

MIRROR NEURONS - THE REASON WHY THE OSHO CHAPPAL FAD SPIKED AND THE REASON WHY WE NEED TO GET ETHICAL WITH OUR ADVERTISING

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It is difficult to miss a fad. Whether it's the Rubik's Cube craze, or the fad of sporting yellow Livestrong wristbands. One may think that fads are the stuff of youngsters'. But adults are also susceptible to the fad mechanism, remember grownups sporting the Pune born Osho chappals or for that matter going on the Atkins diet? Fads tend to launch off like missiles and then fizzle out just as quickly if they don't manage stay on and become a trend. Fads could spell opportunity for marketers if companies are able to quickly home into the fads and add value to it by turning it into a sustainable business. But what exactly fires up fads? It is the existence of one of the most powerful drivers of human progress and one of the

prime discoveries in recent neuroscience: mirror neurons. These are neurons in key parts of our brain – the premotor cortex which is the center for language, empathy and pain. This gets stimulated not only as we perform certain actions but also when we watch someone else perform that action.

Mirror Neurons - The Imitation Element of The Brain

In 1996 neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti and his co-workers at the University of Parma in Italy published some extraordinary findings. They had run an experiment to record electrical activity from neurons specialized for hand movement in two pigtail macaques. As anticipated, these neurons got stimulated

when the animals reached for peanuts that were placed in front of them. What was entirely unexpected, however, was that these same neurons fired when a scientist in the lab reached for the nuts instead. The monkey remained stationary. However, watching the scientist move had activated motor areas in the macaque's brain, just as if the animal had carried out the action itself.

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), Rizzolatti and his colleagues soon documented the same phenomenon in humans and named the responsible nerve cells "mirror neurons." These cells perform a dual function: they become active during any type of active behavior like chewing food, throwing a ball, performing a dance, whether we do it ourselves or just watch someone else do it. Therefore, our conscious brain generates an inner simulation when we follow the actions of another person. Mirror neurons are presumed to be abundant in brain regions responsible for planning and initiating actions, including the primary motor cortex, the premotor cortex and supplementary motor areas. The discovery of this mechanism, suggests that everything we watch someone else do, we do as well, on a mental scale. At its most basic, we mentally rehearse or imitate every action we observe, be it a somersault or a smile. It explains much about how we learn to smile, walk, talk, or swim. At a deeper scale, it suggests a common neurobiological energy which helps us in understanding others and learning. It also helps us to figure out why yawns are contagious.

From the moment we're born, we are propelled by mirror neurons. Stick your tongue out at an infant and it will imitate

your action. This is pertinent because it reveals why we're programmed to imitate from cradle to tomb. It explains why we humans pick up fashions and trends and how these go on to become part of our culture. It explains why showing fashionable hip-bands of one's underpants can quickly become a fad or why a rapper's gesticulation can quickly turn into a fad. Imitation is not just a fun human trait. It's a behavior that's embedded in our brains. That's why fashion exists, why sport is so popular, why we experience the playing of it as vividly as we watch a game.

Wharton marketing professor Jonah Berger points out that fads aren't restricted to toys and gadgets. As per him fads also surface in areas such as education and management. For example, Six Sigma, the quality management strategy introduced in 1981 by Motorola, became a rage after it was adopted by companies such as General Electric, but currently this trend is now passé. Berger also suggests that fads typically develop around products that communicate something about social identity. "Fads tend to arise in situations where people imitate the behavior of others. They are particularly likely in situations where one group might have high status or exclusivity that others want." Clothes and music are fruitful ground for fads because they are a via medium to communicate something about a person's identity and style, while more practical items like a washing machine would do so to a smaller extent therefore are thus less prone to setting off trends.

Mirror Neurons Crucial For Learning

Mirror neurons' role in understanding is best described by Dr V.S. Ramachandran, Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition and

Professor with the Psychology Department and Neurosciences Program at the University of California, San Diego. He believes that the mirror neuron is crucial in the development of elaborate social skills, social networks, and knowledge infrastructure we call culture. As per him it plays a crucial role in our learning, right from understanding Shakespeare or for that matter even learning the hip-hop. Mirror neurons, are supposed to have allowed early humans to first understand basic, possibly puppet like actions, which led to more sophisticated motions and finally ballooned to become language. As more complex and abstract communication evolved, information began to expand and gained momentum to build the intellectual and community fabric which we call culture.

Mirror Neurons Also the Culprit of Sinister Action

Mirror neurons however don't always replicate positive actions. Its study has revealed a new, more disturbing perspective on the dynamics of and lessons taught by violent video games, for instance. UCLA's (University of California, Los Angeles) Iacoboni is studying the subject and suggests that such games reinforce an association between pleasure and accomplishment by causing harm. This explains growing teenage and student violence and killings. Iacoboni speculates that the strength of imitative violence in the mirror neuron systems can be so powerful that it can become difficult to refrain from.

Mirror Neurons And Advertising

While on the subject of understanding mirror neurons let us also look at advertising and its role in communication to the

consumers. Advertisers often use illogical methods of persuasion and communicate to their consumers more of illusion than truth. This is often coupled with artistic photography, exceptional special effects, clever slogans, acting and music. It is truly a form of art choreographed to attract and keep the attention of its target and make them more amenable to persuasion. Because we now have an understanding of the role of mirror neurons in the brain we can comprehend how advertising plays up on our brains. This is the reason why advertising has been called the most significant establishment of modern society and has the ability to change a set of values held by people. It can influence a populace to replace their thoughts regarding things which they may have otherwise thought of as morally wrong, to an attitude that it's morally right or acceptable.

Let us look at advertising which targets the youth of today. The use of violent imagery is now on the rise and increasingly being used to advertise and market a diverse range of goods from sports apparel to shoes, perfumes, computer games, cars, watches, jeans and even credit cards to the youth. Fashion companies like Dolce & Gabbana, Louis Vuitton and Jimmy Choo use a lot of titillating images to promote their products in their markets. This eroticism is also backed up by suggestive violence. As a result we have these ads being seen by our youth and having a deeper effect than intended, thanks to the mirror neurons getting powered up in our brains. Though these companies do not endorse violence publicly through their company literature, or in the press, their ads which directly communicate to consumers speak a different language. When a consumer looks at a Dolce & Gabbana ad, violence

against men and women begins to be perceived as a luxury. The effect of this violent and erotic imagery is to make violent and sexual behaviour appear normal and even acceptable rather than strange and disgusting. It also manages to attract a viewer's attention through emotional, psychological and startling appeal. Through their communication, will not these companies influence the young to bring in a twisted order of sadists feeding on violence and humiliation? Do you think these ads can actually persuade the consumers to buy their products? Isn't this kind of advertising just adding to a visually polluted advertising order?

When we consider that realize that one of the basic traits of an effective marketer is to have empathy, we are looking at creating long relationships with our customers. When a company is truly empathetic, the recognition of value to consumers is just a starting point. A more critical factor is the continued high level of engagement with them. Today we have many consumers walking away from advertising in disgust, complaining that all ads are untrustworthy. Consumers would like to have confidence that ads tell the truth. Besides this we also have as per Wharton's Marketing professor Lisa Bolton the "Truth Effect" kicking into the effect of advertising on the consumer. She states that all marketers should be truthful, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because being deceptive can alter consumers' long-term psychological perceptions about what is and is not true. The "truth effect" is a tendency for people to believe in the truth of claims if those claims are repeated. There are two explanations as to why the effect occurs. First, repeating a claim makes it seem more familiar and

people mistake familiarity for truth. The idea is that we tend to think that things we know are the truth and not lies. So, if something seems familiar then it must be true. Second, people misattribute repeated claims to different sources, and then tend to believe something more if multiple sources endorse the claim.

Finally, isn't advertising supposed to be all about communicating benefits to your target? Don't we need to understand this as an advertising community and begin to monitor ourselves to remain ethically responsible?

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