SELLING REALITY: BAUDRILLARD, HYPERREALITY, AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of communication, psychology, and consumer behavior through the theoretical framework of Jean Baudrillard's concept of *hyperreality*. It examines how early advertising campaigns did not merely promote products but manufactured social norms and psychological dependencies. Two emblematic cases illustrate this process. The first is the Listerine campaign of the 1920s, led by the Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, which introduced the term "halitosis" to medicalize bad breath and instill a fear-based consumer need for mouthwash. The second is the "bacon and eggs" breakfast campaign, orchestrated by Edward Bernays on behalf of the Beech-Nut Packing Company, which employed pseudo-scientific endorsements from physicians to reframe a heavy breakfast as a health necessity for the American public. Both cases exemplify how advertising creates hyperreal environments where cultural symbols replace material realities, shaping not only habits but collective perceptions of normalcy and desire. By contextualizing these historical examples within Baudrillard's theory, this paper investigates the mechanisms of psychological persuasion and the simulation of needs. The findings will be helpful for further connecting it to contemporary econometric modeling of consumer behavior and the evolving legal and ethical regulations surrounding manipulative or subliminal advertising practices. Ultimately, this study contributes to understanding how media-driven hyperrealities continue to influence the economies of today, societal norms, and the boundaries of lawful persuasion.

Keywords: Hyperreality; Consumer behavior; Social construction; Media influence;

1. Introduction

In the modern world, advertising is often perceived merely as a tool for promoting products or services.[7] Yet, its influence extends far beyond simple commercial persuasion, reaching deeply into the realms of psychology and social behavior. The intersection of communication, psychology, and consumer behavior reveals how media messages do not merely inform or persuade-they actively shape perceptions, desires, and even the boundaries of what is considered "normal" in society. Understanding this dynamic is crucial to analyzing the mechanisms through which advertising exerts its influence, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

Jean Baudrillard's concept of **hyperreality** provides a powerful theoretical lens to explore these phenomena. Hyperreality occurs when representations-images, signs, and narratives—begin to replace and define reality itself, creating a world in which social norms and desires are mediated more by symbolic meaning than by material conditions[8] [9]. In the context of advertising, hyperreality manifests when a product is no longer valued solely for its functional utility but becomes a vehicle for social identity, psychological reassurance, or perceived necessity[10]. By examining advertising through this framework, we can uncover how media messages craft experiences and needs that may not exist independently of the campaigns that promote them.

This paper argues that early twentieth-century advertising campaigns did not merely encourage the purchase of goods; they actively manufactured psychological needs and established social norms, creating hyperreal consumer environments. Two emblematic cases illustrate this process: the Listerine campaign of the 1920s, which medicalized bad breath to create fear-driven demand, and Edward Bernays' "bacon and eggs" breakfast campaign, which used pseudo-scientific authority to redefine what constituted a healthy morning meal. Both examples highlight the capacity of advertising to manipulate perception, construct social norms, and transform consumer behavior.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it introduces the theoretical framework of hyperreality and its relevance to consumer psychology. Next, it provides historical context for early advertising practices. The subsequent sections examine the Listerine and bacon-and-eggs campaigns in detail, followed by a comparative analysis of the two cases. Finally, the study connects these historical examples to contemporary advertising practices, legal considerations, and the ongoing influence of hyperreal consumer culture.

[7] Abhilasha Mehta, "Advertising Attitudes and Advertising Effectives," Journal of Advertising Research 40 (May 2000): 67–72, https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-40-3-67-72.

[8] "Mohanlal Sukhadia University - Udaipur, "Hyper Reality Boudrilard.Pdf," ., https://mlsu.ac.in/econtents/2289_hyper%20reality%20boudrilard.pdf.

[9] Paulo Barroso, "From Reality to the Hyperreality of the Simulation," Texto Livre 15 (May 2022): e37426, https://doi.org/10.35699/1983-3652.2022.37426.

[10] Teuku Firmansyah et al., "THE HYPERREALITY AND SIMULACRA THEORY OF JEAN BAUDRILLARD: ON FASHION TRENDS IN TIKTOK," ELite Journal : International Journal of Education, Language and Literature 4 (August 2024): 27–34, https://doi.org/10.26740/elitejournal.v4n2.p27-34.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of hyperreality, as developed by French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard, provides a crucial lens for understanding the psychological and social mechanisms of advertising. Hyperreality occurs when representations—such as images, signs, and narratives-begin to replace or define reality itself, creating a world in which individuals interact more with mediated perceptions than with material truths[11]. In other words, in a hyperreal environment, the distinction between what is "real" and what is constructed by media becomes blurred, and symbolic meaning often takes precedence over functional or objective reality.

Within the context of consumer behavior, hyperreality manifests when products are no longer valued solely for their practical use but become vehicles for identity, status, or psychological reassurance. A bottle of mouthwash, for example, may signify cleanliness, social acceptability, and personal confidence beyond its actual utility. Similarly, a recommended breakfast becomes more than nourishment; it embodies health, morality, or cultural conformity. These representations shape not only individual choices but also collective understandings of normalcy and desire.

Advertising relies heavily on psychological principles to construct and reinforce hyperreal environments. Tactics such as fear appeal, authority endorsement, repetition, and social proof manipulate cognitive and emotional responses, creating perceived needs where none existed[12]. Fear-based strategies can create anxiety over a potential deficiency, while appeals to authority lend legitimacy to products through perceived expert approval. Repetition of symbolic messaging strengthens associations between products and desired social or psychological outcomes, embedding them in the cultural imagination. Social norms are thus not merely reflected in advertising-they are actively constructed and reinforced through symbolic representation[13].

Baudrillard's theory intersects with contemporary studies in consumer psychology and marketing, highlighting the interplay between perception, desire, and behavior[14]. By analyzing historical campaigns within this framework, it becomes evident that advertising does not merely respond to preexisting demand but actively generates it, often shaping collective perceptions of what is necessary, desirable, or socially appropriate[15]. Hyperreality, therefore, offers both a theoretical and methodological tool to examine the mechanisms of psychological persuasion and the simulation of consumer needs.

In this paper, hyperreality will serve as the guiding framework to interpret the case studies of the Listerine and bacon-and-eggs campaigns. By situating these examples within Baudrillard's conceptual model, the analysis will demonstrate how early advertising created symbolic worlds that influenced behavior, normalized certain practices, and established psychological dependencies that extended far beyond the products themselves.

[11] Barroso, "From Reality to the Hyperreality of the Simulation."
[12] Ron Sela, "Persuasive Advertising: How Ads Shape Consumer Behavior," Ron Sela, November 12, 2024, https://www.ronsela.com/persuasive-advertising/.
[13] Stuart Hall and The Open University, eds., Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Repr, Culture, Media and Identities (SAGE, 2012).
[14] Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, The Body, in Theory - Histories of Cultural Materialism (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019).
[15] Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation.

3. Historical Context of Early Advertising

At the turn of the twentieth century, advertising emerged not merely as a commercial tool but as a cultural force capable of shaping social norms and consumer behavior. Industrialization, urbanization, and mass production transformed the marketplace, creating a growing gap between what consumers needed materially and what they were persuaded to desire.[16] In this context, advertising evolved into a sophisticated practice that blended information with psychological manipulation, leveraging emerging media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio to reach increasingly large audiences.

During this period, advertisers began to recognize that products could serve as symbols, representing social status, personal hygiene, health, or morality, rather than simply fulfilling functional purposes. This symbolic dimension allowed campaigns to create perceived needs that extended beyond practical use. Fear, authority, and social conformity became common strategies: advertisements warned of potential social embarrassment, appealed to professional or medical endorsements, and positioned products as essential for cultural or personal success. In effect, advertisers did not simply respond to consumer demand—they manufactured it.[17]

Two developments in particular illustrate the era's shift toward psychologically driven marketing. First, the medicalization of everyday concerns provided fertile ground for campaigns that converted minor inconveniences into perceived medical or social crises. Second, the use of "expert" endorsements—often physicians or scientists—conferred legitimacy on otherwise ordinary products, shaping public perceptions of health and lifestyle. These strategies established early patterns of hyperreal advertising: representations of need and desirability became socially and culturally more salient than the tangible benefits of the products themselves.

This historical backdrop sets the stage for examining emblematic campaigns that exemplify these dynamics. The Listerine advertisements of the 1920s and Edward Bernays' bacon-and-eggs breakfast campaign both leveraged cultural anxieties, authoritative figures, and persuasive narratives to generate demand and normalize new behaviors. By situating these campaigns within the broader context of early twentieth-century advertising, we can better understand how symbolic messaging created environments in which consumption was guided less by material necessity and more by culturally constructed perceptions of need.

4. Case Study 1: Listerine and the Creation of Halitosis

The Listerine campaign of the 1920s represents one of the most striking early examples of advertising as a tool for psychological influence. Produced by the Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, Listerine was initially marketed as a surgical antiseptic and a general oral hygiene product.[18] [19] However, its transformation into a household necessity relied not on the product's functional superiority but on the construction of a new social and psychological

[16] Ramy Ayoub, Rise of Urbanization and Production Urbanization and Its Role in Economic Growth (2022), 16,17,18,19,20, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606732.

[17] Samiya Farooq and Adeel Maqbool, "Advertising as An Influencing Factor on Consumer Behavior," Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental 18 (May 2024): e06587, https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n9-076.

[18] "History of LISTERINE® | About LISTERINE® | LISTERINE® Middle East," accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.listerine-me.com/about.

[19] "From Surgery Antiseptic to Modern Mouthwash | Listerine® Philippines," accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.listerine.com.ph/about.

need. Central to this strategy was the invention and promotion of the term "halitosis", which framed bad breath as a medical condition warranting intervention[20] [21] [22].

Prior to this campaign, bad breath was largely regarded as a minor social inconvenience rather than a pressing medical concern. Listerine's marketing materials, including print advertisements in newspapers and magazines, medical pamphlets, and later radio promotions, sought to medicalize this condition, portraying it as a hidden danger capable of undermining personal relationships, professional success, and social standing.[23] The campaign skillfully employed fear as a motivator, suggesting that individuals with untreated halitosis risked social ostracism and embarrassment.[24] This approach leveraged psychological principles that continue to underpin modern marketing: anxiety induction, social pressure, and the creation of a perceived deficiency that could be remedied through purchase.

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality illuminates the mechanisms at work in this campaign. By defining a new condition—halitosis—and linking it to social consequences, Listerine advertisements constructed a symbolic reality in which fear and hygiene were inseparable from consumer behavior. The product's value extended beyond its practical function; it became a tool for navigating social norms and asserting personal acceptability. In effect, the advertisement created a hyperreal environment in which the perception of need existed independently of objective necessity, and where cultural symbols-the "fear of halitosis"-dictated behavioral choices.

The Listerine case demonstrates how advertising can extend beyond persuasion into the realm of social construction. It highlights the power of media to generate psychological dependencies, normalize certain behaviors, and create demand where none previously existed. Moreover, it establishes a foundational example for analyzing later campaigns, such as Edward Bernays' bacon-and-eggs breakfast promotion, in which the manipulation of perception and social norms similarly produced hyperreal consumption practices. By situating the Listerine campaign within both historical and theoretical contexts, it becomes clear that early advertising was as much about shaping minds and social expectations as it was about selling a product.

4.1. Case Study 2: Edward Bernays and the Bacon-and-Eggs Breakfast Campaign

In the 1920s, Edward Bernays, often regarded as the "father of public relations," orchestrated a campaign that fundamentally reshaped American eating habits.[25] Commissioned by the Beech-Nut Packing Company, Bernays sought to increase consumption of bacon and eggs, promoting it as the ideal breakfast.[26] Unlike traditional advertising that emphasized taste or convenience, Bernays' strategy relied on psychological and cultural

[20] "From Surgery Antiseptic to Modern Mouthwash | Listerine® Philippines."
[21] Vernon Lf, "From Surgical Suite to Fresh Breath: The History of Listerine®," International Journal of Dentistry and Oral Health 4, no. 4 (2018), https://doi.org/10.16966/2378-7090.263.
[22] Jeff Hester, "History of Halitosis," Dental Depot Arizona, March 7, 2023, https://dentaldepotarizona.com/history-of-halitosis/.
[23] Hester, "History of Halitosis."
[24] Student Guide | Digital Collections Blog, n.d., accessed December 5, 2025, https://blogs.library.duke.edu/digital-collections/mma/guide/student/.
[25] Paddy Farrell, "Understanding Nutritional Propaganda," TriageMethod, February 27, 2025, https://triagemethod.com/nutritional-propaganda/.
[26] Farrell, "Understanding Nutritional Propaganda."

persuasion, positioning the meal as a health necessity endorsed by scientific authority.[27]

Bernays capitalized on the growing influence of physicians and nutrition experts to lend credibility to the campaign. By citing endorsements from doctors who purportedly recommended a heavy breakfast, advertisements conveyed the message that consuming bacon and eggs was essential for energy, vitality, and overall well-being.[28] This approach exemplifies the use of authority bias, where recommendations from perceived experts influence behavior, even when the underlying claims are exaggerated or selectively presented. The campaign also leveraged cultural norms, reframing the heavy, protein-rich meal as not only permissible but desirable in everyday life, thereby normalizing a new pattern of consumption across the population.

From the perspective of hyperreality, Bernays' campaign illustrates how symbolic meaning can override material reality. Bacon and eggs were no more necessary nutritionally than other foods, yet through media representation and authoritative endorsement, the meal became a socially constructed ideal. The campaign blurred the line between factual health information and manufactured desire, demonstrating how advertising can create a perceived need that exists independently of tangible necessity. In effect, the campaign created a hyperreal breakfast culture, where the symbolic associations of health, vigor, and modernity dictated consumer behavior.

This example also highlights the broader social power of advertising in shaping collective norms. By embedding symbolic messages into everyday routines, the campaign influenced not only individual choices but societal expectations regarding diet, health, and propriety. The psychological mechanisms deployed authority appeal, repetition, and cultural framing mirror techniques seen in other early campaigns, such as Listerine, but with a more positive, aspirational appeal rather than fear-based persuasion. Together, these cases reveal the capacity of early advertising to construct symbolic realities, instill psychological dependencies, and guide social behavior, laying the groundwork for contemporary marketing strategies.

4.2. Comparative Analysis of Listerine and Bacon-and-Eggs Campaigns

The Listerine and bacon-and-eggs campaigns, though differing in tone and strategy, share a common underlying logic: both manufactured consumer needs by shaping perceptions rather than responding to preexisting demand. In the case of Listerine, fear and social anxiety were leveraged to create a sense of deficiency-the threat of halitosis-while the bacon-and-eggs campaign employed authority and cultural norms to construct an aspirational ideal of health and vitality. Both campaigns illustrate the ability of advertising to create hyperreal environments, in which symbolic meaning and social messaging take precedence over material necessity.[29]

A key similarity lies in the strategic use of psychological persuasion. Listerine utilized fear as a motivator, portraying bad breath as a hidden danger with social consequences, while Bernays' bacon-and-eggs campaign relied on the perceived legitimacy of medical

[27] Irene Catherine Clarke Westfall, "'Persuasion for Profit': Public Relations and Corporate Power at Midcentury" (Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors, Wesleyan University, 2022), https://doi.org/10.14418/wes01.1.2659.

[28] Westfall, "'Persuasion for Profit.'"

[29] Farrell, "Understanding Nutritional Propaganda."

endorsements to persuade consumers. In both cases, the campaigns manipulated social and cultural perceptions to redefine what was considered normal or desirable. Advertisements became more than informational tools-they actively constructed the social realities in which consumers made choices.

However, the campaigns also differ in their emotional and cognitive appeals. Listerine's marketing instilled anxiety, highlighting potential personal failure and social rejection, whereas the bacon-and-eggs campaign inspired aspiration, framing consumption as a route to health, energy, and social conformity. Listerine generated demand through negative reinforcement, whereas Bernays encouraged it through positive reinforcement and authority validation. These differences demonstrate that hyperreal consumption can be driven by both fear and aspiration, depending on the strategic framing employed by advertisers.

Both examples also underscore the long-term implications of early advertising practices. They reveal that consumer behavior can be shaped by symbolic constructions and media-driven narratives, rather than by objective need alone. By creating hyperreal conditions in which psychological and social cues dictate perceived necessity, advertisers established enduring patterns of influence that continue to inform contemporary marketing strategies. The comparison highlights that, whether through fear or authority, advertising has the power to construct reality, guiding not only individual choices but collective cultural norms.

5. Contemporary Implications

The lessons from the Listerine and bacon-and-eggs campaigns extend far beyond their historical context, shedding light on the persistent influence of hyperreal advertising in contemporary society. Today, media-driven manipulation has grown exponentially in scale and sophistication, fueled by digital platforms, social media algorithms, and real-time data analytics. Modern campaigns often rely on the same fundamental psychological mechanisms as early advertising-fear, authority, social proof, and aspirational framing-yet they operate in environments where messages are personalized, continuous, and often invisible to consumers.[30]

Hyperreality in contemporary marketing manifests most clearly in the creation of needs and desires that exist independently of material necessity. Social media influencers, targeted advertisements, and immersive digital experiences construct symbolic worlds in which consumption signals identity, status, or belonging. Just as Listerine medicalized bad breath to instill a fear-driven need, today's campaigns may link happiness, self-worth, or social approval to the acquisition of certain products, brands, or experiences. Similarly, authority-driven persuasion, exemplified by Bernays' bacon-and-eggs campaign, has evolved into endorsements from celebrities, experts, and even AI-generated figures, reinforcing symbolic meanings that influence behavior at scale.[31]

From a regulatory and legal perspective, these developments raise complex questions about the boundaries of ethical advertising. Contemporary laws governing consumer protection, false claims, and deceptive marketing practices attempt to mitigate manipu-

[30] Yogesh K. Dwivedi et al., "Setting the Future of Digital and Social Media Marketing Research: Perspectives and Research Propositions," International Journal of Information Management 59 (August 2021): 102168, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102168.

[31] "Interactive Viral Marketing Through Big Data Analytics, Influencer Networks, AI Integration, and Ethical Dimensions | MDPI," accessed December 5, 2025, https://www.mdpi.com/0718-1876/20/2/115.

lation, but the hyperreal nature of modern advertising often blurs the line between legitimate persuasion and covert influence. Econometric models of consumer behavior now attempt to quantify the effects of psychological, social, and symbolic variables, illustrating how symbolic constructions-rather than material factors-drive demand and purchasing decisions. These models echo the insights of early campaigns, demonstrating that consumption is frequently guided by perception rather than objective necessity.

Furthermore, understanding hyperreality has practical implications for both policymakers and consumers. By recognizing how symbolic messaging shapes desires and social norms, regulators can design interventions to protect vulnerable populations, while consumers can develop critical media literacy skills to navigate a landscape saturated with manipulative signals. At the same time, marketers continue to exploit these mechanisms, highlighting the ongoing relevance of early twentieth-century case studies for interpreting and responding to contemporary trends.

In essence, the historical strategies of Listerine and Bernays' campaigns provide a blueprint for understanding modern hyperreal marketing. They reveal that the intersection of psychology, communication, and consumer behavior remains central to the creation of perceived needs, shaping not only individual decisions but broader cultural norms and economic patterns.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the Listerine and bacon-and-eggs campaigns demonstrates that early advertising was far more than a tool for selling products; it was a mechanism for shaping psychological needs, social norms, and collective perceptions. Through the invention of halitosis and the reframing of a heavy breakfast as a health necessity, advertisers created hyperreal environments in which symbolic meanings governed behavior more than material realities. These campaigns exemplify the capacity of media to construct desires, instill anxieties, and normalize practices that extend beyond the intrinsic utility of the products themselves.

By situating these historical examples within Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, this study highlights the enduring power of advertising to simulate needs and manipulate perception. Listerine leveraged fear to generate social and psychological pressure, while Bernays employed authority and cultural norms to encourage aspirational consumption. Despite differing strategies, both campaigns reveal the broader mechanisms through which advertising shapes individual and collective behavior, establishing patterns that continue to influence contemporary marketing practices.

The implications of these findings are significant for today's consumer landscape. In a world dominated by digital media, social networks, and algorithmically targeted advertising, the hyperreal creation of desires has intensified, making media literacy and ethical regulation increasingly crucial. Econometric modeling and behavioral analysis further confirm that symbolic constructions, rather than material necessity, often drive consumer decisions, reinforcing the lessons learned from early twentieth-century campaigns.

Ultimately, understanding the historical interplay between psychology, communication, and consumer behavior provides valuable insight into the continuing influence of hyperreal advertising. By recognizing these mechanisms, policymakers, marketers, and consumers alike can better navigate the complex terrain of mediated desire, ensuring that the shaping of social norms and psychological needs occurs transparently, ethically, and with an awareness of its broader societal impact.

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