Subliminal Brand Messages on Apple's Data Privacy Campaign in Peirce's Semiotics

Pesan Merek Subliminal Pada Kampanye Privasi Data Apple *Dalam Semiotika* Peirce

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Abstract - This research investigates the impact of hidden messages in soft-sell advertisements on consumers' perception, trust, and intention to behave towards brands, and focuses on the implications of data security and reliability. This study, a descriptive qualitative methodology combined with Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis framework, delves into visual elements, storytelling, and advertising contexts showcased in Apple's ad as focal points that illuminate pressing data security challenges today. The research addresses the gaps identified in prior investigations regarding the presence of subliminal cues in advertisements, illustrating that emotional engagement and subtle persuasion can bolster brand presence and distinction within the technology sector. The outcomes effectively portray its product ecosystem as a reliable data security option, underlining the significance of safeguarding personal data. Furthermore, Apple adeptly illustrates its comprehension of product placement as a strategy rooted in subliminal messaging for marketing purposes. Implies that businesses can enhance consumer trust through narrative branding and the incorporation of semiotic elements to communicate brand messages discreetly, such as assurances of data protection. Moreover, embedding products within a narrative framework has proven beneficial for boosting brand recall, emotional connection, and customer loyalty are key elements for sustaining enduring relationships with consumers who increasingly prioritize privacy.

Keywords: Brand Message, Data Security, Semiotics, Soft-sell advertisement, Subliminal Messages.

Abstrak - Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana pesan subliminal dalam iklan soft-selling dapat mempengaruhi persepsi, kepercayaan, dan intensi perilaku konsumen terhadap merek, khususnya terkait proposisi nilai keamanan dan keandalan data. Dengan pendekatan analisis descriptive qualitative technique dan semiotika Charles Sanders Peirce, penelitian ini mengkaji simbol visual, narasi, dan situasi periklanan dalam iklan. Apple sebagai objek kajian yang menyoroti isu keamanan data yang relevan saat ini. Penelitian ini mengisi celah studi sebelumnya terkait keberadaan sinyal subliminal dalam iklan, serta menunjukkan bagaimana resonansi emosional dan persuasi tidak langsung dapat memperkuat positioning dan diferensiasi merek dalam pasar teknologi. Hasil penelitian Apple secara efektif menunjukkan ekosistem produknya sebagai solusi keamanan data yang dapat dipercaya, menyoroti pentingnya menjaga privasi data. Apple juga berhasil menunjukkan pemahaman tentang penempatan produk sebagai pendekatan pemasaran berbasis pesan bawah sadar. Implikasi dari studi ini menunjukkan bahwa perusahaan dapat membangun kepercayaan konsumen melalui branding naratif dan penggunaan elemen semiotik untuk menyampaikan pesan merek secara halus, seperti jaminan privasi data. Selain itu, penempatan produk dalam alur cerita terbukti efektif meningkatkan daya ingat merek, keterlibatan emosional, dan loyalitas pelanggan, faktor penting dalam menjaga hubungan jangka panjang dengan konsumen.

Kata Kunci: Branding Naratif, Data Security, Iklan Soft-Selling, Loyalitas Pelanggan, Semiotik, Sinyal Subliminal.

INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness of the digital ecosystem has been an intrinsic aspect of people's lives. The seamless transfer of data across the internet motivates the integration of digital gadgets. Nevertheless, despite the ease of access, there exists a potential danger of compromising privacy through a phenomenon known as data breach. Verizon's 2024 data breach investigation report reveals that among the 30,458 occurrences that took place, 10,626 were verified cases of data leakage. For 95% of the cases, the median estimated loss was US$46,000, with a range of US$3 until US$1,141,467 (Hylender et al., 2024). Furthermore, as stated in IBM Security's 2023 report, the aggregate losses resulting from

incidents of data leakage reached a sum of US$4.45 million, representing a 2.3% rise compared to the preceding year (Security, 2023). Aside from monetary damages, the data breach also results in a decline in public trust and has a contrary effect on the long-term viability of the business. To alleviate this issue, the need of crisis communication becomes paramount in efficiently and comprehensively managing the public's view of incidents (Noor et al., 2024).

Crisis communication can be implemented through many media and formats. YouTube is a social networking platform that enables users to communicate through the medium of long-duration videos (Chawla et al. 2023). Internet users use YouTube as a platform to further explore material pertaining to their areas of interest (Kim et al., 2022). As a platform, YouTube is highly effective in disseminating communication messages through the strategic development of educational and engaging content (Nofrika, 2019). In the context of data security incidents, transparent communication regarding privacy preservation measures is increasingly imperative, especially when disseminated by the technology company itself.

Apple is one of the tech companies that consistently advocates all users for the protection of user privacy through video content on its official YouTube channel. It's also fuelled by concerns of Apple ecosystem users about privacy leaks. In previous studies, Apple's AI voice assistant feature, Siri, has been found to have compulsory rules to share its data with Apple (Rebelo et al., 2021) In addition, some users complained that some of Apple's built-in apps (Safari, Siri, iMessage, Family Sharing, FaceTime, Location Services, Find My, or even Touch ID) took their data in an opaque manner (Bourdoucen & Lindqvist, 2024). Based on a series of case studies above, Apple is trying to deflect those issues through a variety of data security video content.

Apple strategically employs a hybrid of public relations and marketing strategies in its data security content. The short film, "The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work," released on July 19, 2023, garnered over 77 million views by August 2024, sparking significant public interest and subsequent academic scrutiny. This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology and a semiotic framework to uncover the subliminal messages embedded within the film. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, the research investigates how the film constructs representations through its visual and narrative elements, categorizes data breaches as objects of concern, and implicitly conveys brand strategy through subliminal messages.

Selvakumar & Mathew (2015) conducted a quantitative analysis on how advertising strategies affect consumer behavior. They found that advertising serves as a potent tool for capturing consumer interest and promoting purchases of specific products by employing both soft sell and hard sell techniques. Alhelali (2023) investigated how digital marketing strategies influence consumer buying choices. This within a survey framework. Soft sell advertising emphasizes emotional appeal, subtle meanings, and brand image development, whereas hard sell is centered around factual presentations and logical analysis. evaluated four digital marketing approaches: email marketing, social media marketing, online advertisements, and mobile marketing. The results indicate that digital marketing methods are more impactful on consumer decisions than traditional marketing, with social media exerting the greatest influence over purchase choices. Maalik & Choughari (2020) explored how subliminal messaging in marketing affects online consumers' purchase intentions, highlighting that consumer perception, awareness, and understanding of such messages play a role in decision-making. This study confirms the effect of subliminal messaging on consumer purchasing behaviors. Research by Suresh & Tandon, (2018) further emphasizes the favorable effects of perceptions of subliminal advertising on consumer attitudes and actions.

In summary, earlier research demonstrates the beneficial effects of marketing via digital platforms on brand purchase interest and compares the benefits of soft selling against hard selling in shaping consumer buying choices. Meanwhile, studies in semiotics remain pertinent for analyzing the sign elements present in visual communications (Yusof et al., 2023). By thoroughly reviewing the existing literature, this study seeks to address the gaps identified in these prior works. This research will explore the role of qualisign, sinsign, and legisign as forms of representation in the transmission of data privacy information in three indicators: representation, object, and interpreter. It will examine how icons, indices, and symbols are depicted as items pertinent to the problem of data breaches. Additionally, it will analyze

the way the interpretant's understanding of the brand message is subtly communicated via subliminal cues. The report provides insight into addressing technical challenges and data breaches, highlighting the significant role that marketing communication can play in such scenarios. In addition, directing attention towards this research will result in the use of soft-sell advertising rather than a hard-selling approach based on Apple's prior semiotic discussions.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)
Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) is a strategic approach that integrates all forms of marketing communications, from advertising, promotions, public relations, digital marketing, to visual communications, to deliver consistent, coordinated, and synergistic messages to consumers (Belch & Belch, 2021). IMC not only focuses on delivering information, but also building emotional relationships, trust, and cohesive brand experiences, so that brands can be more psychologically attache in the minds of consumers.

Data breaches and mitigation strategies
A data breach, defined as the intentional or accidental exposure of confidential information to unauthorized entities (L. Cheng et al., 2017), poses a significant threat to organizations across sectors, including corporations and government agencies. Such incidents can lead to substantial financial repercussions, reputational damage, and jeopardize organizational sustainability. Sensitive data compromised in breaches encompasses a wide range of information, such as employee and customer details, intellectual property, and medical records (L. Cheng et al., 2017).

Public perception increasingly highlights the critical responsibility of corporations in mitigating data breaches. Through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, companies can proactively reduce the frequency and impact of such incidents (Zhu et al., 2023). Organizations prioritizing CSR often exhibit enhanced preparedness to respond to data leaks, characterized by established communication protocols and robust stakeholder engagement strategies. This proactivity can mitigate negative consequences, preserve public trust, and safeguard corporate reputation (Zhu et al., 2023). Consequently, technology companies possess autonomy in developing effective communication strategies to address data breach incidents with the public.

The soft-selling approach on advertising
The term "advertising" originates from the Medieval Latin verb *advertere*, signifying the act of drawing attention to ideas, products, or services through oral or written public announcements (Rehman et al., 2019). The primary function of advertising involves constructing subcategories of values and needs within a social framework and subsequently associating them with specific products. Consequently, consumers tend to select products aligned with their perceived values and needs (Littlejohn, 2009). Consumer approaches to advertising can be categorized into two primary types: hard-sell and soft-sell. While hard-sell advertising employs direct persuasion, soft-sell advertising relies on emotional appeal, implicit meaning, and brand image development (Selvakumar & Mathew, 2015). The latter category encompasses subliminal messaging, which involves the covert communication of implied messages.

Subliminal messages are defined as intentionally crafted stimuli to bypass conscious perception and register directly within the subconscious mind (Maaliky & Choughari, 2020). These messages, encompassing emotions, concepts, or other forms, are encoded by the brain without cognitive awareness. The manifestation of subliminal messages is diverse, ranging from logos subtly incorporating hidden imagery to fleeting visual cues embedded within videos. Despite the brevity of exposure, human cognition can capture these stimuli (Maaliky & Choughari, 2020). Consequently, individuals unconsciously process and internalize these messages, influencing emotions, perceptions, and behavior. Prior research has demonstrated the efficacy of subliminal messaging in advertising, with a positive impact on consumer purchasing intent (Maaliky & Choughari, 2020). A recent study conducted in China on Generation Z further corroborates the effectiveness of product placement as a subliminal marketing strategy, as it positively influences consumer cognition, attitudes, and purchase intentions toward featured brands (Z. Cheng & Nagai, 2024). This empirical evidence underscores the strategic value of subliminal messaging within marketing communication.

Semiotic Traditions

It explores how humans construct meaning through the interpretation of these communicative elements. Signs derive their significance from shared conventions and rules, as exemplified by the agreed-upon meanings of words within languages.

Semiotic theories diverge in their conceptualization of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a binary structure of the sign, comprising the signifier and the signified (Khalid Alsalem, 2020). The signifier is the tangible, perceptible element, such as sounds, letters, images, or objects, while the signified is the abstract concept or meaning represented by the signifier (Littlejohn, 2009).

Meanwhile, Charles Sanders Peirce, an American scientist, argued that there are three parts in signs: representamen, object, and interpretant. Representation is a concept that represents objects in various forms, whether in the form of images, sounds, texts, or other physical objects (Lisnanur & Purwasih, 2023). The object is the real form of something that is represented by the representation. The interpreter is the individual who gives meaning to the representation in relation to the object it represents. Semiotics is the systematic study of signs and symbols (Littlejohn, 2009). The relationship between the three is called a semiotic relationship triadic (Priss, 2022). A representamen is a concept that represents an object in a variety of forms, whether in the form of images, sounds, text, or other physical objects. The object serves as the actual referent of the representamen. The interpretant is the observer who actively constructs meaning by correlating the representamen with its corresponding object. Meanwhile, the interpretation of a sign may give rise to a variety of meanings or be called polysemy (Priss, 2022). This ambiguity can direct a sign to both negative (confusing) and positive consequences (resulting in conveying multiple messages at once in a single delivery) (Littlejohn, 2009).

In semiotic research, to evaluate the depth and accuracy of the analysis of the elements of signs in advertising videos, the assessment measures used are (Turale, (2020): (1) Accuracy of Representational Identification (Signs) (2) Clarity of Objects Referred to by Signs (3) Sharpness of Interpretation (Interpretant) (4) Relationships Between Semiotic Elements (5) Completeness and Coherence of Analysis Results. The analysis procedures include (1) Data Collection (2) Video Segmentation (3) Identification of Signs (Representational) (4) Determination of Objects (5) Interpretation (6) Analysis of sign relationships (7) Results. (Yakin & Totu, 2014).

Framework

In accordance with the elaboration of the concept described earlier, the framework of thinking in the study of the analysis of subliminal messages on the advertising video "The Underdogs: Swiped Mac" using this tradition of Peircean semiotics can be illustrated in the following figure.
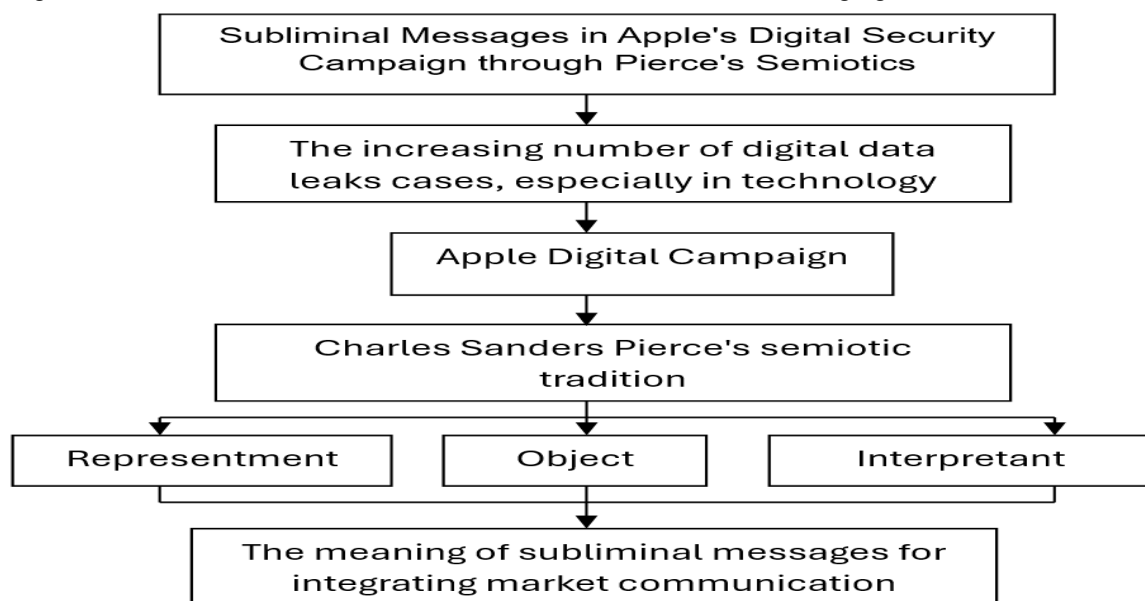

Figure 1. Research Framework

The concept put forward in this study is how the implicit messages found on Apple digital advertisements are conveyed to the audience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs an interpretive paradigm underpinned by a descriptive qualitative approach. This methodological choice is predicated on the need for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon without the constraints of hypothesis testing or theory building. Aligned with the research's aim to comprehensively understand a particular event or experience, this approach facilitates the discovery of emergent findings (Turale, 2020). To provide a nuanced description of signs, the research will utilize Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics. This framework enables a comprehensive analysis of semiotic elements through the interconnected lenses of representation, object, and interpretation (Yakin & Totu, 2014).

The research focuses on video footage that discusses the importance of data privacy protection. The footage is a published video produced by a specific technology brand as part of their commitment to addressing public issues related to data leaks. Through a set of such criteria, 'The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work' of one of the technology brands, Apple, was selected as the object of the study.

This study conducts a comprehensive analysis of the short film, focusing on the identification and evaluation of representations as outlined by Peirce's semiotic theory.

Representation is a concept that represents objects in various forms, whether in the form of images, sounds, texts, or other physical objects (Lisnanur & Purwasih, 2023). Representation can be divided into 3 parts, namely (1) Qualisign is the property inherent in a sign, such as color, sound, texture, or smell, can make it a sign. As an example, the color red on prohibition signs indicates danger and attracts the attention of road users. (2) A sinsign is a sign that has a causal relation to its object. Footprints on the ground indicating that someone has passed is one of them. (3) Legisign is a sign that is interpreted on the basis of agreed rules or conventions, just as words in a language have meanings agreed upon by the users of the language.

Object is the real form of something that is represented by the representation. An object can be classified into 3 types, namely (1) Icon is a representation related to its object based on similarity (Fajar Nugraha & Ashadi, 2020). As an example, the image of a dog's head is an icon that represents a four-legged animal. (2) An index is a representation related to its object by virtue of a causal relationship. For example, a dog's footprint is an index that shows that there is a dog in the vicinity of the area (3) A symbol is a representation that is related to its object based on convention. As an example, the word "dog" is a symbol that represents a barking four-legged animal.

Interpreter is the individual who gives meaning to the representation of the object it represents. In the interpretant, there are 3 categories, namely (1) Rheme is the interpretant in the form of feelings or emotions, such as the feeling of fear when seeing a ghost photo is an emotional interpretant. (2) Dicisign is an interpretant in the form of action or behavior. For example, running when you feel you see a ghost is an energetic interpretant. (3) Argument is an argument that is an interpretant in the form of a thought or idea. For example, the thought that ghosts are creepy creatures is a logical interpretation. The interpretation of a sign can give rise to diverse meanings or referred to by the term polysemy (Priss, 2022). This ambiguity can lead a sign to both negative (confusion) and positive (successfully communicating diverse messages at once in a single delivery) (Littlejohn, 2009). The positive side in the interpretation of this ambiguous message becomes the main element in this study, where the meaning can be translated both literally and figuratively (subliminally).

The analysis will delve into the film's visual, audiovisual, textual, and symbolic elements. These representations will be interpreted as signifying the object of study: Apple's corporate response to data breach incidents. Through a detailed examination of the relationship between the representations and the object, the researcher aims to uncover the underlying, subliminal message that Apple seeks to communicate via this short film.

This study will begin by retrieving the short film "The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work" from Apple's official YouTube channel. The film will be subjected to multiple viewings, with each segment being analyzed in detail. This iterative viewing process is designed to ensure the rigor of the researcher's interpretations. The resultant observations will form the dataset for a semiotic analysis of the video's constituent elements. Through in-depth interpretation of this data, the study aims to draw comprehensive conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

This short film, "The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work," offers a rich tapestry of characters for analysis. The protagonist, Bridget, and the two laptop thieves are central to the narrative. Bridget, as the central character and the driving force behind her small team, is portrayed as an expressive individual with strong leadership qualities but a tendency to panic in certain situations. This is evident when she impulsively pursues the thieves who stole her laptop. In contrast, the two thieves exhibit distinct personalities. The thief with the knitted hat is characterized by ambition, while the thief in the blue jacket is portrayed as more comical throughout the narrative. These contrasting personalities contribute to the film's overall comedic tone.

An analysis of the characters' expressions reflects the universal human experiences that arise during real-world incidents. Bridget's expressions of panic and anxiety serve as a universal representation of the emotions, individuals experience when their privacy is compromised. Her negligence in safeguarding personal assets, as exemplified by the laptop theft, mirrors the common risks faced by individuals in the digital age, where data security threats are ubiquitous. Conversely, the thief's expressions of optimism and ambition upon successfully stealing Bridget's laptop highlight the darker side of such incidents, where individuals may be motivated by personal gain at the expense of others.

As a prominent brand, Apple strategically incorporates various symbolic elements of its products into this short film, aiming to associate its brand with the need for data security solutions. The rejection of the stolen item at the antique store can be interpreted as a deliberate product placement strategy by Apple to indirectly promote its products. Within this scene, the implementation of the 'Touch ID & password' feature is showcased as part of a security system designed to enhance user data protection through a combination of biometric and password-based authentication. This is further emphasized by the shopkeeper's explicit mention of various Apple security features, including "biometric authentication, Secure Enclave, various encryption methods, and tracking tools." In terms of tracking, Bridget utilizes the "Find My" feature on her iPhone to locate the stolen device. This built-in Apple application allows users to track their devices both when they are powered on and off. Lastly, Apple presents a simulation of the encryption feature applied to the lost device. This feature enables users to completely lock down their device, with access only granted through a unique authentication code generated by another device linked to the user's account. The utility of this feature is evident when Bridget seeks IT support to activate the device lockdown mechanism. Consequently, until the end of the story, only Bridget possesses the authority to unlock the device using the unique code stored on her phone.

Representation

The short film The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work represents Apple's tactical endeavor to enlighten audiences about the significance of safeguarding personal information and ensuring privacy in the digital era, while simultaneously showcasing related products. By narrating the ordeal of laptop theft faced by the protagonist, Bridget, Apple weaves a storyline that highlights the increasing dangers to personal data security that are significant in today's tech-driven culture. The concept of representation can be understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism, which implies that the interpretation of events or objects emerges through social interactions and varies with each person (Littlejohn, 2009).

This analysis of the film encompasses both the characters' intricate dynamics and the storyline as a whole. The central figures in this short film are Bridget, the main character, and the two individuals who steal her laptop. Bridget is portrayed as expressive and possessing leadership qualities, yet she can become easily flustered in specific situations. This is particularly evident when she impulsively decides to relentlessly chase after the thieves who stole her laptop. However, Bridget's choice is bolstered by a supporting character who is eager to assist her. Additionally, the two criminal characters exhibit contrasting traits. The thief wearing a knit cap appears ambitious, while the one in the blue jacket consistently acts foolishly throughout the plot. This contrast adds to the comedic elements that pervade the film's presentation.

In general terms, character portrayal in short films also reflects themes of diversity and uniformity, which resonate with Apple's corporate values (Apple Inc., 2022). This assertion is backed by the fact that the

characters embody various cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. Examination of how characters express themselves mirrors the reality individuals face during a crisis. Bridget's display of fear and distress serves as a common depiction of the emotions that people undergo when their privacy is compromised. The failure to protect personal valuables, as illustrated by Bridget, symbolizes broader societal vulnerabilities similar to those associated with data security threats. Conversely, a sense of ambition and positivity is exhibited by the thief when he successfully seizes Bridget's laptop.

The object

The examination of imprints on objects within this brief film is portrayed throughout each significant scene presented. The endeavors of the two thieves trying to offload laptops to antique stores illustrate the actual repercussions of data theft, where pilfered data is commonly traded illegally via online channels. The offenders engaged in these cyber offenses are primarily driven by the prospect of achieving substantial financial gains by selling individuals' private information to untrustworthy entities. Confidential details such as credit card information, health records, and other personal data transform into valuable goods on the darker areas of the web.

Additionally, the theme of equality and standardization emerges as a crucial element within societal culture. Instances of racism directed at particular racial or ethnic groups frequently infringe on human rights and are a vital concern in societal discussions. Here, social construction theory (social constructivism) offers a framework to comprehend how societal views regarding race and discrimination are created, sustained, and reformulated within the community. In this film, the principle of equality is depicted through the character of Brian, a black man who has a role equal to that of Bridget, the main character, in her quest to recover the lost device. This implies that the principles of equality and diversity that Apple champions are evidently showcased in this film.

This form of product placement effectively emphasizes the newest items promoted by Apple. According to information available on Apple's official site, the devices utilized by the characters in the movie set to be released in July 2023, such as the iPhone 14 Pro, MacBook Air, and Apple Watch Series 8, signify the use of cutting-edge technology. Furthermore, the Apple applications featured in the movie, including 'Maps', 'Find My', 'Apple Pay', 'Password and Passkey', and 'End-to-End Encryption', are directly connected to the theft problem encountered by Bridget's character. Overall, the integration of product placement in the film not only highlights Apple products but also illustrates their application in pertinent scenarios, thereby enhancing their practical significance for viewers.

The interpreter

As an entity, Apple subtly integrated various product aspects in this film to connect its offerings with pertinent data protection solutions. This approach to conveying messages aligns with subliminal communication principles (Maalik & Choughari, 2020). The portrayal of rejecting stolen items in an antique shop serves as a strategic product placement by Apple to indirectly advertise its products. Within this scene, the application of the 'Touch ID and password' functionality reflects a part of Apple's security framework aimed at bolstering user data protection through biometric verification and passwords. The narrative from the storekeeper character, who mentions Apple's security features such as "biometric authentication, Secure Enclave, different encryption methods, and tracking tools," further underlines this.

Concerning the tracking device, Bridget's character utilizes the "Find My" feature on her phone, which is Apple's native app enabling users to trace devices whether they are powered on or off. Following this, Apple showcased a demonstration of using the encryption feature on a lost device, allowing a user to completely lock the device, making it accessible solely through the authentication of a unique code from another device linked to the user's account. The practicality of this feature was highlighted when Bridget enlisted the IT team's assistance in implementing the device's locking function. As a result, by the conclusion of the narrative, only Bridget possesses the ability to unlock the device using a unique code held within her phone. In summary, the depiction of Apple's features and products in the film suggests a strong perception of the high security available to consumers utilizing Apple products.

The themes of equality and diversity presented in the film significantly enhance Apple's image as a brand that endorses inclusivity (Apple Inc., 2022). By incorporating a range of diverse characters, the film illustrates not only Apple's products but also the brand's dedication to universal social principles

such as equal rights and respect for diversity. The multiracial and multicultural portrayal of characters emphasizes Apple's position as a socially conscious brand, increasing its relevancy in a continually evolving global market. This mirrors the application of diversity principles in Apple's marketing approach, which seeks to forge emotional connections with consumers from varied backgrounds. Therefore, Apple is not merely marketing its products but also playing a role in the worldwide dialogue on the significance of diversity and equality.

Discussions

The Underdogs: Swiped Mac | Apple at Work" serves as a strategic initiative by Apple to raise public awareness about the significance of data security and privacy while concurrently promoting its products. Through the narrative of Bridget, the protagonist who experiences a laptop theft, Apple constructs a plot that serves as a metaphorical representation of the pervasive threats to personal data security in the digital age. The thieves' subsequent attempts to sell the stolen laptop to various antique stores reflect the stark reality of the illicit data trade, wherein stolen data is frequently commoditized and traded on dark web platforms. Cybercriminals can reap substantial financial gains by selling sensitive personal information, such as credit card numbers, health records, and other personal identifiers, to unscrupulous entities on these online black markets (Ouellet et al., 2022).

From the description above, this study emphasizes the importance of marketing communications in shaping consumer perceptions and beliefs, especially in the context of crucial issues such as data security. In today's digital age, consumers are increasingly selective about the commercial messages they receive. Therefore, subtle, emotionally relevant, and indirect communication approaches are becoming more effective than explicit and aggressive hard-selling approaches (Belch & Belch, 2021; Fill & Turnbull, 2019). In this context, marketing communications not only function as a medium for conveying product information but also as a strategic tool in building a strong and compelling narrative. Through the use of semiotically designed visual symbols and narratives, Apple successfully conveys subliminal messages about the importance of data security and the reliability of its product ecosystem without having to put forward claims directly. This shows how narrative and persuasive marketing communications can instill brand values and identity in the minds of consumers (Chandler, (2007), Mick, (1986). By focusing on this research, we also see a shift in marketing strategy from a hard-selling approach to soft-, which emphasizes storytelling, emotional engagement, and subtle branding selling (Yusof et al., 2023) (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This strategy has proven to be more effective in building long-term relationships with consumers, especially among audiences who are already accustomed to and skeptical of conventional marketing techniques. Apple's approach to framing data security as part of consumers' professional lifestyles is also an example of how modern marketing communications play a role in shaping customer value perceptions and loyalty on an ongoing basis (Hackley, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Apple's short film *"The Underdogs: Swiped Mac"* serves not only as entertainment but also as a strategic communication tool rich in symbolic meaning. Through semiotic analysis, three key aspects are identified: (1) As a representamen, the film uses audiovisual storytelling to raise awareness about data theft, aligning with symbolic interactionism; (2) As an object, the narrative metaphorically illustrates cybercrime and data breaches, while visual cues of Apple products reinforce their real-world functions; (3) As an interpretant, Apple subtly integrates product placement and social values—such as diversity and inclusion—into the storyline. This aligns with Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), where the film blends advertising, branding, and social messaging to communicate Apple's identity as a secure, inclusive, and forward-thinking brand. The film exemplifies Apple's use of IMC by combining emotional storytelling, product visibility, and social responsibility to build brand trust and loyalty. The analysis focuses on a single film and lacks quantitative data, limiting the scope and generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine more Apple campaigns to identify recurring IMC strategies and include quantitative methods to enhance analytical depth and validity

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