Propaganda

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

1 Does the image in this advertisement make you think that the kind of tires you buy matters? Why? What comes to mind when you see it?



2 If you are now imagining babies getting injured or dying in a car crash due to failing tires, you're not alone. After this campaign ran in the summer of 1956, Firestone closed the year with a record $60 million in profits, the largest in the rubber industry's history at the time. Were Firestone tires actually safer than other tires? Possibly. Possibly not. But it didn't matter. Because of the symbolism in their ad, people began associating Firestone with safety and protection.

3 That is how propaganda works.

4 Propaganda is a form of persuasive communication that intentionally manipulates an audience's perceptions, opinions, and emotions to promote a cause or viewpoint and influence public opinion. This advertisement aims to sell tires by manipulating emotions like fear, care for the vulnerable, and protectiveness of children. It essentially convinces people they aren't good parents if they don't buy Firestone tires. At the same time, it shapes the perception of Firestone as an ethical and caring company.

5 Propaganda can be used to convince people of many things, from buying products to supporting political candidates. Not all emotional appeals are propaganda, though. Propaganda typically targets more than one person, is deliberate and systematic, and furthers the goals of the propagandist. The CEO of Firestone may care about child safety, but their main goal is to sell tires.

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6 While some propaganda can be harmless and understandable in a competitive market, it can also be used for insidious purposes. For example, in the 1970s, Richard Nixon's political campaign declared a "war on drugs"—later admitted as propaganda—to persuade the public to accept the mass imprisonment of Black men and anti-war activists during the Black Power Movement and the Vietnam War. John Ehrlichman, Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, said, "You want to know what this [war on drugs] was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people...We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

7 Propaganda can be obvious and transparent, but it can also mislead people into supporting something that goes against their own interests. There are many types of propaganda, so knowing them and recognizing where they appear helps ensure you don't fall for these tactics.

Types of Propaganda and How They Work

8 In the 2020 presidential election, when President Trump referred to former President Joe Biden as "Sleepy Joe," he used a propaganda technique called **name calling**. Name calling connects a person or idea to a negative symbol. In this case, the nickname implied Biden was too old, slow, or inattentive to effectively lead the country.

9 Other examples include Hefty garbage bags labelling competitors as "wimpy, wimpy, wimpy" and some media outlets calling advocates for marginalized groups "snowflakes," painting opponents as weak or fragile. Early 1900s U.S. magazines depicting immigrants as vermin and Nazi propaganda calling Jewish people "lice" used name calling to dehumanize people they perceived as threats.

10 The danger of this type of propaganda is that it can lead audiences to support people, causes, or products that run counter to their needs or goals simply because they associate them with ideas they dislike or oppose.

11 The propaganda technique **glittering generalities** is a close relative of name calling. Instead of using negative words, this strategy uses positive but vague words to make ideas seem good without specific evidence. Words like *truth*, *real*, *community*, *prosperity*, and *protection* are common in advertising and politics to make audiences more receptive to believing that something will be beneficial or worthy of their time and money.

12 In 2018, Apple advertised the iPhone XR as "Brilliant. In every way." BMWs have been marketed as "the ultimate driving machine" since 1975, Tesla claims to make "the safest car ever," Gillette is "the best a man can get," and Red Bull "gives you wings." These products sound great, but only because advertisers say so. Similarly, politicians have run for office on glittering generalities.

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Historic campaign slogans include Lincoln's "Protection to American Liberty," Teddy Roosevelt's promise of "National unity. Prosperity. Advancement," Nixon's claim of "Peace. Experience. Prosperity," Obama's "Change We Can Believe In," and Trump's "Make America Great Again." All of these seem like uplifting, noble pursuits, yet the terms used are vague and subjective with no real measurable meaning.

13 Like glittering generalities, **transfer** associates a product or idea with a positive symbol, making the former seem trustworthy or desirable. For example, bottled water with pictures of snow-capped mountains on them use transfer by leading consumers to connect the clean, purity of a mountain spring with the bottled water. This water likely does not come from the spring pictured on its label, but the association we have with that imagery can influence our perception of the water.

Gaslighting

What is gaslighting?

A manipulation move that aims to confuse a victim and undermine their sense of what's real in order to gain power over them.

4 Common Techniques

1. Blatant lying

   Gaslighters will lie and stick to their story even when there is clear proof that they are wrong. A gaslighter might say, "I would never say that," or "you are misremembering," despite the truth. They will also try to align others against their victim with their lies.

2. Targeting what is dearest to you

   Gaslighting also involves chipping away at the victim's confidence and sense of self. This is done by continually criticizing and challenging what the victim values most to hurt and control them.

3. Moving gradually

   Gaslighting typically does not happen all at once, but will happen over time, starting small and then increasing. At times, gaslighters will even be complimentary to seem like they are on your side, which can become increasingly more confusing in the midst of criticism and lies.

4. Not aligning actions with words

   Simply put, when gaslighting, people will say one thing and do another. They will often project their own behavior onto their victim. They will also tell their victim they're the only one who can be trusted, even while actively lying to them.

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Origin

The term "gaslighting" came from a 1944 George Cukor film, *Gaslight*, in which a husband purposefully makes his wife feel like she is going crazy in order to control her.

Famous Gaslighters

While anyone can use gaslighting, it is a common tactic among dictators and cult leaders to gain control. For example, Kim Jong Un—the Supreme Leader of North Korea—denies his regime's abuses while flooding state media with images of himself as a benevolent leader. Similarly, David Koresh—a notorious cult leader in Waco, Texas in 1993—used gaslighting to convince followers of his divine authority, persuading men to give him their wives and deceiving others into accepting his version of reality.

14 Sometimes, propaganda disguises itself as evidence, which we see in the tactic **testimonial**. If you have ever seen a product boast that it is doctor recommended, you have seen testimonial in action. Testimonial is when a respected or famous person endorses a product, candidate, or idea, leading the audience to connect that person's traits to what they are endorsing. An athlete endorsing shoes, for example, makes people associate the athlete's success with the product.

15 Testimonials become problematic when given by people unqualified to make sound judgements about certain topics, like musicians endorsing political candidates or influencers promoting health products. While everyone is entitled to an opinion, that level of influence can be dangerous when not coming from a place of expertise. In addition, vague mentions of "expert support" without specific sources manipulate people's trust without accountability.

16 Instead of making something seem desirable by connecting it to the rich and famous, advertisers and politicians sometimes do the opposite, making the rich and famous seem like regular, everyday people. This tactic is referred to as **plain folks**. Propagandists use plain folks so their ideas or products appear relatable and beneficial to everyday people.

17 Examples include President Trump's mentions of eating fast food and Obama's references to his student loan debt, which help both appear more in touch with average Americans. Companies use slogans like "The fabric of our lives" (Cotton) and "Like a good neighbor" (State Farm) to seem relatable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Health and Public Services used plain folks in its "We Can Do This" campaign by showing real people encouraging others to get vaccinated.

18 The "We Can Do This" Campaign also appealed to our human desire to follow the crowd by suggesting that everyone was getting vaccinated, so you should, too. This type of propaganda, called **bandwagon**, convinces audiences to believe, desire, or do something because many others seem to. Bandwagon works because it is common for people to assume that what is popular must be worthwhile and to fear being left out or simply missing out.

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19 On social media, likes, followers, and shares directly impact viewers' perception of the distributor's and the content's worth due to the bandwagon psychology. This strategy is so effective that influencers and political candidates are buying fake followers and bots to boost their popularity.

20 Using **fear** as a propaganda technique involves exaggerating the negative consequences of failing to take a specific course of action. Anti-smoking ads featuring pictures of people with tracheotomies, campaigns to fight the spread of AIDS featuring images of coffins or headstones, and the public service announcement during the COVID-19 pandemic instructing Americans to "Stay home. Save Lives" all use fear of disease and death to garner support for their causes. After the September 11th attacks, President George W. Bush's assertion that "if you're not with us, you're with the terrorists" coupled with ambiguous terror alerts used fear to justify warrantless surveillance under the Patriot Act. Propagandists often exploit fear, a powerful emotion, to advance their goals.

21 In turn, when blame for a problem is unfairly placed on one person or group, it's called **scapegoating**, yet another type of propaganda. Scapegoating is effective because people tend to feel safer when they can find a source for their problems that they can target and defeat.

22 A primary example of scapegoating from U.S. history is President Roosevelt's 1942 executive order relocating over 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, accusing them of disloyalty without any real evidence. This shifted public fear and anger away from the war to the Japanese American community. In advertising, it is common nowadays for education apps like Grammarly and Photomath to sell their products by scapegoating teachers and traditional schools as confusing or ineffective.

Recognizing and Resisting Modern Propaganda

23 Propaganda can be a powerful tool used for benign and even altruistic purposes, like selling items or promoting public health. It is regularly used by all political sides. However, when misused, it can agitate people's emotions and blind them into taking actions and adopting beliefs that do not benefit them or truly align with their values.

24 Today's digital age makes falling for propaganda easier. With constant media and information overload, people rely on mental shortcuts, known as cognitive bias, to avoid fatigue. This tendency to make quick associations among related ideas increases our vulnerability to manipulation.

25 The first step to avoid being duped is knowing what propaganda is. Once you can identify it, you won't be able to ignore it. Awareness can help you make choices that are rooted in logic.

26 Now that you are more familiar with propaganda as concept, the following strategies can help you think more critically when choosing who and what to support:

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1. Ask if the message exaggerates or downplays something to gain support.
2. Check for evidence supporting vague claims.
3. Find other credible sources and do your own research (on both the information and "experts" who are endorsing it)
4. Reflect on the speaker's motives—why do they want you to believe this?
5. Reflect on your own biases—why do you want to believe this?
6. Approach online polls and trends with skepticism, knowing bots and fake accounts distort data.

27 With so much information at our fingertips and so many companies and campaigners competing for our attention, money, and votes, it is hard to know who or what to trust. When others try to manipulate us, it is natural to even doubt our own senses. However, the best defense against propaganda is realizing it is lurking everywhere and understanding its tricks!

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