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## Brands Increasing Customer Engagement With Manipulative Tactics

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand the psychology of consumers and their reaction to various “marketing” tactics used by companies. Also to analyse various marketing campaigns that use such unethical manipulation tactics to attract and engage consumers.

It is shown and proven time and again that brands use various manipulation techniques to influence the consumer and induce the desire for the product that is being marketed hence increasing the demand for that product which leads to an overall increase in sales.

These tactics vary from brand design to decoy pricing to impulsive buying strategies and many more. These tactics induce or change the perception that these consumers have about the product or the company that is producing them.

The current existence of the digital era has drastically raised the stakes as anyone with the right algorithm can get information about the target audience, target the potential customer base, and manipulate these people by pushing personal agendas of selling the product that they are assigned to market.

Most of these manipulative marketing strategies are unethical, some brands use ethical manipulation to push their product to potential customers of that product. Various marketers and entrepreneurs use this ethical manipulation while marketing through honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness.

The majority of these findings are made through primary research by observing brand, and consumer behaviours and the intersection of both where the consumers are induced with the desire to purchase. Secondary research was also used to interpret the information and gain deeper knowledge on this very topic.

**Keywords-** Marketing, Manipulation, Strategic, Unethical, Tactics, Digital Era

### Introduction

Companies around the world use various techniques, including a lot of manipulation tactics to reach more customers and get them to buy their products. The reason why these tactics are called manipulation tactics is that these marketing tactics lead to a change of belief and thought process of a consumer when looking for a product, or even a service for that matter. These manipulation tactics often lead to the desire to buy the marketed product hence leading to an overall increase in demand for that product. These tactics may be unethical as these campaigns are mainly focused on orchestrating and exploiting the emotions of consumers.

Marketing is the activity that a company undertakes to promote sales of a product or a service. Marketing includes promoting, selling, creating awareness, and tapping potential customers, and usually ends up with the target audience buying the product. The types of marketing are Traditional and Digital. Digital type of marketing is on the rise in the current world due to the rapid growth in urbanisation and technology. Marketers, while running campaigns to market their product or service try to induce the impulse to purchase among their target audience hence trying out unethical tactics like manipulation of consumers to create product demand and boost sales (Twin, 2022).

A desire to reach out and purchase products are ignited by marketers. And to do this, manipulation techniques are often incorporated. However, the AMA's (American Marketing Association). Statement on Marketing Ethics doesn't permit this. Irrespective various companies use strategic manipulative tactics to gain consumer

attention and inflict a tendency in the consumer's mind to purchase that product. And this has become easier with the 'Digital Era' where most urban residents use the internet where they are constantly bombarded with advertisements, notifications, and product-related information to induce the desire to purchase on a subconscious level (Tiautrakul, 2019).

Customer impulses or impulsive buying is a behavioural trait among consumers where they buy certain goods or services without planning. This tendency of the consumer is often exploited and tapped on by various companies and brands where products are strategically placed to manipulate the customer's pre-planned objectives and to influence them into buying that product. We often see impulsive purchases being made near the cashier or register where the customer, while paying adds nearby attractive products to their carts. These decisions are often based on irrational thinking and marketers tap into this tendency of customers to boost sales (Economic Times, 2022).

Inspiration vs manipulation is a topic of interest often trod upon by marketers, whether to sell by inspiration or by manipulation is thought about. Marketers often land on using strategic manipulation techniques as orchestrating consumer behaviour has shown to provide better short-term results in terms of lead generation and increase overall sales of that marketed product. What manipulative campaigns do is create noise in the market around a product to get more customers to buy them but this noise does not work in the long term as manipulation is a trick that can be used only for so long before consumers grow out of them. These manipulative marketing campaigns also cost the marketers more money as these campaigns are extensive and often lead to constantly changing strategies to keep up with 'the trick', to change the message put forth, and to 'innovate' the products (Powers, 2013).

### **Review of literature**

(Murray, 2021) says that signs of digital consumer manipulation include confirming shaming, price discrimination, dark ad patterns, fake reviews, showing fake scarcity, engagement with bots, creating social influence, constant ad exposure, etc. These strategic tactics and psychological factors affect your rational thinking and reasoning process and get you to purchase their product.

(Peek, 2022) explains the science of persuasion as arming reciprocity, commitment, consensus, authority, liking, and scarcity to influence consumer behaviour to generate more leads and increased conversion to sales. The article also describes consumer behaviour as the tendency and reasoning of an individual to purchase from and support certain products from specific brands. Also, it is said not to cross the line between influence and manipulation as it would be disastrous in the long run.

(Short, 2014) provides evidence of how corporations are secretly manipulating consumer emotions. Tactics like in-store music, subtle details in logos, characters on the packaging, jacking up prices to later show a sale, strategic store designs from entry to checkout, smells to gauge customer attention, menu cards with no currency signs, encouraging 'try and buy, etc. These tactics influence customer behavior and engage them for longer amounts of time which results in the customers spending and purchasing more.

(Vartalaap Consulting Services, 2020) talks about the manipulation tactics used by brands to get more customers and why brands need to do this to sustain in the fierce market competition. The article also talks about ethical manipulation which is a must for marketers. Ethical manipulation includes relevance, omnipresence, and intimacy with the customer to create a positive brand value and retain loyal customers. This also avoids the feeling of guilt of unethical customer manipulation on the entrepreneur's and marketer's conscience.

(Sales Manago, 2018) shows how we as consumers are manipulated by marketers by showing us fake reviews, paid expert opinions, paid social media influencer posts, emotional storytelling around the product, strategic product placement, etc. The article also justifies that it is a marketer's job to make us buy their products and to do that marketers must influence our decisions by subtle or blatant manipulation to convert potential customers and leads into sales.

(IJCRT.org, 2020) explains the blurred and constantly thinning line between marketing and manipulation. Brands and companies use stimuli and mechanisms of advertisements to manipulate the consumer also by using exaggerating product quality, emotional persuasion, and inaccurate deceiving advertising.

(Hopper, 2022) tells consumers how persuasion knowledge defends the consumers' interests and can defy manipulation and consumer attempts. One gains and learns about persuasion knowledge right from childhood with the sense to distinguish commercial content. One must know to judge and point out signs of manipulation to evade the brands' influence on one's own purchasing decisions.

(Oldford, 2018) explains how manipulation is actively used in marketing and how it can be used ethically too. Oldford stresses how manipulative marketing is a factor to survive the corporate competition and create raving fans and loyal returning customers of the brand. Ethical manipulation removes the factor of guilt and can also leave a positive imprint on the customers if executed properly. The article also explains to illuminate the pain to make the stakeholders aware of their pains and then guide them and further offer a quality product to solve that (pain) problem. To help the stakeholders they must be manipulated otherwise they may not figure the problem out themselves.

### Research Methodology

The research methodology used here is mainly a survey of the general public on the topic of if they have experienced these manipulative tactics and either has fallen into the trap or evaded it.

Secondary research has also been used by accessing pre-existing research papers and articles by established writers and publishers to gain a deeper knowledge of this topic.

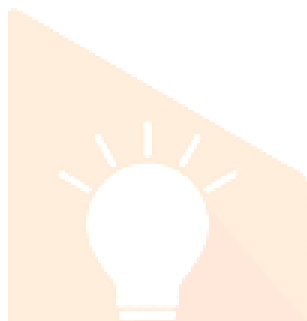
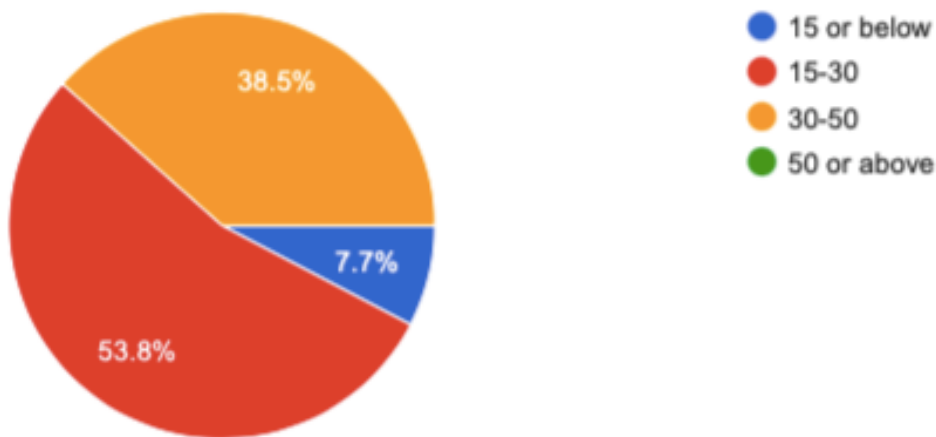
### Concepts

- A. Manipulation- Manipulation is a concept used in reference to the influence of consumer behaviour and emotions to get them to buy the marketed product. All marketing campaigns involve some manipulation either ethical or unethical. Some ethical manipulation is required to birth the impulse, want and desire to purchase the marketed product.
- B. Strategic marketing- This is an essential factor in various marketing campaigns. This process involves the definition and ideation of the marketing mix i.e the 7 P's (Jerome E. McCarthy; Booms and Bitner) which are Product, Price, Promotion, Place, People, Process, and Physical evidence. This Strategic marketing aims at targeting the right audience, marketing their product to that audience, and converting leads into sales. The main objective of this process is to boost/maximise sales.
- C. Decoy pricing- Decoy Pricing is a concept used by salesmen where an unfulfilling product is introduced at an unreasonable price to get customers to purchase the product that is priced higher. This is usually seen in movie theatres and even houses, for example, 3 quantities of popcorn are priced at Rs. 230, Rs. 280, and Rs. 300. And the price difference between the 2nd and 3rd option is high. This gives the illusion of reasonability of the third option and inclines the customer to buy the popcorn at Rs. 300.
- D. Confirm shaming- This is a tactic used usually by subscription plans where the marketers make it very hard to cancel the subscription and on cancellation the decision is shamed with more, better subscription plans, ridiculing consumer decisions and hence limiting and partly violating the consumer's right to choose.
- E. Fake reviews, Fake demand- Many brands, usually E-commerce websites show fake reviews and paid reviews to create a fake positive image of their products to get more footfall consumers widely consider reviews and are inclined to purchase a highly, positively reviewed product
- F. Price illusion- Salesmen raise the price of their product and then later reduce it to give the illusion of a sale to attract more customers. Sometimes what brands also do is reduce already inflated, unreasonable prices to attract more customers with the illusion of reasonability and lower prices.
- G. Price discrimination- Marketers strategically look through geographic demographics where people tend to pay more and mark their product prices higher in that area.
- H. Cookie-related advertisements- Almost all websites on the internet use "cookies" which collect personal information of the user and their internet activity and push related advertisements to nag the customers and inflict an unnatural want to get them to buy the product.

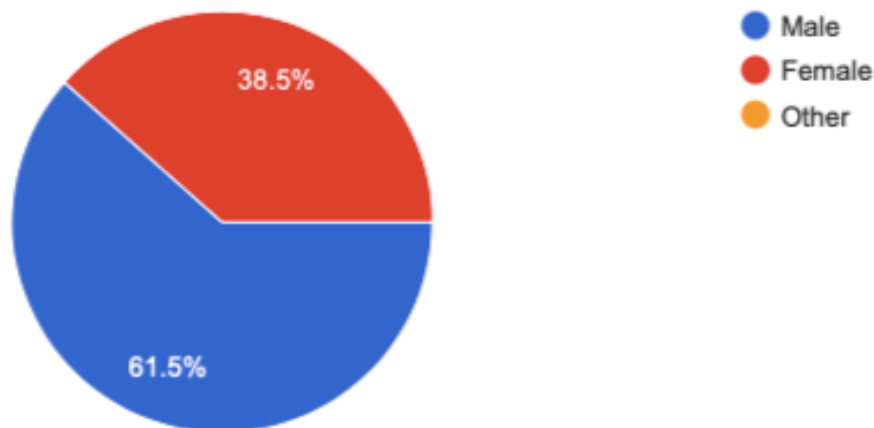
## Analysis and Discussion

Primary research was conducted via a survey where survey subjects were asked questions about themselves and their experiences with marketers and spurious offers and advertisements that could manipulate them.

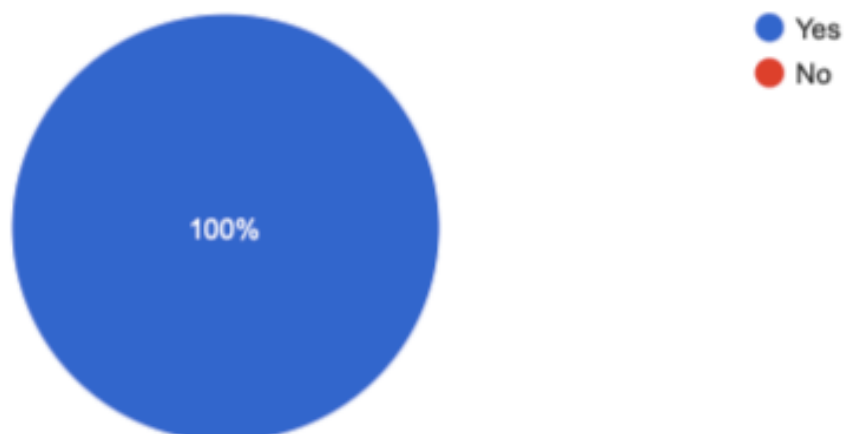
What age group do you belong to?



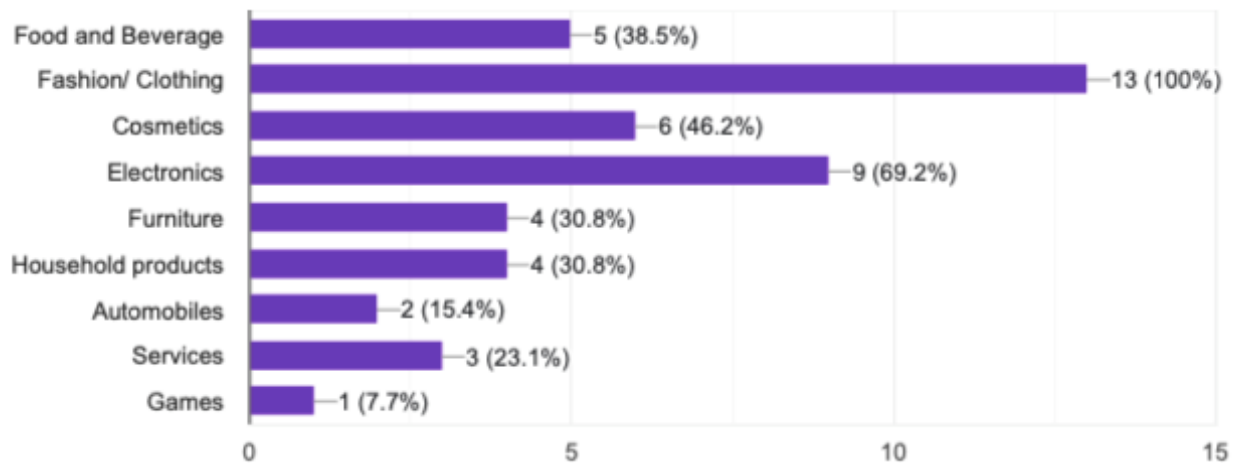
What gender do you belong to?



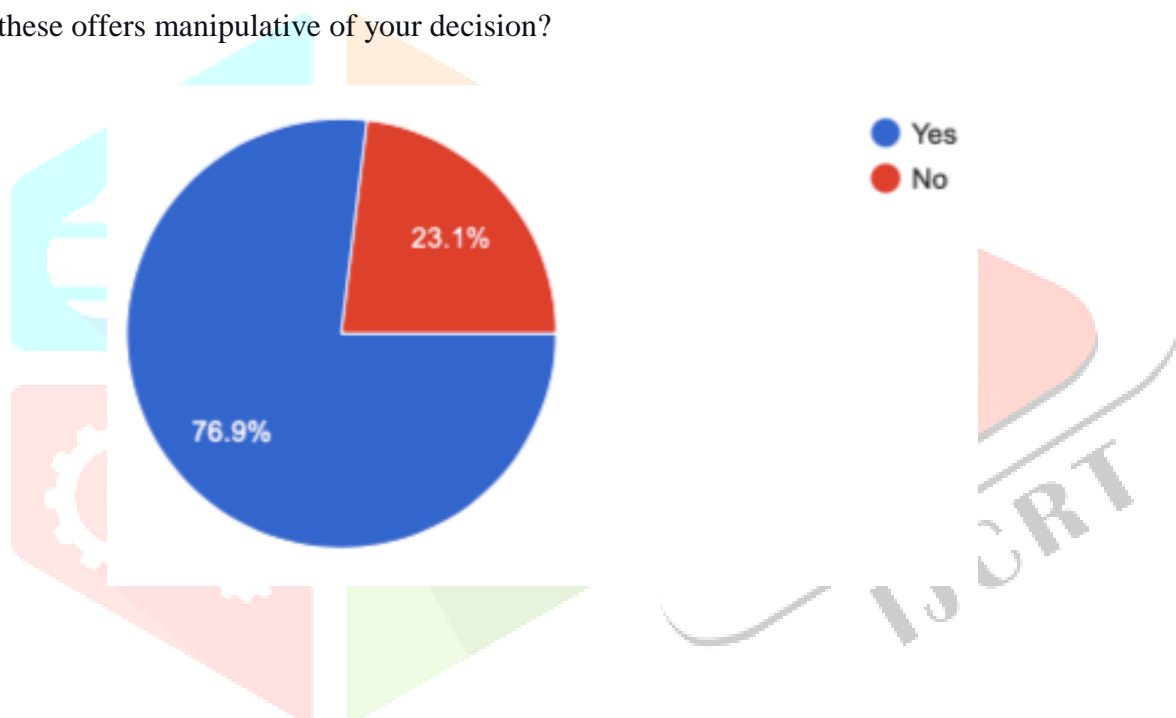
Have you come across offers on shopping sites?



What products were advertised to you by these offers?



Were these offers manipulative of your decision?



### Findings

Most of these shoppers belonged to the age group of 15-30 years and the least belonged to 15 or below years of age.

More males were a part of this survey than females.

All of the survey subjects came across these offers and manipulative advertisements that set out to influence their decisions, out of which the most marketed product was fashion.

The survey said that most of the survey ants faced marketing tactics like “buy 2 get 1 free”, advertisements related to recent activity, price illusions, etc.

After conducting both primary and secondary research it was found that 100% of people have come across some sort of marketing campaign that they suspect is manipulating or influencing them to purchase their product.

These tactics included using cookies to understand the users' search history and pushing related advertisements, decoy pricing, jacking up prices and reducing them later to give the illusion of a sale, fake reviews, confirm shaming, etc.



## Conclusion

The constant growth in urbanisation has led to an increase in the number of brands which has created a market with intense cutthroat competition. This competition expects brands to bring their best marketing strategies to the table to gain a larger customer base and retain those customers to create a loyal customer base.

While it is deemed necessary for brands to involve consumer manipulation and influencing consumer behaviour in marketing campaigns, it is suggested that brands use ethical manipulation as mentioned by (Oldford, 2018).

Brands are suggested to approach this form of manipulation with relevance omnipresence and intimacy. This ethical manipulation also reduces the guilt of consumer exploitation in the marketer's and the entrepreneur's conscience.

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