

CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW: THE EFFECT OF MACHIAVELLIAN MARKETING IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND E-COMMERCE USE ON THE PURCHASING BEHAVIOR OF MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z

Pilifus Junianto^{1,2*}, Agustinus Purna Irawan³

^{1,3} Doctoral Program of Management Science, Universitas Tarumanagara, Jakarta, Indonesia

² STIE Bentara Persada, Batam, Indonesia*

Email: pilifusj@gmail.com

³ Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Tarumanagara, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: agustinus@untar.ac.id

*Corresponding Author

Submitted: 24-01-2025, Revised: 02-03-2025, Accepted: 13-04-2025

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the development of information and communication technology has profoundly transformed the marketing landscape. Social media has emerged as a dominant platform used by marketers to reach consumers, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z, who are active users of digital technology. This study examines the impact of Machiavellian Marketing strategies on the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z through social media and e-commerce platforms. Machiavellian Marketing, characterized by manipulative and often unethical approaches, exploits the digital habits and psychological tendencies of these young consumers. Furthermore, this study highlights the influence of Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—on consumer behavior. Individuals with high levels of these traits are known to be more prone to engage in manipulative behavior on social media, which affects their purchasing decisions. The research was conducted through a literature review method from the Scopus database, aiming to provide critical insights into the ethical implications of Machiavellian-based marketing strategies as well as offering new perspectives on ethics in result-oriented marketing. These findings are expected to aid marketers in designing strategies that align with the psychological profiles of consumers while considering their ethical implications.

Keywords: *Machiavellian Marketing, Purchasing Behavior, Millennial Generation, Generation Z*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the evolution of information and communication technology has profoundly transformed the marketing landscape. Social media has emerged as a dominant platform employed by marketers to reach consumers, particularly among Millennials and Generation Z, who are recognized as active users of digital technology (Chang & Chang, 2023; Kim et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2012). Millennials and Generation Z exhibit unique characteristics and buying behaviors, particularly within the realms of social media and digital marketing. Millennials have seamlessly integrated technology into their daily routines, utilizing social media platforms for communication, entertainment, and shopping activities (Anshari et al., 2019).

This phenomenon necessitates companies to devise more sophisticated and adaptive marketing strategies, one of which is the implementation of Machiavellian Marketing. This strategy is characterized by its manipulative approach, aimed at subtly yet effectively influencing consumer behavior (Harris & Lock, 1996; Hunt & Chonko, 1984; Shen & Dickson, 2001; Tang & Chen,

2008). In this context, it is crucial to understand how such tactics can impact young generations who tend to be more skeptical but also vulnerable to the influence of social media.

This research focuses on a literature review of the impact of Machiavellian Marketing on the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z through E-Commerce social media. The literature review was traced from Scopus. By compiling a comprehensive literature review, it is expected to add to the critical studies that discuss Machiavellian Marketing research and provide a new perspective on ethics in results-oriented marketing.

Machiavellian Marketing embodies the implementation of strategies that are manipulative, deceptive, and frequently unethical to accomplish marketing objectives. This notion draws its roots from the political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli, which espouses the use of cunning and duplicity in political governance. When adapted to the marketing realm, such strategies often prioritize the interests of the corporation, frequently compromising consumer welfare. This approach raises significant ethical questions about the balance between corporate gain and ethical responsibility (Harris & Lock, 1996; Hunt & Chonko, 1984; Shen & Dickson, 2001; Tang & Chen, 2008).

A key characteristic of Machiavellian Marketing involves deceptive practices, such as misleading advertisements, undisclosed fees, and false claims regarding product benefits (Kariyawasam & Wigley, 2017; Mandal, 2022). Additionally, high-pressure selling techniques are employed to coerce consumers into making purchases they may not have otherwise considered (Mandal, 2022). Exploitation of consumer behavior is another hallmark, wherein psychological insights are leveraged to manipulate consumer decisions, employing emotional triggers or subconscious cues (Hendlin, 2019; Racine, 2021). Masked marketing further complicates consumer perceptions by presenting marketing communications as independent third-party endorsements, falsely fostering trust (Petty & Craig Andrews, 2008).

Then, it is important to remember that Machiavellian Marketing refers to the application of Machiavellian principles in marketing strategies. This concept is characterized by:

Manipulative Tactics

Machiavellian marketers often engage in manipulative behaviors to achieve their goals. They may exploit interpersonal relationships and use strategic thinking to outmaneuver competitors and manipulate consumer perceptions (Rauthmann & Will, 2011; Sanchez-Rabaza et al., 2023).

Cynical Worldview

These marketers typically hold a cynical view of human nature, believing that people are inherently self-serving and can be easily manipulated (Rauthmann & Will, 2011; Sanchez-Rabaza et al., 2023).

Lack of Traditional Morality

Machiavellian marketing often involves actions that are considered unethical or immoral by traditional standards. This includes deceptive practices and a focus on winning at any cost (Rauthmann & Will, 2011; Sanchez-Rabaza et al., 2023).

Long-term Strategic Planning

Machiavellian marketers are skilled in long-term planning and strategizing, often prioritizing their own success over ethical considerations (Rauthmann & Will, 2011; Sanchez-Rabaza et al., 2023).

Impact on Performance

Studies have shown that individuals with high Machiavellian traits can be successful in sales and other performance metrics, as they are adept at using manipulative tactics to close deals and achieve targets (Aziz, 2004).

In practical terms, Machiavellian Marketing finds application in various forms, including native advertising, which integrates advertisements with editorial content to make them less distinguishable and more compelling (Martins et al., 2023). Advergaming, which are interactive games designed to promote products, often target children who may not yet discern the commercial intent (Verdoodt et al., 2016). Additionally, social media influencers are engaged to subtly promote products, cloaked as personal recommendations, a tactic that can prove more persuasive than traditional advertising methods (Racine, 2021). These applications reveal the multifaceted nature of Machiavellian strategies in contemporary marketing.

However, the ethical concerns surrounding these practices are substantial. The manipulation of consumers through such tactics can lead to exploitation, eroding consumer trust and potentially inflicting long-term damage on the brand's reputation (Mandal, 2022; Suriya Kumari et al., 2024). Additionally, the covert nature of these tactics poses significant regulatory challenges, complicating the enforcement of consumer protection laws (Beede et al., 2016; Kariyawasam & Wigley, 2017).

Finally, the practical implications of employing Machiavellian marketing strategies present significant ethical and organizational challenges. While these tactics may generate short-term gains, organizations must carefully consider the ethical dilemmas they pose, as the long-term consequences could include reputational damage and hindered success (Malinowski, 2009). Additionally, the presence of Machiavellian traits within team settings can have mixed effects. Although such traits may foster entrepreneurial drive and contribute to success, they also have the potential to create distrust and disrupt team cohesion if not appropriately managed. Hence, organizations need to balance the pursuit of immediate outcomes with a mindful approach to ethical considerations and team dynamics (Schippers et al., 2019).

Machiavellian marketing, which involves manipulative and self-serving strategies, significantly influences consumer behavior in various ways:

Opportunistic Behavior

Machiavellian marketing, characterized by manipulative and self-serving strategies, exerts a notable influence on consumer behavior, particularly through opportunistic actions. Consumers exhibiting high levels of Machiavellianism, referred to as High Machs, are predisposed to engage in opportunistic claiming behaviors, wherein they exploit service guarantees and platform policies for personal advantage. Interestingly, while reasonable compensation can mitigate such

behaviors in High Machs, it paradoxically may instigate unethical actions among those with lower Machiavellian traits, or Low Machs (Chen & Zhou, 2014).

Influence of Platform and Reference Groups

The attitude of the platform and the behavior of reference groups primarily affect Low Machs. Tolerant platforms are more susceptible to opportunistic claims, and observing opportunistic behavior in reference groups can mislead others into similar actions (Chen & Zhou, 2014).

Manipulative Advertising and Consumer Trust

Inappropriate advertising, perceived as deceptive or manipulative, can influence consumer behavior negatively. Consumers often view such advertising as misleading, which can affect their trust and purchasing decisions (Kádeková et al., 2019; Lunardo & Mbengue, 2013).

Social Influence

Social marketing strategies, including public awareness campaigns and regulatory measures, can mitigate exploitative buying behaviors. These strategies promote ethical consumption and transparency, reshaping consumer attitudes and preferences towards more responsible behavior (Suriya Kumari et al., 2024).

Neuromarketing Concerns

The use of neuromarketing techniques to understand and influence consumer behavior raises ethical concerns. These techniques can create an unbalanced relationship between consumers and marketers, potentially leading to manipulative practices (Atli & Yazici, 2021).

How Dark Triad personality traits significantly influence the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z through social media and e-commerce

The Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—significantly influence the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z through social media and e-commerce. Here's how each trait impacts consumer behavior:

Machiavellianism

Individuals high in Machiavellianism are strategic and manipulative, often engaging in behaviors like Facebook surveillance to gather information for personal gain (Stiff, 2019). This trait is linked to higher purchase intentions and consumer self-confidence, which mediates their buying behavior (Blair et al., 2022). They are likely to exploit social media to make informed purchasing decisions and may be drawn to products that enhance their social status.

Narcissism

Narcissists seek admiration and validation, which drives them to purchase items that boost their self-image. They are more likely to recommend products to others and have strong purchase intentions, regardless of whether the products are hedonic or utilitarian (Blair et al., 2022). Their behavior on social media often involves posting content that highlights their acquisitions, further influencing their purchasing decisions (Stiff, 2019).

Psychopathy

While psychopathy is less directly related to proactive career behavior, it does influence unethical behavior and aggressive interpersonal orientation, which can extend to consumer behavior (Blair et al., 2022; Cui & Zhang, 2021; Dill et al., 2022). Psychopaths may engage in impulsive buying and are less concerned with ethical considerations, making them susceptible to manipulative marketing tactics.

Finally The Dark Triad personality traits, encompassing Machiavellianism and psychopathy, significantly influence individuals' interactions with social media and e-commerce platforms, shaping their consumer behaviors in nuanced ways. On social media, particularly platforms like Facebook, individuals with pronounced Machiavellian and psychopathic traits are inclined towards surveillance activities, utilizing these platforms to gather information and execute strategic purchasing decisions, as observed by Stiff (2019). This propensity for information gathering and strategic planning translates into heightened purchase intentions and bolstered consumer self-confidence within the realm of e-commerce. As noted by Blair et al., (2022), individuals exhibiting these traits are not only more likely to engage in online shopping themselves but are also more prone to recommending products to others, thereby amplifying their influence within digital consumer networks. Consequently, a deeper understanding of the Dark Triad traits can equip marketers with the insights necessary to craft tailored strategies targeting Millennials and Generation Z. By effectively leveraging social media and e-commerce platforms, marketers can strategically influence the purchasing behavior of these demographics, aligning marketing approaches with the psychological profiles that drive consumer engagement.

In a real-world context, researchers have observed that the influence of Machiavellian Marketing strategies is evident in the marketing campaigns for luxury smartphone brands. The study found that the dark triad and sophisticated technology influence the consumer behavior and interactions of Millennials and Generation Z with luxury brands, which can be reflected in tendencies towards excessive exhibitionism, high self-esteem, and heightened imagination of superiority, beauty, and self-perfection. This is corroborated by findings from Iaia et al. (2022), which highlight how Dark Triad personality (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) along with technology, shape consumer perceptions and behaviors towards luxury smartphone brands. Additionally, the use of counterfeit goods among Millennials and Generation Z is also prevalent, a behavior indicative of inauthentic actions aimed solely at self-presentation. This phenomenon has also been explored by Razmus et al. (2024) in their journal article "Counterfeit Brands and Machiavellianism: Consequences of Counterfeit Use for Social Perception."

2. RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, data was sourced from Scopus by conducting a literature search using the query: ("Machiavellianism" OR "manipulative" OR "deceptive" OR "strategic") AND ("marketing" OR "advertising" OR "promotion" OR "branding") AND ("Dark Triad" OR ("narcissism" OR "psychopathy" OR "Machiavellianism") AND "personality traits") AND ("Social Media" OR "E-Commerce") AND ("Purchasing Behavior") AND ("Millennial" OR "Generation Z"). After retrieving the relevant literature, the researcher reviewed the selected journals, summarized the findings, and provided critical commentary on it.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Following a thorough review of the literature, several key aspects warrant attention concerning the phenomena occurring among Millennials and Generation Z. The analysis of the literature reveals that Machiavellian Marketing strategies have a profound impact on the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z, particularly through the use of social media and e-commerce. These strategies, characterized by manipulative and often unethical tactics, are adept at exploiting the digital habits and psychological inclinations of these young consumer segments. As Millennials and Generation Z are prolific users of digital platforms, they are particularly susceptible to manipulative marketing strategies that are seamlessly integrated into their online activities. This raises significant ethical concerns regarding the manipulation of consumer behavior and the potential long-term impact on consumer trust.

Moreover, the influence of the Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—on consumer behavior is evident in the manner in which these traits interact with digital marketing strategies. Individuals with high levels of these traits are found to engage in more strategic and manipulative behaviors on social media, such as information gathering and surveillance, to enhance their purchasing decisions. These behaviors are not only linked to increased purchase intentions but also to a greater propensity to recommend products to peers, thereby amplifying their influence within digital consumer networks. Consequently, marketers, by understanding these psychological profiles, can tailor their strategies to effectively target and engage these demographics, albeit with the necessity for careful ethical considerations.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The conclusion of this study reveals that Machiavellian Marketing strategies have a significant impact on the purchasing behavior of Millennials and Generation Z through social media and e-commerce. The findings indicate that these strategies, which are manipulative and often unethical, are capable of exploiting the digital habits and psychological tendencies of young consumers, raising ethical concerns regarding long-term consumer manipulation and trust. The practical implications of this study emphasize the necessity for companies to design more responsible and ethical marketing strategies, considering the long-term impact on brand reputation and consumer trust. This research recommends that marketers prioritize a deep understanding of psychological profiles, including the influence of Dark Triad traits, to develop more effective and ethical strategies when targeting Millennials and Generation Z. Furthermore, it is crucial for companies to balance short-term outcomes with well-considered ethical considerations to create sustainable and ethical marketing strategies.

REFERENCES

- Anshari, M., Alas, Y., Razzaq, A., Shahrill, M., & Lim, S. A. (2019). Millennials consumers' behaviors between trends and experiments. *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning*, 9(4), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJCBPL.2019100104>
- Atli, D., & Yazici, Ç. (2021). Philosophical perspectives on ethical issues in neuromarketing. In *Paradigm Shifts within the Communication World* (pp. 255–273).

- <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85110814552&partnerID=40&md5=5667764dd014ae0a7e02a52b16c4ac18>
- Aziz, A. (2004). Machiavellianism scores and self-rated performance of automobile salespersons. *Psychological Reports*, 94(2), 464–466. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.94.2.464-466>
- Beede, P., Boddewyn, J., Dickinson, S., Kerr, G. F., Mortimer, K., & Waller, D. S. (2016). Towards a Global Framework for Advertising Self Regulation. In *Developments in Marketing Science: Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Science* (pp. 601–602). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24184-5_150
- Blair, J. R., Gala, P., & Lunde, M. (2022). Dark triad-consumer behavior relationship: the mediating role of consumer self-confidence and aggressive interpersonal orientation. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 39(2), 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCM-07-2020-3981>
- Chang, C. W., & Chang, S. H. (2023). The Impact of Digital Disruption: Influences of Digital Media and Social Networks on Forming Digital Natives' Attitude. *SAGE Open*, 13(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231191741>
- Chen, Z., & Zhou, W. (2014). Opportunistic claiming behaviour in two-sided markets. *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, 14(1–2), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJNVO.2014.065090>
- Cui, Z., & Zhang, K. (2021). Dark Triad but a bright future? Socially malevolent personality traits and proactive career behavior. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 49(11). <https://doi.org/10.2224/SBP.9736>
- Dill, A. T., Triki, A., & Westin, S. W. (2022). Towards an Understanding of The Dark Triad, Ethical Fading, and Ethicality of Behavior. In *Advances in Accounting Behavioral Research* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–29). <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1475-148820220000025001>
- Harris, P., & Lock, A. (1996). Machiavellian marketing: The development of corporate lobbying in the UK. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 12(4), 313–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.1996.9964417>
- Hendlin, Y. H. (2019). I Am a Fake Loop: the Effects of Advertising-Based Artificial Selection. *Biosemiotics*, 12(1), 131–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-018-9341-z>
- Hunt, S. D., & Chonko, L. B. (1984). Marketing and Machiavellianism. *Journal of Marketing*, 48(3), 30–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298404800304>
- Iaia, L., Leonelli, S., Masciarelli, F., Christofi, M., & Cooper, S. C. (2022). The malevolent side of masstige consumers' behavior: The role of dark triad and technology propensity. *Journal of Business Research*, 149(July 2021), 954–966. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.05.057>
- Kádeková, Z., Košičiarová, I., Holotová, M., Kubicová, L., & Predanocyová, K. (2019). The impact of inappropriate food advertising on consumer behavior. *Potravinárstvo Slovak Journal of Food Sciences*, 13(1), 1034–1039. <https://doi.org/10.5219/1216>
- Kariyawasam, K., & Wigley, S. (2017). Online shopping, misleading advertising and consumer protection. *Information and Communications Technology Law*, 26(2), 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2017.1289835>
- Kim, H. J., Hong, A. J., & Song, H.-D. (2018). The relationships of family, perceived digital competence and attitude, and learning agility in sustainable student engagement in higher education. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 10(12). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124635>
- Lunardo, R., & Mbengue, A. (2013). When atmospherics lead to inferences of manipulative intent: Its effects on trust and attitude. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(7), 823–830.

- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.06.007>
- Malinowski, C. (2009). The relationship between machiavellianism and undergraduate student attitudes about hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. *Competitiveness Review*, 19(5), 398–408. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10595420910996019>
- Mandal, P. C. (2022). Marketing and Its Social Implications: Concerns and Initiatives. *International Journal of Social Ecology and Sustainable Development*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJSESD.2022010103>
- Martins, A., Gavina, A., & de Silva, B. M. (2023). Native Advertising New Challenges for Online Consumers and the Role Of Media and Advertising Literacy. *Rotura: Journal of Communication, Culture and Arts*, 2023(Special), 48–63. <https://doi.org/10.34623/acmp-2e37>
- Petty, R. D., & Craig Andrews, J. (2008). Covert marketing unmasked: A legal and regulatory guide for practices that mask marketing messages. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 27(1), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.27.1.7>
- Racine, J. (2021). Using human emotion as a conduit for connection in branding and advertising. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 9(4), 423–431. <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85103582597&partnerID=40&md5=de0155b140c275bc42e1ca3c0ad5790b>
- Rauthmann, J. F., & Will, T. (2011). Proposing a multidimensional machiavellianism conceptualization. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 39(3), 391–404. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2011.39.3.391>
- Razmus, W., Grabner-Kräuter, S., & Adamczyk, G. (2024). Counterfeit brands and Machiavellianism: Consequences of counterfeit use for social perception. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 76(September 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103579>
- Sanchez-Rabaza, J., Rocha-Martinez, J. M., & Clempner, J. B. (2023). Characterizing Manipulation via Machiavellianism. *Mathematics*, 11(19). <https://doi.org/10.3390/math11194143>
- Schippers, M. C., Rauch, A., Belschak, F. D., & Hulsink, W. (2019). Entrepreneurial Intentions of Teams: Sub-Dimensions of Machiavellianism Interact With Team Resilience. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02607>
- Shen, D., & Dickson, M. A. (2001). Consumer's acceptance of unethical clothing consumption activities: Influence of cultural identification, ethnicity, and Machiavellianism. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 19(2), 76–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X0101900204>
- Stiff, C. (2019). The Dark Triad and Facebook surveillance: How Machiavellianism, psychopathy, but not narcissism predict using Facebook to spy on others. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 94, 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.044>
- Suriya Kumari, A., Mani, S., & Arumugam, A. (2024). Assessing the effectiveness of social marketing strategies in regulating exploitative buying behaviour in bangalore's urban secto. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnologia - Serie de Conferencias*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf2024910>
- Tang, T. L.-P., & Chen, Y.-J. (2008). Intelligence vs. wisdom: The love of money, machiavellianism, and unethical behavior across college major and gender. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 82(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9559-1>
- Verdoodt, V., Clifford, D., & Lievens, E. (2016). Toying with children's emotions, the new

- game in town? The legality of advergames in the EU. *Computer Law and Security Review*, 32(4), 599–614. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2016.05.007>
- Williams, D. L., Crittenden, V. L., Keo, T., & Mccarty, P. (2012). The use of social media: An exploratory study of usage among digital natives. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 12(2), 127–136. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1414>