

Marketing psychology and the hidden persuaders

PSYCHOLOGY is put to many uses beyond the discipline. In marketing, these can be especially controversial. In 1957 Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* described how the marketing industry used depth psychology and motivational research to manipulate the public. Chapters like 'The psycho-seduction of children' and 'Self-images for everybody' left no doubt about Packard's moral contempt for marketing's uses of psychological techniques. The public was duly appalled. Fifty years later, marketing's persuasive role is generally accepted as part and parcel of the neo-liberal economic agenda.

Even so, residual suspicion of marketing's psychological influence remains, and not only from those repelled by the coercive strategies of big business. Marketing techniques are blamed for rising childhood obesity and alcohol misuse, not to mention cigarette-related disease, the decline in public manners and countless other social ills from avarice to anorexia. The subtext of this criticism is that marketing's effect is psychological because it influences people to do things that harm themselves and others.

Some suspicions about the psychological influence of marketing are unjustified. For example, many consumers express a belief in 'subliminal' advertising effects, though there is no evidence that promotions flashed on the TV screen for less than 1/16 of a second either occur (OfCom rules forbid them) or could be effective in directing behaviour. Other criticisms are taken very seriously. For example, the UK Advertising Standards Authority recently banned a series of Smirnoff Vodka ads featuring a quirky character called Uri because, in their opinion, his 'disregard for authority and



CHRIS HACKLEY feels that a modern understanding of the psychology involved in marketing can help us to critically engage with it.

socially acceptable adult behaviour' would make Uri a 'cult figure' with under 18s, breaching the revised code of practice on alcohol advertising. This kind of argument seems to rest on an implicit theory of social group influence.

In this article I want to offer a personal point of view on the uses of psychology in marketing. I feel that these are not necessarily shameless, spurious or sensational. In fact, I will suggest that the influence of psychology can enable a more thorough critical engagement with marketing practices.

The science of consumer control!

Many social scientists have little time for the instrumentalism and intellectual shallowness they see in management research. And marketing is, of course, guilty as charged. One particularly galling example is the way Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is invoked in most standard marketing text books to imply that brand consumption is a natural and inevitable expression of human drives. These texts neglect to mention the humanist agenda which drove Maslow's work and made his hierarchy more suitable as a rationale for less, rather than more, consumption.

The way marketing has used psychology to beef up its claims has even attracted critical comment from some marketing academics themselves (e.g. O'Shaughnessy, 1997). Others have pursued a rigorously psychological research agenda in marketing (Foxall, 1997, 2000). There is a dedicated academic journal, *Psychology and Marketing* (published by Wiley), which pursues the cross-disciplinary agenda; and a few others such as the *Journal of Economic Psychology* (Elsevier). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the bulk of published research in marketing makes little explicit use of psychological theory.

The nearest thing to an exception is advertising. Ad agencies have pursued an active interest in psychology since J.B. Watson applied his behaviourist theories to a very successful career with J. Walter Thompson. Today, surveys and experiments are often used to 'copy test' audience recall or to measure attitudes in response to creative executions. The pseudoscience of 'psychographics' was invented on Madison Avenue. It's a technique of categorising consumers according to their 'values and lifestyles', the better to exploit their deep motivations. Tests of physiological response to ads are not unknown, with ad-watching consumers wired in to tachistoscopes or psychogalvanometers. There is currently a buzz around the idea of 'neuromarketing', the use of MRI scanners to isolate activity in brain receptors on exposure to marketing stimuli.

Yet the general picture of the use of psychology in academic marketing is bleak. It tends to be invoked to present marketing as a (positivistic) science of consumer control. But, after over 100 years of research in marketing and consumer science, debate still rages on how, or if, advertising 'works'; failed products are as common as ever, and angry customers still throng 'customer service' departments. Most top-tier marketing and advertising journals look, at a glance, like light reading for physicists, with their elaborate cause-effect models and experimental reporting style. These articles claim to reflect the agenda of management, yet it is a remarkable manager indeed who has ever read one.

A different approach

Packard assumed that the 'hidden persuaders' were successful, and his legacy continues to this day. The latest craze for hugely expensive 'neuro-marketing' initiatives indicates the need corporates have to pursue a scientific agenda of consumer control. Yet for me, Packard's

WEBLINKS

Advertising Standards Authority:

www.asa.org.uk/asa/adjudications/public/

ESRC alcohol and identity research project:

www.identities.org.uk

Using psychology for marketing strategy:

www.marketingpsychology.com

Weblog: www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog

vision of marketing manipulation isn't plausible on an individual level. The science of consumer control simply isn't advanced enough to have such an effect. Perhaps research that looks inside our heads for marketing's effects only finds half the answer.

Perhaps it is work from outside the mainstream, deploying psychology in pursuit of a more critical agenda in marketing and consumer research, which should complete the picture. For example, in the 1980s a small but influential body of work began to challenge the dominant economic model of the 'rational' consumer by adapting experiential, existential and humanistic psychology to explore consumer fantasies, hedonism and emotionality (Hirschman, 1986; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Since then, other work has built on this 'interpretive turn' in marketing and consumer research (Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1988) exploring, for example, consumer irrationality (Elliott, 1997) and the ways in which brands act as symbolic resources for the production of social identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

My own uses of psychology in my research lean toward these traditions. While teaching business I studied Open University modules for my BPS conversion diploma. From this I learned Margi Wetherell and Jonathan Potter's discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). I used my take on it in my PhD research to look at the creative advertising process in top London advertising agencies (described in Hackley, 2000). I couldn't get to grips with previous research which positioned creativity as a set of traits and located it inside the head of one individual. It felt more intellectually satisfying to look at this in terms of the language and symbolism arising from an interactional context. After all, advertising tends to be collaborative rather than individual: creative partners working on a brief will still be influenced by the opinions of account planners, clients, senior executives, the consumers and others.

In recent years more discourse-based critical approaches have emerged in the

marketing literature (e.g. Brownlie *et al.*, 1999). I have drawn on the psychology of rhetoric and ideology (e.g. in Billig, 1987, 1991) to try to show how popular marketing texts themselves act as ideological conduits in the field (Hackley, 2003). I have also looked critically at the way ad agencies use qualitative research (Hackley, 2002). Work in this vein suggests that the influence of marketing lies not only in its ability to draw on massive resources to control consumers with behavioural science. Its also has a more subtle role as an ideological apparatus, normalising expressive consumption and mobilised in the language and discourse of management education and marketing practice. In fact, I would suggest that

marketing's influence is more powerfully explained by exploring its ideological character than by conducting experiments to see whether some people prefer blue socks or red ones.

Some current projects

Positivistic approaches still dominate research in marketing but far more interesting, to me at least, are consumer culture-based studies which investigate the ways in which marketing practices frame our lives, goals and senses of identity. One of my PhD students, Norman Peng, is studying viewers' responses to political advertisements (singled out for criticism by Packard). Another, Amy Tiwsakul, has used depth interviews, focus groups and auto-ethnographies to explore young consumers' engagement with product placement on TV (Tiwsakul *et al.*, 2005).

This is the kind of marketing practice often described (inaccurately) as 'subliminal' because viewers are seldom consciously aware that a brand appearing in the script or scene of a TV show (or computer game, novel or movie) has been strategically placed for commercial ends. Indeed, cognitive research has suggested that people don't really notice placements. Brand recall and 'intention to purchase' scores after exposure tend to be very weak. But viewers feel that brands add realism and relevance and marketers are very keen to exploit this direct route into consumer experience (Hackley & Tiwsakul, 2006).

So what has our research approach revealed about how people engage with product placement? It transpires that young consumers draw on their knowledge of TV product placements as a resource in self-positioning discourses (Tiwsakul & Hackley, in press) in much the same way as they use conventional advertising (O'Donohoe, 1997; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). In other words, young consumers draw on advertising for cues about displaying and affirming their senses of identity. For example, Ritson and Elliott (1999) conducted an ethnographic study in British schools which revealed how important advertisements were to adolescents as conversational gambits. Talking about the funniest or cleverest ads was a way of displaying personal values and group membership. In this sense the ads a person thought were cool helped to define their social positioning.

This use of advertising is not necessarily connected to consumption of brands – rather, it is about the consumption of brand advertising. A discourse-inspired psychological approach reveals that advertisements are an important form of social communication quite apart from their role in selling stuff.

Our qualitative research has also suggested that placements within the dramatic context of a TV show resonate with young viewers' experience and can access episodic memory, kicking in when the viewer recreates the experience portrayed in the TV drama. For example, one respondent claimed that she recalled a product placement for the Dairy Queen ice cream parlour (a well-known brand in Asia) only when she walked past the store on her local high street. A lot of cognitive research in this field assumes that semantic memory holds the key to predicting

consumer behaviour – if a brand is recalled after exposure to a marketing stimulus, maybe it will be bought. No one has yet tried to test the extent to which the dramatic realism of entertainment programming creates cues for episodic recall, probably because it is hard to fit such a construct as episodic memory into the experimental paradigm.

The effect of product placement can also be partly explained through the ideological notion of ‘normalisation’. Placement effects may be partly a matter of recall, but more importantly, putting brands in entertainment normalises them as inevitable accessories to everyday social life.

DIMENSION FILMS/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

Another exciting project I am involved with that combines psychological investigation and marketing is called Branded Consumption and Identification: Young People and Alcohol. It is funded by the ESRC under the Identities and Social Action theme (www.identities.org.uk) and led by Chris Griffin, Professor of Psychology at the University of Bath. The project team has reviewed a vast range of alcohol brand marketing practices in the UK and is now well into the data-gathering phase with focus groups, depth interviews and fieldwork around the social life and drinking practices of young people in three UK regions. The project is topical, given the current moral panic about ‘binge’ drinking. Some of the criticism of alcohol marketing seems fuelled by the overtly sexualised and gendered advertisements that were seen before the recent regulatory clampdown.

Our initial readings of the data sets suggest that branded alcohol has a role in

orienting and adding nuance to young people’s discourses of ‘going out’. The drinking stories of friendship and hi-jinks are often engaging and sometimes colourful (‘eyeballing’ and ‘funnelling’ are two drinking games you won’t see in polite salons). But, above all, they are social. Alcohol brands, along with clubs, music and fashion constitute a discursive

landscape which young people seem to draw on in complex ways to perform social competence and accomplish identity positioning strategies. Sensational headlines mask a cultural phenomenon in

which marketing is deeply implicated.

But, however amoral marketing practice may be, simple cause and effect cannot easily be assigned, and the moral high ground is already too crowded to accommodate all the marketing critics. Seen through a sociological social psychological lens, marketing wields a powerful influence within a richly symbolic interactional context. Marketed brands nuance the meaning of everyday interaction. For drama buffs, life is a stage: but for marketers, it’s a product placement opportunity.

Potent partners?

Vance Packard’s disapproval of marketing’s psychological influence would receive a ready hearing were it published in 2007. If anything, our suspicion of marketers has deepened even as our obsession with brands has grown. You may think that marketers contribute to this negative PR by making overblown claims about our techniques – I couldn’t possibly comment. But it seems clear that psychology and marketing make potent partners. If academics widen our perspective to take in the sociological social psychology of marketing we might demystify it and its practitioners just a little, and perhaps at the same time offer a more telling critique of its unintended or marginal effects.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Is the integrity of the discipline compromised by psychology’s involvement in marketing and advertising?

Does Packard’s vision still have relevance given the alleged sophistication of modern consumers?

Should psychology play a greater role in advertising regulation and public policy?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail ‘Letters’ on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute (members only) via www.psychforum.org.uk.