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Video Hoaxes: Why We're Such Suckers



Fake ads have never been more popular. Why do we like to be tricked?

Jeff Gordon Terrifies a Car Salesman



YouTube screen capture

You've probably seen the viral video by now: NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon disguises himself (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5mHPo2yDG8>) as a suburban dweeb and takes a local car salesman for a terrifying test drive. The prank generated 30 million page views, so far, and a surprising amount of debate over whether it was real or staged.

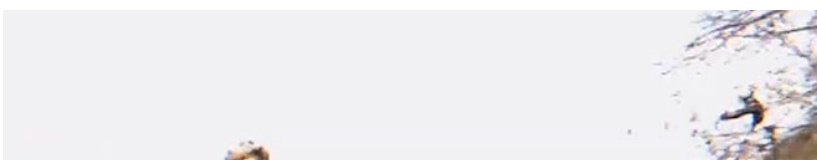
"To anyone who has even had a remote association with video or TV production knows it's a fake," says Joe Glennon, an associate professor of advertising at Temple University's School of Media and Communication. There's a CLOSED COURSE disclaimer on the bottom of the screen. And no lawyer on the planet would let a Pepsi film crew put people in danger like that for a commercial prank.

So why do people respond to tricks and pranks in advertising? Why do companies find such success with this approach?

The dubious authenticity of such videos are precisely why they're so successful, says Abhijit Biswas, clinical professor of marketing at the University of Texas at Dallas. If 50 percent of the audience believes the ad to be real, and 50 percent believes it to be staged, that's a perfect scenario from a marketing point of view. "It's the debate itself that drives the ad, that causes it to be forwarded and passed around," Biswas says.

VIDEO: 'Test Drive' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5mHPo2yDG8>)

Water Walkers





YouTube screen capture

In 2010, the "Liquid Mountaineering" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe3St1GgoHQ>) hoax video showed extreme athletes literally running on water thanks in part to water resistant shoes from outfitter Hi-Tec. The company initially denied that it was behind the video, but later came clean.

Tricking people for entertainment is a concept that has its roots in stage magic, says Alex Boese, creator of the Museum of Hoaxes website and author of several books on the history of pranks and cons. "We regard lying as this ethical breach, yet in certain cases people like to be tricked," he says.

VIDEO: 'Liquid Mountaineering' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe3St1GgoHQ>)

Slip and Slide



YouTube screen capture

The eye-popping Megawoosh video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkwh4ZaxHIA>) of a few years back appeared to be amateur footage of a guy shooting down a huge slip-and-slide and up a ramp, then flying hundreds of feet and landing in a kiddie pool. In fact, it was a German marketing video for Microsoft.

Thomas Plante, psychology professor at Santa Clara University and author of the Psychology Today ethics column "Do The Right Thing," says that most people have the tendency to believe what they are told. "Some trust the world and generally believe what people tell them," says Plante. "Others are more skeptical and, at the extremes, paranoid. They are a variety of psychological tests that can assess these qualities in people."

VIDEO: 'Megawoosh' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkwh4ZaxHIA>)

Pixar Prank



YouTube screen capture



The line between what's real and what isn't can get very blurry, as with this Lots-o'-Huggin' Bear commercial (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6dZtNYGILM>) that made the rounds in 2010. The ad is carefully designed to look like a TV commercial circa 1983, but of course it's a viral promotion for Pixar's "Toy Story 3." It's a fake commercial about a fake toy, designed to promote a real movie. Or, to put it another way, it's a commercial pretending to be another commercial.

"Covert marketing campaigns go way back," Boese says. "All the way back to, at least, P.T. Barnum in the 1840s. When the whole publicity industry got rolling in the 1920s, there was all sorts of covert marketing."

VIDEO: 'Lots-o'-Huggin' Bear Commercial' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6dZtNYGILM>)

Pickup Game



YouTube screen capture

Pepsi MAX made another hugely successful viral hoax video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DnKOc6FISU>) last year, in which NBA star Kyrie Irving dresses up as an old man and dominates a New Jersey street ball game. Like the Jeff Gordon video, the video is not ostensibly about tricking the viewer, it's about letting the viewer in on an artful prank.

But if the prank itself is staged, isn't that ultimately tricking the viewer again?

"Throughout history there have been certain kinds of lies that have always been accepted," Boese says. "When people lie in a way that's charming and entertaining, it's always been accepted."

VIDEO: 'Uncle Drew' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DnKOc6FISU>)

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