

Instagram's Sneakiness Makes Super Bowl Ads Look Quaint

When the commercials come on during the game, at least you'll know Jason Bateman is trying to sell you something.

By Sheila Marikar

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On Sunday, millions of Americans will hunker down in front of the nearest big screen to watch the Super Bowl and its roster of splashy, celebrity-studded advertisements. For brands, it's a crucial stage: In our extremely fragmented media landscape, there's [no better way](#) to reach a crowd.

CBS is [reportedly charging](#) \$5.1 million to \$5.3 million for 30 seconds of commercial time during the game, and to make that kind of investment worth it, brands pour resources into formulating bits of theater that might get viewers talking (recall Budweiser's eye-rollingly annoying "[Whassup](#)" guys and tear jerky Clydesdales). The absurd premises advanced by this year's roster of Super Bowl ads are set to include Jason Bateman operating an elevator (brought to you by [Hyundai](#)), Christina Applegate tooling around town with a back-talking batch of candy ([M&Ms](#)), and Chance the Rapper dancing in an airplane hangar with the Backstreet Boys ([Doritos](#)).

They're fun, they're silly and they're hyped almost as much as the game itself. They're why plenty of non-football fans (raising my hand) watch the Super Bowl. But above all, they're clearly ads, which makes them seem almost quaint at a time when advertising has begun to take on much more subtle — and at times, stealthy — forms.

A [2017 survey](#) by the Association of National Advertisers found that 75 percent of marketers partake in "influencer marketing," the practice of paying people with robust social media followings to promote a product, and 43 percent of them plan to spend more on it in the next year. Companies are increasingly targeting users of Instagram, the app once dominated by photos of babies and brunches, to hype their products. And as influencer marketing and the social network itself have evolved, the lines have blurred between sponsored ads (in which a company pays Instagram to push an advertisement to users); "influencers" tagging things that they're paid to promote (Kim Kardashian West [posting a selfie](#) with a "flat tummy" smoothie); and regular folks shouting out brands they like, just because (like a friend tagging the design hotel where he stayed during a recent trip to Tokyo, compelling me to book a room there when I went to Japan).

"The goal is to get the ads to be as relevant and interesting to you, as a consumer, as the content that you've elected to follow on your own," said Vishal Shah, Instagram's head of product.

But the ads are not always obvious, and the people pushing products on Instagram may not be as immediately recognizable as the stars of Super Bowl commercials. Last year, Johnson & Johnson tapped teenage Instagram users with around 500 followers each to promote its latest line of Clean & Clear products, reasoning that these people would be seen as more trustworthy endorsers of the acne-combating collection of cleansers and creams than mainstream celebrities who hawk a variety of products. They were, after all “doing things that other kids responded to authentically,” a Johnson & Johnson representative told [AdAge](#).

Among companies with products to promote and Instagram influencers with themselves to promote, authenticity has become a goal, a thing that people try to reverse engineer either by turning the kid next door into a pitchman — in the case of Johnson & Johnson — or by posting what we’re supposed to believe are unfiltered accounts of their daily lives, like the makeup guru who posts a selfie in her mussed but not messy bed, claiming she “woke up like this.”

“If you’re trying to be authentic, by definition, you’re not authentic — you’re manufacturing your online persona,” said Arianna Margulis, the artist behind the Instagram-based comic strip [But Like Maybe](#) (it’s like “Cathy” for millennials and Generation Z). Ms. Margulis says she follows the guidelines laid out by the Federal Trade Commission and discloses when she’s being paid for a post: she’s done advertisements for brands like Harper’s Bazaar, the dating app Hinge and Pizza Hut. But those guidelines aren’t always clear, and a frequently asked questions page on the [F.T.C.’s website](#) points to confusion around who qualifies as an influencer and what qualifies as an advertisement.

Take this sample question: “If I post a picture of myself to Instagram and tag the brand of dress I’m wearing, but don’t say anything about the brand in my description of the picture, is that an endorsement? And, even if it is an endorsement, wouldn’t my followers understand that I only tag the brands of my sponsors?” (Short answer: Tagging a brand is an endorsement and may require disclosure. Don’t assume that your followers know anything.)

Ms. Margulis’s line of work has become so sought after that people who are not paid in money, sneakers, or makeup are claiming sponsorships from brands like Nike and Sephora in their posts so as to “fake it ’til they make it” as social media influencers. “They’ll caption a post ‘#sponsored,’ even though they’re not sponsored, to either impress their followers or to impress companies that they want to get paid by,” said Brian Braiker, the editor in chief of the magazine [AdAge](#).

So murky is the morass of who’s hyping something because they genuinely like it and who’s doing it to get paid that, in 2017, the Instagram account [SwearBy](#) was launched to help “smart women find real and #notsponsored recommendations for the best products around.” I first found out about SwearBy when a beauty editor I follow announced that she had 10 boxes of hydrating face masks, lip balms and face cleansers from a luxury skin care brand to give away. Would-be winners had to follow SwearBy, follow her, like her post and post a comment naming a product they swear by. The post may not have been sponsored (although I wondered who paid for the 10 boxes) but it was an advertisement for many things: SwearBy, the luxury skin care brand, and the editor whose opinion carried so much weight that she was given 10 boxes of stuff to give out.

There's nothing wrong with non-celebrities trumpeting products because they like them or touting their accomplishments because want to get more work. But there is something hollow and dystopian about opening an app to see people you like and instead seeing people you like try to sell products to you. As Duncan Watts, a sociologist and principal researcher at Microsoft Research, put it: "There's a problem when you try to mix friendship with economic transactions." He compared it to how people in relationships don't pay for sex, and you wouldn't normally tip a friend who invites you to their home.

All smart consumers question the veracity of ads like the ones that will appear during the Super Bowl — does anyone really think Chance and the Backstreet Boys chop it up over "Flamin' Hot" chips? But on social media, we now have to question whether anything we see is actually authentic.

Meanwhile, Instagram is making it easier to purchase products through the app. Mr. Shah intends for the network to become "the world's largest personalized mall." Thanks to increasingly smart algorithms, users will see more products they're likely to like, and be able to buy them with a couple of taps of the thumb. At least on Super Bowl Sunday, those who want to avoid being marketed to will know exactly when to get up and refresh their drink or the chip bowl. They just might think twice about refreshing Instagram.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/02/opinion/sunday/super-bowl-commercials-instagram.html>

Answer the following questions:

What do you think of influencer marketing?

Do you agree with Duncan Watts who says; "There's a problem when you try to mix friendship with economic transactions." Why, Why not?