

Market Grooming

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Market Grooming: The Dark Side of AI Marketing

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Preface

AI, large language-based models (LLM), Internet of Things (IoT) and allied technologies have enabled machines to perform business activities that are normally performed by human beings (Ho & Chow, 2023; Werner et al., 2022). AI has become a crucial tool for enhancing corporate core competencies, steering towards agile corporate strategies and business models and understanding the challenges of internal (employee relationship management – ERM) and external customer relationship management (CRM) (Smith, 2018; Ventura, 2021). Technology and human interaction bring in a lot of opportunities and challenges in the management of the business in general and marketing in particular (Belanche et al., 2020; Dukes et al., 2020; Krafft et al., 2020). The use of technology also brings in issues related to trust, perceived risks and threats, ethical, security and social impacts, and so on (Chen et al., 2022). The most important is about misusing AI for market grooming and consumer grooming. The markets often stalk their consumers and slowly groom them by tracking, predicting, grooming and then selling the products of the services (Grogan, 2019). Studies have claimed that companies like Amazon could accurately predict that a particular woman is pregnant (even before those women knew it) (Grogan, 2019).

Using technologies, the marketers send subliminal messages, neuromarketing, social constructive reasonings, cues and stimulus to the consumers and slowly and gradually condition consumers to ‘do what marketers want them to do’. This is market and consumer grooming, where a consumer is almost a novice, has not given informed consent and doesn’t know that they are making decisions based on what others are telling them and not based on what they shall do undependably. This can compromise consumer independence, freedom and democracy. Such tools if used in politics can mar the whole democratic process of countries and political systems. The book touches on consumers’ sides of issues where the consumers might be manipulating AI platforms (deliberately seeing other sites and products, putting products in baskets... and complaining about being misfolded and waiting for offers). This area is also being not researched yet (Ventura, 2021).

Market Grooming: The Dark Side of AI Marketing will be a paradigm shift project in the field of marketing. The book explores how marketing is executed to attract customers (where customers are free to make decisions) from an opposite paradigm, i.e. where the customers, markets and communities are groomed, socially conditioned, subliminally marketed and influenced to passably ‘do what marketers want the consumers to do’. Such research work will have great

implications in minimising the negative consequences of AI and technology-enabled marketing to individuals, communities, societies, governments and so on. This will reinforce the idea of ethical–sustainable marketing in the era of Industry 5.0. It answers to lean back’ experience of the stakeholders. The book will reinforce that Marketing 5.0 should be about technology for humanity and not the other way.

This book is a unique interdisciplinary project inculcating and integrating ideas of public policies, business and techno-entrepreneurs with those with a stream of technology. The book has inputs from fields of marketing, technologies, cybersecurity, AI, ChatGPT, ICT, IoT, big data analytics, etc. There is not much research in the areas of market grooming, and AI and new CRM models (Ledro et al., 2022; Smith, 2018), technology and new digital consumer behaviours and customer journey mapping (Ho & Chow, 2023) and lean back attitude (Darsi, 2022).

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Artificial intelligence (AI), large language-based models (LLM), Internet of Things (IoT) and allied technologies have enabled machines to perform business activities that are normally performed by human beings. The book explores how marketing is executed to attract customers (where customers are free to make decisions) from an opposite paradigm, i.e. where the customers, markets and communities are groomed, socially conditioned, subliminally marketed and influenced to passably ‘do what marketers want the consumers to do’.

Bringing together the diverse expertise required for *Market Grooming: The Dark Side of AI in Marketing* has been a journey enriched by the generosity, talent and dedication of many individuals.

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The most important is about misusing AI for market grooming and consumer grooming. The markets often stalk their consumers and slowly groom them by tracking, predicting, grooming and then selling the products of the services. Together, we have illuminated the dark side of AI in marketing, fostering a deeper understanding of its implications and paving the way for future inquiry.

Thank you all for your invaluable contributions.

Warm regards,
Editors

Sumesh Singh Dadwal, Hamid Jahankhani, and and Kenneth Revett

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Introduction

Audience

The book will also be a useful source for academics, researchers and technology-driven strategists and marketers to understand and apply the principles and the practices of artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), conversation services automation (chatbots) and allied technology-empowered strategies, new business models and AI, machine learning, digital marketing, AI-CRM models and associated personal, social, political–legal and ethical concerns in the marketing in the developed as well as in less developed countries. The book will also be of interest to regulators, law implementing agencies, professional bodies and IT technologists and consultants across sectors.

Key Features of the Book

Several books are written for marketers to exploit or use AI to their advantage. Almost no books exist which highlight the agendas and issues of market grooming by marketers. The book put forward explores and analyses a range of unethical practices in marketing such as grooming your customers using AI, neuro-marketing, subliminal marketing and customer stalking. Customers on the flywheel, navigating the dynamics of patient grooming on doctor–patient relationships, use ChatGPT in Marketing 5.0, AI shapes the hiring process through biased HR data, machine learning techniques to project customer behaviour, it also discusses areas on practices of ethical marketing, exploring AI frameworks of ethical marketing in the era of AI, ethical navigation paradigms in AI-driven marketing, the balance between personalisation and automation in human–AI interaction, AI in digital marketing and actions to improve the image of marketing.

Hence, it seems a unique research project with almost no competition or at least no direct competition, as this book focuses on a new paradigm of market grooming by marketers, a kind of negative side of marketing (how to avoid those negative personal, social, ethical and political legal impacts of AI in marketing) and will be interesting to a variety of stakeholders, regulations, marketing agencies, governments, consumers and so on. The book will explore a variety of interdisciplinary areas and will contribute chapters from authors from Europe

and Asia, so the book will be more valuable for the readers. This book explores and analyses the principles and practices of AI, the IoT, ChatGPT, conversation services automation (chatbots) and allied technology strategies and digital marketing.

Organisation of This Book

The book has explored the concept, model and practice of the dark side of digital technology in general and AI in particular and its use in grooming the customers and grooming the market. The book explores the strategic side as well as practices of marketing companies in grooming customers using technology, AI and concepts of customer stalking. Flywheel model, neuromarketing, subliminal marketing ethical and unethical marketing and so. The book is organised to first analyse the concept, practices and models of market grooming, followed by a positive application of AI and machine learning; there are also sections on ethical marketing in the era of marketing, and towards the end, the book develops some arguments for improving the image and practices of marketing.

The first chapter explores and analyses a range of unethical practices in marketing such as grooming customers using AI, neuromarketing, subliminal marketing and customer stalking, customers on the flywheel, and Chapter 2 is on AI-Driven Trading: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Market Manipulation. Chapter 3 illustrates the dynamics of patient grooming in doctor–patient relationships. Chapter 4 is about the application of ChatGPT in Marketing 5.0. Chapter 5 analyses how AI is shaping the hiring process through biased HR data.

The second section discusses areas of practices of ethical marketing. Chapter 6 analyses the use of machine learning techniques to project customer behaviour. Chapter 7 explores the AI frameworks of ethical marketing in the era of AI. Chapter 8 is about ethical navigation paradigms in AI-driven marketing. Chapter 9 debates creating a balance between personalisation and automation in human–AI interaction. Chapter 9 is about AI and ethical digital marketing.

The third section is about balancing AI and marketing. Chapter 10 explores the balance between personalisation and automation in human interaction. Chapters 11–13 discuss a range of actions to improve the image of marketing, practices of Chinese short video platforms to enhance user stickiness and grooming and neuromarketing.

Though each chapter on its own has independent standing and relevance, however, as a whole, the book flows from exploring the concept of marketing and thorough ethical paradigms and closes with a positive set of recommendations.

This book is organised into 13 chapters. A brief description of the chapters is given in the following sections.

Chapter 1 – Market Grooming: Grooming Customers Using Artificial Intelligence

This opening chapter sets the scene and builds the framework of the book and the concept of market modelling and the use of AI. *In the era of generative AI, big data analytics, business analytics and mega global digital corporations, the profession of marketing is at a crossroads between ‘Prosumer-Marketing’ and ‘Market Grooming’.* ‘Market Grooming’ is a one-sided, unethical process of conditioning or influencing, deceiving or persuading or manipulating and even exploiting customers by the marketing organisations, without customers’ voluntary consent, permissions, awareness, etc. As the consumers have asymmetric access to information, asymmetric and lesser favourable levels of control, and lesser power in the process of exchange, as customers trust the marketers or are dependent on popular brands; the markers tend to exploit the situation. The process of market grooming has become easier due to the power of AI, generative AI, ChatGPT, TikToking, machine learning and big data analytics leading to the development of sophisticated predictive models and persuasive models. This chapter explores and analyses a range of techniques in marketing such as permission marketing, Flywheel marketing, subliminal marketing, neuromarketing, cyberstalking ethical marketing, etc. in the era of AI. The arguments for high concerns pertaining to potential market grooming are supported by theories of ethics, theories of digital marketing and models of AI. The chapter concludes with some strategic recommendations.

Chapter 2 – AI-Driven Trading: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Market Manipulation

Algorithmic trading has evolved beyond traditional methods by incorporating machine learning techniques to analyse extensive datasets. The integration of machine learning and ATS has helped in enhancing the decision-making process leading to more accurate predictions of market trends, risk assessments and optimal execution strategies. The opaque nature of artificial trading models can create challenges in understanding the decision-making process of these systems. This lack of clear understanding raises questions about accountability, and market participants lack transparency on whether movements are economic-driven or algorithmic trading strategies. The chapter explores the development of AI-driven trading and key characteristics of algorithmic trading systems. In conclusion, the integration of machine learning into capital markets represents a major shift in how investment decisions are made, risks are managed and how markets operate independent AI trading systems. Its increasing use highlights the need for careful ethical consideration, regulatory flexibility and ongoing monitoring.

Chapter 3 – The Dark Side of AI: Navigating the Dynamics of Patient Grooming on Doctor–Patient Relationships

The growth of AI-enabled marketing has led to motivating customers purchase goods and services where the customers are ‘nurtured’ or ‘groomed’ to make a purchase decision. Consumer grooming as the name suggests involves changing or influencing an individual’s behaviour and decision-making abilities by repeated personalised messaging. We have entered an era where AI is driving marketing in almost all industries and influencing customer decision-making. The healthcare industry is quite a concern as it involves the health of the poor and vulnerable impacted by AI decision-making, also deeply affecting the conventional doctor–patient relationships. AI in healthcare marketing involves using marketing gimmicks by marketing organisations where individuals are targeted with individualised medical messaging, changing the trust dynamics between patients and doctors. The marketing gimmicks often impact the healthcare decision-making of the patients, leading to induced healthcare purchases through these marketing messages, rather on advisory of doctors or other healthcare professionals. As a result of this constant patient grooming or medical brainwashing, patients end up making a wrong decision regarding their healthcare. Therefore, it is required that stakeholders in the health ecosystem prioritise more transparency, authenticity and patient empowerment to mitigate the challenges of patient grooming in the healthcare sector. The establishment of more stringent controls on medical marketing techniques, the development of health literacy and the cultivation of open communication channels within the healthcare ecosystem are all necessary because of this. In the end, AI-driven marketing presents prospects for personalised healthcare experiences; yet its unregulated expansion raises substantial ethical and patient safety issues.

Chapter 4 – ChatGPT in Marketing 5.0: Gold Is Real or Just a Gold Plating

Organisations using advanced technology, like ChatGPT, for executing their marketing practices are proliferating, but such fast growth also comes with different adverse impacts of ChatGPT. This interaction of ChatGPT with the humanly implemented Marketing 5.0 approach complements the marketing effectiveness. However, while considering the brighter aspects of this techno-marketing integration, marketers should also keep its dark side in mind. Therefore, this chapter investigates the integration of AI-enabled ChatGPT into Marketing 5.0 practices. However, both the concepts under study are growing in terms of literature, and the research gap is even more extended when considering their associated views. Furthermore, significantly less literature is available emphasising the negative aspects of this advanced technology. This chapter bridges these gaps by reviewing the literature and presents the gold-plating effect of ChatGPT usage while implementing Marketing 5.0 practices. It also proposes a framework for showing the relationship between ChatGPT utilisation for practicing Marketing 5.0, depicting the dark side of this techno-marketing integration.

It also emphasised the need for conscious and learnt association between the concepts under study.

Chapter 5 – Unpacking the Double-Edged Sword: How Artificial Intelligence Shapes Hiring Process Through Biased HR Data

This chapter discusses and explores how AI has transformed the field of hiring, enabling employers to collect and analyse massive amounts of data to understand and predict the suitability of candidates. However, AI can also have subconscious effects on candidates' and employers' needs through biased data, which can stem from human biases, algorithmic errors or external factors. For example, Amazon scrapped an AI-based recruitment program that favoured male candidates over female candidates due to the historical patterns in the resumes it analysed. This chapter examines how AI can shape a candidate's needs through biased data from various sources and types and what are the consequences for a candidate's welfare and rights. We review the literature on AI applications in hiring, the origins and kinds of bias in AI systems and the potential risks and benefits for candidates. We also suggest some guidelines for reducing bias in AI and enabling candidates to make informed and ethical choices online. We argue that AI can be a double-edged sword for candidate's needs and that more research and regulation are required to ensure its fair and accountable use.

Chapter 6 – Leveraging Machine Learning Techniques to Project Customer Behaviour Through Predictive Analysis and Ethical Marketing

This research investigates the intricate dynamics of consumer behaviour and the transformative impact of predictive machine learning algorithms. Employing a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, the study explores the application of unsupervised K-means clustering and supervised random forest algorithms. Through real-world case studies and data analysis, insights are gained into the predictive modelling of customer behaviour in diverse industries. Findings reveal the effectiveness of these techniques in segmenting customers based on income and spending behaviour, with a prediction accuracy of 84%. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating qualitative insights to enrich understanding and validity. The study also critically explores the potential risks associated with unethical marketing that leads customers to purchase products without their voluntary and fully informed consent.

Chapter 7 – Towards Responsible AI: Exploring AI Frameworks, Ethical Dimensions and Regulations

The field of AI is advancing far more rapidly than the establishment of rules and regulations, which is causing certain fear. However, slowing down this progression to avoid an economic crisis is not an option because of open-source AI,

which facilitates faster development processes and collective contributions to codes and algorithms. Public policies, such as the ‘European Union AI Act (EU AI)’, ‘Whitehouse AI’ and the G7’s ‘Hiroshima Artificial Intelligence Process’ (HAP), have already been drafted. Regulators need to adopt a dynamic approach given AI’s rapid advancement, and they need to eventually strive for international harmonisation in their rules and regulations for better collaborations. The EU’s AI Act is the ‘world’s first comprehensive law’, and it focuses on five main pillars similar to other countries’ drafts: ensuring AI usage is safe, transparent, traceable, non-discriminatory and environmentally friendly. They portray four risk categories against which citizens can file complaints: (1) unacceptable risk, (2) high risk, (3) generative AI, and (4) limited risk. The US AI policies include ‘The Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights: Making Automated Systems Work for the American People’ and the ‘Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence’. This conceptual study extensively reviews the concept of AI and compares pioneering draft laws while providing recommendations on ethics and responsible AI.

Chapter 8 – Ethical Navigation Paradigms in AI-Driven Marketing: Insights and Perspectives

AI has several advantages for enhancing marketing strategies. It raises ethical problems about customer priority, market share consolidation and consumer manipulation. This study examines ethical issues from a modern viewpoint, using insights from AI and previous literature reviews. The implementation of AI in marketing may result in unanticipated ramifications, including the reinforcement of preexisting prejudices, infringement upon customer privacy, restriction of competitive forces and meddling with consumer conduct. This research seeks to enhance the industry by offering a contemporary viewpoint on the ethical issues related to AI utilisation in predictive marketing, based on insights from previous literature reviews in the field.

Chapter 9 – Artificial Intelligence in Digital Marketing: The Ethical Implications of Digital Influence on Markets and Consumer

This research, titled ‘AI in Digital Marketing: The Ethical Implications of Digital Influence on Markets and Consumers’, conducts a comprehensive examination of the nuanced role played by AI in shaping consumer behaviour and influencing decision-making processes. While the incorporation of AI in marketing offers commendable advantages, such as providing personalised content and optimising strategies to enhance customer experiences and market efficiency, it concurrently introduces ethical considerations. This study meticulously scrutinises the latent potential for market grooming, wherein AI subtly guides consumers towards decisions that may not align with their best interests. By delving into instances of data privacy breaches, algorithmic biases and the unintended consequences of hyper-personalisation, this research contributes substantively to the ongoing

discourse on the responsible utilisation of AI. The study underscores the imperative need for regulatory frameworks aimed at ensuring ethical practices in the dynamically shifting digital landscape. It endeavours to strike an equitable balance between the constructive contributions and potential pitfalls of AI in the realm of marketing. Through this research, we aim to shed light on the ethical dimensions associated with the digital manipulation of markets and consumers, providing insights that can inform industry practices, policymaking and public awareness.

Chapter 10 – Exploring the Balance Between Personalisation and Automation in Human–AI Interaction

This study investigates the intricate relationship between personalisation and automation in AI, focusing on their impact on human interactions. The purpose is to discern patterns significantly influencing modern society, using notable examples from e-commerce, social media and digital advertising. The research employs a multifaceted approach, drawing insights from real-world examples of AI implementation. Noteworthy instances include Amazon’s use of AI algorithms for personalised product recommendations, Netflix’s application of AI in content recommendations and Tesla’s Full Self-Driving feature in autonomous vehicles. The findings reveal the dual nature of personalisation and automation. In e-commerce, personalised recommendations, such as those on Amazon, can lead to impulse buying and potential financial strain. Similarly, social media algorithms, like Facebook’s echo chamber and advertising strategies, exemplified by Google’s ‘skippable’ and ‘non-skippable’ ads, strategically influence user behaviour and decision-making. The research also highlights the success of Netflix’s personalised content delivery and the potential safety challenges in Tesla’s Full Self-Driving feature. The study underscores the importance of a balanced approach to personalisation and automation, especially in ethical considerations, user privacy and data security.

Chapter 11 – Improving the Image of Marketing: AI Has the Potential to Assist in Marketing Decisions and Change Perceptions

Marketing is sometimes viewed as manipulative and as enticing consumers to live beyond their means. AI-powered systems can change the image of the marketing discipline and improve the marketing decision-making process. This chapter argues that embedding AI in the marketing process can help to alleviate public and consumer concerns about the marketing discipline. AI has the potential to make the marketing process transparent, but this is dependent on trust and privacy variables. Openness about using AI in the customer experience and how it is applied will put marketing on an objective framework. However, marketing decisions will be a mix of data and information mediated by intuition, reasoning, experience and empathy and these are qualities that are associated with

marketers. AI customer experience requires decisions that are objective (personalisation) and those that are empathy related.

Chapter 12 – Exploring the Practices of Chinese Short Video Platforms to Enhance User Stickiness and Grooming the Customers: A Case Study of DOUYIN China (TikTok)

The global popularity of short video platforms has surged with the rapid development of mobile internet and 5G technology. DOUYIN, among other platforms, has amassed a massive user base in China. This study presents a theoretical framework based on media dependency theory and user stickiness perspectives. It identifies three key factors that affect user stickiness: platform algorithms, content resources and user interaction. An interpretive philosophy and inductive qualitative approach were adopted to conduct an in-depth case study of DOUYIN. Thematic analysis of secondary data from various sources was used. The findings demonstrate DOUYIN's innovative approach to utilising advanced algorithms, diverse content and social interactions to enhance user engagement. DOUYIN utilises machine learning techniques to create user profiles and comprehend video content. It subsequently provides real-time personalised recommendations and optimises the algorithms based on user feedback. DOUYIN also incorporates PGC, UGC and PUGC generated content, supported by a creator incentive system. Moreover, DOUYIN enables interactions between users, creators and the platform through commenting, sharing and live streaming features.

Chapter 13 – Market Grooming: How Neuromarketing Influences Consumers' Purchase Decisions?

Neuromarketers use methods like eye tracking, biometrics, brain imaging (fMRI and EEG) and eye tracking to try to understand how consumers make decisions, what grabs their attention and how they emotionally interact with companies, products and ads. Market grooming is the process of creating and manipulating the existing market towards a specific product, service or idea. It is the practice which helps the marketer to groom the product through various stages of marketing, be it market research, product development, advertising campaigns or creating favourable conditions for the product, all practices are performed to groom the market for a specific product; when it is combined with neuromarketing, it becomes a perfect blend for the success of the product in the actual market. The study concludes that market grooming along with neuromarketing can present a significant potential for enhancing the understanding of consumer decision behaviour by increasing the validity and precision of assessing customer responses to marketing activities.

Chapter 1

Market Grooming: Grooming Customers Using Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

In the era of generative artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, business analytics and mega global digital corporations, the profession of marketing is at a crossroads between ‘Prosumer-Marketing’ and ‘Market Grooming’. Whereas prosumer (producers + consumers) marketing means a process of exchange in which producers and consumers have equal, just, control, voluntary, fully aware engagement and control over the process of design, development and exchange of goods, services and values. On the other hand, ‘Market Grooming’ is a one-sided, unethical process of conditioning or influencing, deceiving, or persuading or manipulating and even exploiting customers by the marketing organisations, without customers’ voluntary consent, permissions, awareness, etc. As the consumers have asymmetric access to information, asymmetric and lesser favourable levels of control, and lesser power in the process of exchange, as customers trust the marketers or are dependent on popular brands, the markers tend to exploit the situation. The process of market grooming has become easier due to the power of AI, generative AI, ChatGPT, TikToketing, machine learning and big data analytics leading to the development of sophisticated predictive models and persuasive models. This chapter explores and analyses a range of techniques in marketing such as permission marketing, flywheel marketing, subliminal marketing, neuromarketing, cyberstalking, ethical marketing, etc., in the era of AI. The arguments for high concerns

Market Grooming, 1–35

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pertaining to potential market grooming are supported by theories of ethics, theories of digital marketing and models of AI. The chapter concludes with some strategic recommendations.

Keywords: Market grooming; subliminal marketing; neuromarketing; permission marketing; generative AI and cyberstalking and sales flywheels; TikToking; ethical marketing

Introduction

In 2022, a controversy and media backlash occurred against an advertisement campaign featuring children holding teddy bears in bondage harnesses and costumes that embroiled both Balenciaga and its designer (Issawi & Cohen, 2024). The campaign was seen as paedophilic and child exploitative, it was trying to groom children as future consumers of the aspirational brand Balenciaga. Several books have highlighted the unethical and other concerns related to the commercialisation of marketing to kids. The authors highlighted the marketer's intervention to exploit immature minds while claiming that they are empowered. With targeting advertisements to kids 'the children were subjected to "saturation bombing" by the media, they are being seduced, manipulated, exploited, brain-washed, programed and branded' subsequently promoting obesity, eating disorders, 'sexualisation' and materialism (Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010b). The effect of such manipulation is equivalent to grooming young brains to become brand-loyal adult consumers.

Since the last century, the concept of marketing has evolved through various phases viz, production concept, product concept, sales concept, marketing concept, societal marketing concept and prosumers' marketing. The production concept implies that the meaning of marketing is to produce in large quantities and the prices will fall and 'supply will create its own demand'; the product concept argues that marketing is about adding more and more product features, even ignoring core needs and being 'marketing myopic'; the sales concept argues that marketing means 'pushing products down to the customers by convincing them'; the marketing concept gives significance to understanding of 'consumers needs' as core purpose of marketing; the societal marketing argues that marketing should be ethical and 'the marketers should exchange only those products and services that "don't have any negative consequence to stakeholders in the longer term"' and the prosumers (producer + consumers) marketing is about customising to each customer needs and 'mutual collaboration of producers and consumers' in the process of design, development and marketing (Kotler et al., 2023). However, the recent understandings and practices of marketing in the digital era are apparently crossing the limits of ethical marketing and leading to the exploitation and manipulation of customers, a kind of market grooming.

The famous Facebook (Meta) – Cambridge Analytica scandal is a big blot that surfaced in 2018. Cambridge Analytica was able to use Facebook data for its clients to better 'micro-target' political messages to people who could be

influenced (Confessore, 2018). The data privacy and ethics were breached, and Facebook (Meta) agreed to pay \$725m (£600m) to settle the legal action (McCallum, 2023). The debate about data privacy, breaches, ethics, data collection, usage, user rights exploitations and trust has substantially increased since the Facebook data breach scandal in 2018 (Hasan et al., 2021).

Imagine you searched online for a product such as a TV. Today when you go to different websites or search engines, you get a lot of information regarding TV, blogs, influence comments, social media ads and so on. Ultimately you bought a TV with features that were quite different compared to your initial intention to buy. Do you think you have made your decision independently without being influenced, or without being slowly groomed to tweak your choice towards features and characteristics of a particular brand? What about if technology and big data analytics of the companies have profiled your cognitive emotional and behavioural responses and then used that information to make you believe that a particular brand is better than others, and the decision is not a free informed decision? This is a typical example of marketing companies intending to groom customers, to make them believe in their brands with specific characteristics and to influence customers to purchase those products. It is not an imaginary thought experiment, but it represents today's reality of marketing. Recently there was a story in the media, where a young woman started receiving online offers for post-pregnancy products and even accessories and clothes for newborn babies. After a complaint from the woman, the investigation revealed that a big online company was using data analytics on the purchase history of other women with a similar profile, similar search searches and similar online behaviours. And based on analogous online behaviour and profile, the online platform company could predict that this woman was pregnant, even before the woman herself knew about it. Such is the power of AI and data analytics that it can profile each customer, design customised marketing stimuli and then slowly and gradually convince any customer to believe in and desire specific features offered by specific brands. In this kind of marketing strategy, there are elements of lack of transparency, lack of informed consent by the customers, black-box awareness of the customer about the data that a company has, lack of full control over customer decisions, subject to external social pressure and so on; hence, such marketing moves could be classified as actions of customer grooming or grooming the market.

Such kind of marketing strategies often use big data, data analytics, subliminal ads, targeted ads, influencer pressures, other morally or ethically questionable techniques to seduce customers to buy or own specific brands.

Ethics in Marketing and Market Grooming

Ethical marketing implies that marketing decisions by an organisation should be driven by moral rules and principles of behaviour (Abromaitytė-Sereikienė, 2005). There are several definitions and theories to understand ethics. Ethics are considered a relative and latent construct and difficult to measure directly and absolutely. In different countries, cultures, ethnicities, etc., there may be different

rules and guidelines for morality and normality. Hence it will be difficult to have a universal definition of ethical marketing. Broadly ethical marketing should follow moral principles of rightness or wrongness. The debate on ethics in marketing escalated in the 1960s with the book Packard's *Hidden Persuaders and Manipulators* in 1957 and later debates expanded into areas of corporate social responsibility and societal marketing (Smith & Murphy, 2013).

Levitt, the marketing Guru of the 1960s, like Milton Friedman, has rejected the idea of morality or social responsibility as the role of marketers and they argue that such goals will compromise the profits of the organisations. Dincer and Dincer (2014) introduced the first comprehensive model for ethics in marketing. The debate continued over the years and in 1991 Laczniak and Murphy strongly argued for morality and ethics in marketing (Smith & Murphy, 2013).

Marketing ethics deals with marketing decisions involving moral judgements, standards and rules of conduct of marketers. From the positive perspective, being ethical means evidencing a behaviour based on a collection of a code of conduct and expected moral standard behaviours; however, from a normative perspective, ethics involves

Practices that emphasise acceptable norms, values, principles, conducts, transparent, trustworthiness, honesty, fairness, responsibility, citizenship and responsible personal and organizational marketing policies and actions that exhibit integrity as well as fairness to consumers and other stakeholders and undertakes exchanges based on mutual expectations built on trust, good faith, and fair dealing in their interaction while avoiding the unintended consequences. (Murphy et al, 2005 cited in Dincer & Dincer, 2014)

Utilitarianism theory of ethics is about judging the morality of right and wrong based on the net utility of gains and pains. So ethical behaviour shall produce the greatest pleasure for main stakeholders with fairness and justice and thus it is morally right to highlight the positives to many and ignore the negatives or pains to a few (Malik, 2023). Deontological theory assumes that fulfilling one's duty and ensuring the right actions, while conformity to strict rules and regulations and not paying attention to its consequences is a morally right thing to do (Malik, 2023). Kant argues for principle the 'Categorical Imperative' (CI) to fulfil one's duty and that intentions are more important for morality and that acting in self-interest over the interests of others is an unethical action. Ross, another deontologist argues that our moral duties are self-evident and recognisable ('intuited') by rational agents and are based on the plurality of moral duties (Robson & Tsou, 2023). Social contract theory assumes that contractual duties require rational agents to mutually agree or consent and fulfil the same. Teleological theory argues that morally right behaviour should result in achieving and maximising the desired right ends and means to reach the ends do not matter. An ethical dilemma may occur when a morally right duty or action results in negative consequences (deontological), or when an immoral action is undertaken to achieve positive consequences (teleological).

Ethical marketing emphasises responsible and ethical behaviour from all involved in marketing exchanges and should guarantee integrity, honesty, fairness, justice and so on (Malik, 2023). Any kind of practices such as misleading advertisement, product and price discrimination, unfair treatment, non-equal power exploitation or manipulation for benefits, etc., are classified as examples of unethical marketing. Marketing has been criticised for creating false wants, spurious personal identities, heroism with brand possessions, encouraging over-consumption, overselling private goods at the expense of public goods, avoiding the rights of less capable people and creating environmental social and cultural pollution (Malik, 2023). Virtue ethics theory argues that excellence in character and virtues in individuals will ensure ethical behaviour (Malik, 2023).

Concept of Grooming and Market Grooming

The act of grooming is seen as a nonviolent method and course of conduct used by abusers to unethically gain access to, entrap and control victims without their consent or without their ability to give consent (Craven et al., 2006). The term has often been used in the context of predators, paedophiles, child sexual exploitation, terrorists or extreme elements, drug suppliers or law enforcement agencies, other professionals, etc., with the motives of seduction, molestation or exploiting of vulnerable victims (Lanning, 2018). It is a process by which the victim is befriended by influencing their environment and influencers to gain confidence, trust, access and control of the victim (Craven et al., 2006). A variety of manipulative and deceptive techniques are used by the offenders to increase offenders' power and control and increase the dependency of the victim for hooking the victim (Whittle et al., 2013). In the extremist's contexts, the groomers recruit people into extremist activities by persuasion, pressure or manipulation, emotional appeals, common interests, role modelling, heroism, self-esteem and confidence, and utopian motivations (Lennings et al., 2010).

In the domain of marketing, citing a systematic literature review, Hastings and Sheron (2013) argued that exposure to alcohol advertisement and thus grooming children at a younger age increases the likelihood of a higher amount of alcohol consumption in their adolescence. Digital media, social networking platforms, user-generated content, peer pressures, content-sharing platforms, apps and websites have made information availability wider and without control, thus further leading to uncontrolled encounters of grooming.

The advertisements and promotion in media are aimed at influencing consumer behaviour by influencing the consumer's awareness, interests, perceptions, desires, etc. However, many times the disseminated information may contain subliminal messages, which are not directly and consciously processed by the consumer, but the messages reach into their minds at a subtle, subconscious level; thus, manipulating and persuading consumers to consume of advertised product (Maalik & Choughari, 2020).

The information processing theory puts forward a central route of Information and a peripheral route of information reaching the human brain (Lennings et al., 2010).

The central root of information is data-rich and explicit information, which is processed by the left brain effortfully, logically and slowly. On the other hand, the peripheral system of information processing involves fast, less cognitive, more emotional and implicit information processing by the right brain. In the case of grooming, the groomers try to use emotional, less data and more pictures, stereotypical confirmatory biased information, thus involving peripheral roots of information dissemination and convincing their targets (Lennings et al., 2010).

In summary, the concept of ‘Market Grooming’ is very similar to the concept of ‘Grooming’ in other contexts. As shown in Fig. 1.1, many of the features of such marketing stimuli can be like acts of grooming, as they involve, non-consent, vulnerability, risk, exploitative motives, peer pressures, manipulation and deception to increase offenders’ power, control, gain confidence, trust, access to and increase the dependency of the target.

Consumer Behaviour and Sales Funnel

Consumer behaviour theories and models argue that several external and personal factors affect the five stages of consumer behaviour, viz need recognition, search for information, evaluating alternatives, purchase intention and actual purchase. Marketers make use of a five-stage sales funnel, viz awareness, interests, desire, action (AIDA) and loyalty to convert customers from strangers to prospective customers, clients, and loyal customers to advocates (Wilk et al., 2021). Loyalty and trust in brands are indications of higher dependence of the customers on the brand and accessing less control and independence, thus having characteristics of being a groomed person.



Fig. 1.1. Concept of Market Grooming.

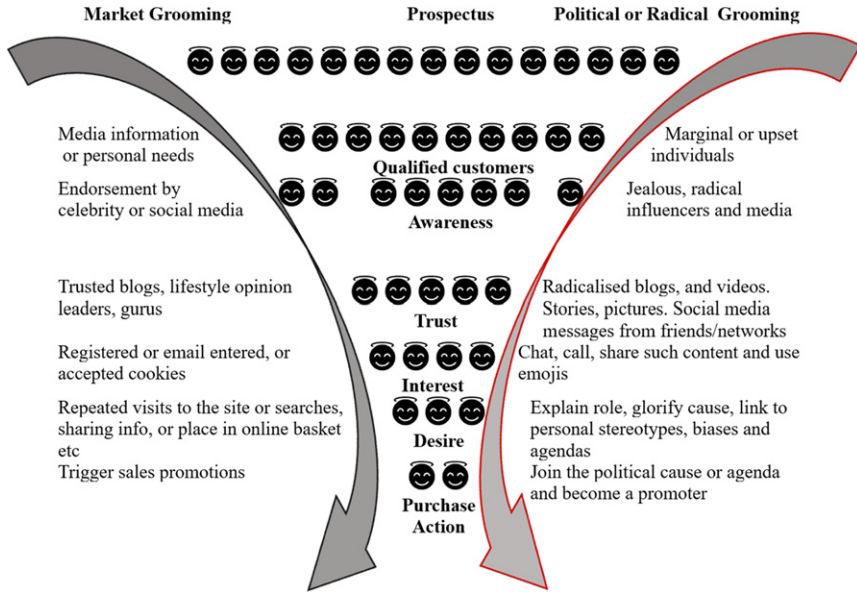


Fig. 1.2. Sales Funnel of Market Grooming vs Political or Radical Grooming.

Fig. 1.2 displays the stages of a ‘Sales Funnel’ as applied to concepts of market grooming vs political or radical grooming involving a range of influencers. As one moves down the funnel, the number of individuals captured in the funnel decreases. It can be seen from Fig. 1.1 that the journey of an individual starts as a prospectus with some latent needs or socially constructed needs. However, due to the influence of celebrities, opinion leaders or radical jealous influencers or spokespersons, etc., many of the prospects might become more emotionally and rationally aware individuals. Further exposure to trusted blogs, video sites, stories, pictures and social network messages will create a higher level of trust in the brand or ideas in the aware individuals. At this stage, some of the trusting individuals start decreasing self-control and become dependent on the influencers and now they become keenly interested in the radical ideas or highly interested in the marketed products and so they start actively seeking information and sharing or supporting the information. A few highly interested individuals will develop strong desire and start visiting websites more frequently, may save products in online baskets or may argue for radical/political causes. In the end, very few will jump into action, that is, purchase products or join political/radical organisations and then become loyal advocates for the products, brands or services or political radical ideas. The whole process is so gradual that it is difficult to view when an individual gets a fully groomed client.

Sales Funnel to Sales Flywheels

Now online e-commerce companies like Amazon, eBay, Alibab, etc., have understood that using a ‘sales funnel strategy’ is less effective. In the sales funnel approach, one must start with many prospectus customers, continuously spend marketing energy and finally get only a small percentage of actual customers or loyal customers. The sales funnel is a less efficient approach. Thus, the companies have invented and replaced the ‘Sales Funnel Strategy’ with a new strategy named as ‘Sales Flywheel Strategy’ (Halligan, 2018). The principles of flywheel have originated in the field of physics, as the flywheel is more efficient in capturing, storing and releasing energy. The sales funnel uses organisational invested marketing efforts that need to be constantly invested to convert prospects into clients. However, the ‘Sales flywheel’ makes use of freely available energy and resources, that is, customers’ reviews, advocates, influencers, bloggers, social media opinion leaders, influencers as well as previous customers’ reviews, etc. (McAvinche, 2019; Ux, 2021) (see Fig. 1.3).

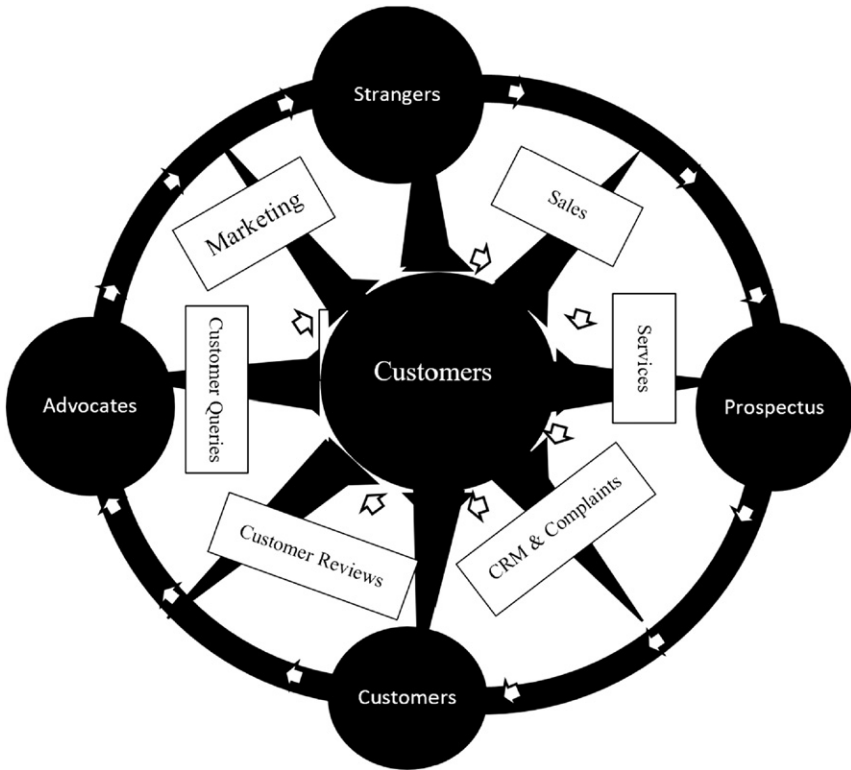


Fig. 1.3. Sales Flywheel Strategic Model.