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English C1000

18 October 2025

Ethics, Implications, and Approaches: The Neuropolitics of Consumption

Perfect expressions of benevolence exist solely in theory, myth, and humanity's own naïveté. This is true on both an individual and a societal level. Historically, the interactions between the governing and the governed have been characterized by a continual pattern of exploitative practices. When self-interest is a motivation, no governing body or dominant authority within a given domain can act for the sole benefit of its subjects. It is no wonder, then, that this same relationship dynamic seen between a government and its citizens can also be observed in other social power hierarchies: the powerful and the powerless, the educators and the educated, the marketers and those they market to. A key feature of this imbalance is the dominant group's ability to regulate the propagation of knowledge. Availability of information does not entail the proportionate and imperative dissemination of such information. Such is the case with the neuropolitics of consumption, where the exploitation of human neurocognitive processes for the sake of coercing consumer behavior is a well-established phenomenon. Despite this understanding within scientific communities, there is an apparent disconnect on a broader societal level between the available information on the matter and whose hands this information reaches. The enduring lack of notice regarding such a discrepancy calls into question the benevolence of the dominant market participants who clearly perpetuate this issue. In an effort to protect individual autonomy, responsibility, and overall well-being, this

deliberate concealment of information and subsequent mass-scale knowledge gap should be counteracted through targeted society-wide educational efforts.

There tend to be two arguable positions or “schools of thought” regarding the aforementioned issue: “A free market warrants the protected expression of free commercial speech, and it is up to consumers to educate themselves to make informed decisions,” and “Leveraging human neurocognitive processes, despite its protection under the law, is an inherently immoral practice that exploits vulnerable consumers.” It would be difficult to find someone who falls into the former category unless he or she has a direct stake in the consumer market, which speaks volumes to the philosophy behind the stance. However, it is important to practice a degree of charity when discussing such a viewpoint. There is indeed a fair argument to be made that this consumer “abuse” is not an abuse at all, but rather, an expression of freedom and even an inherent right. One of the biggest proponents of this stance is Martin H. Redish, Louis and Harriet Ancel Professor of Law and Public Policy at Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law. In his foundational 1971 law review, “Commercial Speech and the Values of Free Expression,” Redish posits that the freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution likewise guarantees the same degree of freedom for commercial speech. In the words of his work, “Commercial speech, much like speech directly concerning collective self-government, reflects a belief in individuals' ability to govern their lives and their right to seek to influence others” (Redish 4–5). Redish continues by using the fact that no Supreme Court decision in the past 25 years has served to suppress truthful commercial speech. He then advances by discussing the judicial outcomes of various cases that demonstrate the Supreme Court’s unwillingness to uphold the suppression of commercial speech. His points

hold merit at face value. But it goes without saying that practices by marketers deserve a high level of scrutiny. Ethicality exists on a spectrum, and the Constitution protects a very wide section of that spectrum. Protection under the law does not presuppose that a given practice is ethical, especially in the case where companies use tactics that specifically target human neurocognitive processes for maximal profit.

The tie between consumer behavior to human cognitive predispositions is a well-established connection that is substantiated by a host of scientific literature. A 2013 journal article from *BMC Neurology* details the mechanisms behind the recently coined term “neuromarketing.” The article demonstrates how a large body of research has identified a clear interaction between the brain’s reward system, which involves a string of neural structures, and product or brand preference. Javor et al. go on to describe this phenomenon in minute detail:

“...the reward system is based on the meso-limbic pathway, which extends from the ventral tegmental area (VTA), through the nucleus accumbens (NACC) and the limbic system, to the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) ... In consumer neuroscience the VMPFC is studied in the context of brand preference. ... when subjects could see the brand, limbic structures like the hippocampus and the DLPFC showed enhanced activity” (Javor et al. 4)

This interaction is discussed in lengthy detail by a range of other scholars as well. A characterizing facet of this consumer-mind interaction is the overall complexity of the neural interactions that go into a simple decision. Even when assessing small purchases, an individual will go through an entire constellation of brain regions to evaluate and weigh factors such as emotion, desire, value, and reward, all for the purpose of arriving at a decision (Diez and

Marco-Pallarés 7). This split-second conclusion ultimately results in the buy or no-buy choice.

Jing Zhang and Eun-Ju Lee expand this view by focusing on the complex neural pathways taken when individuals engage with advertisements. As they report in their 2022 journal article:

“our brain has two neural pathways ... where we perceive two distinct values in marketing exchange processes. We identify two neural pathways of reward and information value (RIV) perceptions in the consumer brain leading to engagement, recommendation, and sharing (ERS) behavior” (Zhang and Lee).

Taken together, the current body of available research demonstrates that consumer decisions are the product of deeply interconnected neural circuitry, even in instances where the degree of attention may appear superficial.

It is without a doubt, then, that companies and marketers take advantage of these vulnerabilities in an effort to provide themselves the greatest possible margin of profit at every turn. In fact, a great deal of effort goes into planning and coordinating these marketing tactics. An interview titled *The Science of Consumer Behavior & Emotional Marketing* between Brent Muller and Marco Baldochhi aims at discussing the effect of cognitive marketing tactics on consumer behavior, as well as the practices Marco uses in his own business, Neuralysis Inc. As a specialist in neuroscience and neuromarketing, Baldochhi utilizes biomedical sensors and tools such as eye-tracking, electroencephalography (EEG), and galvanic skin response (GSR) to perform exhaustive analysis on consumers' cognitive and emotional reactions to various marketing stimuli (*The Science of Consumer Behavior* 11:44–12:05). His company, Neuralysis Inc., is only a reflection of the broader trend taken by large multi-billion and even trillion-dollar companies that assuredly have ample resources to perform an even greater degree of analysis

on their marketing tactics. In Kwangseob Ahn's "Exploitation Business: Leveraging Information Asymmetry," he analyzes the "Exploitation Business" model, which uses asymmetry of information access to maximize personal gain. Ahn provides an empirical context through the industry-specific examples of GenAI and cryptocurrency as frameworks in which information asymmetry is most proliferated. The discussion continues with an examination of social media's evolution and the rise of "fandom business" (Ahn). Ahn's paper serves as a cornerstone piece for illustrating that businesses intentionally use exploitative tactics to leverage consumers to buy their goods or services. The controversy surrounding these methods casts doubt on marketers' true intent when it comes to using manipulative tactics that infringe on consumer autonomy.

Despite the abundance of what we "know" about the methods used to manipulate consumers, awareness itself remains scarce. The biggest issue is that the individuals who are being taken advantage of are oblivious to the methods used to exploit them. However, there is a clear path forward, and that is to counteract this gap through targeted society-wide educational initiatives. In the video, *Why Is Consumer Education Important?*, by County Office, they illustrate the importance of education for the sake of consumer well-being and fair trade. The video provides an analogy that perfectly exemplifies the consumer-market dynamic, describing knowledge as a sort of compass to navigate the "vast sea of the marketplace." County Office then goes on to describe how education also serves as a means of creating a level playing field between consumers and businesses by ensuring a lack of deception (*Why Is Consumer Education Important?* 0:15–0:46). Educating the populace is vitally important in the defense against the malicious regulation of information. The essence of this solution is again summed up

best by Kwangseob Ahn, “Empowering consumers through awareness and education is critical in reducing the impact of exploitation businesses” (Ahn). It goes without saying that for those in power, an educated populace is dangerous, and an uneducated populace is the easiest to herd. If that were not the case, this issue would not exist in the first place.

For the sake of society’s well-being and autonomy, it is imperative to seek truth to its fullest extent. Truth is the binding that holds the pages of humanity together. Not only are companies exploiting their very consumer base right now, but that consumer base is ignorant of the very tactics that are being used against them. As such, large sweeping educational efforts are the only way to tackle such a core issue. After all, it is only through the cultivation of an informed public that society can revive its autonomy from the tightening grip of exploitation and restore stability and integrity to the marketplace of ideas.

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