

VIRTUAL TRYVERTISING. MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERED CUSTOMERS

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to look at the experiential marketing strategy of virtual tryvertising, by analysing a specific case study: the augmented reality application Ikea Place. It provides customers with a set of tools to prefigure a virtual representation of a piece of a furniture within a physical space, in order to appraise its fitness in a prior time to its actual purchase, and hence to provide a benefit for him/her. The semiotic analysis will be carried out by taking into account the use practices prescribed by the application and the promotional discourses of the company. In particular it will look at two advertising videos which accompanied the launch of the application in 2013 and 2017. It will also consider the added value and the experiential gain for users that the adoption of this type of technology entails, in order to understand AR media not only as a mere strategy for commercial purposes, but as a tool for empowering the users' appraising skills traditionally used in the context of a dressing room of a physical store.

Keywords: tryvertising, virtual make-up, augmented reality, digital marketing, Ikea

Introduction

In a survey on Augmented Reality, Kim Kangsoo (2018) notes that “AR research and user community will continue to grow in line with the dramatic increase of commercial interest in AR/MR”. In addition to its application in industrial/military maintenance, medical applications, games, tour guide and browsers, one area that benefits or could benefit from using AR Applications is marketing.

Among marketing applications in AR, several are those that allow the user to view and try virtual representations of clothing products or pieces of furniture superimposed above the image of a face or of a room framed by the digital camera of a personal device. Such applications configure a series of use practices and prescribe to users to act in a performative way. They are mainly aimed at offering increasingly easier and more engaging shopping experiences and the acts performed by the users constitute the action programs previewed by the company’s strategy.

Such applications are very interesting from the semiotic standpoint. The actualization of a 3D model by users creates the object and, at the same time, enables an aspectual configuration which bring out values insofar it prefigures the effective buying experience.

If we consider AR within the landscape of advertising discourses, it is mainly a trendy commercial attraction that corresponds to a series of marketing strategies put in place by companies, in order to attract ever more customers. By means of these strategies, commercial subjects such as companies and multinationals improve fidelity with customers and potential buyers by offering them innovative and amazing purchasing experiences, and consequently they associate the value of technological modernity with their own corporate identity.

However, precisely for this reason, from a theoretical standpoint as stated by Daniela Panosetti (2012), we must be careful to address the aspect of the innovativeness of a media such as AR, which is typically related to sensationalist marketing rhetorics for commercial purposes only. This can be done by looking for the added value and experiential gain for the user that the adoption of this type of technology entails.

In this sense, AR can certainly be considered a central element of specific marketing strategies of customers engagement for commercial purposes. However, its technical mode of operation can be beneficially analysed in order to go more deeper and to decipher the features of an augmented shopping experience. This one would be to the extent that customers, by means of an AR application, are not only entertained and engaged, but also

benefit from an enhancement of their skills of evaluation and judgment normally employed in the choosing and purchase of a product during a shopping practice in a dressing room or a physical store.

The purpose of this article will therefore be to analyse, in parallel, the features of a specific typology of AR applications, as these were able to enable an *augmentation* of users' appraising capacities. It will also consider a specific case study and the promotional discourses of a corporate communication. This will also be traced back to the classic forms of customers engagement, that put into discourse and, therefore, narrativize and prescribe such augmentation operations.

In particular, we will consider one of the most elementary (but also more common) marketing strategies of customers engagement, consisting in the launch of an AR application that provides the user and potential customer with a sort of computational gaze into the screen of a digital device. This constitutes a virtual prefiguration of the desired product, superimposed on user's own body as well as within user's own home, allowing them to appraise its suitability prior to the actual purchase.

This model of purchase experience is called *virtual tryvertising*. Traditionally, the term "tryvertising" refers to marketing strategies which provide the integration of a product or a service into daily life so that the consumers can make up their minds based on their experience, not marketing messages (Füller et al, 2014). Through tryvertising, the customers receive a sample of a product (in small quantities or in a reduced version) in the store and use it even without owning and acquiring it. One of the main typologies of product involved in a tryvertising strategy was make-up. Customers were given a sample of the product advertised in order to test and evaluate it over the course of their lives.

The implementation of digital and computer graphics technologies has allowed for the design of *virtual tryvertising* marketing strategies to communicate new typologies of products such as clothing or pieces of furniture, although one of the main types remains that of make-up. An example is the web site of virtual make-up *Modiface*¹, an application developed by Sephora. Users are able to try, in preview, make-up products offered by the catalogue of the company, and to visualize the appearance of their face wearing AR virtual make-ups, framed by the webcam.

¹ <http://modiface.com> (accessed 15 June 2021).

The specific case study that will be analysed in the course of this article is the Ikea Place application². Ikea Place is an application that allows the users to visualize the virtual prefiguration of a piece of furniture inside their home. They can access a database of products similar to those they have in their home. The application allows users to calculate the measurements of the spaces, together with those of the products in the catalogue which accord with the spatial requirements.

This application is an interesting case study from at least two points of view. On the one hand, the use practices that it prescribes lead the AR application to be conceived as an “object of value”, able to provide the potential customer with augmented skills of calculation and computational assessment, by virtue of the operations carried out by the computer vision software implemented in it. On the other hand, at the level of the promotional discourses of the company, it is described as an activator of a playful shopping experience, modelled on the practices of *do it yourself* (in continuity with those that distinguish the philosophy of the brand). This feature suggests a significant ludic and entertaining dimension, in which both the application and the prescribed use practices are spectacularized.

For this reason, a first semiotic analysis of the application, of its interface and of the use practices prescribed will be followed by an analysis of the promotional discourses of the company, by taking into consideration the advertising videos that have supported the launch of the application in 2013 and in 2017.

The semiotic analysis will lead to a consideration of the augmented user experience as a result of an empowerment process of the traditional dressing room. For this reason, we will initially look at the concept of virtual tryvertising and the modalities in which it configures the empowerment of the customers’ appraising skills.

Virtual tryvertising

The fundamental competence that the customers acquire in using an AR application to purchase a product is, in first place, that of a rational and objective assessment of *a possibility*, strictly connected to the competence of *becoming able to appraise*, in preview, the suitability of a virtual representation of the product itself, directly superimposed over their body or, more generally, into the space in which they imagine it will be placed in the near future³.

² <https://www.ikea.com/ch/it/customer-service/mobile-apps/ikea-place-app-pub0bab12b1> (accessed 15 June 2021).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_dressing_room (accessed 15 June 2021).

This competence is provided by image processing and computer graphics software able to computationally detect the physical space framed by digital cameras. It is able to display virtual content and, consequently provide the customer with a prefiguration consistent with the moment when the product will be purchased and physically present in the room. In short, this acquired competence is closely linked to the *facilitation* of the purchasing experience put in place by this type of applications.

What difficulties does a virtual tryvertising application eliminate? In order to understand this, it will be useful to rethink the modalities in which the customers traditionally act into the physical store, by dealing with physical spaces and items.

For instance, in using virtual tryvertising applications, the customer achieves gains in acquiring the possibility of prefiguring (virtually trying-on) many more products than those they might try-on at a physical store. This feature eliminates the inconvenience related to the materiality of these and the store (for instance, the need to change clothes each time). Many shoppers find trying on clothes a time-consuming chore which negatively impacts their buying intention purchase (Araki, Muraoka 2008). According to Erra and Colonnese (2015) one of the major benefits is precisely the improved ability to make the right buy, by reducing the time required. With virtual tryvertising applications the customers can try much more dresses in less time.

One of the most interesting aspects of virtual tryvertising is that it presupposes — in addition to the digitization of the physical space in which the product will be placed — a *virtualization* and *dematerialization* of the product itself. The trying of a material item inside a store is not a foreshadowing. Instead, it is already a real actualization of the *couple subject + material product* (although not validated by the attestation of ownership, which happens instead with the payment). The chosen dress is *specifically* worn, the furniture is *tangible*, the make-up product can be *physically applied* over the hand in order to observe the aesthetic effect on the skin.

Besides, the prefiguration in AR and the trying-on process lightens the traditional practices. They release customers from a series of precautions and commitments that should be taken in the dressing room. They are not required to remove their clothes in a public or semi-public context, or repeatedly soil their own skin with different make-up products. In the case of a piece of furniture, it releases them of all the measurement, calculation and preventive appraising operations that, in AR, are carried out automatically by the computer vision software. The customer simply enjoys the pleasure of the buying experience.

Moreover, although several people make purchases on the Web, when they come to buy clothes online, they are often not entirely satisfied. This is due to the fact that they are unable to appraise the fitness of the product.

In general, we might say that virtual tryvertising aims, on the one hand, to facilitate and, on the other, to empower the purchase experience, since it both virtualizes the physical experience in the store, and restores the try-on dimension that has been lost with the advent of e-shopping practices.

However, the competences acquired by customers with virtual tryvertising applications are more than just the facilitation of the physical purchase experience, as well as the enhancement of the online one.

The applications configure a particular mode of human-computer interaction, typical of AR, in which the users or, in this case, the customers, are technologically increased in their modality of acting in the physical world.

While the traditional model of tryvertising configures a direct and tangible relation between the customers and the advertised product, as if the product was already owned and used by them in daily life, with virtual tryvertising the relation is set in a way that users are placed in a condition to *potentially* try-on *all* the (representations of the) products. However, they are never owned by the customers who negotiate a broader availability of the products with their immateriality.

Where, before, the physical co-presence of the product and of the customer assured the correct suitability of the former and the judgment was due to the latter, with virtual tryvertising the rational calculations (for instance those concerning the size of a cloth) are carried out by the computer vision software. The customer is asked only to appraise the purchase based only on their tastes and preferences.

It should also be noted that this model has significantly shed light on a social trend that distinguishes it from the traditional shopping experience. By the use of this type of applications, users have become completely autonomous and independent in the assessment act and in the choice of the product to buy. They are already transformed into more rational and lucid customers, by learning to shop without the support of the sales assistant, whose task is to advise, propose and persuade, with the aim of inducing the customer to overcome the initial indecision and buy the product.

In this sense, we might state that the semiotic efficacy and the practical functionality of virtual tryvertising — in contrast to traditional tryvertising marketing strategies — can be detected also in the fact that it reconfigures the pragmatic operations carried out in the dressing room of the traditional point of sale. In such conditions it is typical to appraise and to choose, in a

rational way, the possibility of a purchase, by starting from considering a series of variables (suitability, price, quality of materials, colour variations etc.).

Culturally, the dressing room also represents that symbolic liminal space between reality and imagination — for example, the theatre dressing room — in which the individual manipulates his/her aesthetics appearance, in order to enter into a space of possibility and fiction, such as the stage of a theatre.

Virtual tryvertising does not suppress the playful and imaginary dimension that characterizes the exciting traditional shopping experience at the point of sale, and in particular the dressing room. This typology of applications is not just featured by powerful decision tools for the on-line shopper, but also contributes to the fun factor of in-store shopping (Shaikh et al. 2014).

The purchasing experience with virtual tryvertising becomes exciting and playful, thanks to the interactivity of the contents, the possibility of trying an infinite range of clothes countless times, to experiment with new solutions and to imagine, in a playful way, the renewal of one's personal image.

Customers are thus simultaneously *empowered* from a visual and cognitive standpoint — since they acquire the computational skills offered by computer vision software to rationally assess the purchase. However, they are also *entertained*, since they are put in a more enjoyable condition to decide which product to buy among a range of possibilities.

In our view, the definition of a meeting point between the rational assessment and playful instinct of the customer is what allows for the combination of the experience of the dressing room with virtual tryvertising applications in AR.

Then, semiotically thinking about the practices of use prescribed by the Ikea Place application means thinking about a process of users' competences empowerment. This is in addition to spatial and visual augmentation and the provision of a set of use practices and habits traditionally related to the dressing room located in the store.

In a such perspective, the domestic space becomes a dressing room, a performative and experiential space of possibilities, of imagination and of imaginative and playful prefiguration of the product to purchase in the near future.

Case study: Ikea Place

The Ikea Place application can be referenced to the virtual tryvertising model. Its mode of operation is very simple and immediate. Once the ap-

plication is started and the device's camera is activated, the computer vision software scans the room in which the user imagines placing the previously selected furniture product. At this point, the software extracts the measurements of the room using simultaneous localization and mapping technologies and, finally, it positions a 3D model of the specific product.

A first version of the application was launched in 2013. It used the paper catalogue as an anchor point⁴ for the virtual contents. It was followed by a second one, in 2017. The latter boasted greater definition and truthfulness of the contents better integrated into the real space from a visual point of view. It also featured a reduced presence of commands in the interface allowing users to “touch” and interact *directly* with virtual contents in a more immediate way (for example to change its orientation the user “touches” the representation of the product into the display and not the buttons).

The interface

The user interface of the application⁵ is very essential and is featured by a minimalist aesthetics, in accordance with the design style of Ikea brand. Only three buttons appear in the main screen.

The first icon stylizes a house, allowing the user to open and navigate the home page. Here, a set of custom pieces of furniture are presented according to default design styles. They are grouped and accompanied by a call-to-action, such as “Be inspired” or “Try at home”. The same section also provides other practices such as free browsing of the product catalogue viewable in AR, organized by thematic or categorical collections.

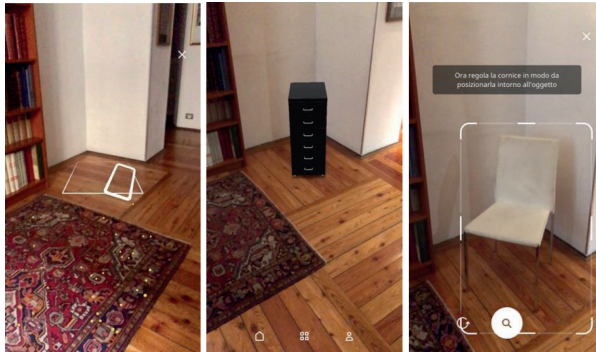
The main use practice prescribed by the application provides, first of all, browsing of the range of furniture components by scrolling through the virtual catalogue. It allows the user to choose the product to be displayed and, subsequently, the positioning of its virtual representation in the domestic space previously scanned by the computer vision software.

The second icon consists of four small squares grouped together. This configures, a particularly interesting further practice of use. It is possible to search among the components of the Ikea catalogue starting from framing one piece of furniture which the users already own and is already present

⁴ An anchor point is a physical object, usually flat and quadrangular in shape, which is used by the computer vision software as a reference point for the creation of a virtual space within which to place the computer graphics content. The most technologically advanced applications have automatic mapping software and do not require anchor points to place a content into a physical environment.

⁵ The analysis was carried out on version 5.2.0, downloaded from the Italian store, via Apple device.

in the home. This path provides two phases: first, the users are asked to touch on the screen of their device, the object framed by the camera that they want to look for and, then, adjust the frame by placing it around the object. This practice does not lead to a display pieces of furniture in AR, but it activates a hyperlink to the (wider) online catalogue on the Ikea website.



Finally, the last icon represents a stylized bust which opens a section in which the products previously labelled by the user as “favourites” are shown and organized within a “wish list”. Here there is a list of collections of furniture pieces, created on the basis of user precedent choices and, finally, a feedback section, in which users are invited to comment on their experience.

The application as a “value object”

Although the use of the application is simple and immediate, the articulation of cultural values associated with it by the corporate discourses is not trivial.

In addition to the precedent analysis of use practices, we decided to develop a study of the promotional videos which accompanied the launch of the application. They represent a discursive level which cannot be ignored in order to decipher the semiotic functioning of the same use practices analysed.

It is precisely at the level of these texts that the augmentation of the users’ appraising skills is put into discourse and narrativized.

On Ikea’s website, the second version of the application has been presented through a short video. It described a digital service offered free of charge to users, to provide them with the capacity to make a rational and objective assessment, both qualitative — useful in choosing the product that best suits the style of their home — and quantitative, to calculate the measurements of the spaces, in order not to make mistakes during the purchase. The dis-

course rhetoric presents the application as an “object of value” capable of conferring a pragmatic competence to users and enhancing their purchase experience.

It is precisely in the narrative articulation moving from a situation of discomfort (Fig. 4A) — in which a couple realizes that they have inaccurately measured their living room (they have probably not used Ikea Place!) — to a situation of comfort in which the discomfort is resolved (Fig. 4B), that the narrative of the promotional spot articulates⁶.



The description of the application as an “object of value” is also justified by the fact that the entire structure of the experience of buying an Ikea product at a physical point-of-sale is characterized by a series of complications that require the “client-model” to activate a series of skills in order to solve them.

The totality of the use practices which the multinational purchasing experience provides are do it yourself practices, and they are articulated in a series of processes in which the performative action of the user is an essential component. For instance, the shopping experience is articulated over a much larger time than that actually spent in the store. It continues in the domestic space with the “rite” of assembly, and identifies, in all its phases, a series of challenges to be completed, ranging from searching for the exit from the labyrinth of the departments, to solving the puzzle of modular pieces to be assembled in the correct order.

Nevertheless, by looking at the company philosophy⁷, the pieces of furniture themselves designed by the Swedish company represent the result of a rational calculation between the quality of the product and the selling price, combining the utopian dimension of people’s independence, the

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UudV1VdFtuQ> (accessed 15 June 2021).

⁷ We refer to Norton et al. (2011).

ownership of elegant goods and minimalist aesthetics to the practical and utilitarian value of saving and functionality⁸.

User responses

The Ikea Place application does not represent an alternative to in-store purchase. In fact, there is no section provided to finalize the on-line purchase of the product prefigured in AR.

The experience enabled by the use of the application should be understood within the context of a marketing strategy. It might be considered an earlier stage, complementary to the program of action of the overall purchasing experience. In fact, the application has the dual function of facilitating and engaging the potential customer, allowing them to move through the physical store and purchase a product (or at least to do it through the e-commerce section of the website).

However, according to users' responses, it is precisely the absence of a section for online purchase that the application is considered useless.

We carried out an analysis of the comments in the "Review" section of the application page on the Apple Store. Although it cannot be considered a satisfactory quantitative analysis, it is interesting to note that many of them are critical, as opposed to neutral or positive (only 737 out of 1844). This suggests a certain "elementarily" of the system, mainly due to a limited catalogue of products which are selectable and viewable in AR.

This quantitative data supports the thesis that the application does not so much enable a substitute for the in-store experience, but rather a series of action programs that, although semantically referable to the values system of Ikea, aim to a completely different objective: that of engaging and entertaining the potential customers, and strengthening the relationship of fidelity that will lead them to physically go to the store and to finalize the purchase.

Moreover, as noted by a recent study of a sample of individuals of Portuguese origin, the application helps make the shopping experience easier and more immediate, but without allowing its completion:

"Users felt greater confidence and greater convenience of purchase when using the IKEA Place application [...] it is not clear whether the user after physically purchasing a product on a commercial surface could purchase a product online using an AR application from that organization. Thus, it is concluded that familiarity with IKEA is not at all necessary to purchase a product through the IKEA Place application" (Alves and Reis 2020: 121).

⁸ For more information on the cultural ideologies linked to the Ikea brand's social reputation, see Leone (2015).

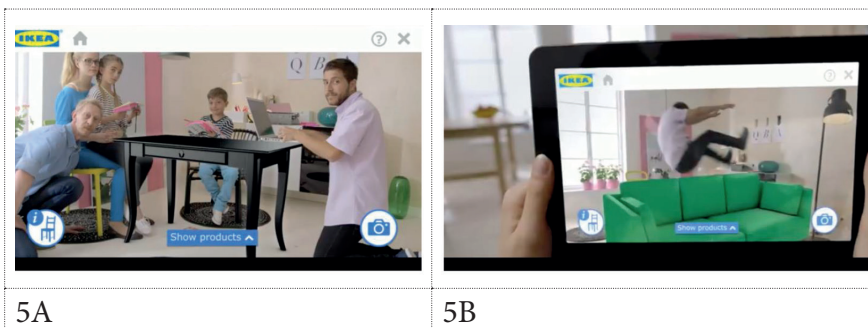
It is no coincidence that most of the comments are negative (1107 out of 1844). A sense of dissatisfaction emerged with the pragmatic-rational functionalities which that the utilitarian rhetoric of the spot expected. Instead, this is not achieved in the actual uses prescribed by the application. Whether due to a crash or a system bug, a lack of realistic virtual furnishings or the above-mentioned impossibility of possibility of finalizing the purchase, the essential criticism of the application is that it does not add any practical value to the purchase experience. It is not essentially an “object of value”, but rather an entertainment tool focused mainly on the playful dimension of the experience.

Playful and computational. The game of augmentation.

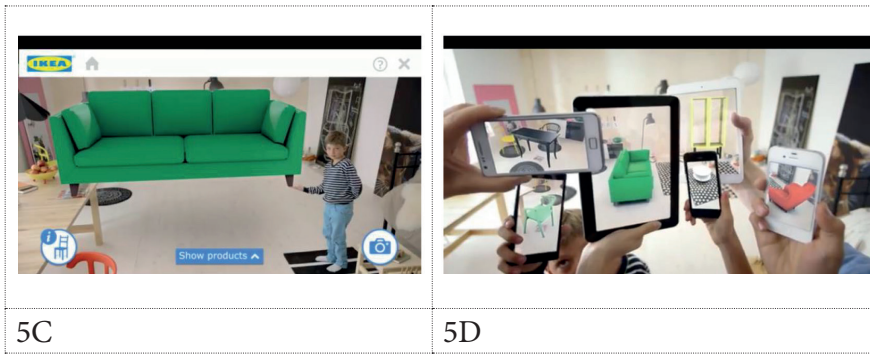
The significant playful and irrational dimension enabled by AR technology is clearly detectable by analyzing the promotional video of the first version of the application, discursively more complex than that published in 2017⁹.

In this video, AR technology is not presented at all as an empowering tool, connected to a logic-computational competence (although the operation is almost the same), but rather as a medium for the entertainment of the whole family. Several formal and figurative aspects of the video support this assertion: from the absence of voice-over describing the operation of the application, to the predominant presence of cheerful and lively music, which feeds the general playful atmosphere.

The spot shows a family represented by different age groups using the application each in an original way. In one of the scenes, for example, the mother takes a photograph of all the members in which she inserts a “magic” AR table (Fig. 5A).



⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=70&v=vDNzTasuYEw&feature=emb_title (accessed 15 June 2021).



This spot can be read as a sort of “staging of everyday life” as it is enriched by a series of circus-like gags (Fig. 5C), in which AR is used as an illusion attraction or in a pure comic sense. In a later shot, shown in Fig. 5B, the boy jumps in the direction of the virtual sofa and falls on the floor, creating an effect typical of the language of slapstick comedy. In the final sequence (Fig. 5D), each member of the family identifies with a screen, within which several furniture products are displayed and, in the next sequence, these are physically realized in the home space.

In contrast to the second version of the application, especially looking at the discursive rhetoric of promotional videos, a radical evolution of the values attributed to the use practices of the application and of the sense related to AR technology can be observed. From the playfulness of entertainment, it moves on to practical utility, from spectacularizing the virtuality that breaks down the barriers between the physical and the invisible, to the rhetoric of the efficiency of spaces and the functionality of technological tools.

Conclusions

In the course of the article, we observed the mode of operation of the Ikea Place AR application, by focusing first on the analysis of the prescribed use practices, which we can see as figures of human-computer interaction with AR media. Then we focused on the company’s promotional discourses by analyzing the entertaining and playful dimension ascribed by the brand to this particular buying experience. Finally, we took into account a set of quantitative data, so that it has been possible to assess the judgment attributed by the users to the use practices prescribed by the application. It facilitates the shopping act, but it provides a more limited range of products than that of the points of sale as well.

To conclude, it can be argued that the specificity of this application consists not only of the ability to visually enhance physical reality, but in the mechanization of a series of pragmatic and rational evaluation and judgment operations by the users. It also consists of the ability of the application to dematerialize the product and make the shopping experience more enjoyable and playful. This is aimed not only at making the brand more attractive and more competent on the market, but in order to facilitate the customer shopping act as an *augmented* experience, compared to that involved in the traditional shopping experience in a physical store.

So, user empowerment no longer concerns only the visual capabilities of the subject, given to computer vision software, but the more general existential dimension of the individual who is individualized and made autonomous in the conduct of the uses practices.

In fact, with virtual tryvertising, the customer can not only play with products, by dreaming and fantasizing with an infinity of virtual models, but can manage autonomously and independently every stage of the shopping experience.

This leads to a neutralization of the mediation figures such as the sales assistants, to whom the skills of evaluation and measurement can be referred. With AR, they are instead attributed to a computational entity (an artificial intelligence?), whose voice appeals to the viewer of the promotional video of 2017, in complete abnegation toward the user. The resulting experience is more immediate, and aims to bring the user and the corporate subject closer together, as inscribed in the application. The customer is required to trust their smartphone as well as the accuracy of the application, which identifies with the corporate subject.

If conceived in this sense, the marketing strategy aspires to much more than a persuasion to purchase. Of course, the game of augmentation still aims to engage the potential customers to buy a product, but it does so by offering them a particular tool, which works in harmony with the central values of contemporary digital culture. Ikea's model customer is autonomous, independent and individualized, they are rational and lucid buyers. The AR application represents the culmination of this vision, by allowing the users to increase their operational and pragmatical capabilities in a completely autonomous way, as well as to acquire some form of super-power over their decisions, by becoming free from the limitations imposed by the physical dimension of things, people and spaces.

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