

Online advertising: Guiding or misguiding customers

1. Introduction

Digital marketing can be highly deceptive in nature. Although online ads are aimed at providing ease to the customers and enhancing accessibility, most of the advertising agencies use manipulative strategies which makes them highly misguiding in nature.

2. How can online ads be guiding or misguiding in nature?

3. Online advertisements can be highly misguiding:

- a. Devious exaggeration of products functions
- b. Provide selective information; concealing half of the truth about products.
- c. Setting unrealistic trends, the beauty propoganda.
- d. The recency bias and its tendency to overemphasize recent expressions.
- e. Use of cinematic tricks aimed at customer manipulation

4. Online ads play a guiding role in customer service:

- a. Advertisements don't exaggerate, people do.
- b. Impossible to conceal product specifications in this internet oriented era.
- c. A form of creative expression aimed at inspiring and motivating.
- d. Recency bias a tool of providing search engine optimization.
- e. Cinematic tricks are used for grabbing attention not misleading; A harmless marketing strategy.

5. Synthesis:

- a. The undeniable powerful influence of ads on people's behaviours.
- b. Individual understanding capabilities of people vary
- c. Exploit people's emotional insecurities for financial gains.
- d. Clickbait articles and headlines; sensationalised, manipulative and misleading.
- e. The narrow line of difference in attention grabbing and manipulation.

Online Advertising: Guiding or Misguiding customers?

On October 27, 1994, the world of advertising was completely transformed by a small graphic, bearing the presumptive words, "Have you ever clicked right here? You will..", in a kitschy rainbow font. The age of 'Banner ads' had begun which were the first ever ads to surface the internet. Since then, internet has drastically changed the advertisement industry and continues to do so. With the advancement in technology and innovation in ideas it has outdone all the other media of advertisement. Online ads use data algorithms to provide customers with personalized ads experiences. Nonetheless, digital marketing can be highly deceptive in nature. Although ^{online ads} they are aimed at providing ease to the customers and enhancing accessibility, most of the advertising strategies used by marketing agencies make them highly manipulative and misguiding. The techniques used by these agencies; including exaggeration of product's function, concealing the limiting features of the product's functionality, setting unrealistic beauty trends, exploiting the recency bias and using cinematic tricks for capturing customer's attention, are aimed at increasing the ad's traffic but in reality they serve the function of manipulating and misguiding the customers. Some might argue that online ads don't exaggerate, people do and that concealment of information is impossible in this internet oriented era. It can also be

claimed that ads are, at their best, a creative expression aimed at motivating people and the recency bias merely provides search engine optimization. Moreover, the cinematic tricks are harmless marketing strategies used for inspiring the audience. Notwithstanding, the influence of advertisements on people's behaviours cannot be denied. They can easily be manipulated as their understanding capabilities vary from person to person depending on different factors. It is also true that marketing agencies exploit the emotional insecurities of their customers for financial gains. Even the clickbait articles and headlines are, on purpose, made sensational and appealing making them highly deceptive. In fine, there is a very narrow line of difference between 'engaging' and 'manipulating' which the marketing agencies should mind while formulating their agendas.

Online advertising also known as online marketing, internet advertising, digital advertising is a form of marketing which uses the internet to promote products and services to the audiences and platform users. It can be both guiding and misguiding for the customers as some people claim that online ads can guide customers by providing them with information about products and services that meet their interests. By targetting ads to specific demographics and search terms businesses can reach customers who are more likely to

to be interested in what they have to offer. However, some people believe that ads can be misleading if they contain false or misleading information about a product. This can make people to make purchases based on inaccurate information which can be frustrating. Moreover, some ads are intentionally designed to be deceptive for the sake of manipulating users into making a purchase.

Online ads can be highly deceptive due to the amount of exaggeration used in describing product's functionality. This over-embellishment makes the products stand out and more appealing. Exaggeration makes the products specious as the products may not actually perform as well as the ad suggests. It is general knowledge that 'Red Bull' doesn't actually 'give you wings'. A simple yet catchy marketing slogan used for years was officially deemed deceitful in 2014 when a man named Benjamin Careathers sued the company for false advertising. He claimed that i've been drinking 'Red Bull' for 10 years and have not developed wings or any heightened physical attributes, much to his dismay. 'Red Bull' ultimately settled the lawsuit for 13 million dollars. (Cory Hainer, Advertising claims: exaggeration or fabrication?, 2018)

Hence, On daily basis public witnesses that the companies selling the most ordinary of products use bold exaggerating ^{tactics} to make their products more appealing.

Moreover, marketing agencies deliberately conceal the limiting features of their product's functionality. They don't make false claims but pertinent information is consciously left out making the advertisement deceptive. Such concealment can lead to customers making purchases based on inaccurate information, which can ultimately harm both the customer and the business. For instance, the Volkswagen's 'Dieselgate' scandal 2015 included fact concealment claim and that too in an online advertisement. The emissions of its diesel engines were far higher than its advertised limits. This led to a loss of trust in the company and a decline in sales. Such manipulative and misleading tactics used by companies trigger wider discussions about the importance of transparency and honesty in digital marketing.

Setting unrealistic trends by ~~misguiding~~ ~~custo~~ online advertising can also misguide customers by creating false expectations. The beauty propaganda is a common technique used in advertising products that promotes the idea that beauty is the most important factor to consider while making a purchase. This leads to customers making purchases with ^{an unrealistic} ~~the~~ set of standards and expectations in their minds ^{which} ultimately causes them disappointment. Savannah Greenfield, a researcher ^{at} the University of Omaha in her article 'When beauty is the beast', 2018,

says that advertisements portray an over-sensitized and un-attainable ideal of beauty. They create a void in women's lives that can only be filled by buying the products to elevate themselves towards the ideal and because the ideal is unattainable, the product's demand and the cycle continues. In this way these companies keep misleading customers towards false glittering unrealities for their own financial gain by exploiting their physical, emotional and social insecurities.

A large number of marketing agencies exploit recency bias and its ability to overemphasize expressions and manipulate customers. Recency bias is a cognitive bias that favors recent events over historic ones; a memory bias. Brands target recent events in their ads to take advantage of the recency effect. For instance, In 2019 Nike released an ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL Quarterback who became a controversial figure for his protests against police brutality and racial injustice. The ad was released just a few days before the start of NFL season. The ad created a lot of controversies but also a lot of buzz and attention for Nike (Shah Mohamad, Strike while the iron is hot, 2018). In the same way recency bias is exploited in online advertisements. Smartphones always keep a check on user's surroundings via camera and microphones. This check enables the applications to scan the environment, rec-

Organize the discussion topics and tap into customer's recency bias hence, exerting extra influence on their decision-making, without them having any idea about it. Computer science academics at Northeastern university conducted a research with 17,000 of the most popular apps, which were then found to be recording the phone's screen and sending that information to third parties (Gizmodo, panoptispy: characterizing audio & video eubilteration, 2018). So, we can safely assume that the psychological influence projected on customer's decision-making is a manipulative and hence misleading tactic used by marketing agencies.

Moreover, online advertisers use various cinematic tricks to manipulate customers. Cinematic tricks are used to evoke emotions and persuade customers to buy. Tricks such as music, lightening and camera angles are used in online ads to create a sense of urgency, excitement and nostalgia which can influence customers' emotions and decision-making. An example of online cinematic tricks used for manipulating customers is when a food company uses exaggerated close-up shots of their product in action, with steam and sizzle sound effects to make the food look and sound more appetizing than it actually is. This kind of manipulative tactics can surely be counted as misleading as they have a great

influence on customers.

In their defence, marketing companies claim that online ads don't exaggerate, people do. Ads can use persuasive language and imagery to promote products and services, but they don't create false claims or misrepresentation. People's exaggerations may be based on subjective and biased opinions. Moreover, people exaggerate without consequences and their overstatements often go unchecked. For example, a phone company may advertise that their battery lasts up to 12 hours, but a person may claim that it last for 24 hours even though he did not use it continuously. So it is very much possible that this exaggerating tendency of people ~~puts~~ misguides them rather than the advertisements themselves.

In addition, they also claim that concealment of information is impossible in this internet oriented era. Customers have access to a wide range of products & services online, including reviews, ratings and comparisons. Online ads are subject to scrutiny and evaluation by customers, who can report false and misleading ads to regulators and consumer advocacy groups. If a customer is interested in buying a product online they can search for more information using the internet and reviews and ratings provide additional ease in making an in-

formed decision. Hence, online ads cannot conceal any information related to products as it is readily available on various websites and social media platforms.

Besides, Ads are a form of creative expression aimed at motivating and inspiring people. They can be visually stunning and emotionally inspiring and can tap into universal human desires such as happiness, love and success. In this way, they never let the air of a healthy competition cool down which is of utmost importance for human growth. A fantastic commercial from 'Canon' shows not photographers, but adventurers, using their product. The first part of commercial highlights amazing experiences like running from girabbes, alongside more regular events, dad climbing on a snowy roof doing who knows what. But some amazing pictures are displayed at the end, the music escalates at just the right time and the tagline "long live imagination" comes along.

Corey wainwright, most uplifting commercials of all time, 2021). Therefore, it would be unjust to blame ads for setting unrealistic trends for the sake of customer manipulation, when a whole lot of them is trying to set healthy trends aimed at motivating and inspiring.

Furthermore, recency bias is utilized ~~to~~ ~~prev~~ by different applications

and websites utilize recency bias to provide personalized ads experiences by search engine optimization; a harmless marketing strategy. Websites use recency bias to adhere to the best SEO practices. Providing fresh content that aligns with current trends and events helps websites to stay competitive in search engine rankings. This does not necessarily involve manipulation but is a common strategy employed to improve visibility and reach. For instance, According to a study by parse.ly i.e. "Are more posts, less traffic a sign of audience engagement?" published in October 2019; keeping the content fresh and relevant encourages audience engagement and loyalty. Thus, the concept of keeping the content up-to-date aligns with recency bias for audience engagement and manipulation.

Not to mention, cinematic tricks serve the function of grabbing customer attention rather than manipulating them into buying products. Techniques such as special effects, camera angles, lightening and sound designs are used to elicit emotional responses from the audience. They make the ad appealing, increase viewer anticipation and engagement and increase audience retention and recall. A study from discusses how story telling in advertising is used to catch viewer's attention and evoke emotional responses, examples include ads like google's "loretta" super bowl commercial.

(J.F and Stern B.B, narrative advertising strategies and consumer engagement, 2020)

Hence, the purpose is grabbing attention not manipulation.

Nevertheless, the influence of advertisements on people's behaviours cannot be denied. Online ads are often tailored based on user's online activities, search histories and social media profiles which can create an illusion of personal relevance, persuading people to take actions. This personal relevance supplemented with the bombardment of repetitive stimuli of frequent advertisements makes people take actions that they would not have considered otherwise. 'Advertisers often use geo-targeting to show location-specific ads, leveraging people's proximity to influence their behaviours. This is a manipulative technique as it exploits spontaneous decision making' (Kim K. & Johnson K, personalized online ads and consumer responses, 2021). Hence, the influence of online ads on people's behaviour is undeniable which adds to the argument of manipulative function of online ads.

Moreover, the concealment of information is not as impossible as some might claim as the consumer range is very wide and the knowledge basis of customers vary from individual to individual. Many online services offer complex and

lengthy terms and conditions which the customers cannot fully understand and a lot of crucial information is hidden in fine prints. This practice can mislead consumers by presenting a skewed picture of the product. For example, in a study conducted by Obar J.A, titled 'The biggest lie on the internet' published in 2020 it was observed that ~~only~~ 74% of the individuals who encounter terms and conditions online, skip the reading part or even if they do, don't understand it completely.

Therefore, the complexity and length of terms and conditions is a form of information concealment and hence a misleading tactic.

Some online advertising strategies target people's insecurities or anxieties to sell products or services. The goal is often to create a perceived need or problem that their product can solve. For doing so, they emphasize flaws of individuals, feeding their insecurities for their own sake. For instance, weight-loss product ads often show dramatic before-and-after pictures and offer quick results. These ads are leveraging people's insecurities about body image. Therefore, we can consider exploiting public's insecurities for financial gain as a manipulative and misleading tactic.

Clickbait articles and headlines

are very often sensationalized, manipulative and misleading. They use different tactics including exploiting customer's curiosity or creating a sense of urgency etc. to encourage clicks. The actual content might just be mundane and below ordinary. For instance, a headline might say "you won't believe what this celebrity looks like now!," to exploit curiosity and encourage clicks. But the original content might be disappointing (Neil Patel, what is clickbait and why does it work so well?, 2021). This also contributes to negative online experiences and users feel misled and manipulated by such content.

In addition, there is a very narrow line of difference between 'engaging' and manipulation. Engaging content should inform, entertain and connect with the audience in a genuine way. On the other hand, manipulation in content and advertising often involve using deceptive or misleading tactics to influence someone's behaviour or emotions. 'Influence is the ability to affect someone else's behaviour because of your authority, knowledge or relation with that person while manipulation is the power to influence someone else to your advantage. It is often done without other person's knowledge'. (Ben Richardson, The difference between influencing

and manipulating, May 2021). Hence, the marketing agencies should mind this difference to avoid misguiding customers.

In a nutshell, online advertisements guide customers by enhancing accessibility, providing product specific information and providing personalized experience by targeting specific demographics but its intricate strategies often verge more towards misguiding customers than guiding them. Be it exaggeration of product's function, concealment of information, setting unrealistic trends, exploiting recency bias or using cinematic tricks for manipulation of customers, the misguiding tactics of online advertisements cannot be overlooked. But with the collective efforts on individuals, organisations and government the goal of transforming online advertisements from a potentially misleading force into a truly guiding tool can be achieved.