



# Keeping up with *The Joneses*: Stealth, secrets, and duplicity in marketing relationships

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## KEYWORDS

Secrets;  
Duplicity;  
Stealth marketing;  
Undercover marketing;  
Disclosure;  
Ethics

**Abstract** Stealth, or undercover, marketing involves the disguising of marketing communications that marketers undertake to purposefully influence their audiences without the audiences being aware of these activities. Inasmuch as stealth marketing involves secrecy (the withholding of information) and miscommunication (the communication of partial or misleading information), it is at least on some level duplicitous. Duplicity is the double act of secrecy and misrepresentation. In this article we explore duplicity in marketing communications. Specifically, we deconstruct the movie *The Joneses* to explore the various ways in which both marketers and consumers employ duplicity in their communications—to each other and themselves. We conclude by exploring the ethical and functional issues duplicity raises, and suggest that irony is one way in which duplicity can be ethically and productively employed.

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## 1. Introduction

The glamorous new neighbors down the block or that popular student in your class might not be who they seem. Furthermore, it might not be so easy to keep up with them—either in terms of their possessions or in terms of the stories they

tell. In recent years stealth marketing has become increasingly commonplace, and the lines between content and promotion, reality and fiction, and secrecy and deception have become ever more blurred. As Roy and Chattopadhyay (2010, p. 71) observe, “In today’s postmodern marketing environment, once clearly labeled promotional messages have now been woven subtly into the various facets of our culture.” However, consumers are adapting to this new environment, taking active steps to protect themselves from unwanted scrutiny and targeting. Effectively, consumers are deceiving the deceivers.

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Herein, we set out to explore the ways in which deception occurs. Specifically, we propose a model of the modes of duplicity in marketing relationships. We illustrate the model using the movie *The Joneses*, a perspicacious, semi-tragic comedy about the convoluted relationships between marketers and consumers.

We proceed as follows. First, we provide a brief review of the literature on duplicity and disclosure issues in marketing. Second, we develop a model of the modes of duplicity that occur inter- and intra-marketers and consumers, outlining the ways in which both parties deceive each other and themselves. Third, following a synopsis of the movie *The Joneses*, we deconstruct the narrative to illustrate the various modes of duplicity in marketing relationships. We then discuss the lessons that can be drawn from the model, as well as ethical and functional issues raised by duplicity in marketing. We conclude by suggesting that ironic duplicity minimizes the problematic ethics of duplicity and maximizes its functional marketing benefits.

## 2. Stealth marketing

A brief survey of the literature on stealth marketing yields a variety of definitions and synonyms. The terms *stealth marketing*, *undercover marketing*, *buzz marketing*, and *covert marketing* are employed interchangeably and are defined as tactics utilized to reach the target audience without the promotional messages being perceived as an advertisement (Cooney, 2005). Essentially, stealth marketing is promotion in disguise. Moreover, in an increasing number of instances, the line between the disguise and deception is becoming tenuous (Katyal, 2010; Milne, Bahl, & Rohm, 2008).

Roy and Chattopadhyay (2010) argue that the concept and practice of stealth marketing is not new; however, the Internet and online social media have witnessed its rediscovery and burgeoning. Indeed, stealth marketing is seen as a key marketing strategy in reaching media savvy consumers (Milne, Bahl, & Rohm, 2008). However, an increasing number of case studies are emerging of the practice becoming duplicitous (Katyal, 2010), often with negative consequences for the consumer (Sakai, 2013). It is this grey area of duplicity between marketers and consumers that we explore.

## 3. Secrets, duplicity, and deception

Secrecy represents the active withholding of information (Berthon, Pitt, Hanna, & Parent, 2014). Duplicity, from the Latin word 'duplex'—meaning

twofold—involves both the withholding of certain information and the transmission of false or partial information (Miller, 1983). Thus, duplicity necessitates secrecy, whilst secrecy need not be duplicitous. Duplicity entails purposeful miscommunication to achieve a desired outcome; it is the act of deception (Masip, Garrido, & Herrero, 2004). We use the terms duplicity and deception interchangeably; in fact, most dictionaries actually define duplicity as deception. The deception of consumers by marketers is perhaps as old as marketing itself. Indeed, deception is part of human psychology and is practiced to a lesser or greater extent in most social contexts (Trivers, 1985). Studies of duplicity (e.g., Anderson & Simester, 2014) have focused on identifying those factors that influence the relative success or failure of deceptive communication.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most research in marketing has focused on firms deceiving consumers (e.g., Aditya, 2001; Wible, 2011). However, given that duplicity is a ubiquitous social strategy, we widen this focus to consider three types of deception: between, among, and within. We study deception of the consumer by the marketer, deception of the marketer by the consumer, deception between marketers, deception between consumers, and finally, self-deception of the marketer and self-deception of the consumer.

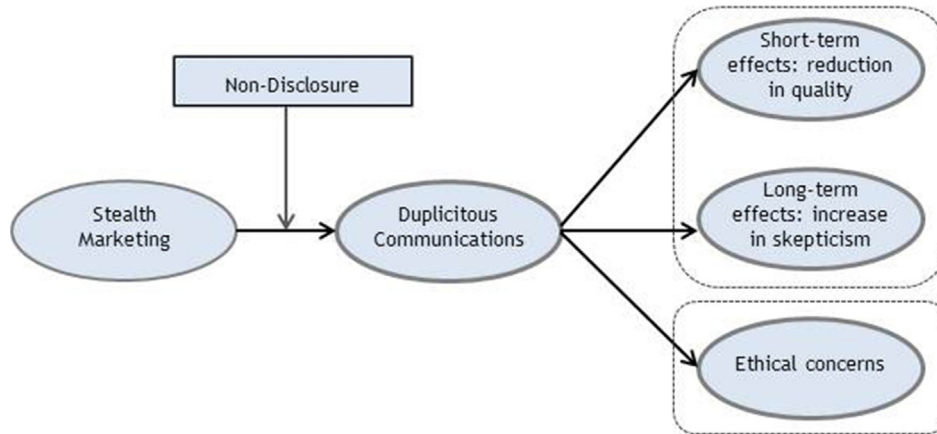
## 4. Disclosure issues in marketing

Roy and Chattopadhyay (2010) propose a typology of stealth marketing based on customers' knowledge and competitors' awareness. Visibility of the marketer's intent (i.e., disclosure), both to customers and competitors, plays a crucial role in how companies code their promotional messages and create a stealth marketing strategy. Likewise, Berthon et al. (2014) emphasize the significance of visibility of the boundary that defines a secret.

Ahuja, Michels, Walker, and Weissbuch (2007) investigated teenagers' perceptions about disclosure in buzz or stealth marketing. Among several interesting findings was one that warrants further attention (p. 156): "In general, teens would NOT tell their friends if they were a buzz agent and did not care if their friends revealed it to them." However, the issue of disclosing intention to promote a product through word of mouth and receive compensation is not really very clear from a legal or ethical standpoint.

Disclosure potentially undermines the effectiveness of stealth marketing; non-disclosure renders it duplicitous. Moreover, duplicity is not without cost. The issue of cost in disclosure is an important one,

Figure 1. Duplicity and its effects



for allocation of cost is asymmetric between disclosure and non-disclosure. If a company directly discloses, it bears the cost. If it chooses not to disclose, the entire marketing environment bears the cost. This is a marketing example of the ‘tragedy of the commons.’ In a case where word-of-mouth recommendations are paid for by the marketer, sincerity of the recommendation comes into question (Creamer, 2005). Thus, duplicity raises a number of functional issues over and above the ethics of such a practice. In the short term, paying consumers to promote a product may undermine objectivity of the reviews, and thus reduce quality of the information relayed to other consumers. In the long term, as consumers learn about the increasing use of duplicitous marketing tactics, it may heighten consumer skepticism toward all communication—from whatever source. This is summarized in Figure 1.

## 5. Conceptual framework

We define *duplicity* as the purposeful withholding of certain information and the transmission of false or partial information in a communication so as to create a misleading impression in the minds of an audience. The term ‘misleading’ may range from partial truth to an entire fabrication or falsehood. Psychologists (e.g., Kimmel, 1998) and evolutionary biologists (e.g., Dawkins & Krebs, 1978) have developed various theories about the role of deception or duplicity in nature and human society. Their first observation is that it is found in both the human and animal kingdoms. Indeed, it is intrinsic to virtually all social communication (Dawkins, 1982). Moreover, it is not confined exclusively to the social

sphere: self-deception also plays a significant role in the human psyche (Trivers, 2000).

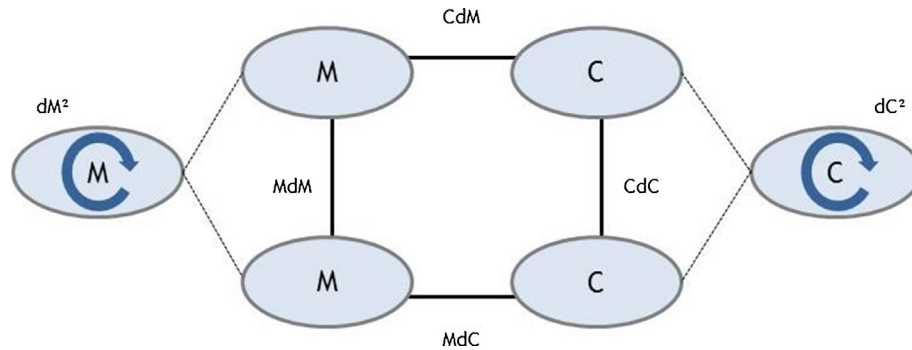
Various theories exist as to why people are duplicitous, but most differentiate self and relationship motives (Guerrero, Anderson, & Afifi, 2007). Buller and Burgoon (1996) suggest the following motivations:

- *instrumental*—to avoid censure or to secure some gain;
- *rational*—to protect close relationships and wider social bonds; and
- *self-identity*—to ‘save face’ and/or to build and maintain self-image.

From this, we begin to see that duplicity serves an important function in communication; it is not simply bad, negative, or immoral. Taking an agnostic view toward deception, we now go on to outline the various modes of duplicity in the marketer-consumer relationship.

In Figure 2, ‘M’ denotes marketers, ‘C’ denotes consumers, ‘d’ denotes duplicity, and a superscripted ‘2’ denotes self. Thus, we have six possible modes of duplicity in marketing relationships. These exist at three levels: between marketer and consumer, among marketers and among consumers, and finally, within marketers and consumers. The most documented is MdC, where the marketer attempts to deceive the consumer. Next is the inverse, CdM, where the consumer attempts to deceive the marketer. Following is deception among marketers (MdM) and deception among consumers (CdC). Finally, we have self-deception of marketers ( $dM^2$ ) and self-deception of consumers ( $dC^2$ ).

Figure 2. Modes of duplicity in marketing relationships



In the next sections we provide a synopsis of *The Joneses* and give examples from the scenario to clarify the conceptual framework. Deconstruction of the scenario enables us to further explain the duplicity in stealth marketing and also encourages us to explore alternative marketing strategies.

## 6. Keeping up with *The Joneses*

The movie *The Joneses* portrays a group of four people that act as a family, who together move into a new suburban neighborhood in the U.S. As employees of a stealth marketing company called Life Image Enterprises, their main objective is to act as opinion leaders and reference groups to influence the consumption practices of the community. A company executive contacts them periodically to introduce products that are seasonally appropriate for the family's demographics, geographic location, and social class. They work as a unit, but competitively, and their success is measured based on percentage increase in their designated products' sales.

Kate and Steve Jones, along with their teenage children Jenn and Mick, act as the perfect family—and their neighbors try to keep up with the Joneses. The Joneses represent the textbook definition of an associative group. They are the American Dream personified.

The Joneses are at work from the very first scene. As they arrive at their new house, they ask a passerby to take a photo of them. Mick does not waste a moment in discussing the features of the smart phone that has a built-in camera, taking care to mention the brand name. The Joneses employ several tactics, one of which is to identify key influencers and woo them. Kate starts with an upscale hair salon knowing well that Billy, the owner, would be the one introducing her to her target market and also making recommendations. Steve, who hides the fact that he is a professional golfer, joins the local golf club and starts taking classes from the shop assistant/caddy at the club. Jenn targets high

school girls focusing on fashion products, and Mick markets electronics to high school-aged males. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that these fake family members not only keep secrets from their community, but also from each other.

As previously described, the modes of duplicity in stealth marketing may exist between the marketer and consumer (going either direction) or it may manifest in the secrets they keep from themselves. In *The Joneses*, the family is called a 'unit' or a 'cell' and the members are called 'producers'; thus, self-duplicity on the Joneses' side reveals itself in the form of secrets kept from the rest of the unit.

### 6.1. Marketer-to-consumer deception (MdC)

Marketers' deception of consumers is legendary. And indeed, this is the surface premise of the movie. From the clothes the Joneses wear to the cars they drive and the food they eat, they are secretly promoting products and a lifestyle package; certainly they go beyond promotion to instigate sales and upgrading. For example, take Kate, the mother: She acts as the opinion leader to the neighbor women as they all emulate her style of tracksuit and sneakers after a brief encounter with her during their morning walk. Steve, the father, influences the men through the consumption of more stereotypically male products such as sporting goods, a media set, a lawnmower with a screen, watches, and cars. Similarly, Mick, the teenage son, shows off his video games and sportswear, and Jenn, the daughter, creates fashion trends among her high school friends.

In a real-life example, Sony employed a camera phone campaign in 2002 in New York and nine other major cities via which actors posing as tourists asked passersby to take pictures with their Sony Ericsson T68i, which allowed the 'tourists' to show off the features of the camera. Later, in an online 2006 PSP campaign, Sony hired Zipatoni, a marketing company that created a faux fan site that looked like an independent blog, to activate customers. Once the

attempt to deceive was revealed, Sony published an explanation/apology; the website was later removed, along with YouTube videos (Graft, 2006).

Similarly, RIM, the manufacturer of Blackberry phones, launched a campaign in 2010 by hiring young attractive females as covert marketing agents. The girls would go to bars and clubs and flirt with men, asking them to enter their contact information into the girls' Blackberry Pearls so that the prospects could get a chance to experience the phone firsthand (Osterhout, 2010).

## 6.2. Consumer-to-marketer deception (CdM)

Whilst marketers can mislead and deceive consumers, the reverse is also true. In *The Joneses*, Larry the neighbor deceives Steve about the nature of his job and income, leading Steve to believe that Larry is living a luxurious life and driving an expensive sports car while he is actually defaulting on his credit cards and unable to pay his mortgage. This exemplifies the customer deceiving a market researcher, misrepresenting the segment she or he might fall into.

Indeed, as any car salesperson knows, consumers regularly visit dealerships with no intention of buying but rather of having a fun time test driving cars that fall beyond their budget. This is true in many product categories, from clothing to housing. On a more prosaic level, customers often keep their contact and demographic info secret to ensure anonymity, especially from companies that require personal data. A common practice is to employ aliases and temporary email accounts when subscription is necessary for single-use interaction (i.e., to gain access to content once). This type of duplicity enables consumers to receive certain perks (e.g., discounts by subscribing to newsletters) without actually disclosing the information the marketer requires or desires to obtain.

## 6.3. Marketer-to-marketer deception (MdM)

In the movie, other marketers in the community are also targets for stealth marketing. These 'connectors' are the people that reach to the target consumers on the stealth marketer's behalf and create a ripple effect for the promotional message to reach a larger segment. The hairstylist and the golf merchandise salesman/instructor are two examples of such connectors, and keeping the promotional message a secret from the connectors is another mode of duplicity. Kate, a marketer disguised as a consumer, gives her hairstylist hair care products, which

he sells in his salon. Steve gets golf lessons from the shop assistant at the golf club, who also teaches golf. What Steve hides from him is that he is a skilled golfer. When the shop assistant/golf teacher sees the improvement in his student, he starts suggesting the drivers Steve uses to his other customers at the golf club store.

Another example is the Joneses' neighbor Summer, who is a representative for a cosmetics firm. Kate offers to host a sales party at her house in order for Summer to introduce the company's products. Obviously, Summer is unaware that Kate is doing the same thing—selling—but marketing in a very different way. In this situation, Kate's company (Marketer 1) and Summer's company (Marketer 2) are competitors of a sort, but Marketer 1 is using stealth marketing techniques and Marketer 2 is using personal selling.

The most common mode of duplicity occurs when marketers keep their intentions from their consumers. Marketing companies regularly keep secrets from each other. Hence, the extant literature defines and describes stealth marketing as such (Cooney, 2005). Stalk (2006) calls this type of marketer-to-marketer deception 'curve ball' tactics and describes them as outsmarting competitors to look the other way while capturing the customer's business or coercing the competitor into doing something they should not have done. Other tactics include deceiving competitors to misjudge their success and luring them to disadvantageous areas to compete on uneven and favorable grounds (Cooney, 2005). In the past, these types of tactics were utilized by smaller companies trying to penetrate markets dominated by established competition; however, big companies have recently started using stealth marketing tactics against their existing competition.

## 6.4. Consumer-to-consumer deception (CdC)

Consumers often engage in deceptive activities among each other. In *The Joneses*, neighbor Larry, influenced by Steve, goes on a shopping spree. As a result, he defaults on his credit cards and falls behind on the family's mortgage payment, unbeknownst to his wife, Summer. Both characters are consumers who use duplicity for its second, rational function as classified by Buller and Burgoon (1996): to protect close relationships. This type of duplicity is commonly seen in personal relationships. However, in the movie, the context is that of consumption and the trigger is the stealth marketing tactics Steve uses to make the purchase of lavish items desirable, despite the accountability one might feel toward his or her spouse.

Similar examples of consumer-to-consumer deception exist in real life. The Girls Intelligence Agency ([www.girlsintelligenceagency.com](http://www.girlsintelligenceagency.com)) is an organization that employs 40,000 girls between the ages of 8 and 29 throughout the United States as covert influencers to collect marketing data. The Agency works with companies like Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, Sara Lee, Johnson & Johnson, DreamWorks, Disney, Warner Brothers, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, and Sony, providing information regarding the expectations, needs, and desires of a specific market segment via gatherings like slumber parties held at an influencer's house, tours, or similar events. In other words, the influencers employed by the Girls Intelligence Agency hold focus groups or do marketing research without informing their peers.

### 6.5. Marketer self-deception ( $dM^2$ )

Whilst *The Joneses* is nominally about marketers deceiving consumers, it is ironic that many of the most powerful plot hinges and twists in the film revolve around the marketers deceiving themselves. Steve deceives himself regarding the possible consequences of his role in stealth marketing until neighbor Larry commits suicide. Once he discovers that Larry killed himself because he could not deal with the stress of the financial decisions he made to keep up with Steve, however, Steve realizes that he was deceiving not only others but also himself. He announces the truth to the neighbors and leaves his job.

There are several real-life examples of marketers' self-deceptive practices. For instance, Steve Jobs publicly denied the iPhone's apparent antenna problems in 2010. Rather than acknowledging the issue and taking appropriate action, Jobs chose self-deception as a strategy. At the time, this response was considered a big disappointment and damaged the brand value Apple had built over the years. Similarly, public relations agencies that work for big tobacco, oil, and coal companies refuse to acknowledge emerging research relating these industries to human health problems and environmental damage. Instead, they choose self-deception over dealing with the emerging issues in order to justify questionable business practices. One such instance happened at a conference in 1999, where Michael Mudd, an ex-vice president of Kraft, proposed creating a "code to guide the nutritional aspects of food marketing, especially to children," in effort to combat obesity (Moss, 2013, p. 8). The rest of the industry at that time did not feel ready to take on his proposal. Later, Mudd disclosed to reporter Michael Moss that he could not live with knowing he played a part in

engineering products to create addictive eating habits, while at the time he thought it was just business.

### 6.6. Consumer self-deception ( $dC^2$ )

The tragic core of *The Joneses* involves consumer self-deception. Egged on by unscrupulous marketers, some consumers buy into dreams that they know they cannot afford. However, marketing deception can only go so far: it requires consumer self-deception to complete the circle. In the movie, this role is left to neighbor Larry. By living a marketed lifestyle far beyond his means, Larry denies the reality of his impending financial reckoning, which culminates in his ultimate denial of reality—life itself—and his suicide.

Other examples of consumer self-deception include how brand-loyal consumers staunchly defend the superiority of their brand despite evidence to the contrary, or how consumers continue to indulge in overconsumption of products that contain tobacco, trans fats, sugars, and alcohol despite knowing their negative health effects. Indulgent consumers extend both their financial and physiological means by deceptively disregarding or discounting the repercussions. Western societies and economies based on consumerism have made this type of consumer self-deception even more common and perhaps somewhat more acceptable. For example, companies such as credit card consolidation agencies perpetuate the problem by providing temporary relief from negative consequences, thus fueling self-deception. Similarly, on a day-to-day basis, taking the focus from moderation in consumption to over-indulgence in food enables self-deceptive behavior. The wider issue here is that in the broad class of self-deception, we are all torn between image and reality, often choosing self-deception over self-knowledge.

## 7. Discussion

The examples provided in the previous section raise questions regarding the ethical and managerial implications of stealth marketing. On the one hand, the existing literature (e.g., Martin & Smith, 2008; Petty & Andrews, 2008; Rinaldo, Basuroy, Wy, & Jeon, 2013; Sprague & Wells, 2010) discusses the legal and ethical issues in detail. On the other hand, managerial implications have recently received more attention from researchers (see Roy & Chattopadhyay, 2010; Swanepoel, Lye, & Rugimbana, 2009). In this section, we discuss both issues, starting with ethical concerns.

### 7.1. Ethical concerns

Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations mandate that advertisers must disclose a material connection between a person endorsing a product and the company selling the product (Crescenti, 2005). Therefore, based on FTC standards, stealth marketing is a deceptive practice. A non-profit dedicated to "protecting communities from commercialism," Commercial Alert, went so far as to send a formal written request to the FTC asking for investigation of companies that engage in buzz marketing (Ruskin, 2005). In its *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, the Canadian Marketing Association (2008) states: "Marketers should avoid undercover or word of mouth initiatives that encourage a consumer or business to believe that the marketer's agents are acting independently and without compensation when they are not."

Although ethical concerns are not the main focus of this article, analyzing the examples in *The Joneses* through Martin and Smith's (2008) ethical perspective provides direction for our suggestions. Martin and Smith look at three real-life cases representing an in-person stealth campaign: one blog that seems genuine but which is actually paid for by Walmart and two platforms that provide personal interaction both online and offline. The researchers assess the tactics used in these cases according to the key issues of deceptiveness, intrusion, and exploitativeness. In their analysis, they find all three cases to be ethically questionable, both from a consequential and non-consequential view.

The non-consequential view of ethics considers only conformity of the act to accepted societal norms, regardless of the outcome. The stealth marketing tactics used by the Joneses violate generally accepted norms like not lying to your friends and neighbors.

### 7.2. Managerial concerns

Despite the associated ethical and legal concerns, stealth marketing campaigns are said to be effective in capturing the 18- to 34-year-old demographic, which is typically considered unresponsive to traditional marketing efforts (Maye, 2001). Stealth marketing represents an effort to bypass consumer skepticism and message clutter, and its allure lies in marketers' perception that it works (Rotfeld, 2008). The effectiveness of stealth marketing has been the question in marketers' minds; yet to our knowledge, no studies exist examining the outcomes of such campaigns in terms of increased sales or revenue. Anecdotal accounts aside, perhaps the lack of empirical evidence might mean that stealth marketing is not as effective as marketers seem to

believe. Malcolm Gladwell (1998, p. 66) observed: "The curious thing about our contemporary obsession with spin. . . is that we seldom consider whether spin works. We simply assume that, because people are everywhere trying to manipulate us, we're being manipulated."

We do not argue whether or not stealth marketing is effective. Nevertheless, we propose that using irony may be a form of duplicity that minimizes both the ethical and managerial concerns.

### 7.3. Ironic duplicity

Irony is a commonly used rhetorical tool in communicating promotional messages.<sup>1</sup> Like stealth marketing, there is a secret being kept from the consumer; however, it is in the message and not in the intention. Ironic messages have an explicit meaning and an implicit meaning. When marketers use irony intentionally, they expect that the customer will see through the secret's boundaries and that the duplicity in meaning will create a shared secret between the customer and the company. There is no intention to deceive the consumer and no question regarding non-consequential ethics. Moreover, the consequences are no different than advertising, only on a wider audience. As such, this type of duplicity does not raise as many ethical questions as stealth marketing.

Recent work by the authors investigates the effectiveness of irony in bypassing skepticism through experiments. Preliminary results suggest that participants who scored high on the skepticism scale found ironic ads to be more persuasive. Hence, it can be said that unlike the state of research regarding stealth marketing, the effectiveness of ironic duplicity is under examination.

## 8. Conclusion

In this article we discussed modes of duplicity in stealth marketing by deconstructing the film *The Joneses*. The extant literature focuses on one of six possible modes, namely the duplicity between the marketer and the consumer. We introduced examples of duplicity where the marketer keeps secrets from their own unit and other marketers, as well as the customer keeping secrets from marketers, other customers, and themselves.

More importantly, we proposed that using ironic duplicity might minimize ethical concerns related to stealth marketing. Disguising promotional messages

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed conceptualization see Pehlivan, Berthon, and Pitt (2011).

as word of mouth is currently the dominant practice; however, more and more examples using irony as a disguise are emerging in advertising (Pehlivan, Berthon, & Pitt, 2011).

Although stealth marketing is perhaps as old as marketing itself, a discussion of the phenomenon as a marketing tool is of the recent decade. We believe that this marketing practice, mostly used during buzz marketing campaigns, warrants more attention from the research community, as well as more managerial attention. Not only is it necessary to discuss the ethics—the major focus in the literature—but it is also crucial to understand the process as a marketing operation and as a consumer experience. This article is a step in this direction.

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