

The New Strategies of Social Influence Masked in the Media that Slow Down Social Change

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Abstract

In modern societies, capitalism has made use of advertising to disseminate, sustain, and dynamize its profit-oriented production model. The argumentation of this chapter proposes that, in the face of the environmental, technological, social, and cultural changes of the late twentieth century, advertising has set in motion, during the first years of the twenty-first century, the adaptive mechanisms of change that have allowed it to evolve and survive in the new context of consumption. The chapter shows the ways in which advertising has changed its strategies in this process of adaptation. It has gone from a direct persuasive model embedded in the media to an indirect model masked in any support of the digital culture of entertainment. This subtle adaptation has made not only that advertising continues to fulfill its function at the service of the capitalist economy and sociocultural reproduction but also that its new strategy is increasing its advertising effectiveness, since it is using techniques of masking and activation of consumer participation that increase the psychological footprint that induces them

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to consume. This new advertising has been endowed with a renewed capacity to slow down the change toward less unequal sociocultural models committed to a more sustainable global environment. In the absence of an economic paradigm shift, we suggest a path of possible positive change through counterargumentation strategies, awareness raising, and social and institutional education policies that highlight the strategies and consequences of these new surreptitious forms of advertising persuasion.

Keywords

Advertising · Advertainment · Masking · Branded entertainment · Persuasion

1 Introduction

Climate change, overexploitation of resources, and pollution are some of the challenges of the new global context that require new modes of consumption. However, the capitalist system puts up a firm resistance considering that these changes may affect its business profit model. During the twentieth century, advertising inserted in the media has been an effective tool at the service of spreading its persuasive messages directed at the consumer. These messages have helped shape consumers' desire to purchase such goods and services. However, current technological, social, and cultural changes have caused traditional advertising to lose its effectiveness at the end of the twentieth century. This is a problem for the functioning of the business system. Let us remember that one of the characteristics of capitalism, throughout the centuries, has been its ability to adapt to new circumstances that allow it to maintain its profit-oriented development model. This has caused, at present, the capitalist system, favored by the existence of a global and neoliberal market, to react and look for new strategies and forms of social influence that restore its effective influence on consumers. Recent scientific advances have revealed a set of psychological phenomena that advertising is using to implement new highly effective hidden persuasive strategies to persuade the consumer. This chapter describes what these scientific advances consist of and what recent strategies are used. These are also very effective because they are hidden and masked, especially in digital entertainment, and consumers do not realize that they are receiving commercial messages that are influencing them. Concrete examples are presented of all this. However, if there is a will to promote social change to improve the current and future welfare conditions of the population, it is necessary to publicize these new hidden persuasive strategies that seek to maintain a socioeconomic model based exclusively on business profit. Making the population aware of these new advertising strategies can help them become aware of these modes of social influence and, in turn, implement social response strategies to counteract the influence of economic powers on the consumer's quality of life. This social response can thus be a form of change that favors consumption for the well-being of the people and not just as a mere consumerism directed by the economic powers.

In summary, the chapter aims to describe the change that has taken place in advertising to adapt to the new economic and sociocultural context. The advertising transformation is being effective because it uses persuasive masking strategies that influence people's lives without them being aware of it. By not being sufficiently aware of being persuaded, we do not counterargue. This contributes to maintaining and reinforcing the profit model characteristic of capitalism. Therefore, the current type of advertising would maintain the economic and social status quo, thus acting as a brake on change. A second objective is aimed at reflecting on possible courses of action that can contribute to creating new opportunities for change.

2 From Technological and Sociocultural Mutation to New Advertising

The technological, social, and cultural changes that have taken place in the last years of the twentieth century have caused advertising to stop fulfilling its persuasive function effectively. Its process of adaptation to the new context has caused it to undergo a profound change, a mutation, in its activity. Below, we will first describe the main factors that have converged to induce and stimulate this change. In a second moment, we will synthesize the manifestations of change that have affected advertising and the common strategy of the new forms of advertising.

2.1 The Impact of Scientific Advances and Sociocultural Changes on Advertising

Among the factors that have impelled the advertising change, the following five stand out.

Firstly, the transition from analog to digital systems has led to the emergence of numerous changes in the relationship between the advertiser and the consumer. Examples of these technological advances are the Internet, streaming technology, and Macromedia[®] Flash software, which enabled audiovisual production and the dissemination of content over the network, personal computers, interactivity, application platforms (apps), social media, etc. Some of these technological advances reduced the audience of the traditional media where advertising was housed. Technological advances allowed and encouraged behaviors such as interactivity, virality, or collaboration and co-creation of messages.

Secondly, among the numerous scientific advances that have taken place in the last two decades, we will only highlight here some of them that have made it possible to modify the psychological conception of the human being that we had until now and that directly affect advertising. We refer to the advances in the knowledge of brain architecture (cerebral hemispheric lateralization), the discovery of our greater capacity to process stimuli (peripheral visual perceptual systems), and the change in the conception of mental functioning (the importance of automatic processes). We

will see below (section “[The Application of Scientific Advances in Advertising](#)”) some of the applications of these scientific advances in advertising.

Thirdly, the dynamics of the economic model has led to a new context of consumption. The transition from the productive economy (demand > supply and passive consumer) to the consumer economy (supply > demand and active consumer) has followed a process of sophistication. General factors such as globalization have influenced consumption patterns. These intermingle with other cultural factors such as those that are manifested in artistic capitalism (Lipovetsky, 2013). This form of capitalism is sustained by a hyperindividualism of consumption (search for hedonistic and emotional experiences) in societies where images, exposed through all types of screens, have acquired a great influence on consumer behaviors. These behaviors become hyperconsumption of lifestyles suggested to the consumer through mechanisms in which advertising plays a central role to induce and suggest changes in fashion and tastes that adapt to the dreamed lifestyle. These marketing mechanisms have the consequence of energizing the market.

Fourthly, the growing over-information and multiplication of brand and product messages invading the market, competing to reach the consumer’s mind, raise the question of how to manage the so-called attention economy” (Davenport & Beck, 2001). In this hyperstimulated universe of images, the active consumer is immersed in a constant flow of messages that he or she can barely process. The number of messages in circulation has increased steadily in recent years. The consumer tries to avoid some of these advertising messages, which are pushed at him without him having sought them out. We have a limited capacity to process stimuli. Therefore, this cultural situation of over-information raises the problem of how to handle so much available information. As a protection mechanism, people try not to process this push advertising imposed from outside.

Finally, in the analog media era, there was a growing unease among consumers about advertising saturation. There was too much advertising during television broadcasts. Added to this factor was the appearance of recording devices (DVR), which made it possible to avoid watching live advertising slots. The viewer could zap and skip his or her exposure to advertising. The irruption of technological devices such as these gradually contributed to a fragmentation of audiences. The consequence of the convergence of these two factors, added to the over-information factor mentioned above, led to a decrease in advertising effectiveness. Advertisers were concerned about the gradual decline in the effectiveness of traditional audience measurement measures (GRP). This was of concern to them because it affected the persuasive effectiveness of their messages and therefore the effectiveness of the function pursued by advertising. With this factor, the four previous factors converged. This situation put in difficulty the advertising model based on communication directed to the masses.

The convergence and interaction of these five factors have given rise to a set of manifestations of change that have impelled advertisers to seek new forms of advertising in order to regain lost effectiveness. Here are some of the manifestations that have affected advertising:

- (a) In the emergence and consolidation of advertising and publicity in the early years of the twentieth century, the mass media played a fundamental mediating role. In that productive economy, in which demand was greater than supply, we can speak of a passive consumer, among other reasons because he does not have too much supply to choose from and consumes what is available and what he can afford. Both advertising and publicity will be characterized as unidirectional communication. The advertiser addresses the consumer to show him the benefits of his product. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have moved from unidirectional to multidirectional communication (Cf. Bermejo-Berros, 2012). Public opinion has diversified, and we can speak of different figures that the advertiser seeks to satisfy (consumer, prosumer, stakeholders, customer, and so on). The company has been replacing the logic of the product with the logic of service and consumer satisfaction. These new forms of communication are characterized by distributed networks in bidirectional and multidirectional relationship modes.
- (b) Advertising saturation, audience fragmentation, and the decline in advertising effectiveness have contributed to advertisers' search for new and more effective forms of advertising investment, which has led them to diversify the media used to reach the public and their eventual targets. In addition to communication in conventional media (above the line, television, press, radio, Internet) and non-conventional media (below the line, sponsorships, events, mailing, etc.), advertising investment has also been expanding to interactive spaces in social networks and the Internet. Finally, it is also occupying spaces outside the media (out the line). Advertising can be in any medium and in any place. In *out the line*, the strategies employed revolve around three basic formulas:
- Place appropriateness: these are those companies that look for the spaces where their products are used or consumed, making the maxim of being in the “right place at the right time” applicable. An example of this would be to advertise baldness products next to a bathroom mirror.
 - Place differentiation: contrary to the previous formula, in this case, it would be a matter of surprising the receiver/consumer with the positioning of the message in a place where it was not expected or even when it was not expected. Such is the case of the songs in which a McDonalds message was included.
 - The complementarity and contrast of places: finally, an advertising situation that aims to surprise the citizen by causing a spatial mismatch. An example would be the initiative of throwing bottles with messages into the sea to advertise the series “Lost.” Here there is a complementarity between the real place chosen by the brand to advertise its product (in the example the bottle in the sea) and the fictitious place to which it refers (the fictional series).
- (c) There has been a hybridization of genres and a blurring of activity boundaries. Advertising no longer occupies specific and well-defined spaces, such as advertising spots or advertising blocks on television, but “blends” (or camouflages itself) with other entertainment genres. Advertising is thus merged into fiction series (brand placement, brand integration, product placement) or allied with

video games (in the so-called *advergaming*); it is introduced into informative pieces (e.g., branded content), etc. (artvertising, tryvertising, and so on). If this hybridization of genres of *advertainment* culture runs parallel to the attitude of rejection of classical advertising on television, press, or Internet advertising of the first generation, among other reasons, for having fallen into the advertising oversaturation of the media, it finds a very favorable ground for its expansion in the current young generation. There is also a blurring of activity boundaries. Advertising and publicity have met again in different activities outside the media (López & Torres, 2007).

- (d) The mutation in the way of advertising has led to the transformation of the consumer from a receiver (anonymous audience) to a user.

Some features allow us to describe this process:

1. It goes from being a target to seeking the personalization of communication (one-to-one).
2. The consumer becomes co-creator. He ceases to be a mere addressee and becomes a participant in interactivity. This has an increasingly relevant role in advertising communication and opens up new advertising possibilities currently in expansion that affect the type of activity deployed by the consumer. This interactivity takes place not only in forms of advertising such as Internet advertising but also in other forms in which there is a process of co-creation, as in the case of the prosumer who interacts with a device to customize a product (examples, Nike sneaker) but also in which there is an advanced process of interactivity with the advertiser. Consequently, interactivity also raises the need to deepen the knowledge of the psychological processes and mechanisms of the user and consumer.
3. It goes from individual consumer to the creation of communities (and therefore opens the possibility of a rediscovery of the other that postmodernity erased, thus building not individualistic but collective identities that help to alleviate the current anxieties of the hypermodern era in which we would be). This circulation of information among community members facilitates the phenomena of virality and co-distribution. Viral marketing is another example of a participatory strategy today, among others such as in the field of connectivity marketing (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). It describes any marketing strategy that encourages individuals to freely transmit a marketing message, mainly through the Internet, to others around them, causing exponential growth as the message is exposed. Like a virus, the rapid multiplication means that the message can quickly reach thousands of Internet users. It is thus a multidirectional communication. The user participates proactively in the advertising messages and the brand's marketing strategy. For example, the automobile brand Chevrolet developed a website for the launch of its new Tahoe model with an application that included videos and audio for users to produce their own spot for the model and distribute it among their friends and acquaintances.

4. It goes from being an analogical reader (i.e., in linear sequences) to a hypermedia reader (in hypertexts), which implies mastering new languages that will shape new forms of multilingual thinking.

In short, in order to adapt to the factors of change that occurred at the end of the twentieth century, advertising has undergone a profound change in recent years, a mutation whose manifestations we have described here and which have led to a new way of understanding advertising action on audiences. In the past, advertising tried to influence our decision-making through campaigns that had a recurring impact on our minds. Now it is asking us for our opinion, trying to get us to participate in its construction and transmission. Overall, in order for these persuasive attempts to be effective and make the consumer become involved and participate in the process, there has had to be a shift from a push strategy to a pull strategy, as we will see below.

2.2 From Disruptive Advertising to Masked and Consensual Advertising

The technological and sociocultural factors described above have led to a decline in the advertising effectiveness of twentieth-century one-way communication and prompted a migration to new formats.

Twentieth-century advertising was characterized by being inserted in the media (radio, press, TV, and so on), with very precise codes that consumers learned to identify from an early age and that allowed them to clearly differentiate it from other content (Brée, 1995).

It was a direct (and disruptive) advertising that used push-type persuasive strategies, that is, the advertising message was pushed toward the consumer. The strategy of this classic advertising is direct because it aims to attract the person to an advertising message by attracting his attention in order to transfer the message consciously to the foveal field. This advertising still exists but continues to lose effectiveness. The factors referred to above are causing advertisers to see it profitable to disinvest in direct advertising and are beginning to shift part of their investment to new forms of indirect, masked, or hidden advertising. This is characterized by the use of a pull strategy in which there are four moments:

1. First, something is done to attract the consumer (to provide information or entertainment about something of interest to him, i.e., something is proposed that has value in itself for the person).
2. The receiver is attracted to the proposed content and decides to start consuming it.
3. In this process, advertising is present within the audiovisual content of which it is inseparable, being susceptible to influence the consumer.
4. If the consumer has favorably evaluated the product, he/she spreads it in a process of virality through acquaintances, social networks, etc.

This indirect advertising is increasingly present in products of the digital entertainment culture as we will see below.

3 Social Influence Scenarios: The Digital Entertainment Culture

3.1 The Application of Scientific Advances in Advertising

Direct-push advertising still exists today and has benefited from scientific and technological advances, such as those enabling interactivity or those technologies enriching interfaces (augmented reality, 3D, VR, 360°), measurement (telemetry data), or new forms of personalized advertising insertion (e.g., Around-Game advertising). Direct advertising is still present in the classic media (press, TV, and so on), as well as in digital media, particularly on the Internet or mobile telephony. (e.g., banners, pop-up, SEM, behavioral retargeting, etc.). Pull advertising also benefits from these technological advances.

However, what is really interesting and novel at present is the way in which an increasingly important part of advertising investment has been shifting toward media products of the digital entertainment culture with specific properties. This pull-type indirect advertising is an adaptive response to the five factors mentioned above, which together were signs of difficulty for the survival of the advertising economic model.

Advertising will not only move into the entertainment culture driven by the factors we have described above, but it will also benefit from some scientific advances in psychology and neuroscience that will allow it to implement effective persuasive strategies. Three of them are of particular relevance: parafoveal vision, cerebral hemispheric lateralization, and the cognitive unconscious (Bermejo-Berros, 2019).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, attention was understood as the action of orienting toward a stimulus and ignoring the surrounding rest that was filtered. Only foveal vision was considered. Decades later, parafoveal vision was added to the process of attention. For example, there is someone in front of you, and you keep staring into each other's eyes as you converse. Suddenly, another person who is sitting behind your interlocutor, slightly shifted to your right, rubs his forehead with his hand. Even though you have never stopped looking at the person in front of you, your visual system has picked up what the other person was doing, even though you had no intention of doing so. During the twentieth century, it was thought that we only had these two visual systems, a focal one, which allowed us to capture our voluntary attention, and a peripheral, involuntary one, which is what led you to capture the movement of the person behind your interlocutor, even though you had no intention of doing so (Strasburger et al., 2011). Based on this conception, twentieth-century advertising considered that only focal attention was effective in conveying its message to the consumer and that parafoveal vision did not serve its persuasive purposes.

Consequently, the strategy of advertisers during the twentieth century was direct advertising, embedded in the media. What advertising did was to try to capture our conscious attention. It appealed to us in an attempt to capture our attention toward the foveal zone (2° – 5°) of maximum visual acuity. However, from the 1980s onward, this strategy began to meet with a lot of resistance from consumers, who knew when they were receiving advertising and sought conscious ways to avoid it because, as we have analyzed above, consumers were saturated with advertising in the media.

In this situation, scientific advances have made it possible to know that the human visual field has not two but three zones of vision: foveal, parafoveal, and peripheral. All of them provide us with information, we process them, and they are likely to influence us (Heath, 2012). Secondly, today we understand well how cerebral hemispheric lateralization allows us to differentially process figurative holistic stimuli and specific stimuli such as language (Janiszewski, 1990). We also better understand the role that peripheral stimulation, such as that from banners, for example, can play (Chun et al., 2014). Today we know that both parafoveal vision and cerebral hemispheric laterality allow advertising effectiveness outside the attentional focus of foveal vision. Advertising is using this knowledge to maintain and expand banner advertising in Internet browsing, as well as in mobile telephony.

Thirdly, our conception of our mental functioning has changed. Previously, our cognitive system was considered to respond to the environment by means of voluntary and controlled processes. However, in recent decades, evidence has accumulated of the great importance of automatic processes in our behavior (Bargh, 2007). Contrary to what was previously thought, unconscious behavior acts in guiding our higher mental functions (Bargh & Morsella, 2010). Advances in the study of these cognitive automatisms have led to the discovery of the cognitive unconscious (Hassin et al., 2005). Our mind is capable of capturing and storing advertising information in these parafoveal and peripheral spaces, without the person being aware of it, and, in a subsequent task (e.g., deciding on the choice of a brand or product), this memorized information is used unconsciously in the current decision-making process, as demonstrated by the priming effect (Froufe, 1997; Froufe et al., 2009). It used to be thought that this was not possible in advertising. Today we know that it occurs and that it influences our decisions and consumption behavior (Heath, 2012; Martin & Morich, 2011). At the same time, these automatic and unconscious processes are triggered in close relationship with automatic and controlled emotional processes (Barrett et al., 2007). The conception of the consumer has been enriched. The rational dimension of consumer decision-making, which dominated during the last century, has recently been joined by the automatic dimension. Both can now be influenced by advertising both in individual exposure to products and content and also in social environments on the Internet (Balau, 2018), in the automatic imitation of social behaviors (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Dijksterhuis et al., 2005). This involuntary influence also extends to digital communities in which young people participate as we will see below.

In conclusion, as we have been describing, advertisers, spurred by the need to change their persuasive strategies, added these scientific advances in their process of

rethinking their way of advertising and adapting it to the new context. In what follows we will look at some of these new types of advertising in order to describe the features of these new forms of advertising. We will find in them the application of these scientific advances.

3.2 Advertising Migration and Masking

In the migration of advertising in search of greater effectiveness, different scenarios have been used that share the pull strategy and masking. We will take as characteristic examples some of their manifestations and psychological effects on users. On the one hand, the presence of advertainment in the products of narrative entertainment culture. Secondly, we will see two forms of hidden and masked advertising. Thirdly, we find an advertising accepted by the consumer and present in digital communities. Finally, there is a phenomenon of increasing levels of user participation, absent in the last century, whose psychological effects of persuasion are more intense than in the advertising of the past.

3.2.1 Advertising in the Culture of Narrative Entertainment

Entertainment has always existed in every culture, even though it was bounded. If, after the wars, the population settled into a culture of reconstruction and work, with entertainment being confined to specific days, today the culture of leisure and entertainment in Western societies has expanded to increasingly broader areas¹ that permeate the worldview of the younger generations. This has led to a renewed interest in advertising, particularly in narrative digital entertainment where advertainment occupies a prominent place. Advertainment is a type of hybrid messaging that incorporates advertising into an entertainment product. Three types of advertainment can be distinguished: product placement, product integration, and branded entertainment. The difference between them lies in the degree of perceptual presence of the product in the content, the level of integration of the product in the plot, and the degree of financing of the production (the greater the financing, the greater the advertiser's influence on the degree of prominence of the brand in the story).

If product placement existed in the last century (Lehu, 2007), it is now acquiring a new impetus and renewal. On the one hand, technical and scientific advances have made it possible to sophisticate the way brands and products are placed in these narrative products and to make their presence less invasive but more effective, for example, in virtual product placement (Mazahir & Yaseen, 2018). On the other hand, audiovisual fiction has become very important in everyday life, particularly for young people. The digital world has brought new behaviors. In the television era, the consumption of a series was at the rate of one episode per week. Now we have

¹ This even extends to the way information is produced and disseminated through the media, as Neil Postman (1985) has analyzed.

moved on to on-demand television, consumption on Internet platforms, etc. This means that the consumer can watch complete series in a short period of time. This easier access to fiction has led to a significant increase in fiction consumption. Many young people, every week, are voracious viewers who watch several fiction series at the same time. Digitalization makes it possible to download episodes and share them with other people.

Advertisers have started to invest heavily in this type of products that will eventually pay off in terms of notoriety and brand image. A successful example that marked a before and after in narrative advertainment was BMW's campaign in the series of short films *The Hire* (2001). The user could watch them online or download them from the brand's website. The short films had a series of subplots with which the user could interact. This fiction had millions of downloads and was shared by many users. In the plots of *The Hire*, the car (BMW) is a central axis of each story. The characters get out of their conflicts successfully because they have a car with great performance. The brand is not mentioned; it is simply there, part of the story. However, when recall and attitude tests are carried out with viewers, it is observed that the BMW brand obtains good ratings (Bermejo-Berros, 2021a). It has been favored by the masked influence of its presence in these cinema-quality, high-budget short films with well-known actors and characters (Chris Owen, Madonna). This example illustrates the idea that advertainment is effective indirect advertising. The success of *The Hire* encouraged other brands to invest in this type of product such as *The Run* (Nissan), *Art of Speed* (Nike), or in interactive narratives such as *7 Years Later* (Mercedes) or *Nokia 20 Lives* (Nokia).

From a psychological point of view, the presence of advertising in audiovisual fiction series has a considerable effect on the values and desires cultivated by the population in general and especially among young people because they are in a phase of their lives in which they are forming their personality and values. The young person may or may not be aware of the presence of advertising. Sometimes, even if they are aware, they accept it because they identify with the characters or with the enjoyment of the story.

3.2.2 Masked Advertising

In the last century, direct advertising, disseminated by the media, was an easily identifiable genre. However, now that it is ubiquitous and can be everywhere, it can seek to be present, but in an underhand, masked way.

The advertainment we saw in the previous section is indirect advertising. Its strategy is not one of total masking but of noninvasive presence. However, when it is well executed, it has a masking effect because the user does not think of it in invasive and persuasive terms but as part of the fictional scenario of the narrative.

Instead, there are other forms of advertising that directly use masking as an advertising strategy. That is to say, in the design of the message, there is a process of concealment or transfiguration of the brand/product with the purpose of activating the brand in the receiver by indirect means. To illustrate this phenomenon, we will resort to two examples whose manifestations use these two different masking modalities.

* A first example (by concealment) corresponds to the press. It is a classic medium that is evolving. In a set of research with 232 publications representative of all categories of press and targets, we had identified the presence of 3 types of new display advertising in the media that constitute three manifestations of this persuasive masking strategy. We have called them *embedded advertising*, *neoadvertorial*, and *self-referential advertising* (Bermejo-Berros, 2011; Bermejo-Berros, 2013b; Bermejo et al., 2011). The three types of masked advertising are characterized by the fact that the subject accesses a text of an informative nature in which an advertising message is embedded, which, since it is not highlighted or delimited by codes that make it independent as an autonomous text, appears disguised in the text that contains it. An example of embedded advertising can be found in interviews with celebrities and public figures. In the article, as the interviewee answers the interviewer's questions, the character tells aspects of his or her life, including, in these cases, personal allusions to the consumption of specific products and brands. Secondly, if advertorials were already used in conventional advertising, there are two features in the neoadvertorial that differentiate it from the former. One is the disappearance of the genre identifier code, located at the top of the page or in the box of the advertising text, on which the word "advertorial" could be read and which warned the reader about the content. A second feature is that neoadvertorials are presented to the reader with the appearance of real informative reports in which the aim is to inform the reader about some monographic subject that interests him or her (e.g., how to prepare a Christmas dinner, what gifts to give or how to fight hair loss, etc.). Throughout the text, allusions are made to products and brands that can help the reader to solve his or her problem or information need. Therefore, the advertising message does not appear in this type of text but at a precise moment and as a suggestion that accompanies the reader in the decision about the issue that led him to read the newspaper article. Finally, as in the previous case, self-referential advertising erases the codes that allow the reader to immediately perceive and categorize the text and ascribe it to the genre of conventional promotion or self-promotion. If in classical advertising self-promotion was an explicit text inviting the reader to consume the product or service, in the new self-referential advertising, a text of interest to the reader is presented, and, within it, messages, whether iconic or editorial, of self-promotion are slipped in.

In a subsequent research, 154 university advertising communication students in their final year (age 21 to 23) participated. These subjects were familiar with advertising messages. They were exposed to a total of 224 stimuli corresponding to pages extracted from press media in which there were pages without advertising, others with classic advertising, and others with the three categories of masked advertising presented above. They were asked to read the content of each page and say whether or not there was advertising there. The correctness of the identification and the time spent (reaction time) were measured. The results showed significantly that the subjects identified correctly and very quickly (in tachistoscope) the presence of classic advertising. However, these same subjects made many errors and had

many difficulties in identifying masked advertising, even though they spent more time exploring the stimulus (Bermejo-Berros, 2013a). These results show how these new masking strategies in advertising prevent young people from becoming aware that they are receiving advertising messages. This contributes to the fact that they do not counterargue, thus increasing the probability of persuasion.

* A second masking strategy (by transfiguration) consists of including, in a fictional universe, fictional brands that have design features that allow the user, unconsciously, to associate the fictional brand to the real brand, thus generating a process of advertising effectiveness. Let us take an example with the videogame *The Guest* (Team Gotham, 2016). It is a videogame in first person in which the player must search for indexes and objects that allow him to solve an enigma. In a previous study, we had investigated those products that could fit in this story and that could be introduced in the videogame creating the perception that they were part of its diegetic universe. Taking into account the aesthetics and intrigue of the videogame, the product whiskey was selected. In our LipsiMedia lab, we designed a poster and a bottle with different versions (real brand, fictitious brand, masked brand, and incongruous brand). Figures 1 and 2 show some of these designs illustrating two forms of transfiguration masking. The posters in Fig. 1 show masking by means of a fictional brand. In Fig. 2 the visual identity of the real brand has been blurred. In both cases there is a transfiguration of the real brand that has perceptual isomorphism relations with the masking stimulus.

In collaboration with the company Team Gotham, developer of this videogame, a version of the video game was made in which these objects were introduced in five different versions of the video game according to the type of location (real, masked, fictitious, or incongruent).

Subsequently, 94 participants played a game and performed different tests of entertainment, attitudes, presence, etc. The results showed that the real brand generated recall but had the disadvantage that there were players who rejected the presence of the brand in the videogame as advertising. The fictitious brand and the masked brand did not generate negative attitudes and counterarguments. On the contrary, the players considered it to be a positive element for the videogame. A very interesting result is that participants who had seen and interacted with the masked fictitious brand during the game remembered, in the posttest, the real brand instead of the masked brand (Figs. 1 and 2). The masked brand had activated participants' prior knowledge of the real brand. There was a transfer phenomenon from the masked brand to the real brand. Thus, the masking effect increased the advertising effectiveness of the real brand. This research confirms that fictitious brands can have an advertising function (Muzellec et al., 2012; Muzellec et al., 2013). These phenomena of influence and transfer between fiction and reality can be observed in other advertising activities such as reverse product placement (Hemant & Padmini, 2016). An example is the *Duff* beer brand in *The Simpsons* series, *Pizza Planet* (Toy Story), or *Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans* candies that appear in the *Harry Potter* novels. These and other fictional brands have been marketed in reality, and knowledge of them facilitates the marketing process in reality.



Fig. 1 Posters with real and fictional brands placed in the videogame. (Source: Own elaboration)

3.2.3 Advertising in Digital Communities

Successful youtubers, influencers, bloggers, and instagramers gather around them groups of thousands of followers who interact with the activity developed by these



Fig. 2 Whiskey bottles with real and masked brands in videogame. (Source: Own elaboration)

social influencers on social media and Internet. These *digital communities* formed around these social mediators attract especially teenagers and young people. To understand this phenomenon, human nature and its needs must be taken into consideration. Advertising does not directly satisfy needs but models them and tries to intervene in the process of the subject's search for their satisfaction. In this exploration, advertising seeks to mediate, suggesting possible objects of desire that can satisfy the need. Young people are in a phase of their lives in which they are building themselves as persons. In a first group of needs that seek to shape individuality, young people are delimiting the features of their identity, drawing the orientation of their life and assimilating experiences that shape their attitude toward themselves and the social world. They need to express who they are and who they

want to be. They look for things that allow them to complete their self. They also need fantasy spaces in which to recreate that identity under construction. A second group of needs seeks to satisfy needs that are built and satisfied in the interaction with other people. Young people have needs for affiliation, to be with others, and to experience belonging to a group. They need social exchange activities that pursue personal adjustment in the social framework (feeling recognized and having consistency). They also participate in socialized joint activities (compete, play, participate in social events with the group) and, finally, experience actions that seek attraction and seduction of the other. Digital communities are spaces that allow channeling the (symbolic) satisfaction of these two groups of needs.

The animators and models (influencers, youtubers, etc.) of the digital community to which young people adhere directly recommend brands and products. If young people seek to insert themselves into that community to satisfy needs, they do so regardless of the fact that it is a community mediated by a monetization activity for the benefit of the youtuber, influencer, etc. Some analysts believe that the success of these models lies in their personal charisma. If this helps, the essential thing is that they mobilize the needs of the young person, associating to the activity they propose on their website/channel ways to satisfy the needs activated in the young person. For example, among instagramers and other models with more followers, we find some who recommend lifestyles (specific fashion and beauty products and brands, body care, and so on). All this is presented in the form of advice or suggestions. The channel's entertainer and influencer adopt favorable attitudes to the product, even consumes it and makes it desirable. It is a suggestion to be imitated by his followers. This procedure (not imposed) makes young people want to follow these suggestions because they seem to satisfy both their individuation needs (feel better doing such and such a thing, diet, sport, etc.; with this product, you will look better, etc.) and group communication needs (doing such and such a thing, you will connect better with your friends; with this way of expressing yourself, you are part of our community; and so on).

The effectiveness of advertising here lies in the fact that it is not imposed but is there, during the interaction in the channel. It is not hidden but semi-masked because it is subtly inscribed in a web of activity and participation, of suggestions and amusement.

Both in this type of advertising and the one we will refer to in the following section, the success and perfect adaptation of advertising to these new contexts have been favored by the type of hypermodern culture in which we find ourselves, as Lipovetsky (1983) argues. According to him, we have entered an era that is no longer defined by postmodernity but by hypermodernity. This is accompanied by a narcissistic hyperindividualism of hedonism and personalization of socialization processes. In my opinion, in this context, the circulation and participation of young people in digital communities are a clear manifestation of this dominant cultural conception of neoindividualism. This process is reinforced and facilitated by a culture in which the image of screens and technoscience characterizes communication (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2007). This omnipresence of products and brands in a permanent circulation of images constitutes stimuli that incite hyperconsumption. In

addition, products and brands are presented in a favorable and beautiful way. This provokes emotions and enhances the desire to purchase the product and thus enter (in a symbolic way) into the world of beauty and luxury represented in the image transmitted by the influencer. We thus find ourselves in one of the dimensions of artistic capitalism of which Lipovetsky (2013) speaks.

3.2.4 Increasing Levels of User Participation

During the twentieth century, advertising used a single persuasive strategy by mere reiteration of the advertising stimulus in the media. The aim was simply for the consumer to perceive the advertising and store in his memory properties of the brand/product with a favorable attitude. The transition from this push strategy to the current pull strategy has not only brought a new form of relationship between advertising and the consumer but has also sought to increase consumer participation. Recently, in an extensive research, we have analyzed a total of 758 advertising campaigns in recent years (Bermejo-Berros, 2020). This study has allowed us to discover that contemporary advertising does not use one persuasive strategy but four. The analysis of the psychological requirements of each of these strategies has shown that between levels one and four the user must perform more actions and of a more complex nature. In the first level, the subject is simply required to attend and perceive the advertising stimulus. In the second level, the user must perform immediate actions in response to the stimulus (e.g., click on a button to obtain a gift). At the third level, we find interactive advertising that requires the subject to perform two or more chained actions that can take place in a mediated time after the presentation of the advertising stimulus. For example, you can participate in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* in which there is advertising. In other examples, you can download an application from the Internet and participate in the activity. In VW Real Racing GTI iPhone, the participant chooses and configures his VW car model, participates in a race, and can download videos of the games and exchange messages with other racers. In other cases, he can perform a set of actions over a longer period of time. Finally, the fourth level corresponds to planned or distant actional advertising. These are forms of advanced interactivity that require planned actions such as those involving the prosumer or in situations of personalization (customization). Among its advertising modalities, we find the user's participation in advertising contests that require creation and planning on his part. The figure of the prosumer, when carrying out true creative processes, falls into this advertising category.

These new advertising strategies introduce more demanding levels of psychological processing (Bermejo-Berros, 2017). The consequence of this is that the footprint left by the brand is greater because, in addition, the participant's contact with the brand is prolonged over time, as the activity can last hours, days, or more. Moreover, given that these are pull strategies, if the participant prolongs his or her participation in the activity, a positive relationship and emotional bond with the brand are produced, the effects of which are more lasting than those obtained by direct advertising in the media of the last century. Therefore, the consequences of these new forms of persuasion are that there is a greater advertising effectiveness and a deepening of the mechanisms of reproduction of the capitalist system. As in the

different forms of masking that we have seen in the previous sections, this increase in levels of user participation comes about because they want to participate in the activity. In this process, advertising is present. It does not attract the voluntary attention of the participant, nor does it pretend to do so, since this does not constitute the central axis of the activity. However, it influences the mind of the participant in an indirect way and through involuntary processing that leaves a trace in his mind. In this sense, we can also speak of a form of masking, since in these activities advertising is not in the foreground of the activity. It is associated with it, but with a presence in the background but just as effective.

3.3 The Effects of the Pull Strategy and Masking

In the forms of hybrid advertising we have just seen (ad plus entertainment), it is the user who decides to expose himself to the content. It should be noted that the advertiser tries to avoid counterargumentation. This not only reduces advertising effectiveness but also does not create emotional engagement with the brand. Today we are looking not only for brand impact in terms of recall and recognition but above all to create experiences and positive emotional experiences with the brand. This means that hybrid advertising must ensure that the user does not feel that the brand is trying to impose and persuade him.

According to a recent study (Bermejo-Berros, 2021a), the effectiveness and effects of the hybrid format and the type of masking used by the advertiser will be the result of the interaction of three evaluative processes that the user activates in his contact with this hybrid product. From the user's experience with the content, the degree of entertainment achieved (or the informative value of the content for him, as occurs in Branded Content), influences the degree of acceptability. The greater the enjoyment experienced in the activity, the greater the acceptability of the brand's presence. At the same time, when the user considers that the type of masking in a particular content is appropriate and relevant, acceptability increases. As a result, the greater the entertainment, acceptability, and relevance, the greater the advertising effectiveness as the consumer experiences the content with an attitude of trust and does not counterargue, for example, a youtuber who narrates his experience with a new video game or an influencer who shows how to apply makeup with certain products. In these cases, the user knows that brand advertising is being done, but they accept it because they are interested or have fun interacting with the content of that youtuber and influencer. In addition, the presence of the brand is appropriate and unavoidable because it is intimately linked to the content of the activity of the social entertainer (youtuber, influencer, blogger, and so on).

These distinctions come to complete the classifications of advertainment (Russell, 2007; Martí-Parreño et al., 2017) and branded content (Castelló-Martínez & Pino-Romero, 2018) proposed so far. The effectiveness of one or the other type of hybrid message depends not only on the properties of the placement (level of presence, integration and funding) but also on the effect on the receiver of the interaction between the degree of entertainment, acceptability, and relevance of the brand

presence. But, from the point of view of social change, what is important is that, in the hybrid messages circulating in today's society, advertising is increasingly adjusting the appropriateness of the placement and the masking of the brand. Thus, the degree of advertising masking increases when acceptability and appropriateness might be low. The consequence of these adjustments is an increase in the acceptability of the message and better penetration of the brand in the consumer's mind.

In conclusion, in current pull advertising, masking is not only an effective strategy to avoid counterargumentation but also a means to increase the degree of acceptability. By means of this strategy linked to entertainment, advertising has not only adapted to the current sociocultural context but would be increasing its degree of effectiveness and, thus, would continue to maintain and reinforce the current consumption model.

4 Strategies for Social Change

In the first decades of the present century, the pull strategy of advertising has found a favorable sociocultural context for its adaptation within the entertainment culture. One of the most effective mechanisms that advertising uses within this general strategy is masking. In this context, the user searches for and interacts with the content. This acceptance of the exchange favors the presence of advertising in the messages in a masked way. Depending on the type of content, the degree of masking can be greater or lesser. We have presented here some examples of this gradation of masking, which has different manifestations and modalities. We can organize these different manifestations in a continuum according to the degree of masking. At one of the poles is the maximum masking that uses the priming effect technique. The consumer receives and processes the advertising stimulus involuntarily. In medium masking, which we have illustrated with the video game *The Guest*, the brand is processed by the user even when it is perceptually transfigured (see Figs. 1 and 2). There is a slight masking, like the example of *The Hire*, when the brand is present in the background of the main activity. The user does not think about the brand during this main activity as their attention is focused on the main activity as it is this that gives meaning to their interaction with the content. Finally, there is a minimal masking as in different activities in digital communities. The brand is present in the activity. The user is aware of its presence but accepts it because he prioritizes the enjoyment of the activity that is the main reason for his participation and attention. What differentiates these four types of masking from classic advertising is the meaning of the activity. In classical advertising the activity consists of presenting (pushing) the product/brand toward the consumer. Therefore, it is an activity imposed from outside on the receiver. The meaning of the activity is the activity itself. On the other hand, in the masking used in the pull strategy, the activity makes sense to the user because he/she seeks to satisfy some need and therefore participates in some communication that provides satisfaction, entertainment, or information. In

this type of pull strategy, advertising is in the background, behind the main activity that gives meaning to participation.

In short, we see that the strategy of masking, through different types and modalities, is a characteristic feature of the model of adaptation of the capitalist model to the current context of hyperindividuality and sociocultural changes. This new adaptation of advertising is not likely to change the current modes of consumption and thus respond to global challenges. On the contrary, it is a more subtle way of perpetuating them. It is an effective way of influencing the user's mind and contributing to the reproduction of the nuclear mechanisms of the capitalist model that drives consumption.

The consequences of these new forms of persuasion, which use masking and strategies of attracting the user to the contents, have shown their effectiveness and have allowed a deepening of the capitalist essence. In this sense, the capitalist model has shown its resistance to change as these new forms of advertising do not question the model but rather adapt it without addressing the global problems facing the world today. Advertising continues to fulfill its function of reproducing the model of profit and social inequality. This model is only valid for those layers of society that can afford to pay the price of the products. The question that arises is whether it is possible to shift to other forms of consumption and interaction with brands.

From an educational point of view, the question arises as to whether it is possible to curb the influence of the subtle capitalism in which we find ourselves. Yes, we can provide ourselves with opportunities for positive change. If we want to reduce inequalities, face the challenges of climate change, and resource scarcity, it is necessary to move toward new forms of consumption. To do this, it is necessary to implement policies to raise awareness of these forms of consumption which, as we have seen above, are currently promoted through subtle mechanisms of underhand influence. Revealing the intentions of a manipulation strategy allows the addressee to become aware of the situation and to be able to act to counteract persuasive attempts. In this sense, we propose to raise awareness of modern surreptitious modes of advertising intervention. In this way, the consumer can acquire a greater capacity to decide more freely his or her relationship with messages and their contents. Educators, families, and public institutions can promote educational actions to raise awareness of these practices of social and economic action. These political and institutional actions can thus contribute to counteracting the pernicious effects of underhand and hidden influences and help us move toward different forms of consumption, perhaps more in line with the planet and equality among people.

Let us look at an example. One day, Louise Delage's account (@louise.delage) appeared on Instagram. In her photos this young woman appeared in desirable scenarios (at the pool, in the countryside, walking relaxed in a forest, enjoying herself in an amusement park, bathing at the beach, etc.). Two months later, her photos and videos reached 50,000 likes. In a recent investigation, we showed 12 of these photos to young people in the age range of this young woman (between 20 and 23 years old) who also had an Instagram account (Bermejo-Berros, 2021b). These young people appreciated these images as they found them appealing (relaxing, fun) and in settings they would like to be in. They claimed that this *instagrammer* seemed

to have an enviable life. The research participants were willing to press the “like” key. However, the vast majority of these young people were not able to realize that in every photo of Louise Delage alcohol was present (in her hand or around her). Nor were their followers really aware of the significance of their action when they clicked on “like.” Participants in this study were in for a big surprise when they were informed that the Instagram account was part of the “Like My Addiction” campaign created by advertising agency BETC, where Louise Delage was a fictional character. The goal was to demonstrate that alcohol addiction can go unnoticed. The really interesting part of this research for the present reflection on social change came later. From this discovery for the study participants, their behavior on Instagram was tracked in the following month. The results show that they had modified their behavior. They now reflected more before giving a like, and they also reflected on the nature of the content they saw on Instagram. In conclusion, they had become aware of their interactive behavior and how the social influence of advertising could go unnoticed. It is an isolated and insufficient example but encouraging as it shows that awareness of advertising mechanisms can help to change ways of acting.

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