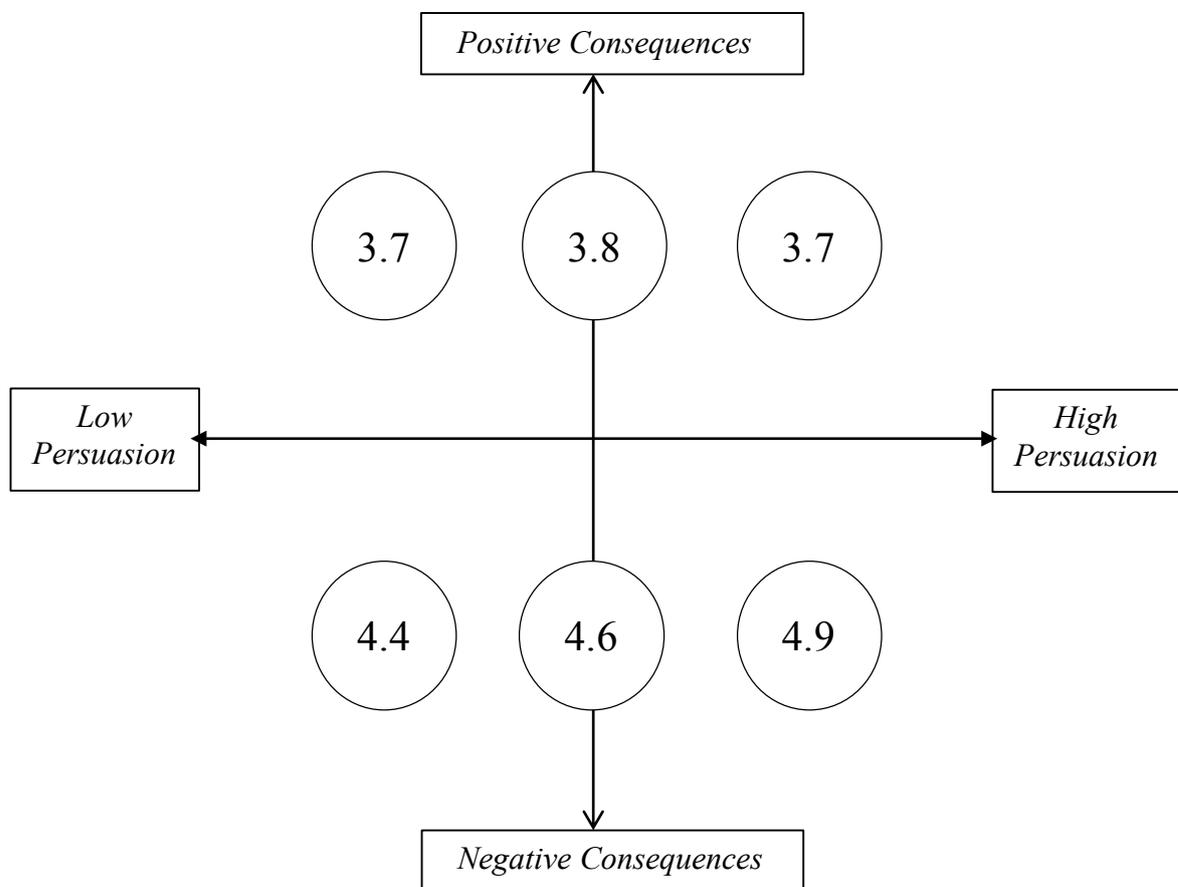


Figure 1: Mean responses for Consequences (negative to positive) x Persuasiveness (low to high)

These results suggest that participants are in fact morally sensitive to marketing manipulation. The scenario receiving the highest degree of moral opprobrium was one that implied manipulation due to a combination of high persuasiveness/negative consequences. Consumer suspicion of manipulation is inherent to this condition, since the campaign is persuading the consumer to act against their own interests (e.g. take up smoking when they want to quit). These suspicions either do not exist or were not seen as problematic by participants when they were faced with a high persuasiveness/positive consequences scenarios.

Moreover, these results indicate that consumers are potentially sensitive to manipulative marketing tactics, but only when they dislike the consequences of a campaign's success. Aside from their immediate significance to the marketing literature, these results have implications for an extension of the dual process theory of moral reasoning (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Kahneman, 2003; Lieberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, & Trope, 2002; Posner, Snyder, & Solso, 1975) in two ways: by extending the application of this model for marketing ethics, and by exposing a key way in which rule-based and consequentialist moral values interact.

Future Work

As described above, Study 2 is designed to approach the issue of marketing manipulation directly. It follows an identical structure, with participants being asked to rate their moral opinions about the same 36 scenarios. The key difference for Study 2 is that each of the scenarios now describe an explicitly manipulative persuasive mechanism:

Company X created a mind-altering ray gun designed to persuade people who typically value healthy eating. The ray-gun is designed to persuade these people to buy their product: A healthy snack. Previous research has indicated that being hit with the beam of the ray gun generates only moderately persuasive effects: 10% of people who did not already intend to buy the product will now buy it.

This tight experimental control will allow us to make direct comparisons with the results of Study 1, selectively isolating the variable of manipulation. Data collection for Study 2 is ongoing, but the results of Study 1 present an intriguing possibility: that people may in fact be quite indifferent to their own manipulation by marketing messages provided they hold a positive view on the consequences of that manipulation.

The findings so far suggest that, while consumers generally claim to care about autonomy, they are either naturally more inclined to suspicion when they perceive the consequences to be positive or (perhaps more troublingly) care far less about the threat of manipulation when it is associated with beneficial consequences. These findings will be further refined and their implications clarified upon completion of our next short experimental study.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that people are generally consequentialist in their evaluation of marketing advertisements, and that the persuasiveness of a given campaign only impacts consumers' ethical judgments when it leads to negative consequences. Understanding this interaction is essential in order to develop useful codes of conduct for marketers and regulators who aim to preserve consumers against emerging threats to their autonomy. While theoretical constructs may provide some limited guidance in this regard, empirical study of how consumers actually behave is crucial if such codes are to have genuine practical purchase.

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