**Reading Film as a Text: Hermeneutics of Suspicion from Film the Joneses**

**Rifqi Khairul anam**

[*rifqistaimpro@iad.ac.id*](mailto:rifqistaimpro@iad.ac.id)

**Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo**

**Abstract**

Film, as a form of mass communication, is fundamentally a textual representation that communicates a specific message. The act of watching a film is fundamentally equivalent to perusing a book, as both mediums are designed to communicate a message. Analyzing a film involves the engagement of our entire repertoire of memories, which serves as the foundation for interpreting its significance. The objective of this research is to illuminate the significance of covert marketing and the hazards it presents by examining the material object of the film The Joneses through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and employing a content analysis approach. Film "The Joneses" portrays a seemingly flawless family with appealing adolescent children and a high socioeconomic status as an ideal. It is, however, disclosed that they are in fact covert marketing agents who engage in stealth marketing. Stealth marketing is an unscrupulous marketing strategy that exploits the consumer's subconscious, obscuring the fact that they are being approached with a product. This form of marketing deceives consumers into believing that they actually need the item, despite the fact that its practical value is superfluous. Instead, the item functions as a representation of one's social status. Therefore, stealth marketing contributes to the perpetuation of a consumer-driven society, in which consumption is employed to demonstrate one's identity and novelty.

**Keywords**: Reading Film; Hermeneutics Of Suspicion; Film The Joneses

**Introduction**

Stealth marketing is a covert marketing strategy designed to conceal the fact that customers are being exposed to promotional material. The prevalence of stealth marketing became evident to the general public with the release of the film "The Joneses" (2009), directed by Derrick Borte, which included this method in Hollywood movies. The film "The Joneses" depicts the affluent lifestyle of a family led by Steve and Kate Jones, a married couple with two attractive teenage children, Jenn and Mick Jones. According to reports, the family just relocated to an exclusive area where the inhabitants had an average income over $100,000.00. Their residence is a somewhat roomy dwelling, including an appealing interior decor, refined furnishings, a diverse array of home appliances, and luxurious automobiles that complement the whole ambiance. Their lives seem to be filled with happiness and a sense of harmony. Every individual in the family have the ability to quickly adapt to the unfamiliar surroundings and establish many social connections. Their neighbors and new acquaintances are amazed by their lifestyle.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over time, the plot gradually unveils the identities of the four individuals comprising the Jones family. As it transpires, the four individuals are, in fact, an impostor family. They are a team commissioned by a marketing firm to execute the Perfect Family Influence approach, which involves doing marketing activities while masquerading as a family. They promote a range of items by incorporating them into their everyday lives, therefore influencing others around them to become consumers of the same things. Put simply, they emerge as pioneers who establish the patterns for their surroundings.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Kate Jones is the team leader tasked with accomplishing the counterfeit family's objective. Stealth Marketing is a method where promotional activities are executed in a discreet manner, sometimes without customers being aware of it. Each member of the family is responsible for promoting the product to their specific sectors and target customers. Segmentation is tailored to the specific age, gender, hobbies, and lifestyle of every individual family member.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Kate, in her role as the team leader and as Steve's spouse, selected her usual salon and the moms in her local community as her primary target demographic. She advertised a variety of products such as mobile phones, bags, beauty care products, clothes, shoes, jewelry, home furniture, champagne, and even toilet seats. She showcased these products in her daily life, whether it was going to the salon, attending social gatherings with friends who own salons, or jogging around her housing complex. Consequently, she managed to persuade the salon owner to replace all the beauty care items used in her salon with the ones used by Kate. Additionally, the salon owner even purchased the same mobile phone that Kate uses. The moms in the area began purchasing attire and athletic footwear similar to those worn by Kate.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Steve Jones, portraying the patriarch, is embarking on his nascent journey in the realm of covert marketing. Formerly, he had an illustrious career in selling many categories of autos. He targeted his golf pals and neighbors as his market throughout his advertising operations. Steve exhibited and marketed a range of things, such as his preferred golf equipment and clothing, beer, advanced lawn mowers, golf simulator games, and sports automobiles.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Meanwhile, Jenn Jones and Mick Jones, who are siblings belonging to the Jones family, focus on their buddies at school as their primary target market. Jenn actively endorses the stuff she utilizes to her adolescent female acquaintances at school, encompassing women's fashion commodities like hair ties, scarves, lipsticks, and other similar items. Mick advertises stylish items, skateboards, and games to his male adolescent peers at school.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Upon the first assessment after one month, the activities of the Jones family continued to provide unsatisfactory outcomes, particularly with regards to Steve's very poor sales performance. Steve received an appeal from the leader to transition from selling goods to selling a lifestyle and attitude. The leader emphasized that when people admire Steve, they desire what he has. The leader explained that consumers are unaware when Steve is discreetly promoting products, which is known as stealth marketing. The primary objective is to maximize sales by cultivating a strong selling instinct.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Kate retained Steve on her team due to her recognition of his capacity for development. In addition, she recommended that Steve prioritize his objectives and use his charm to enhance his sales proficiency. In addition, she requested that Steve locate and begin targeting connectors, individuals who want guidance and recommendations pertaining to the things being supplied. Connectors will effectively attract a larger customer base.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Following their diligent attempts to improve their situation, the Jones family started to see favorable outcomes. Steve achieved the highest sales record. Steve's closest neighbor, Larry, imitated his everyday routine. The climax of the battle arose when Steve discovered his neighbor Larry dead in his swimming pool, having taken his own life due to his inability to settle the outstanding debts resulting from his consumerist habits, which mirrored Steve's own lifestyle. Steve, burdened by remorse, ultimately confessed to his neighbors that he and the whole Jones family had engaged in deception. He disclosed that the Jones Family was, in fact, a fabricated family whose purpose was to showcase their products and lifestyle in order to encourage their neighbors to imitate and purchase the same products.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Film, as a kind of mass communication, is essentially a textual representation that conveys a certain message. The act of viewing a film is essentially same to reading a book, since both mediums serve the purpose of conveying a message. When analyzing a film, our whole repertoire of memories is engaged and serves as the foundation for deciphering its meaning. The riches inside our thoughts include a diverse array of reading materials received from numerous sources, which serve as valuable insights. Additionally, these treasures contain any events we encounter, whether positive or distressing.[[10]](#footnote-10) This research aims to reveal the meaning of stealth marketing and the dangers posed by stealth marketing seen from the material object of the film The Joneses through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion and using a content analysis approach.

**Research Method**

This research is a philosophical reflection approach to The content analysis. The content analysis method is a research approach used to produce accurate reproductions and translations of texts in the specific context being examined. Content analysis is a method that involves several techniques. Whether or not content analysis is used depends on the researcher's authority and willingness to learn it. The content analysis approach offers novel perspectives and enhances the researcher's comprehension of certain phenomena or guides a practical endeavor. Content analysis is a widely used approach in the field of communication science to analyze the various elements of a communication message. In several disciplines such as theology, language, literature-art, and history, the content analysis approach is often used to investigate the textual material found in scriptures, literary and artistic works, photos, images, paintings, books, song lyrics, and manuscripts.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Results And Discussion**

**Stealth Marketing In Real Life**

Stealth marketing is a clandestine marketing approach when customers are unaware that they are being exposed to products. In July 2002, Sony Ericsson hired 60 actors who were instructed to pose as tourists in different places. Their task was to approach anyone they saw and request them to snap their photographs using Sony Ericsson's most advanced invention at the time: a camera phone. During that period, Sony-Ericsson did not create any promotional materials. However, the performers were given instructions not to identify themselves as representatives of Sony-Ericsson. Sony-Ericsson aimed to create an authentic atmosphere in which the performers were strategically chosen to emotionally engage prospective buyers with an impressive new product. While the outcome of the campaign remains uncertain, these individuals posing as visitors were able to effectively engage with a large audience and get significant media coverage.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Wall Street Journal sparked controversy between Sony Ericsson and consumer protection advocates. The Sony Ericsson side has the belief that the general public is indifferent to their actions, particularly as long as their campaign does not attempt to promote or market items. Activists, however, see the Sony Ericsson effort as fraudulent, since it deceives the audience by conditioning them to believe that the "fake tourists" are delivering honest information in a genuine setting.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Stealth marketing is a strategic approach that aims to target the audience without their awareness of being subjected to a marketing campaign. The ethical argument surrounding stealth marketing arises from its perceived deceptive nature. In traditional advertising, individuals are presented with the option to interact with an advertisement. However, in stealth marketing strategies, customers are often unaware that they are being exposed to an advertisement until the program concludes.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A research conducted in India revealed that marketers have attempted to deceive customers by withholding accurate information. Currently, marketers often use stealth marketing across many communication channels to generate brand recognition. Companies compose the commercial in order to enhance its realism, credibility, and authenticity. All characters included after the product placement are covertly endorsed via stealth marketing. Stealth marketing aimed at minors engenders further unethical actions due to their heightened receptiveness to advertisers. Nowadays, the conventional method of advertising is ineffective when targeting youngsters. Adolescents are more drawn to the latest advertising trend that allows them to establish a connection between themselves and the product. Contemporary society has a heightened inclination towards material possessions and displays a more responsive attitude towards advertising. Marketers aim to tap into the preferences and interests of teenagers in order to create advertisements that are more relevant and appealing to them. The organization obfuscated ethical boundaries and attempted to deceive by manipulating the original image of the product via the use of inadequate data.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A Thesis in business administration view that the stealth marketing strategy as immoral, however only a small number would abstain from purchasing the goods. In this scenario, the ethical dimension does not have a substantial influence on individuals' desire for their personality to align with the things they purchase. Companies use stealth marketing as a means to disseminate their marketing message while concealing their connection with the brand. The empirical data indicate that stealth marketing has an inclination towards unethical behavior, yet the consequences of decreased sales remain undetectable. The situations lack clear delineations. Nevertheless, it is advisable for some responses to explore other items rather than supporting products that are being unethically advertised.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Hermeneutics Of Suspicion Sees Stealth Marketing**

Language serves as a medium for communication and also functions as a cognitive process for humans. It may give rise to significant issues due to the presence of two inseparable parts inside language: truth and mistake. As Heidegger asserts, language serves as the abode of human existence, enabling us to articulate our desires and allowing meaning to effortlessly permeate our awareness. Moreover, language is our only means of unveiling the truth that we cannot conceal.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The central element in communication is the message, since all forms of communication aim to convey a message. However, the presence of dialectics in the message does not pose a difficulty, since the topic itself provides a defense. The issue arises when the message is conveyed via written form, as it requires interpretation or analysis.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Paul Ricoeur developed the concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which refers to a philosophy that involves being skeptical and questioning. According to him, in order to comprehend a text, one must question the text itself, analyze the author's motivations and goals, and be aware of the author's background. Only then can the genuine significance of the work be grasped. "If we are unaware of the author's motives and intentions, then we have been 'deceived' by the text," he said.[[19]](#footnote-19)

If we consider its association with an analog text, namely a film named "The Jonesses" which narrates the tale of a Jones family with a very affluent financial position and two exceptionally attractive teenage children, it is safe to assert that they epitomize the quintessential American ideal family. However, the truth is that the Jones family is, in fact, a fraudulent family. They are a team commissioned by a marketing corporation to execute the Perfect family influence approach, which involves doing marketing activities while masquerading as a family.

The hermeneutics of suspicion plays a significant role in comprehending the marketing approach that closely resembles the technique of stealth marketing fraud. Paul Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutics begins by recognizing it as a philosophical study that should be grounded in the fundamental language of human existence. This language encompasses symbols, metaphors, narratives, and other forms of expression that serve as stimuli for deep contemplation. For him, the text engrosses us first, prompting our interpretation; or we interpret it in response to the text's initial communication.[[20]](#footnote-20) By employing the hermeneutics of suspicion, we develop a heightened awareness of the underlying beliefs prevalent in society, such as the notion that a prosperous and harmonious family is an ideal. However, in order to apply this approach effectively, we must first scrutinize the veracity of commonly accepted truths in society. For instance, we may question the authenticity of the Jones family, who were ultimately revealed to be sales agents.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, drawing on insights from Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, involves interpreting texts in a manner that challenges the explicit meaning conveyed by the text itself. The objective is to uncover concealed connotations and undisclosed motives underneath the text. Ricoeur asserts that meaning is not only confined to text, but may also manifest via the reader. This implies that readers have the ability to extract meanings from a text that are not explicitly stated within it. The link between text, reader, author, and community of interpreters is intricate.[[21]](#footnote-21) Stealth marketing, as seen in the film The Joneses, is the use of deceptive tactics to promote products. This kind of marketing is fraudulent since people are unaware that the displayed sign is really a fake, representing covert marketing. The true essence of family is a cozy sanctuary inhabited by a husband, wife, and children, with the purpose of cultivating a joyful familial environment. However, in the realm of covert marketing, this concept is distorted to refer to a group of salespeople who masquerade as a family, offering an idealized lifestyle. Readers must maintain a sense of skepticism towards families like the Joneses in real life, as it is possible that what appears to be a stable and harmonious family is actually a team of sales agents or individuals who have acquired their wealth through illicit means. This highlights the importance of adopting a hermeneutics of suspicion, where we remain cautious of seemingly perfect facades in our contemporary society.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion aims to justify hermeneutics as both a scientific and artistic discipline. Ricoeur posits that hermeneutics is driven by two primary motivations: the inclination to be skeptical and the inclination to be receptive; the inclination to challenge and the inclination to comply. Therefore, when trying to comprehend a text, the initial step is to consciously detach ourselves from preconceived notions and acknowledge the potential for our own biases to influence our understanding. This way, our interpretation of the text is not solely derived from our own perspectives as readers. Furthermore, it is essential to attentively and receptively engage with the symbols and narrative progression of the text, enabling the emergence of imaginative occurrences that precede the text and have an impact on us.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The film "The Joneses" can be analyzed using the hermeneutics of suspicion. This approach requires us to actively cultivate a sense of skepticism and critically examine everything that is commonly accepted in society. In the film, a seemingly perfect family with a high socioeconomic status and attractive teenage children is presented as an ideal.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, it is revealed that they are actually undercover marketing agents practicing stealth marketing. Stealth marketing is an unethical marketing strategy that targets the consumer's subconscious, making them unaware that they are being presented with a product. This form of marketing manipulates consumers into believing that they genuinely require the item, even though its practical value is unnecessary. Instead, the item serves as a symbol of social status. Consequently, stealth marketing perpetuates a consumer-driven society, where consumption is used to express one's identity and uniqueness. This identity is acquired by seeking indicators of social standing, fashionable attributes, symbols of unconventional behavior, or distinctive personal qualities. This kind of consumption is not meant for the purpose of satisfying utility value, but rather to accentuate distinctions, so causing someone to draw attention out.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Consumption serves as a crucial platform for facilitating this process of civilizing or incorporating relationship. Consumption allows individuals to comprehend, get motivation from, and take action based on the items they come across in their environment. Consumption is said to provide people the chance to improve their etiquette by making them conscious of their individuality and their role as members of a cultured society. However, the truth is quite the contrary. It is a misleading notion that consuming empowers individuals, since it actually leaves them weak, being governed by their own set of rules. Currently, stealth marketing has become the dominant set of rules inside society, controlling the very system of rules itself.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Conclusion**

Stealth marketing is a covert marketing strategy that is intended to obscure the fact that consumers are being exposed to promotional material. With the publication of the film "The Joneses" (2009), the general public became aware of the prevalence of covert marketing. "The Joneses" illustrates the extravagant lifestyle of a family. An analysis of the film "The Joneses" can be conducted using the hermeneutics of suspicion. We must actively cultivate a sense of skepticism and critically investigate all that is commonly accepted in society in order to implement this approach. The film portrays a seemingly flawless family with appealing adolescent children and a high socioeconomic status as an ideal. Nevertheless, it is discovered that they are in fact covert marketing agents who engage in stealth marketing. Stealth marketing is an unscrupulous marketing strategy that exploits the consumer's subconscious, thereby presenting them with a product without their awareness. This marketing strategy deceives consumers into believing that they actually need the product, despite the fact that its practical value is superfluous. Rather, the item functions as a representation of one's social standing. As a result, covert marketing perpetuates a consumer-driven society in which consumption is employed to demonstrate one's identity and distinctiveness.

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