Their product, your money: Persuasive advertising always immorally manipulates consumers

Adverts sell dreams and desires alongside the products they advocate; they convince us to make decisions we never would have made on our own. Do I really need a Nespresso machine just because George Clooney seems to like the coffee? (Nestle, 2025)*. The US alone are forecast to spend upwards of $450 BILLION on advertising in 2025, most of which is becoming 'personalised and targeted digital campaigns'* (Statista, 2024)*. When does persuasion become manipulation, and is it ever okay for companies to change our minds?*

In the following, I'll show persuasive marketing is always immorally manipulative, as no customer would ever endorse the money-making intentions of the advertiser who aims to change their behaviour. Persuasive advertising is a violation of personal autonomy; if we wouldn't make a purchase knowing product specifications alone, we shouldn't accept being manipulated into doing so through targeted ads. Crisp would agree that persuasive advertising is always wrong (Crisp, 1987, pp. 413-414), but I show that his account of manipulation of desires is too restrictive, and that Aylsworth provides a better nuanced account of morally permissible manipulation (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 693). I argue that permissible manipulation is never possible in persuasive advertising, and even 'redemptive moral goods' (Sher, 2011, p. 99) are not a good enough reason to manipulate in advertising. There will always be a better way of achieving mutual benefit between the consumer and the producer than through using persuasive advertising, which violates autonomy.

I define persuasive advertising as marketing that influences consumer decisions without using product related-information or facts, for example, through emotional appeals or deception. For example 'Red Bull gives you wings' (RedBull, 2025) which appeals to the emotional urge to fly away (it may be a metaphor for a caffeine and sugar lift, but red bull definitely does not give you wings), provides extremely minimal information about the product itself. The slogan may deceive customers into believing Red Bull has a special property, aside from the caffeine and sugar effects. In fact, Red Bull had a $13 million lawsuit filed against them in 2014 for deceptive advertising, and paid out $10 to people who had bought the drink since 2002. (Duggan, 2014)

My definition is stricter than Sher's, who describes persuasive advertising as 'influencing consumer decision making in ways other than providing straightforward information' (Sher, 2011, p. 97). Sher's broader definition includes true but indirect advertising, like a celebrity endorsing a product they genuinely use, or product placement in a sports match. For example, if Mo Farah advertises Quorn (Selwood, 2017) because he eats it himself, the ad includes relevant truths which aren't conveyed as straightforward information, aligning with Sher's definition of persuasive advertising. But this definition is too broad to isolate morally problematic persuasive advertising. If Farah doesn't eat Quorn but promotes it for financial gain, the ad becomes deceptive; it may cause the consumer to change their behaviour and buy Quorn under the belief that Farah consumes the product. This example fits my stricter definition of persuasive advertising, aligning with Aylsworth's claim that persuasive advertising refers to manipulative rather than rational persuasion (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 690).

I argue manipulative advertising is always immoral, and leave rational persuasion, which 'allows the ordinary process of decision making to occur' (Crisp, 1987, p. 418), as a morally just form of advertising. I define the term 'rational persuasion' as convincing using truths instead of manipulation, where companies are trying to persuade by giving genuine 'good reasons' (Crisp, 1987, p. 418) to purchase a product. This type of persuasion seems less morally questionable than persuasive advertising, and may even be essential in the purchasing process.

I argue persuasive advertising is morally wrong because it undermines autonomy, the fundamental freedom to choose. Aylsworth adopts a 'historical' conception of autonomy, where a desire is autonomous when the person did not, or would not, resist the process of its creation (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 694). In terms of what this means for advertising, autonomy requires that the consumer accepts the method used to advertise, as well as support the result of this advertising on their desires. This is the conception of autonomy I will use.

Crisp states persuasive advertising 'manipulates a consumer without their knowledge and for no good reason' (Crisp, 1987, p. 413). There are four conditions for autonomy according to him; **autonomous desire**, **rational desire**, **free choice**, and **control**. Persuasive advertising violates all of these (Crisp, 1987, pp. 414-416). **Autonomous desire** is only achieved when first order desires, the desires to act, are consistent with second order desires, the desires for the desire (Crisp, 1987, p. 414). E.g. a first order desire might be the want for ice cream. A second order desire would be the desire not to have this desire for ice cream since you are lactose intolerant. A person doesn't have autonomous desire in this situation, because their first and second desires conflict. **Rational choice** states that desires must not be

created by interference, without your will or knowledge (Crisp, 1987, p. 415). In other words, the consumer must accept how the desire was created. For example, adverts must make it clear that they are adverts, and you must be able to opt out of receiving it if you so choose. **Free choice** requires the consumer to be able to weigh up the reasons they are presented with so that they can evaluate a product on its own merit (Crisp, 1987, p. 415). Producers should exercise transparency, and make it clear what their product offers. Crisp claims that **control** by others occurs when the actor makes the agent act for reasons that the agent would not accept as justifiable. In the case of advertising, when the producer persuades the consumer for their own financial gain, instead of for the good of the consumer, with no regard to how purchasing the product will impact them.
Given that persuasive advertising appears to violate all of these conditions, Crisp claims it is morally wrong (Crisp, 1987, p. 417) to use it.

There are two arguments against this claim. Sher argues that if there is a 'redemptive moral good' (Sher, 2011, p. 99) which outweighs the moral bad brought about by manipulation, then it may be justified. The other is by Aylsworth, who argues that Crisp's account of autonomy is too restrictive and not all types of manipulation are necessarily bad (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 693); if persuasive advertising is done in ways we would allow, and results in ends we would accept, it may not be immorally manipulative (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 697). Aylsworth uses a thought experiment of a man called Ricardo to display how some manipulation could be morally permissible. The example is as follows;

Ricardo takes a questionnaire about the type of media he wants to consume on a social media site. He chooses to consume a range of viewpoints, but when given the option, he only *consumes a specific type of media. The site then uses Ricardo's unconscious desire for sex appeal to manipulate him into thinking that through consuming diverse media, he will enhance his sex appeal. This works; when asked why he consumes this media, he states he enjoys its content, but his real motivation is his unconscious desire for sex appeal* (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 693).

On Crisp's broader account of autonomy, the example would be morally wrong because it violates all four conditions (Crisp in Aylsworth, 2020, p.693). For example, the manipulation itself violates Ricardo's 2nd order desire not to be manipulated, and the desire created in response to wanting sex appeal is not a result of rational persuasion. Aylsworth claims that because Ricardo's desires are being manipulated according to his stated preferences, the manipulation may not undermine his autonomy like Crisp would suggest. In fact, he argues instead that if an actor uses manipulation in a way that the agent would endorse for ends they would accept, then it is a morally permissible type of manipulation (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 695). However, I oppose the claim that it is possible for persuasive advertising to comply with these parameters of moral manipulation; it is not possible for advertising to manipulate for ends we would accept.

I adopt Aylsworth's concept of morally permissible manipulation; there are cases where manipulation is beneficial to the customer, and his conditions for morality allow the manipulated individual to retain their autonomy, given that they would agree to the means and ends of the desire. He explains this more fully through the concept of hypnotism; when a person wants to quit smoking they go to a hypnotist who manipulates their thoughts, helping them to quit. If the customer agrees with the means of manipulation; that they will associate smoking with disease, and the ends; that they choose to stop smoking, then this manipulation is morally permissible. However, I argue that the agent must agree to the means and the ends of the manipulation before it occurs. This is an integral difference between the hypnotism example and the case of persuasive advertising.

In the case of hypnotism, the agent seeks out the service because they want to resist the process of creation of their desire to smoke; addiction. The customer agrees to pay a fee for the service before undergoing any type of manipulation; they consent to the means and ends pre-emptively, and the manipulation itself does not benefit the actor. Alternatively, the purpose of persuasive advertising is to get us to retrospectively consent to ends that we wouldn't agree to before the manipulation, and to cause us to act in a way which benefits the advertiser, against our original judgement. Advertising exists to promote products or services that we wouldn't have wanted to buy otherwise, and since one of the requirements for Aylsworth's morally just manipulation is that it must be for ends we would endorse (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 697), it is never possible for advertising to be permissible.

Aylsworth may argue that, for the case of Ricardo, he did consent to the media he was manipulated into consuming before he was manipulated into consuming it, thus Ricardo could have consented to the ends of his manipulation[1]. What is missing from the example is how the behaviour of the site constitutes advertising. Ads are mentioned (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 693), but it is not specified if these ads exist to get Ricardo to buy a product or why the goal of the company is to increase the range of media that Ricardo consumes.

[1] I ignore the question of if he would have accepted the means of his manipulation; it is only necessary to prove that it is never possible to agree to the ends of persuasive advertising. However, there are also moral problems that arise with the process of manipulation of desires, such as lack of ability to consent.

If there is no incentive for Ricardo to consume a wide range of media for the news site, then the manipulation occurs as a part of the service, and not, as advertising would require, to get Ricardo to change his behaviour to make a purchase or benefit the company. I argue that either Ricardo has not been advertised to at all, or if he has been advertised to in order to get him to purchase something that he didn't initially want e.g. a greater amount of access to the news site, then this is an immoral type of manipulation, because it encourages him to make a decision he wouldn't have made before; an end he would have originally disagreed to.

An alternative response to my view may be that some people would consent to the ends of manipulative advertising before they experience the ads, for example if they have already decided to buy the product before seeing the ad, or if the manipulation does not change their behaviour in a way that causes the consumer to purchase the product. I argue in this case that the advert does not constitute an advert to that consumer; since agreeing to the ends before advertising occurs would mean the consumer has accepted purchasing the product, instead of the alternative ends; not wanting to buy the product. Thus when a consumer has already consented to the ends of advertising, it may still manipulate desires, but separately from promoting the product. The permissibility of the manipulation must still be assessed based on if the consumer would accept the means and ends of the manipulation, but it seems unproductive to argue for or against the moral permissibility of advertising that doesn't work; more morally problematic is advertising which changes the choices of a consumer.

There is perhaps one exception to this, when the consumer is indifferent to the ends. Perhaps you need toothpaste. You know about all the toothpaste brands and their properties. There are multiple brands that you would be happy to purchase given this information but are indifferent between them. Persuasive advertising could convince a consumer to buy one of these brands over another. The consumer would be happy with these ends before the advertising occurs; they need toothpaste. And yet the consumer could be equally convinced by rational persuasion alone, and it seems wrong to manipulate unnecessarily. Another implication of allowing this type of advertising is that other brands the consumer would not previously have accepted could also manipulate the consumer into making a purchase of their toothpaste instead. This is wrong, and yet one cannot differentiate between which brands have the right to manipulate. Thus no persuasive advertising can be morally just when consumers can be justifiably convinced by rational persuasion alone.

Finally, Sher would argue that though the manipulative advertising is wrong, it is possible to mitigate this through ‘redemptive moral considerations’ (Sher, 2011, p. 97) which may justify it. If a product or marketing tactic will benefit a consumer, Sher argues it could weigh against the ‘substantial wrong of manipulation’ (Sher, 2011, p. 112). It could be true that manipulative advertising can bring about great moral goods; if I was manipulated into selling my possessions so I could provide many others with a means to live, it would be a moral good that might be greater than the moral bad of manipulation. This still does not justify the manipulation; it is possible to achieve the same great moral goods with lesser moral wrongdoing; it is therefore not only unnecessary, but morally wrong to persuasively advertise. Even Sher admits that it is very difficult to envision a marketing strategy that is really able to justify the wrongness of manipulation (Sher, 2011, p. 112).

Ultimately persuasive advertising is always immorally manipulative; it undermines consumer autonomy by pursuing ends that consumers would not originally accept. Despite Aylsworth's claims that it may be permissible in some instances to persuasively advertise under a historical account of autonomy (Aylsworth, 2020, p. 694), justification under this account is not possible due to the inherent goal of advertising: to change consumer behaviour. The ends of persuasive advertising, which create desires for products irrespective of the consumer's prior wants, would not be endorsed by consumers. Even the possibility of 'redemptive moral considerations' (Sher, 2011, p. 112) does not justify persuasive advertising, since moral goods pursued through manipulation can be achieved without undermining the autonomy of the consumer. We must therefore move towards ads that respect consumer autonomy and away from manipulative tactics, instead promoting a shift towards marketing which is transparent and reflects genuine product value.

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