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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4310-2491> (2011) The Art of War
in manufacturing consumer consent. Chinese Management
Studies, 5 (4). pp. 450-459. doi:10.1108/17506141111183488**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17506141111183488>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17506141111183488>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3897>

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The Art of War in Manufacturing Consumer Consent: Strategy, Business Culture and Ethics in Marketing Management

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to develop a novel conceptual framework, based upon the integration of principles from Sun Tzu's Art of War (2006) and the political and economic aspects of the work of Herman and Chomsky (1998), for the explanation of brand persuasion, the manufacturing of consumer consent and the external engineering of consumption decisions by individuals and groups of consumers.

An examination of the methodological bases of research regarding Manufacturing Consent and Motivational Research provide a basis for the exploration of the factors that influence brand persuasion from both a marketing communications and consumers' position.

Whilst focusing on the development of and interplay between the concepts of Manufacturing Consent and Motivational Research the paper then introduces principles from the Art of War and illustrates their key philosophical connection to the debate. The authors wish to express their advocacy of the Art of War as a general set of principles that link the concepts discussed in this paper in regard to mass media, propaganda and the manufacturing of consent to the themes within Sun Tzu's work with regard to the enemy, manipulated target and protected people and how those constituencies are affected within this ontological premise.

This paper anchors the concept of Manufacturing Consent within the Propaganda Model of Herman and Chomsky (ibid). The paper then extends the concept of Manufacturing Consent from its base within the political economic world of the

propaganda model to the commercial world: the novel contextual phrase defined within the commercial world of marketing communications and purchasing is *consumption engineering*.

The paper further develops Manufacturing Consent and consumption engineering by embedding and integrating principles of Sun Tzu's Art of War into a novel conceptual framework. The new framework theoretically explains the strategy and behaviour of commercial organisations with regard to the use of marketing communications in engineering consumption in a 'sales war' where the consumer is simultaneously the enemy, the manipulated target and the protected people in Sun Tzu's seminal work.

This is a unique interpretation of Sun Tzu's 'enemy' within the fields of marketing communications and strategy – 'the enemy' is the position occupied by consumers. Previous research has discussed organisational competitors as 'the enemy' in a more traditional economic sense (Low & Tan, 1995; Wu, Chou & Wu, 2004; Kolar & Toporisc, 2007).

The paper examines the principles underlying the framework with regard to the resulting ethical positions and the underlying business culture that may allow such strategy and behaviour to be displayed in the commercial world. The framework contains non-problematic insoluble juxtapositions with regard to consumers, their manipulation, and the engineering of their consumption choices.

Finally, the paper concludes by summarising the framework's fundamental contra-positions to the pervasive and dominant neo-classical economic theories of consumer choice upon which most business and commerce is founded. The paper identifies the need for further research and evaluation of the novel framework both in Chinese and Western economic contexts.

2. The Methodological Foundations of Consumption Engineering.

Figure 1 outlines the structure of this work in terms of the key concepts discussed and the proposed conceptual framework that is developed. The paper develops the framework and illustrates the intersection of concepts from political economy which are extended into commercial economy alongside Sun Tzu's Art of War, and seeks to examine the mutually overlapping space occupied by consumers at the shaded centre of Figure 1.

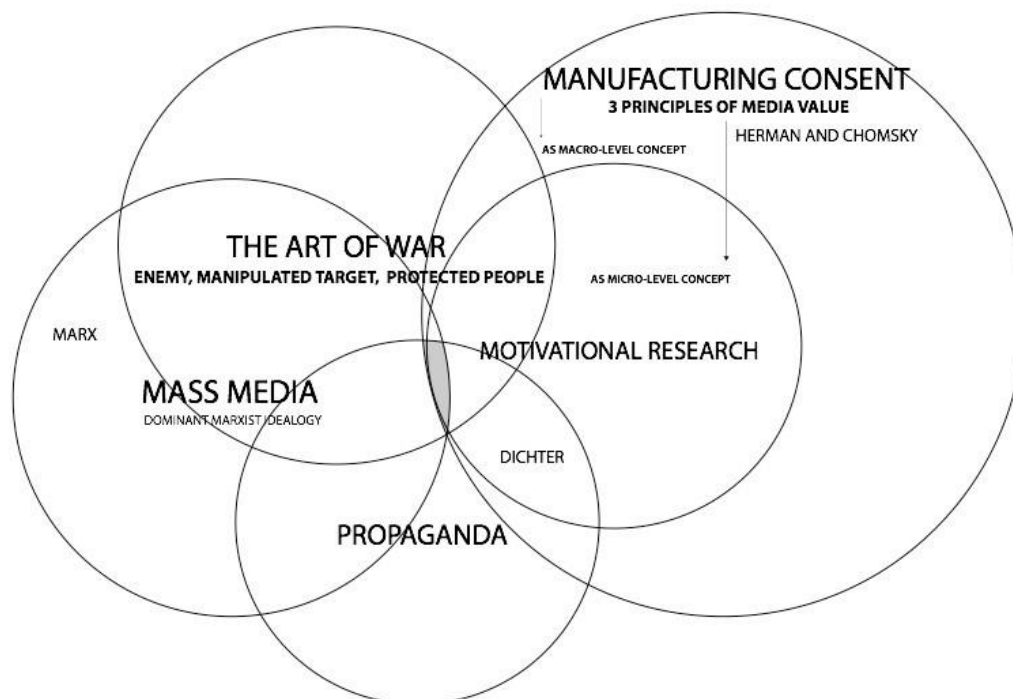


Figure 1. Conceptual relationships between themes described.

The terms Manufacturing Consent and Motivational Research underlie many approaches in the field of marketing. It is possible to explore the evolution of Motivational Research and Manufacturing Consent in marketing and guide the reader through the contextual conceptualisations of such. For clarity, this paper refers to the central concept of Manufacturing Consent and not the theoretical Propaganda Model

(Herman & Chomsky, 1988) although the paper will later explore the foundation of manufacturing consent within the propaganda model alongside the linkage of the Propaganda Model to the Art of War.

As disciplines, Manufacturing Consent and Motivational Research are often seen as disparate systems of thinking across anthropology, psychology and marketing and therefore as fractured and ill defined in relation to one another (Tadajewski, 2006, Arnould and Thompson, 2005, Mullen, 2008).

However, the dominant position within consumer behaviour research has been occupied by positivist methodology and variants of an empirical approach to such an extent that Belch and Belch (2007), for example, almost pejoratively dismiss the "depth approach" as used only by "creative types" (Belch and Belch, 2007: 598). This dominance of positivism in the field stems from the pervasive neo-classical economics model of rational consumer behaviour first illustrated by Marshall (1881) and then massively extended and embedded throughout the 20th-century.

Commercially, the neo-classical economics concept of consumer choice is limiting – it is an axiomatic paradigm where consumer behaviour is exemplified only through observed (and observable) individual, or aggregate individual, consumer choices that reflect the real (or perceived) ‘utility’ of the object. Consequently, Motivational Research underpinned by a methodology, which stemmed from emergent theory development with the consumer as co-creator of knowledge grew apace so that organisations could attempt to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace rather than observe post-hoc whether products would be successful. As a result;

‘... advertisers and marketing managers highly prized the insights available from sociologists, psychologists and psychoanalysts who could provide ideas on conscious and unconscious human motivations. Information that was especially sought after, in particular, related to ‘the unconscious or hidden ideas, associations or attitudes of the consumer in

connection with . . . [a] particular product' (Weiss and Green, 1951: 36).

The core postulate was that the more a commercial organisation understood the consumer, the more leverage in terms of marketing communications and advertising was assumed to be assured. This is still the core postulate of marketing as a field, that understanding the consumption requirements of consumers will allow commercial organisations to satisfy those consumption requirements.

This orthodoxy in marketing has been somewhat challenged in the 21st-century by insights from Brown (2008) through the concepts of learning from failure in marketing. There are numerous case studies where understanding, but not fully servicing, consumers' consumption requirements can be shown to increase brand persuasion, brand loyalty and long-term consumption (Brown 2008).

However, the orthodoxy generally remains intact, with empirical statistical data collection being perceived as dominant and supplemented by Motivational Research to uncover the subtext of consumer behaviour -- to investigate the rational buyers' "wants" and emotional "needs" *alongside* their genuine rational behaviour.

'...people do behave rationally. But rational behavior also includes acceptance of emotions, such as the fear of embarrassment, as a motivator' (Dichter, 1979: 114).

Perhaps in Dichter's (ibid) comment there is some rapprochement of the objective and subjective, positivist and interpretive, outside of observable, rational consumer choices although the level of analysis is still focused at the individual.

By contrast, proponents of the subjective worldview perceive the social world as having a precarious ontological status, questioning social reality, with less emphasis of an external concrete (social) world. In place of assuming an external, concrete reality, interpretive researchers seek to investigate the social world at the level of

subjective experience (Arndt, 1985a, 1985b). For interpretive researchers, social reality is seen to be inter-subjectively composed, so that epistemologically, knowledge is not approached from the standpoint of an external, objective position, but from the lived experience of the research co-participants. As a methodological strategy to ‘understand’ the lived experience of consumers’, interpretive researchers generally – although not exclusively – use qualitative methods (e.g. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Moore and Lutz, 2000; Thompson et al., 1989);

Rather than viewing culture as a fairly homogenous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society (e.g. Americans share this kind of culture; Japanese share that kind of culture), consumer behaviour theory explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism . . . Owing to its internal fragmented complexity, consumer culture does not determine action as a causal force. Much like a game where individuals improvise within the constraints of rules . . . consumer culture – and the marketplace ideology it conveys – frames consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense-making interpretations more likely than others. (Arnould and Thompson, 2005: 869)

In terms of the core philosophies presented in the Art of War, this can be seen as business engaging with ‘the enemy’, where the enemy is the ‘homogenous system’ of the society and individual consumers that businesses are targeting in an attempt to obtain the desired strategic, and therefore commercial, outcome.

The positivist paradigm has been challenged in different contexts. For example, in postmodern history and debates centering on ‘realism and empiricism’ (Jenkins, 2003), “the history of systems of thought” and the examination of concepts via non-linear histories (Foucault, 1984) alongside ideas of commodity fetishism (Baudrillard, 1968), simultaneously fragmented and unified organizational culture (Parker, 2000) and revisionist marketing histories (Fullerton, 1988). These concepts in effect philosophically define and reinforce

the three key Art of War concepts of enemy, manipulated target and protected people where the goal of the consumer in terms of behaviour is manipulated (commodity fetishism), and as the enemy in the sales war is *fragmented and unified*. The enemy is also the protected people that paradoxically has strength because it is simultaneously fragmented and unified, as well requiring care as the manipulated target -- the population of current consumers and future purchasers.

Upon accepting this paradox of the simultaneous existence of multiple roles for consumers and consumption within principles of the Art of War then our conceptual thinking must accept a paradigm shift and acceptance of the milieu in which our lives play out which is based within the discipline of Manufacturing Consent.

Ontologically our 'consumer universe' is framed by Herman and Chomsky's concept. If we accept this as our initial philosophical position then Dichter's Motivational Research paradigm (the need to gain insight into the consumers 'wants' and 'needs' in order to effect a strategy in consumption engineering, and ultimately persuade the purchaser to buy a certain brand) is positioned conceptually within this 'universe'. This position is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

3. Manufacturing Consent, Consumption Engineering and Brand Persuasion

As a world-view, "Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) presents a study of a media that serves to "mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity" (McChesney, 1989). Taking the position that the media functioning in a democracy appear independent, as opposed to the view that propaganda and the overt influence of the media as its primary drivers are the sole concern of the totalitarian state,

Herman and Chomsky propose a model of function that exposes the implicit systems of manufacturing consent to examination.

The idea of questioning the ideas of media freedom and influence on the individual consumer (as manipulated target) of media in a free market economy, where our tacit understanding of which presupposes an understanding of the concept of deregulation of state control on the economy, is necessary to inform our understanding of the implicit 'covert' systems of media control described and demonstrated by Herman and Chomsky throughout their examination of the process (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

The PM posits how propaganda, including systemic biases, function in mass media and seeks to explain how populations are propagandized and how consent for various economic, social and political policies are 'manufactured' in the public mind.

Concepts arising from Manufacturing Consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) range from ideas of political indoctrination to the application of persuasion of the public in purchase decisions. Within the commercial realm, the latter of these is defined by the authors as the novel contextual phrase *consumption engineering*. Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model attempts to explain the performance of the media consistently serving the interests of corporate and state power.

Again, direct parallels can be drawn conceptually with the idea of the consumer as recipient in the consumer exchange where media operates on the micro and therefore personal level, as opposed to the macro level of 'state power'. Media operating as the mechanism for business to engage with the consumer in a more intimate way reflects and supports the larger dynamic of the mass media in relation to the population, and can be considered the point at which we can differentiate between the concepts of

marketing to the purchaser (micro level) and delivering propaganda to the larger population (macro level).

Originally designed as an insight into the function of mass media in the United States, if we metaphorically examine this model through the ‘wrong end of the telescope’ it exposes the mechanics of a ‘guided market system’ controlling media coverage, trends, analysis and function. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) state, the Propaganda Model is based upon 3 hypotheses:

The first hypothesis put forward is that where there is consensus amongst the corporate and political elite on a particular issue, the media tends to reflect this in their coverage of the issue, to the exclusion of rival viewpoints. (Herman, E. and Chomsky, N. (1988, 2)

The second hypothesis is that, in liberal democratic regimes such as the US, where the mass media functions under corporate rather than state control, media coverage is shaped by what is a ‘guided market system’ (Herman, E. and Chomsky, N. (1988, 2).

The third hypothesis relates to the way in which the Propaganda Model is received:

[It] makes predictions at various levels. There are first-order predictions about how the media function. The model also makes second-order predictions about how media performance will be discussed and evaluated.... The general prediction, at each level, is that what enters the mainstream will support the needs of established power. (Chomsky, 1988, 153)

Herman and Chomsky (1988) suggest that the use of propaganda is an integral and long-standing mechanism of population control employed by corporate and political elites in capitalist, liberal-democratic regimes. In totalitarian societies, the state controls the general public’s access to information and this is generally understood to constitute a propaganda system; in capitalist, liberal democratic societies, by contrast, the notion that there is an open ‘marketplace of ideas’ creates the misleading impression that the general public is free from manipulation. “In reality, however, the corporate sector and their political allies have long worked together to ensure that

some ideas are elevated and others are excluded from the ‘marketplace’” (Beder, 2006a; 2006b; Carey, 1995; Dinan and Miller, 2007; Ewen, 1996; Fones-Wolf, 1994; Hughes, 1994; Miller and Dinan, 2008 cited Mullen, A (2009)).

Herman and Chomsky (2002, p. xlii) concluded that the Propaganda Model ‘fits well the media’s treatment of this range of issues’ and contends that, despite its general neglect, the PM remains one of the most tested models in the social sciences. Indeed,

Chomsky states:

... we’ve studied a great number of cases, from every methodological point of view that we’ve been able to think of – and they all support the Propaganda Model. And by now there are thousands of pages of similar material confirming the thesis in books and articles by other people too – in fact, I would hazard a guess that the Propaganda Model is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences. There has been no serious counter-discussion of it at all, actually, that I’m aware of. (Chomsky in Mitchell and Schoeffel, 2002, 18)

Chomsky further states that ‘the first-order predictions of the Propaganda Model [regarding media performance] are systematically confirmed’ (ibid., 154) by the examples presented in his research document. As a reinforcement of this position from the opening paragraph of Herman and Chomsky (1988):

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, inform and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. (ibid., p.1)¹

The Propaganda Model as a form of Manufacturing Consent is important as a macro level general theory that demonstrates mass persuasion controls (see Figure 1). It has been illustrated that extending Manufacturing Consent from its base in political economy at a macro level to the commercial world allows for the generation of mass media consumption engineering and brand persuasion, as well as Manufacturing

Consent consumption engineering through direct marketing communications at the micro level.

Upon applying Art of War principles to the Propaganda Model model, the parallels become clear – there is a unique and paradoxical convergence at both a macro and a micro level where consumers are simultaneously the enemy, the manipulated target and the protected people in Sun Tzu's seminal work. This non-problematic insoluble juxtaposition with regard to consumers, their manipulation, the engineering of their

¹ Although Chomsky and Herman have examined the social function of ideology and propaganda as effective means of population control elsewhere in their work (Chomsky, 1989; Herman, 1999), the PM is solely concerned with media performance.

consumption choices and mass media brand persuasion allows the consumer to maintain an artifice of ‘choice’ and ‘free will’ within a ontologically ‘sealed universe’ in which the ‘invisible government’ of commercial interest captures and manipulates the consumer and future purchasers.

4. Art of War, Business Culture, Ethics and Marketing Leverage

Within this framework of consumption engineering under the aegis of the extension of the Propaganda Model of Manufacturing Consent, the fallacy of choice for consumers both at a micro and macro level raises fundamental questions about the nature of business culture, marketing leverage and ethics.

The premise of consumers as the ‘manipulated target’ within the principles of the Art of War is perhaps non-contentious given statements in the Art of War relating to ‘manoeuvring’ and ‘the use of communication devices, and espionage’ (market intelligence). However, the ‘manipulated target’ within the Art of War is ‘the enemy’ and hence conceptually the framework cannot escape its bases – the novel concept that manipulating consumers is to treat them as the enemy. The manipulation, brand persuasion of, and consumption engineering from consumers as the enemy also relates to Art of War stratagems whereby one breaks the resistance of the enemy without fighting.

Furthermore, it is clear in the Art of War that the leader of armies is the arbiter of the people’s fate and whether the nation shall be in peace or peril. Hence the leader of the armies can not only protect the people’s fate via manipulation and espionage -- whilst treating them as the enemy -- but also by ensuring escape routes and leaving ‘outlets free’. This allows consumers to continue to be held within the conceptual space of the fallacy of choice, and to be shepherded, manipulated and leveraged by organisations

for future consumption engineering.

Within the fields of business strategy and marketing, one would have to consider whether a strategic position founded upon such treatment of consumers is conscionable and ethically justifiable. Such a treatment of consumers appears to be in direct contravention with the basic orthodoxy of marketing, although the premise of manipulating consumers can readily be assimilated into observation of mainstream business culture and practice, irrespective of the ethical position of manipulation. In this regard, it is difficult to segment the holistic, subjective Propaganda Model and manipulation within Manufacturing Consent from the methodologically opposed core of information provision under free market economic systems founded upon the objective and individual bases of Marshall's (1881) work on consumer behaviour with regard to utility.

This paper is concerned with ethical propositions regarding the welfare and treatment of consumers and the possible conflict of such with the premise of consumers as the enemy. The paper is not concerned with a base examination of the ethics of manipulation of consumers and whether organisations employ ethical marketing: the reader can refer to Patterson (1966), Laczniaak & Murphy (1991) and Murphy, Laczniaak & Wood (2007) for such discussions.

Whilst the manipulation of consumers may be less contentious with regard to consumer welfare, the treatment of consumers as 'the enemy' is less ethically conscionable, at first sight, although the stratagems of the Art of War illustrate clearly how marketing intelligence and marketing may be conducted. However, it is important to note at this juncture that the leader of armies can be seen to have a duty of care to the 'protected people' both in peacetime and in times of conflict and this duty of care – a clearly positive moral and ethical position – while juxtaposed to the

manipulation of the consumers as the enemy provides for some parallel joint existence of the concepts and the space which consumers occupy without ethical mistreatment, but rather with ethical responsibility.

This parallel joint existence of consumers as ‘the protected people’ and ‘the enemy’ is non-problematic and provides for ethical treatment of consumers within the framework of Manufacturing Consent and consumption engineering -- a form of ‘benign sales war’ of brand persuasion with consumers where consumption engineering is prevalent but ethical responsibility emerges.

5. Conclusion

This paper has developed a novel framework based upon principles of Sun Tzu’s Art of War with the political economy work of Herman & Chomsky (1988) for the explanation of brand persuasion and consumption engineering.

The paper has not sought meaning in brand persuasion in the traditional, defined sense of knowledge development and base information provision, but rather an insight into the contextual space which consumers occupy and the influence, consumption engineering and purchasing leverage brought to bear on the consumer via marketing efforts.

The framework is a reconciliation and integration of Western radical interpretive political economy theory and seminal Chinese military stratagems resulting in the parallel joint existence of consumers as the manipulated target, the enemy, and the protected people in the ‘war’ for sales’. This novel interpretation of consumers as ‘the enemy’ leads to potentially significant ethical considerations for marketing organisations although the parallel existence of the consumers within principles of the Art of War allow ethical responsibility and a duty of care to consumers to emerge and

embed.

Further analysis and consideration of the framework is required, and the next stage of the research programme will be to test the framework via organisational case studies in both Western and Chinese economies.