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Unveiling the Influence of Manipulative Marketing Tactics on Young Buyers

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Abstract: ***Shopping decisions are increasingly influenced by manipulation tactics, particularly impacting the vulnerable young buyers who easily succumb to highly persuasive marketing content. While advertisements are designed to raise awareness about organisational offers, the predominant focus in current promotions involves actively pushing products through emotional appeals, giveaways, and endorsements. This study investigates whether young consumers are more susceptible to manipulation today, especially post-pandemic. Additionally, it examines the extent of social media's contribution to manipulating these consumers. Results indicate that the brands exert greater influence on young buyers than in the past with social media subtly embedding convincing subliminal messages.***

Keywords: Manipulation, Social media marketing, advertisement, Word of mouth

1. Introduction

Business firms with sales and push strategies often attempt to manipulate to influence buyers unethically to buy their product or use their service, as everything is fair to them. To influence the shopping decisions, firms develop well spread good tactics, that sometimes include manipulation or subtle subliminal messages that convince you to shop for the merchandise (more straightforward people tend to call it "brainwashing").

Anand Singh et al (2020)[1] through their survey, concluded that, the consumers are being manipulated illegally by the firms for the sake of profits. Shlomo Sher (2011)[2] built a framework for evaluating the immorally manipulative tactics in market used by firms. Cristina-Maria Prelipceanu (2013)[3] , found that, firms manipulated people by employing celebrities, plain folks. They also use flattery technique, bribery technique, expert techniques etc. A few general tactics utilized widely by the brands include

1) Promotions,
2) Expert's Opinions,
3) Social Proofs,
4) Emotions and
5) Product Placements and so on.

Research Questions:

- Do social media manipulate young buyers?
- Do the present-day sellers manipulate more compared to the past?
- Which platform manipulates the young buyers more?

1.1 Promotions

It's true that usually you'll find an honest deal, but sometimes the offers are pure scams because the costs are manipulated. Some vendors raise their prices significantly just before the sales season then spectacularly announce a giant discount. Ultimately, the worth remains on top of before the sale, but the unaware consumers are tempted by the eye-catching "-50%" signs and buy eagerly, thinking they need found a true bargain, but the one that basically benefits from the transaction is that the merchant.

Another common tricks are that the "buy more, pay less", "Hurry up" promotions that cause you to buy over you actually need, sometimes things that you'll never use. It's the other of saving money, but your brain is tricked into thinking that you just like a bargain. Kirk Kristofferson et al. (2014)[4], found through their research that, the consumers when exposed to scarcity promotions behaved aggressively and they tend to buy the product shown in such promotion, even when there are no real competition for them in buying the specific product.

1.2 Expert's Opinions

It's a typical technique to make trust. Often, they're presented as doctors or members of associations with seriously sounding names that decision to mind an officer institution. Why on earth would a health organization promote a specific brand of products?! Nobody knows, and nobody fact-checks this. But even that we don't seem to be really tuned in to it, we unconsciously remember the merchandise as reliable and recommended by experts, and this affects our shopping decisions. Our sub-consciousness does the trick and that we buy the merchandise.

[1] *Singh, A. K., & Kulhari, D. (2022). Addressing Competition Concerns in Big Data. Journal of Legal Studies & Research, 8(1), 193-207.*

[2] *Sher, S. (2011). A framework for assessing immorally manipulative marketing tactics. Journal of Business Ethics, 102, 97-118.*

[3] Prelipceanu, C. M. (2013). Advertising and language manipulation. *Diversité et Identité Culturelle en Europe, X (2)*, 247-254.

[4] Kristofferson, K., White, K., & Peloza, J. (2014). The nature of slacktivism: How the social observability of an initial act of token support affects subsequent prosocial action. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *40*(6), 1149-1166.

Cristina-Maria Prelipceanu (2013)[5] has also found that, firms manipulated people by expert opinion and scientific evidence techniques to prove something. Scientists, doctors and other professionals often appear in advertisements and commercials to create the merchandise or service more credible. It often works because many folks tend to trust scientists and scientific evidence. However, it's important to look at the "evidence" because it is often misleading.

1.3 Social Proofs

Nowadays online research is an integral a part of our shopping habits – shoppers depend upon online reviews, online ratings before they make a sale. Hence, this can be the reason why word of mouth marketing exists. The net is stuffed with fake reviews and fake ratings that were posted either by the corporate employees or those who are being obtained it. WOM (Word of Mouth) may be a business now and there are many agencies that provide these WOM services. These opinions shouldn't be trusted blindly and fairly we are often misled by the manipulative reviews and ratings of these agencies.

Ling LIU et al (2021)[6] did an analysis on the online review and ratings and in their research, they found that, the consumers highly depend on the online reviews and ratings these days and hence the firms can attempt to manipulate the consumer's perception through the WOM (Word of Mouth). They also advice the consumers who rely on the online reviews to not blindly rely on the online reviews and ratings.

Chrysanthos Dellarocas (2006)[7], in his work, found that, internet-based forum opinions influenced the purchasing decisions of the consumers. The consumers were found to be manipulated by the opinion forums running on the internet.

1.4 Emotions

Companies often like to consult with positive emotions to make their brand image. This is one of the most important reasons, why many adverts are purely entertainment oriented and sometimes they don't really appear to be selling their product. This can be how viral content is generated, and it builds positive feelings on the minds of people towards the brand. Fear and anxiety, as an example, are fairly often used as an incentive to shop for instance. Phrases like "last chance!" "Promotion ends soon!", "last piece in stock", "someone just bought this" cause you to end up in a hastily and ill-conceived purchase.

Danang satrio et al. (2011)[8], in their research on viral marketing for cultural product, found that, emotion influences people's purchasing intentions. It makes them participate more than being passive.

1.5 Product Placements

A product inserted in an exceedingly TV program or a movie, really worked well, even when we aren't aware that, for most of the time, we are observing a product of specific type repeatedly, as, it appears only within the corner of the screen. It will become an even more powerful tool, when we just like the character portrayed in it or when we get impressed with the approach to life shown on screen. Once we see that specific placed product while shopping, something will tell us in our heads to try that product if were not familiar to it or we will switch our preference towards it, if it is an alternative to the product we purchase.

Thus, for the sake of increasing their sales and earning profit, consumers are being manipulated by the firms by a variety of tactics these days. And social media may serve as, one of the vital tools of manipulation, for these firms nowadays.

Pamela Miles Homer (2009)[9], found that, when not repeated, product placements can manipulate the consumer's decision making regarding buying of that product. He also mentioned that, the repetition of product placement can impact negatively.

According to Margaret C. Campbell (1995)[10], studied attention-getting advertising tactics in his work and his model helps to examine tactics involved in attention gaining. These are mainly used in advertisement telecasted in television. The study was done to know how well these tactics manipulate audience. To convince customers, television uses various tactics and out of those, one such strategy is, delay brand or mystery ads. Another important tactic is borrowed interest appeal strategy. The research shows that there a gap between personal preference of the customer that changes due to manipulation created due to advertisement and advertisement should add gain to consumer perception rather than manipulating them.

Other than these tactics, techniques like cause-related marketing, and activities like CSR are used by the firms as manipulative tactics these days to influence our decisions. According to Pennie Frow et al. (2015)[11], the CRM, which helps the organisation in gaining the trust and relationship of the consumer may result in manipulation of consumers [6].

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Lissy C. Friedman (2009)[12], through his study on the use of CSR tactics as the defensive tactics by the tobacco industries, found that CSR activities can also manipulate the consumer's perception towards the brand, and it can even bring out positive results, even if the firm sells, product which affect the consumer's health [13].

Michael J Barone et al (2000)[13], done a study about the CRM (Cause-related Marketing), which has an influence on consumer choice. The results show that CRM cues affect choice primarily through compensatory strategies involving trade-offs rather than non-compensatory strategies. The companies supporting social causes can also affect the consumer's choice.

Douwe van den brink et al (2006)[14] done a research study on the effect of cause-related marketing and their strategies as well as tactics on consumers. Their paper also discusses the link between cause-related marketing and brand loyalty. The result of their study shows that CRM campaigns enhances consumer's brand loyalty for low involvement products. Thus, CRM can be used as a manipulative tool to enhance the brand loyalty for low involvement products.

Charles H. Noble et al. (2009)[15], in their research work found that the OBC (Online Brand Communities) can be utilized as effective tools to influence sales by manipulation. This tactic is also used for retaining the old and new consumers by few firms.
Allison J. Lazard et al. (2020)[16], in their research found that, the photo manipulation positively influenced consumer preferences towards the brands. They also questioned the efficiency of people's skill of visual literacy, as in their work, they found out that, the visual photo manipulation tactics worked strongly.

Role of Social Media in manipulation:
Billions of people are active in social media like facebook, twitter and instagram every day. Social media helps in viral exchange of information, and it is public domain. According to Oren Gil-Or (2010)[17], social media marketing has become one of the most attractive sources of marketing, especially, Facebook. His paper, approaches on creating demand with this approach of using Facebook for marketing. The research of his claims that, single message can spread like wild fire in a really faster away in Facebook and using this, companies can spread their messages virally. In this way, Facebook and other social media platforms can be used as a social media tactics tool.

In their work, Terry Daugherty et al (2014)[18], concluded that, within a network of consumers in social media, the quantity of information dissemination is found to be incredible, as social media like Facebook, grow exponentially in this internet era.

Ivona Stoica and Elisabeta Ioanăs (2014)[19] in their study concluded that, social media had a role in impacting the consumer's behaviour, especially when, the consumer is about to make a purchase. Semaan, Kocher, Stephen Gould et al (2018)[20] in their research, found that, digitally manipulated advertisements created more favourable brand attitudes, though they are thought to perceive as immoral.

2. Research Methodology

In this study, the researchers have conducted a survey via Google form, in which the investigators have interviewed the respondents with simple nominal scales. The form is circulated mostly to people of age ranging from 15 to 25. People of age between 15 and 24 is 248.55 million in India which is around 17.7 4 % of the total population. The convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, is used for choosing the sample population from the targeted population from chosen cities in South India for this study.

The main purpose of the survey was to find, whether the sellers manipulate the young consumers more compared to the past and to find out the importance of social media in it. Around 120 responses were collected on which appropriate statistical analysis were carried out to test the hypotheses.

3. Analysis and Discussion

H_{a1}: There is significant association between the age category and manipulation of young buyers.

[12] Friedman, L. C. (2009). Tobacco industry use of corporate social responsibility tactics as a sword and a shield on secondhand smoke issues. Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics, 37(4), 819-827.
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[14] *Van den Brink, D., Odekerken-Schröder, G., & Pauwels, P. (2006). The effect of strategic and tactical cause-related marketing on consumers' brand loyalty. Journal of consumer marketing, 23(1), 15-25.*
[15] *Adjei, M. T., Noble, S. M., & Noble, C. H. (2010). The influence of C2C communications in online brand communities on customer purchase behavior. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 38, 634-653.*
[16] *Lazard, A. J., Bock, M. A., & Mackert, M. S. (2020). Impact of photo manipulation and visual literacy on consumers' responses to persuasive communication. Journal of Visual Literacy, 39(2), 90-110.*
[17] *Gil-Or, O. (2010). Building consumer demand by using viral marketing tactics within an online social network. Advances in Management, 3(7), 7-14.*
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Table 1: Age * Manipulation of Young Buyers

			Sellers manipulate young buyers		Total
			Yes	No	
Age	15-20	Count	10	6	16
		Expected Count	13.9	2.1	16
	21-25	Count	90	10	100
		Expected Count	86.7	13.3	100
	26-30	Count	2	0	2
		Expected Count	1.7	0.3	2
	Above 31	Count	2	0	2
		Expected Count	1.7	0.3	2
Total		Count	104	16	120
		Expected Count	104	16	120

Table 2: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.663[a]	3	0.022	0.042
Likelihood Ratio	8.055	3	0.045	0.042
Fisher's Exact Test	7.807			0.046
N of Valid Cases	120			

5 cells (62.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .27.

Table 3: Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.	Exact Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	0.284	0.022	0.042
	Cramer's V	0.284	0.022	0.042
N of Valid Cases		120		

P Value = **0.042,** at Alpha, **α = 0.05.** Since 4 cells (62.5%) have expected count less than 5, and Fisher's Exact Test result was used instead of Chi square result. Fisher's Exact Test P Value = 0.046; Cramer's V value is 0.284.

Result: P Value < Alpha, α; P-value (**0.046**) < **0.05**, Reject **H_o**, Null Hypothesis.

Discussion: There is significant manipulation targeted at the young buyers . Also, the descriptives reveal that out of 120 responses, 104 agreed that the firms manipulate the consumers more nowadays compared to the past. 104 out of 120 is a huge proportion and indicates that, 5 out of 6 people chosen randomly, agrees to the statement. The level of dependency or association of two variables can be obtained from the Cramer's V value. In this case, the obtained **Cramer's V value is 0.284**, which tells us that the conclusion is moderately strong in association.

H_{a2}: There is significant association between "Social media manipulates young consumers" and "Age Categories"

Results and Discussion H_{a2}: At an alpha level of 0.05, with dof = 6, Fisher's Exact Test P Value = 0.010 was obtained; Cramer's V value is 0.232. P-value (**0.010**) < **0.05**. Social media is the major tool in manipulating young consumers. In this case, the obtained **Cramer's V value is 0.266**, which tells the moderate association. The firms use social media to influence the young consumers. As revealed in the past reviews of literature it is evident that there are numerous social media tactics employed by the firms to manipulate. The youngsters are more prone to these social media tactics.

H_{a3}: There is significant difference in the intensity of manipulation among different modes of marketing communication.

Table 4: Manipulation Intensity x Modes of Marketing Communication

			Modes of Marketing Communication			Total
			Social media	Personal Selling	Mass media	
Manipulation Intensity	High	Count	76	16	12	104
		Expected Count	71.1	18.2	14.7	104
	Low	Count	6	5	5	16
		Expected Count	10.9	2.8	2.3	16
Total		Count	82	21	17	120
		Expected Count	82	21	17	120

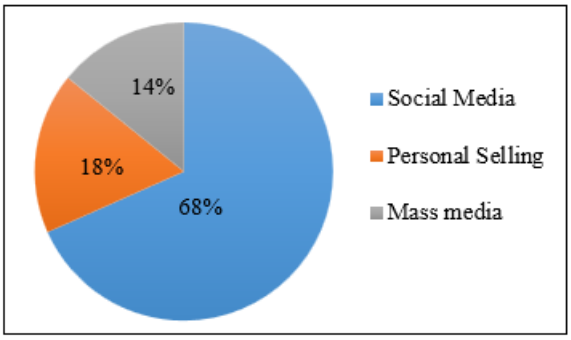
Table 5: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.366[a]	2	0.015	0.019
Likelihood Ratio	7.663	2	0.022	0.029
Fisher's Exact Test	8.257			0.01
N of Valid Cases	120			

The minimum expected count is 2.27.

Discussion: At alpha value of 0.05, the p value (asymptotic significance) is 0.015 and hence its interpreted that there is association between the modes of marketing communication and the intensity of manipulation. Looking back at the descriptives, it is evident that, the firms are using social media as an important tool in influencing the young buyers.

The humongous growth of social media in the current internet era and the growing population of young people using social media can be stated as the two main reasons for firms using social media as their tool in manipulating young consumers. Covid – 19 pandemic has made the virtual space more stronger and so is reflected in the marketing tactics that targets the young buyers. Guided buying could be one solution that will minimize young buyers getting manipulated. Business firms can introspect and understand that tactics is short lived and will damage the sustenance in the long run.



Graph 1: Modes of Marketing Communication

Are Consumer aware?

According to Bang Nguyen et al. (2013),[21] consumers are getting aware of these manipulation tactics and are expecting retailers to be fair enough. They expect fairness not only in terms of price but also in terms of fairness in tactics used. As they mentioned in their work, the number of people getting aware of the fact that, they are being manipulated is increasing. But not all the consumers are aware of these manipulations and not all the consumers know all the tactics of manipulation. Hence, they are still being manipulated, by the subtle subliminal messages that, convince them to shop for the specific product. As Allison J. Lazard et al (2020)[22] through their work on photo manipulation, new manipulation tactics are created continuously by the firms especially in the online platforms and as the consumers are not aware of it, falls for it. Therefore, more awareness is required on manipulation tactics especially among the young buyers.

4. Conclusion

Young buyers are being manipulated by the firms nowadays and awareness regarding this is needed among them. For this purpose, social media plays a vital role and acts as a major tool nowadays than any other media, since, the growth of social media is exponential and young consumers are more glued to social media than to the real physical world. Manipulating consumers is an illegal tactic and it should be controlled and reduced to nil. According to San Bolkan et al. (2009)[23], mostly negative impact is created on an organization only for its mistakes. These mistakes may reach in form of complaints, negative word of mouth, third party action that leads to loss in business. Thus, manipulation tactics should be projected as a firm's mistake, so that the firms may think twice before taking these tactics in their hands. Considering this, one can say that, this manipulation induced buying end up wasting the buyers' money on products which are imposed on them.

5. Research Implications & Future Directions

The study has aimed at guided buying for young buyers and to create awareness in the minds of all the readers about wrong influence and misguidance of young buyers. This study helps to probe more such manipulative tactics used in other platform and raise voice against it. Future researchers can also study the degree to which the social media manipulates the consumers, in influencing their buying habits.

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