Propaganda Techniques in Advertising: The Oblivious Consumer

Trisha McIntyre

Sullivan College of Technology and Design
When considering propaganda, the first thought that comes to mind is likely war or politics. Throughout history, there are many examples of propaganda, one group or regime seeking to control another; however, the average person encounters propaganda everyday. President of the Marketing Firm Yankelovich, Jay Walker-Smith said, "Everywhere we turn we're saturated with advertising messages trying to get our attention, we've gone from being exposed to about 500 ads a day back in the 1970’s to as many as 5,000 a day today"(Johnson, 2006). Propaganda is a powerful and persuasive form of communication though the term isn’t widely used today; its techniques are still employed in advertising. It is not uncommon for advertisements to use propaganda techniques to grab our attention by using our emotions and relying on our initial reactions, these ads are constructed in hopes to bypass intellect and reason in order to sell their products. In this paper, I will define propaganda and its origins and describe techniques used by propagandists and advertisers alike, while investigating what types of propaganda we identify with.

Propaganda comes from the Latin word “propagare” meaning “to sow or propagate (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2012, p.2). The Oxford English Dictionary defines propagate as to “Spread and promote (an idea, theory, etc.) widely.” The dictionary also defines the word propaganda as “chiefly derogatory Information, especially of a
biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view (oxforddictionary).

“In its origins “propaganda” is an ancient and honorable word. Religious activities, which were associated with propaganda, commanded the respectful attention of humankind. It was in later times that the word came to have a selfish, dishonest, or subversive association” (AHA, 2013).

History has sullied the word and its uses; propaganda in it’s most recognizable form was used to spread hate and fear, most notably during times of conflict.

Controlling people through their beliefs is not a new concept. The battle for peoples minds dates back to Ancient Athens, where Greeks who had different political and religious views used games, theater, assembly, law courts and religious festivals to propagandize their ideas and beliefs (AHA, 2013). Propaganda has continued throughout the ages and can be seen being used during World War I and World War II as a political tool for recruiting and most notably by Nazi Germany. As Eskilson states, “Scholars consider the Nazi regime to be one of the most media-aware governments of the twentieth century. The Nazis used mass media in order to sway public opinion” (Eskilson, 2007, p.266). Hitler enlisted Graphic Designers to illustrate some of histories most prolific war posters that vary from portraying Hitler as the protector of Germany to emotionally manipulative posters like Chamberlin’s Work, which depicts assumed dead German civilians with a photo of British Prime minister, Neville
Chamberlin. Iconic posters like Norman Rockwell’s “Save Freedom of Speech, 1943 poster” advertising “War Bonds” appealing to the contrast of American society to that of Nazi Germany (Eskilson, 2007, p.283). These propaganda techniques, while different, accomplished the same goal, which was uniting each nation to its leaders in support of a war.

Terence Qualter says there are four basic criteria for successful propaganda: it must be seen, understood, remembered and acted on. The combination of these 4 components is paramount for effective visual communication (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p.299). Through the study of propaganda, designers can create powerful communications, the kind that raises awareness to social or political issues, though it’s most commonly seen in advertising, designers have always played the role or messenger.

The seven-devices of propaganda analysis first appeared in November 1937 in the second issue of Propaganda Analysis, the bulletin of the newly chartered Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) (Sproule, 2015). The article explained that we are fooled by propaganda because we don’t recognize it when we see it. The seven propaganda techniques are as follows: Card stacking, Testimonial, Glittering generalities, Transfer, Plain folks, Bandwagon, and Name-calling. These techniques are used by many advertising agencies throughout the world and have been adapted to suit their needs. Card stacking is showing a product’s best features, telling half-
truths and ignoring or lying about its potential problems or side effects (where drug companies are concerned). Another device see often in advertising is Testimonial, this is where the use of a well known respected person often celebrities or political figures are used to endorse a product or service (athletes selling sport drinks). The third technique is Glittering generalities, this is the use of virtuous words or ideas to evoke a positive response or approval from the intended audience, words associated with values or patriotism (McDonalds is America’s favorite). Transfer is another technique used that relates something or someone respected with a product. Symbols are commonly used in Transfer, for example, flags, crosses, statue of liberty, sex appeal, power and money are all effective symbols. The use of Plain folks, another technique, is where everyday people are used to sell a product or service giving the impression that “they’re one of us” we use it you should too. Another propaganda technique advertisers use is bandwagon where “everyone is doing it”. The act of persuading consumers to take a course of action based on what others are doing, be on the winning side and join the millions. Lastly, name calling, is the use of names or words to evoke hate or fear, an example, by saying “foreign” rather than “imported” when it comes to non-native materials is enough to perhaps persuade a consumer to buy into your product vs. the other (McClintock, 2003).

Today, propaganda techniques are used in everything we see from media coverage, radio, product advertising, to fast food restaurants. According to the American Historical Association, “Recent economic changes have expanded the volume of propaganda. Under the conditions of mass production and mass
consumption, techniques of propaganda and public relations have been greatly
developed to help sell commodities and services and to engender good will among
consumers, employees, other groups, and the public at large” (AHA, 2012). Osgood
concludes that,

[T]he days of brazenly propagandistic posters and radio broadcasts may
have faded into history, but the science of propaganda has simply evolved
into less overt forms of image making and media manipulation. Paralleling a
broader development in international politics, where symbols and images
loom large as critical components of political power, the phenomenon of
posturing for public opinion has become increasingly sophisticated, involving
such techniques as staged media events, generated news, orchestrated public
appearances, and carefully scripted sound bites. The communication
techniques that camouflage modern propaganda have obscured the basic fact
that the end of the Cold War has brought about more propaganda, not less
(Osgood, 2002).

Osgood describes a modernized version of propaganda techniques and its
uses in today’s world. The truth in Osgood’s claims can be seen on any News channel
today. Propaganda in its original wartime uses still exists and is used today by
governments and organizations, an example, Islamic State (Isis) is using the west’s
media tools and techniques against it. “Isis has proved fluent in YouTube, Twitter,
Instagram, Tumblr, internet memes (see: #catsofjihad) and other social media”
(Rose, 2014). Isis targets Islamic people in their propaganda hoping to recruit to
their cause. The goal of propaganda is to control what people believe, it’s about ideology, political, religious or otherwise. He who controls the public mind controls the public. Advertising is all about appealing to your prospective consumer, and propaganda techniques lends well to manipulating beliefs.

The world is comprised of companies, which pay millions and millions of dollars in advertising each year, using advertising techniques to convince people to spend their money buying the company’s products or services. Advertising techniques include most if not all propaganda techniques, and have been utilized since the dawn of modern advertising in the 1920’s. Edward Bernays, a pioneer in advertising and propaganda, first introduced these techniques with tobacco advertising. History tells us how successful those campaigns were, During World War II; cigarette companies put free cigarettes in American soldier’s rations. With cigarette sales at an all-time high companies were able to solidify loyal customers after they returned home from the war (Vernellia, 1999).

Since then, advertising and propaganda have gone hand-and-hand with the lines becoming so blurred, it’s hard to differentiate one from another, thus making it harder to identify propaganda techniques when they are being employed. I conducted research which depicts how people blur those lines by exploring our reactions to propaganda. Nine images were chosen, that contained both historic/iconic propaganda images and modern advertisements/images using propaganda techniques. I received nearly forty-five submissions from participants aging between 18-70 years old. Facebook was the primary tool used to deploy the survey as well as a physical handout containing the same survey. I used a
qualitative research method to better understand how we respond to propaganda images. I was able to identify two categories based on the responses received, which resulted as historical propaganda and modern propaganda. When showed an image of Uncle Sam 85% of the respondents positively identified the image as propaganda.

This image of Uncle Sam was created for propaganda purposes during WW1 era, used to recruit US soldiers and has since become a historical icon of America.

When shown this iconic image of a Coca-Cola Advertisement of an 1900’s style nurse, the same 85% of participants responded to the image as propaganda.

Both images are example of iconic/historic propaganda used back in WW1-WW2 eras that is when most American's were introduced to propaganda techniques. Coca-Cola is one of the longest standing companies who used these techniques still today making them highly identifiable; however, when showed a modern Coca-Cola advertisement, 55% responded that they believe it to be propaganda.

When given another modern advertising image of Jared from Subway, only half the respondents identified it as propaganda. This is a common propaganda technique called “Plain Folk", the use of
regular people to promote and endorse your products or services. When comparing historic vs. modern propaganda images, people most commonly identify with historic images. On average only 50% of the people who took the survey can identify advertising propaganda, which means that leaves 50% that can not
determine it when seen. The higher percentages on average 85%, of the people can identify historic or iconic propaganda.

It’s concerning how easily people can be swayed with propaganda in advertising; the ability to think and act for oneself is jeopardized by the need to influence consumers’ decisions. While statistically, based on my research findings, at least half the people are unaware of the techniques used in advertising when they are exposed to them. This explains why, in 2010 advertiser’s spent an estimated $143 billion in the United States and $467 billion worldwide on advertising (WPP, 2011). The motivation is astoundingly clear, if a company can afford to spend that much on advertising, how much are they making off their consumers. Propaganda techniques are very powerful tools, and when used in advertising are effective, which is why they are still used by and large today. As consumers, it’s important we think for ourselves and base our decisions on factual information by researching and analyzing the information we’re given. Educating yourself on the techniques advertisers use enables you to identify them when they are being used thus giving you the tools you need to make an informed decision.


Internet Sources


Images:

Rockwell
https://lh5.ggpht.com/OcvRhXfDBLevKbRGL1SopTq0izNyHL690dw_eZC89gkn1VZ-8h1HPE6ctxpWVG2ji_eH=s85

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Uncle Sam

Jared Subway
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