Influence & Persuasion: Crash Course Media Literacy #6

Crash Course: Media Literacy
https://youtube.com/watch?v=VXhLmkrN0-I
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/VXhLmkrN0-I

Let's play a little game of "name that tune." I'm going to start singing a tune, and I want you to see if you can finish it without me. Ok, here goes: [singing] "Ba da ba ba ba…" What about, [singing] "I am stuck on Band Aid Brand…." Did you hear that in the little kids' voice? That's a cute one. Ok last one: [singing] "Gimme a break, gimme a break." C'mon you had to know that one. If you didn't' finish at least one of those I'd be shocked.

These little songs advertisers use in commercials are called jingles, and you know these popular ones because they were written specifically to get stuck in your head. Catchy tunes are just one technique advertised use to get you to remember them, and hopefully, buy their stuff.

For years, psychologists and sociologists have studied why humans buy things, and brands use that research to hack our brains and open our wallets. By applying the skills we've learned so far, we can protect ourselves from buying yet another fancy Frappuccino off the no-so-secret secret menu. Today we're going to un-hack your brain on advertising.

[Opening music]

First things first: let's define advertising and its close cousins, public relations and propaganda. An advertisement is a public notice promoting a product, even, or service. Advertising is the art of creating those. Sometimes brands create ads themselves, and sometimes they hire companies to do it for them. Yes, just like the people from Mad Men.

Public Relations, or PR, is something different. PR is the management of the relationship between the public (that's you) and a brand. PR tells the public what the brand is up to and tries to make the brand look as good as possible. They're the people who write the apology when someone makes a mistake or build the hype around the latest iPhone release.

Finally, propaganda is information distributed with the direct purpose of promoting a certain point of view. This info is often misleading or biased, and propaganda is usually used to promote specific political viewpoints. These definitions may seem tidy, but the differences between these fields can be really hard to distinguish out in the real world, especially online.

Don't worry, we'll talk a lot more about propaganda later in the course. Last time on Crash Course Media Literacy, we learned that all media is constructed. Creators make choices each step of the way, from their work's purpose and focus, to the point of view they use to tell their story. Advertisements work the same way, from the split-second ad you swipe through before watching your friends' stories to elaborate movie trailers that get as much hype as the movie itself. On top of that, ads are created using a century's worth of market research: experiments carried out to discover what makes us want to buy things. Advertisers use that knowledge to tap into our desired, often exploiting our most basic needs – not only the food and shelter kind, but the love and belonging kind too.

One of the pioneers of this somewhat sinister art was Edward Bernays. Working in the 1920's and '30's, he wrote: "The human being – male or female – is a herd animal. Man is fearful of solitude…he is more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence." That's from his 1923 book *Crystalizing Public Opinion*, which became a classic in the public relations field. It detailed how humans can be persuaded to change their habits if it will help them to follow the crowd.

Think back to middle school. What was that one trend that everyone had to follow, or you felt totally left out? Friendship bracelets, the latest pair of Jordans, a fidget spinner, one of those little electronic keychain pet, seriously, what was the deal with those things? Chances are you or your friends bought them because everyone else had one – and you wanted to fit in. Advertisement love to play on this need, and that's how trend and fads happen in the first place.

In the 1940's psychologist Abraham Maslow added another piece to this puzzle. He identified a hierarchy of needs he said all humans had. It's set up like a pyramid. At the base, the foundation, all humans need food and water, shelter, and sleep. Just above that, they need to feel safe, too. Then comes the need for love and feeling like you belong somewhere. After that, we need to feel accomplished, like we matter. At the tippy top of the pyramid is the need to fulfill our destiny, to be our best selves. Now all of these needs, combined with our natural desire to follow the crowd, are like little buttons on our hearts and brains. Advertisements press different combinations of buttons in hopes that we'll respond the right way. Usually that means buying their product.

The sales pitch of most modern ads is that Product X will satisfy your need for Y. For example, security systems promise on of our most basic instinct. Safety. We want to be safe, so we buy alarms to keep our the bad guys. And Slim Jims? They promise food – of a sort. Down at the bottom of the pyramid. But some products claim to satisfy multiple needs higher up on that pyramid.

Let's head into the Thought Bubble to take a closer look.

Check out this vintage ad for hair dye. It features Loreal's iconic slogan "Because you're worth it." They've used this slogan more or less since 1971. In this ad, it's used with the claim that this dye is the most expensive in the country. Usually, that's not a great way to sell a lot of anything. But the slogan "because you're worth it" presses a lot of our human need buttons. For starters, any advertisement for hair dye implies that natural hair color is boring. So, for other people to like us, to stick with the herd, our hair has to be a different, better color. But still a pretty normal, human-y color, so we don't stick out from the herd. That's the button for feeling loved and like we belong. But there's also that need for accomplishment, like we matter. We're worth it. The ad is saying, you're hot. You're the best. You deserve this product. You deserve the most expensive dye, even though it's luxury. Nay, because it's luxury.

Not only is this ad an appeal to stick with the herd, to blend in with beauty norms, but it's also an appeal to individualism. Its an appeal to that middle of the pyramid and the tippy top, the desire to become our best selves and rise above the rest of the herd. It's genius, really. If you've ever screamed TREAT YOSELF while splurging on a pair of designer shoes after a long day, you've fallen into this ad trap.

Thanks for the help, Thought Bubble.

Once an advertiser knows which "need button" to press, the need to persuade you that it will work. Turns out that there are a few things that really persuade us.

The first is authority: if we think the person talking is an expert, we're likely to believe them. Like in those "5 out of 5 dentists recommend" toothpaste commercials. Dentists know teeth right?

The next is likeability: if we like them, are friends with them, or trust them, we're also likely to listen. That's why brands used extremely popular and respected celebrities, like say, Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, to sell watches or perfume.

Same with consistency: if what's being said vibes with what we already believe, we'll probably go along with it. If everything you've

heard about this new true crime podcast says its great and thrilling and awesome you probably wouldn't believe your coworker's negative review of it.

If there's a consensus around something, if it's popular, we are easily swayed to think it's good too.

And if we think it's a scarce resource and we could have a piece of it, it's even more attractive. So if everyone else had an iPhone and you didn't, you'd probably really want one. And if a limited edition version came out that was signed by Beyoncé you'd want that one even more.

Advertisers often use these persuasive qualities in benign ways to get us to buy one brand of chocolate of another or something. But they can also be used against us by being baked into false claims. They're not lying, exactly, but making claims based on poor or misleading logic.

One popular type of fallacy in advertising is an appeal to emotions. This is when an ad convinces you to take action by tugging on your heartstrings. Those sad sick dog commercials with the Sarah McLachlan song? That's an appeal to emotions. Just because sick dogs make you sad doesn't automatically mean an organization deserves a donation, it just makes you link the two together, (I mean, please still save the sick dogs, this is just an example folks.)

Then there's the false dilemma, where an ad shows you a limited number of choices so you won't consider all the options. Laundry detergent ads for example, seem to always go "head to head" with another brand, but only one other brand, even though there are dozens.

Another popular one is the red herring, the presentation of something totally irrelevant to distract you from the issue at hand. This happens in politics all the time. Ever seen a TV campaign ad during a local election that shouted something totally unrelated at you? Like, "Don't elect Dan, his daughter eats CEREAL." And suddenly you're wondering what's wrong with cereal until you forget that cereal has nothing to do with politics.

Then there's traditional wisdom, the idea that you should pick something because that's how your grandmom or your old man used to do it. But your old man used a record player because there wasn't any other option, not because he wanted to lug around a crate full of vinyl to every single party. All of these fallacies and persuasive techniques can be used for good and for evil and in between. Public service campaigns can get kids to stop smoking or invest in local journalism. But on the other hand, cosmetics ads can harm teen's body images, causing eating disorders and depression.

The better psychologists an sociologists get at persuading the human brains even if their intentions are good – the better bad actors get at it too. All the more reason to stretch your media literacy muscles.

Today we talked about how advertisements can make you change your mind. Next time on Crash Course Media Literacy we're going to tell you when and where they're doing it. We're going to talk about those creepy targeted ads that follow you around the internet and much, much more.

See you next time. Until then, I'm Jay Smooth.

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