
Miscellaneous

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Submitted

June 14th, 2024

Approved

April 30th, 2025

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

www.communication-society.com

2025 – Vol. 38 (2)

pp. 357-375

How to cite this article:

Leal-Rico, I., Sánchez-Olmos, C., & Papí-Gálvez, N. (2025). Rethinking subvertising in the digital age: definition, functions and future perspectives, *Communication & Society*, 38(2), 357-375. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.38.2.024>

Rethinking subvertising in the digital age: definition, functions and future perspectives

Abstract

Subvertising remains a little-explored and ill-defined phenomenon, requiring clarification through theoretical analysis. This study proposes establishing a definition and conceptualisation for this practice, understanding how it is used, and offering predictions as to how it may evolve. Some areas of uncertainty are identified through a prior systematic search, enabling the selection of variables to be researched. A panel of experts is convened, consisting of 10 international experts from the theoretical and practical fields, and the methodology is followed in order to address and clarify the variables identified. The results reveal consensus on the definition of subvertising and on its nature, conceptualisation, means of circulation, utilities, female participation and perspectives on how it may evolve. It can be concluded that subvertising is an activist practice that is useful for a range of individuals and groups, including activists, brands and general society. Despite being strongly influenced by digital communication and social media, it is still a practice linked to urban spaces. Its future utility is projected in terms of social and particularly environmental issues. The experts state the need for the phenomenon to adapt to the ever-changing world of advertising in order to ensure its survival and strengthen how it is used.

Keywords

Subvertising, culture jamming, advertising, promotional culture, activism.

1. Introduction

Seen as a form of activism, subvertising is not limited to discrediting commercial messages. Its focus lies in subverting and reusing these messages to communicate alternative ideas, turning it into an interdisciplinary field that requires the intersection of a range of disciplines for analysis, such as communication, sociology, economics, art and law, among others. Subvertising is a complex phenomenon, structured between cultural practice and the reproduction of cultural forms (Glassco, 2012). Some authors consider subvertising a form of activism aimed at influencing advertising and pushing anti-consumerist messages (Raoul & Bonner, 2019). Others emphasise how it advocates for the democratisation of public spaces, and acts as a loudspeaker to enable forms of popular expression that are denied citizens by traditional privatised media (Dekeyser, 2021). The interdisciplinary nature of this communicative practice, and the diverse range

of activist interventions that it encompasses, has historically prevented any clear consensus on how subvertising should be defined and understood as a concept (Leal-Rico et al., 2023).

This lack of conceptual clarity serves as justification for this research, the main aim of which is to clarify and establish the theoretical bases by which subvertising is defined and categorised, in order to understand its applications and possible future developments within the context of the media and contemporary social discourse. To achieve this, the Delphi method is applied using a panel of academic and professional subvertising experts, who give their answers to questions for which there is still no consensus, namely its definition, use, formats, media, gender issues and future perspectives. These variables arise from a previously conducted systematic review (Leal-Rico et al., 2024) of an extensive body of 253 texts published between 1980 and 2020, in which areas of uncertainty are identified and research questions for clarification are defined.

Although the future of subvertising remains uncertain, by consulting with experts an informed forecast can be made for possible directions that subvertising might take in the future (Landeta, 2002) within a transmedia context dominated by short attention spans, wherein subvertising agents can find new forms of resistance against brand-implemented strategies. According to Jenkins (2006), transmedia culture has created a constantly evolving media landscape, where the frontiers between traditional and digital media become blurred. In this scenario, the appearance of social media marked a significant change in approaches to subvertising (Sanz, 2016) by facilitating both the distribution of images on multiple platforms and participation in coordinated activist actions. A consideration of this perspective is fundamental to understanding and anticipating how the subvertising movement will develop, particularly in the context of the digital crossroads at which the contemporary media panorama finds itself.

2. Subvertising: a hard phenomenon to define

Subvertising has its origins in the 1980s (Dekeyser, 2018), and the various definitions that have been offered since then have attempted to conceptualise the phenomenon from a range of different perspectives. Katyal (2012) states that subvertising implies the conscious re-codification of commercial brand images in order to transgress and modify their social meaning. Irzik (2011) argues that subvertising consists of modifying an advertisement or creating a fake advert that imitates the original's appearance as a way to criticise or make fun of the company, allowing for the possibility of an original subvertising creation to exist alongside the original. Pacheco (2009) highlights subvertising's ability to "(...) appropriate advertising language's resources in order to reuse them and send them back into society in the form of subversive messages" (p.67). Other definitions interpret it as a parody of advertising which, through small changes, turns the original message into a criticism of itself (Abarca, 2010) or simply acts as culture jamming in the form of parody (Harold, 2003). Some definitions take a more integrationist approach, such as that suggested by Dekeyser (2018), defining subvertising as a practice involving a range of illicit artistic and activist interventions in urban advertising spaces (which includes destroying, inverting, replacing, removing, supplementing and cutting). This diversity of approaches justifies the need to reach a degree of consensus on the definition of subvertising.

Subvertising is often linked to the artistic legacy of the Situationist International (Lekakis, 2017) and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), a cornerstone in the history of symbolic protest (Glassco, 2012). Debord's concept of *détournement*, which involves appropriating advertising codes to subvert their imagery and contexts (Lasn,

1999), provides a potent tool for resisting the saturation of goods in the spectacle-driven society. Other influential theories include Umberto Eco's essay *Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare* (1987) and artistic movements such as Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, J. Heartfield's photomontages, Surrealism, Iconoclasm, Gestural Abstraction, Fluxus, Pop Art, the Yippies and Rockers of the 1960s, Graffiti, and Public Art of the 1970s, alongside political and cultural movements such as May '68 and the Counterculture.

In theoretical terms, figures like Debord (1967), Dery (1993/2010), Eco (1987), Lasn (1999), and Klein (2000) have significantly advanced the popularisation of subvertising and culture jamming. Critical perspectives from Marcuse (1965) and the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002) establish foundational revolutionary critiques of power structures. This diversity highlights the need for a precise and comprehensive definition of subvertising, a goal pursued through expert analysis in this research.

Subvertising has been analyzed in sociology (Carducci, 2006), semiotics (Tseronis & Forceville, 2017), psychology (Odih, 2013), and politics (Philipps, Schoelzel & Richter, 2016). Abarca (2010) explored its theory, while Chan and Yuen (2019) studied its connection to advertising. Dewhirst and Kozinets (2014) viewed subvertising as communicative discourse, and Boisen (2015) identified social, cultural, and political motivations behind these tactics. Wettergren (2009) outlined core elements defining it as activist praxis. Historical works, like Cabello's (2006), contextualized its origins and evolution.

Critiques have also been prominent, with Gilman-Opalsky (2013) and Haiven (2017) discussing potential complicity with capitalist structures. More recently, Maier and Mafael (2024) evaluated subvertising's effectiveness, focusing on its influence on consumers and corporate brands. These diverse approaches highlight subvertising's complexity and the need for interdisciplinary perspectives.

To date there has been little agreement on the use of subvertising-related terminology. According to Leal-Rico et al. (2023), subvertising is the most widely used term to refer to the subversion of advertising. However, up to 38 terms have been coined to describe practices that seek to correct persuasive brand messaging, such as *spoofing*, *brandalism*, *adbusting* and *antiadvertising*, among others. Unlike the generalised consensus following the first appearance of the term culture jamming, no overall knowledge is noted about the coining of the term subvertising. According to Dekeyser (2018), the term was coined by the cultural critic Mark Dery in his article "Subvertising: The Billboard Bandit as Cultural Jammer" (*Adbusters*, Fall/Winter 1991, Volume 2, Number 1), about the production and dissemination of anti-ads aimed at deflecting Madison Avenue's attempts to turn the consumer's attention in a given direction (Dery, 1993/2010).

Even though the use of the terms subvertising and culture jamming can sometimes overlap, leading to confusion about their definitions, Dery (1993/2010) suggests that subvertising is a "ubiquitous form of jamming" (para. 37). Still, few authors have explicitly addressed this distinction, suggesting a lack of clarity that justifies this research. Culture jamming (Dery, 1993/2010) is a subversive and counter-hegemonic practice that emerged in the late 20th century. Jammers primarily aim to dismantle dominant meanings and expose cultural manipulation in the media (Lasn, 1999). Both subvertising and culture jamming employ similar subversive tactics, such as manipulating cultural symbols and appropriating media to disseminate messages. They are also predominantly rooted in leftist political spheres, aligning with anti-globalisation, anti-capitalist, and anti-consumerist movements (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), the anti-corporate movement (de Melo, Consorte & Nomura, 2014), and guerrilla communication (Irzik, 2011).

Although these practices share significant overlaps, key distinctions seem to emerge between the two. Culture jamming encompasses a broad spectrum of symbolic subversion, while subvertising typically targets commercial brands or advertising styles directly. For example, jamming critiques include diverse cultural symbols, such as Palestinian resistance symbolism expressed through social media narratives (Cervi & Divon, 2023). However, subvertising often employs advertising-specific language and explicitly critiques brands, which frequently become scapegoats for broader systemic criticisms. A case in point could be found on Luke Strickler's TikTok, which expressly targets Geico's sponsorship of LGBTQ+ Pride event in 2023 (Long, 2024). The content creator uploaded a video questioning Geico for engaging in *rainbow-washing* during the event. This case illustrates the complexity of today's subvertising paradigm, which adopts formats widely used by content creators, now key actors in brand endorsement and critique.

Despite their peculiarities, both phenomena are known as *artivism* (Aladro-Vico et al., 2018), *creative activism* (Harrebye, 2015), or *playful activism* (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), classified as *digital activism* due to their engagement on social media (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023). Some critics argue that such approaches are lazy forms of activism and are limited to performative online engagement rather than substantive real-world action (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Conversely, other authors contend that these practices use humour, irony, and parody to challenge dominant cultural narratives, making complex topics more accessible, particularly to younger audiences like Generation Z, and they expand audience reach and foster critical dialogue through innovative, less conventional strategies (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). This tension underscores the contested status of these practices as serious activism, blurring the lines between art, play, and political engagement. Although culture jamming is fundamental to the conceptualisation of subvertising, several studies highlight other key influences, underscoring the need to clarify the movements shaping this discipline.

In general, there seems to be evidence of a conceptual ambiguity with regard to subvertising. Perceived as both a protest tool (Nomai, 2008) and a social movement concerned with the role of citizens as consumers (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), it is also seen as occupying the space between being a tool and a movement (Carducci, 2006), with no clear-cut definition of the term. This range of approaches underscores its subversive nature and its ability to challenge the dominant model, while reflecting the social, artistic, political, and cultural dimensions of subvertising. Given the lack of consensus on its definition and nature, a clear explanation is needed to facilitate understanding of the term.

2.1. How subvertising is used

Subvertising can be characterised above all by its ability to counter the mainstream media. It operates in a way that Rodríguez-Ferrándiz (2003) describes as hygienic cannibalism, which has an impact on the symbolic consumption of the consumerist narrative, counteracting its influence through techniques that help to demystify the spectacle (Lasn, 1999). Thus, subvertising informs citizens and acts on their behalf to express their disagreement with injustices and inequalities (de Melo et al., 2014), forcing those in positions of power to sit up and take notice (Brisman, 2010). It is also seen as a powerful activism tool to be used against brands, challenging the corporate imposition of ideologies and their influence on the economy and on culture in general (Moreno, 2015). Beyond its association with activism, subvertising emerges as a critical media literacy resource that

aids reflection among students (Rahmah, 2018) and as a means of individual creative and artistic expression (Abarca, 2010).

As indicated by Maier and Mafael (2024), subvertising can be used as a way to attack a specific brand directly, but it can also use advertising as a way to get a social or political message across. This double purpose has led to subvertising being used to support a range of social causes, such as feminism (Barbaño & Moreno, 2019), environmentalism (Pacheco, 2010), issues associated with the fast-fashion industry (Micheletti & Stolle, 2008), promoting sustainable urban planning (Dekeyser, 2021) and promoting healthy nutrition (Muralidharan, 2016). These causes tend to share a predominantly liberal approach and are usually aligned with resistance movements against globalisation which promote universal justice. Although subvertising is a tactic that can adapt to a range of ideologies, the social causes on which it has had the most significant impact remain unclear.

2.2. Circulation and formats of subvertising

The advent of the internet marked a pivotal moment in creating and disseminating subvertising content (de Oliveira et al., 2017). By enabling the free and global circulation of information, it transformed the reach and impact of such practices (DeLaure & Fink, 2017). Initially, in the late 1970s, subvertising was predominantly a physical endeavour, centred on modifying (or *liberating*, in activists' parlance) existing advertisements, particularly billboards (Dekeyser, 2018). Digitalisation, however, expanded the scope of subvertising, enabling activists to transcend physical modifications and adopt innovative approaches. As Klein (2000) observed, the ability to self-edit and manipulate images has empowered activists to create campaigns "(...) designed to mesh with their targets, borrowing visual legitimacy from advertising itself" (p. 285).

With the rise of digitalisation and the playful approach of activist protests, these tactics have evolved beyond critiquing specific advertisements to promoting ideals of universal social justice. Subvertising has adapted to digital formats, emphasising anti-brand content as a counter to pro-brand narratives. Recent tactics illustrate this shift, such as anti-haul videos critiquing specific brands and their values (Wood, 2021), or augmented reality filters that distort corporate logos and encourage user participation in subvertising campaigns on platforms like Instagram (Long, 2024). As persuasive communication formats diversify, subvertising continues to expand, necessitating further scholarly exploration. This evolution is particularly significant in the digital era, where social media platforms have become critical spaces for platform activism (Vrikki & Lekakis, 2024), in a context of platforming that mediates social, cultural and economic activities (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Social media reshapes subvertising (Sanz, 2016), enabling broad content distribution and coordinated activism within a hyper-connected environment. Understanding the formats and platforms where subvertising circulates in this media landscape (Jenkins, 2006) is crucial. Physical ad modifications are still relevant, but digitalisation introduces a hybrid *phygital* approach, enhancing connectivity through the creative integration of digital technologies (Diniz, 2010). Technological advances have also given rise to new subvertising formats. Echoing advertising's evolution, subvertising has progressed from interventions in traditional media to transmedia campaigns, combining diverse formats, languages, and platforms. This transition underscores subvertising's dynamic and adaptive nature in today's media-saturated environment.

2.3. The gender perspective

To understand women's role in subvertising, the gender dynamics and levels of representation in the practice need to be examined. Given the anonymous nature of subvertising, and the fact that it often operates outside the law, identifying the gender diversity of its activists poses a challenge. Subvertising groups do not provide clear information on the presence of women among their members. According to Gaia Scagnetti (2005), in a list of 118 jammer collectives, only the Guerrilla Girls group explicitly recognises women's involvement. Although this fact is not representative, it suggests a potential under-representation or invisibility of women as subvertising agents. However, this remains a hypothesis without any empirical verification.

Considering the relevance of the contemporary feminist movement, the role of women in producing subvertising content warrants closer examination. For instance, influencer marketing is particularly salient among female creators promoting makeup, skincare, and beauty brands. Interestingly, makeup videos and beauty routines have become spaces where feminist activism is expressed (Araüna et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this activism frequently fails to confront brands and lacks a strong political commitment. It often becomes diluted within the narratives of popular feminism co-opted by capitalism, as critiqued by Banet-Weiser (2018). In this vein, feminist scholars critique *femvertising*, where brands exploit feminist ideals for advertising. While these campaigns promote female empowerment, they reflect a post-feminist view that does not challenge the neoliberal context, address intersectionality or transform systems perpetuating women's oppression (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Lekakis, 2023). Thus, given the relationship between women, advertising, and empowerment, we deem it relevant to also examine this relationship in the context of women's role as subvertising agents.

3. Methodological design

This research aims to determine the fundamental aspects of subvertising, both in the present and with a view to the future. The following research questions are therefore proposed:

RQ1. What is subvertising?

RQ2. What is the purpose of subvertising?

RQ3. Through what channels does subvertising circulate and what formats does it use?

RQ4. What is the female contribution to the creation of subvertising?

RQ5. What is the future of subvertising?

To answer these questions, a qualitative methodology is applied, using the Delphi method, by consulting a panel of experts in two rounds. A panel of experts on subvertising was formed using convenience sampling. The initial selection included the main authors from a systematic review of 253 documents across 11 databases. A follow-up confirmed these experts are currently researching or practising subvertising. The sample expanded with a snowball method, identifying additional experts through participant contributions. In total, 35 specialists were contacted, resulting in 10 participants and a 29% response rate. Some people declined due to unavailability and others did not respond despite multiple attempts. It is worth noting that, given the scant scientific production and the scattered nature of subvertising as a discipline (Leal-Rico et al., 2023), the relevance of the participants considered experts justifies the fact that the results represent a synthesis of thought by a particular group (Gordon, 1994). It is, therefore, the most suitable technique

to explore elements that involve a mixture of scientific evidence and social values (Webler et al., 1991). Qualitative diversity and the minimum number of participants were both taken into account in the choice of participants, in accordance with the recommendations of several authors for the Delphi methodology (Gordon, 1994; Landeta, 2002). Thus, the panel of experts represents a broad international spectrum of theoretical and practical specialists in subvertising, with gender parity (five men and five women), of whom seven work in academia and three operate in the practical field. It is worth noting that the processing of personal data for this research had the approval of the ethics committee of the University of Alicante. Table 1 shows the list of experts who formed the final sample.

Table 1. Participants on the panel of experts

Code	Expert	Affiliation	Country	Rounds
1/MP	Marta Pacheco Rueda	Universidad de Valladolid	Spain	1st + 2nd
2/TD	Thomas Dekeyser	Royal Holloway University of London	UK	1st + 2nd
3/AD	Ana Duarte Melo	Universidade do Minho	Portugal	1st + 2nd
4/BM	Begoña Moreno López	Universidad Europea de Madrid	Spain	1st + 2nd
5/VC	Vince Carducci	College for Creative Studies	USA	1st + 2nd
6/FC	Florencio Cabello Fernández Delgado	Universidad de Málaga	Spain	1st
7/JP	Julián Pellegrini	Miembro de Proyecto Squatters	Argentina	1st + 2nd
8/JL	Jose Carlos León	Comicpublicidad	Spain	1st
9/MT	Michelle Tylicki	Miembro de Brandalism y Special Patrol Group	UK	1st
10/km	kyle Magee	Miembro de Subvertisers International	Australia	1st + 2nd

Source: Own elaboration.

The research questions were formulated following the aforementioned systematic review and were drawn up containing variables so as to determine the characteristics of subvertising in greater details (see Figure 1). Thus, RQ₁ was approached in terms of the following variables: definition, origin, conceptualisation and artistic influences. RQ₂ analysed subvertising's purpose, grounds and advocacy for social causes. RQ₃ observed the media and formats used, and RQ₄ looked at women's involvement. Finally, the question on the future of subvertising addressed the media, formats, predominant gender of activists and the geographic areas that would be most active in the future.

Figure 1. Flow of questions according to research questions

RESEARCH QUESTION	VARIABLE	QUESTION 1ST ROUND	CONSENSUS 2ND ROUND
What is subvertising?	Definition	- How would you define subvertising?	7,9/9
	Origin	- Rate from 1 to 5 the importance of the following events in the creation and rise of subvertising.	6,4/9
	Conceptualization	- Select those movements you think are related to subvertising.	8,3/9
	Artistic influences	- Is there any cultural, social or artistic movement not mentioned above that you think has influenced subvertising in a decisive way?	
What is the purpose of subvertising?	Purpose	- What do you think are the main purposes of subvertising? Select a maximum of 5 purposes. - Would you add any other purposes?	7,3/9
	Legitimation	- Please rate the extent to which you consider that the following motivations legitimize the use of subvertising to a greater extent. - Would you add any other motivation to the list?	8/9
	Advocacy for social causes	- Historically, subvertising has been used to support various social causes. Please rate from 1 to 5 the level of relevance you think these causes have had in subvertising actions.	5,3/9
Through what channels does subvertising circulate and what formats does it use?	Media outlets	- Rate the level of relevance in the dissemination of subvertising images made by these media from 1 to 5. - What other media do you think subvertisers groups currently use to both disseminate content and engage with their audiences?	8,4/9
	Formats	- Below you will find a classification of subvertising formats according to their composition system (creation or alteration of content) and their context (physical or digital). Which of these subvertising formats do you think are currently the most common? Select a maximum of 5 formats.	6,5/9
What is the female contribution to the creation of subvertising?	Gender	- Beyond the all-female "Guerrilla Girls" group, do you know of any other groups that include women members? - If yes, which group/s? - Describe the role of women in the subvertising movement, do you think their role is relevant or is there an under-representation of women as subvertisers creators?	7,3/9
What is the future of subvertising?	Media outlets	- How do you think communication technologies (Internet, social media ...) will influence the organization of protests, campaigns and subvertising movements?	7,7/9
	Formats	- In terms of subvertising formats, how do you think physical subvertising alterations and creations (billboards, posters, etc.) will coexist with digital interventions?	7,7/9
	Gender	- What do you think will be the trend in terms of women's participation in subvertising in the coming years?	6,9/9
	Geography	- There are currently examples of subvertising campaigns organized both internationally (e.g. #BanFossilAds) and locally (e.g. Adblock Cities). In your opinion, do you think that subvertising will focus on pursuing more local and specific objectives, or will it focus on more global issues? Could you give some other examples than the ones mentioned above?	7/9

Source: Own elaboration.

In the first round, in May 2023 a semi-structured questionnaire was distributed online in English and Spanish with questions that were open-ended, multiple choice and to be rated from 1 to 5. The answers given were analysed using the NVivo software (R1/2020). The answers from the first round were codified openly, following grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which helped to identify the categories in the results. By using this methodology, a systematic analysis could be to identify concepts, categories and emerging relationships. As there were no restrictions in terms of predefined categories, relevant information was discovered that would otherwise have gone

unnoticed. The lack of theoretical limitations in the first codification meant that the categories could be adjusted and modified as the analysis progressed, which led to new viewpoints for the second round. The second phase took place in July 2023 and focused on validating the results obtained in the first round. An online questionnaire was sent out with 12 closed questions, with space to go into greater detail in the answers, which were analysed using NVivo. For this questionnaire, the scoring scale was extended to a Likert additive scale from 1 to 9 (Cea, 2004), allowing participants to be more precise in their opinion on the statements made in the second round.

4. Results

4.1. *What is subvertising?*

To answer this question, a definition was proposed based on the open answers obtained in the first round, which achieved a consensus of 7.9/9 of the participants. Including the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist characteristics indicated by three participants in the second round, the following definition is proposed:

A practice that responds to advertising discourse with the aims, on the one hand, to deconstruct and subvert corporate/for-profit advertising messages, codes, media, and symbols; and, on the other hand, to criticise some of its capitalist and consumerist basics and creatively transmit alternative meanings advocating for democratic and social values against the pervasive influence of market-driven narratives.

The current link between subvertising and various social movements, such as culture jamming and the anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist and anti-branding movements, reaches a consensus of 8.3/9. One participant underlines a previously identified observation on the distinction between subvertising and culture jamming: “I would say culture jamming is just another (earlier) name for subvertising, and all those social movements mentioned are really just compartmentalised ways to refer to the global justice movement of the 90s (...) I think anyone opposed to capitalism is going to object and interfere with its microphone (advertising)” (10/km)¹. Therefore, despite the overall consensus, there is a recognised difficulty in conceptualising and defining some subvertising actions that are contextualised in culture jamming, and thus a pertinence to using this term for certain activist practices.

When analysing the currents that have influenced the subvertising phenomenon, the experts validate the classic artistic movements detected in the previous review but, through an open response, add the following contemporary social and cultural influences: environmentalism, green and blue consumerism, feminism, the movement for free software and culture, the hacker movement and commercial advertising.

A consensus of 8.2/9 was recorded in relation to the characteristic duality of the subvertising, which is recognised both as a social movement and as a tool for action. This duality recognises a complex nature and an intrinsic social value, making it resistant to being classified one way or the other.

With the exception of one case, a consensus exists between the theorists and practitioners who take a critical and combative yet still tolerant view of advertising. For example: “(...) to deconstruct is not to destroy, but rather to analyse, question, dismantle texts, unveil hidden plots, dispute attributions of meaning. For this reason, Proyecto Squatters is not defined as an ANTI-advertising project, but a SUB-vertising project: we do not seek to destroy advertising as an instrument of communication, but to deconstruct advertising as a discourse of power” (7/JP). In contrast, following the grounded theory, a new perspective was discovered on the intention of subvertising, one that

¹ The purposeful absence of capitalisations is respected in the verbatim quotes of participant 10/km.

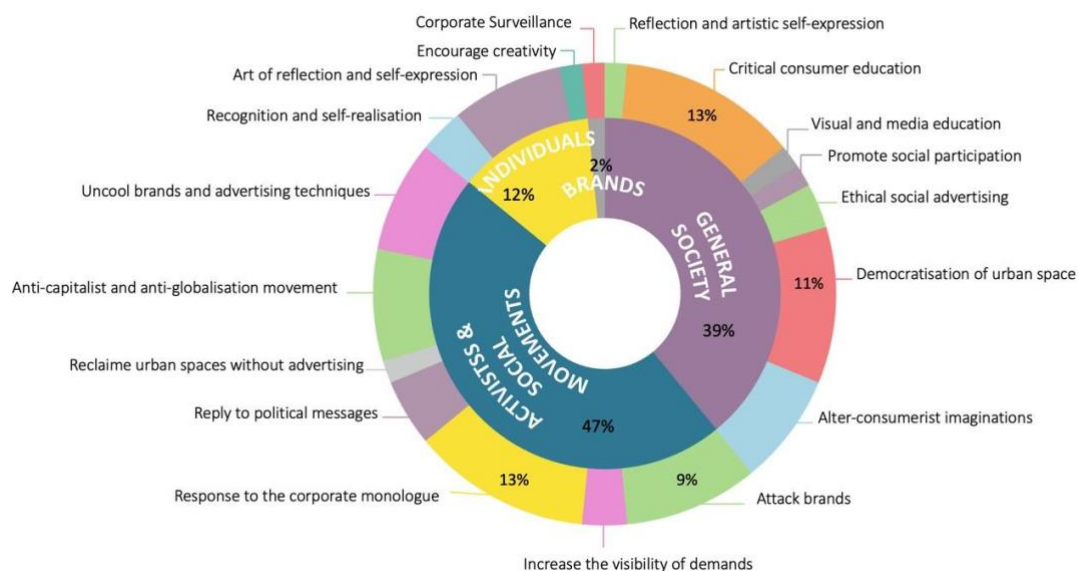
had not been previously identified, and which has an influence on how it is conceptualised. One expert stated a complete rejection of advertising due to its link to capitalism: “I am disappointed by approaches that demand anything less than a complete overthrow of the for-profit media/advertising system” (10/km). This absolute rejection of advertising led to a detailed analysis of the response in the subsequent validation round.

An attitude is therefore detected that opposes this rejection of advertising. This disparity was also recognised among the subvertising experts. For example: “In terms of ‘eradicating advertising’: while some would want to maintain a healthy dose of advertising, others are much more inclined to work towards banning advertising in its totality” (2/TD). Although only one of the participants adopted this attitude of a complete rejection of advertising, it is important to recognise the duality of attitudes in order to gain a full understanding of subvertising and avoid excluding those who seek the eradication of all advertising: “(...) I have been painting over ads and saying they should be eradicated completely (...) I know my opinion is (disappointingly) rare, but the above definition puts me outside of subvertising, which is interesting” (10/km). This contribution highlights the paradox of possibly excluding the most radical artists from the very definition of what subvertising actually is.

4.2. What is the purpose of subvertising?

One of the aspects addressed with the experts was the purpose of subvertising, understood as the ability to achieve its goals and generate changes or have significant impacts. One of its main purposes is to counter the one-way flow of corporate discourse and foster critical education among consumers, for which a consensus of 7.3/9 was reached. Figure 2 shows a summary of all the uses identified in the systematic review, weighted per participant (outer circle) and classified by the audience they can benefit (inner circle), showing that subvertising is useful for various types of audiences: society in general (39%), activists and social movements (47%), individuals (12%) and even commercial brands themselves (2%), which can audit their messages.

Figure 2. Uses of subvertising according to agents



Source: Own elaboration.

The weighted uses with the highest scores relate to consumers’ critical education and protesting against the corporate monologue. Next in order of preference is democratising the urban space,

where subvertising proposes alternative imaginaries to life in society that exist in a space beyond consumerism, and which can therefore be useful for society in general. However, critical views are raised relating to the traditional understanding of advertising as urban pollution and the use of subvertising as a way to democratise urban spaces. Participant 2/TD stated that “The idea of a city without saturation of messages –without claims to the public– might not be so interesting. So if subvertisers focus on fighting visual/mental pollution, too easily can they fall into the trap of arguing for a sterile city”. The expert highlights that, although reduced saturation is desirable, it should not be sought at the cost of creating an environment that becomes sterile and lacking in citizen-led forms of expression. This viewpoint differs from the traditional accusations levelled at advertising, and clarifies the amalgam of viewpoints that are critical of subvertising.

The panel was also asked about the legitimacy of subvertising, understood as the sum of factors that support its relevance in the social and cultural context of the late 20th century. The experts agreed (8.1/9) that the capitalist system’s aggressions, which are not just economic in nature of also have social, cultural and environmental effects, provide subvertising with its legitimacy. Furthermore, an almost unanimous consensus (8/9) justified subvertising because it validates the social right to criticise capitalism and promote cultural practices that challenge and mitigate its adverse effects.

However, a new legitimacy was identified during the first round relating to the dual defensive or offensive nature of subvertising, which was included in the second round for validation. Subvertising is mainly considered a defensive response to the corporate control exerted over different forms of communication, for which there was a moderate consensus of 6.9/9 among the experts. Perceived as a cultural shield against the intrusive incursions of corporate discourse in public life, subvertising shines a spotlight on ad creep, as defined by participant 10/km: “we never gave permission for the level of advertising we are exposed to today across our public sphere, yet over the last century (couple of generations) it has become normal, accepted as a given”.

These nuances and levels of consensus indicate that to understand subvertising and its legitimacy requires balanced reflection, recognising its defensive and critical functions, and the importance of maintaining a diversity of cultural expressions in the public space. This amplifies its ability to “(...) give place to art, to dissidence, to the production and installation of messages in the public space that are outside the capitalist commercial logic. What would our cities be like, what would our societies be like, if there were art instead of advertising in the streets?” (7/JP).

The experts’ reflections and observations were incorporated through the open questions posed during the second round. One participant questioned the way that subvertising is evaluated by academia. Another compared it with social marketing, which proposes practical solutions rather than limiting itself to questioning corporate messaging. In a similar vein, participant 4/BM voiced a criticism of the notion of a “corporate monologue”, highlighting the importance of interaction and critical reflection in the digital age:

(...) currently there is no longer a corporate monologue as such, taking into account the consumer’s ability to respond almost immediately through social networks. Personally, I consider the contribution to reflection to be more relevant, from a playful perspective, which contributes both to society and to companies that reflect on social messages and question their activity.

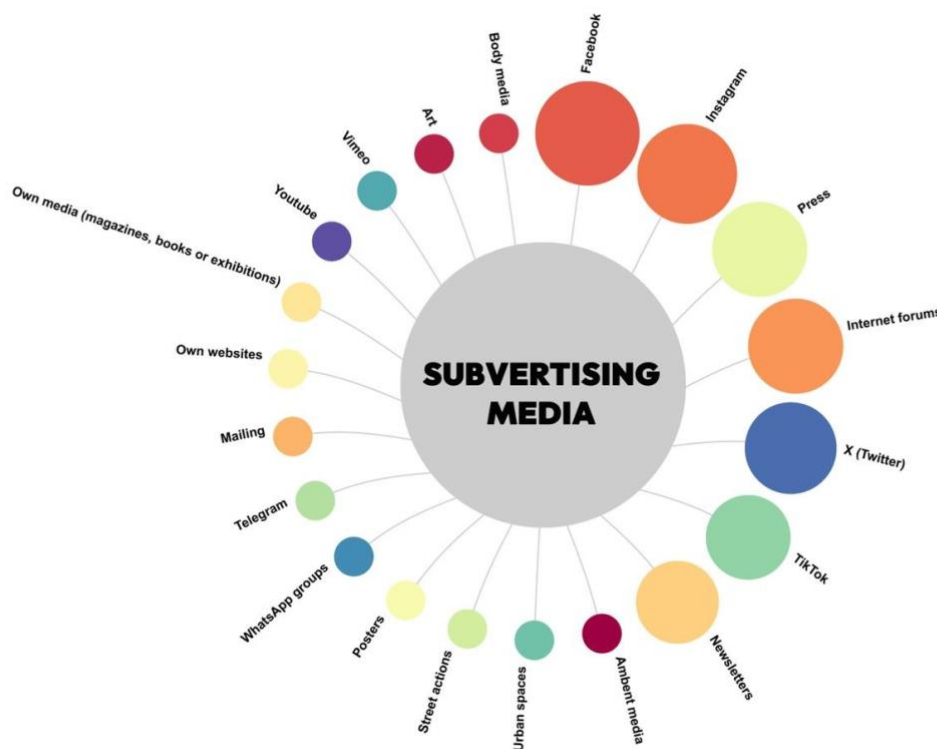
With regard to subvertising’s use as an activist tool for a range of social causes, the experts agreed (5.3/9) that environmentalism has been the most significant issue, reflecting the “(...) damaging connection between capitalist accumulation, facilitated in part by promotional communications, and the environment” (5/VC). It is followed in relevance by feminism, problems relating to the fast fashion industry, moves to curb alcohol consumption, sustainable urban planning and healthy

eating. In this regard, through the open response, three experts provided important nuances on the assessment of social causes supported by subvertising. The interpretation of subvertising's *notoriety* was discussed, which can refer both to the frequency of subverts and their prominence in the media. It was also noted that the connection between subvertising and environmentalism should be understood as an activist alliance rather than subvertising practices lending their support to the cause, given their common ideological relationship. The media's focus on subvertising in certain countries was also called into question, as this can affect the perception of the phenomenon's notoriety, and consequently its overall evaluation.

4.3. Through what channels does subvertising circulate and what formats does it use?

The spread of subvertising has undergone a significant evolution, from its circulation using physical media to a predominantly digital presence. With a consensus of 7.7/9, subvertising is propagated both through physical and digital channels, and digital circulation is expected to surpass traditional means. A higher consensus (8.4/9) highlighted social media as the main vehicle for spreading subvertising content, underlining its central role in promoting these practices. Figure 3 shows all the media assessed by the experts. Digital media (press, newsletters) and general social media (Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter and TikTok) stand out as the main media by which subvertising is spread, though its presence does also extend to physical media.

Figure 3. Means of circulating subvertising



Source: Own elaboration.

Advertising formats themselves have become digitalised as a consequence of the advances made in technologies as they adapt to the crossroads of hypermedia. With a consensus of 7.7/9, digital formats have eclipsed physical media. A change is observed in subvertising's strategy, towards a transmedia context in which there is feedback between physical and digital formats. Despite this evolution, the

experts consider (7.6/9) that physical spaces (posters, billboards, street furniture, etc.) are still important media that have a direct impact on the public. Regarding the interaction of formats, a consensus of 7.5/9 confirmed that current configurations of physical and digital subvertising influence one another and cross over in such a way that they create a coherent relationship by which they feed off one another. However, there was a lower level of consensus (6.5/9) regarding the predominance of integrated campaigns for independent subvertising pieces.

One participant highlighted the need for a clear definition of what digital subvertising is, whereas participant 2/TD took the position that was completely counter to the predominance of integrated campaigns, stating that

(...) subvertising definitely tends to take place in an isolated manner (...). So, I don't think 'integrated campaigns' are common in any kind of meaningful way. Subvertising may respond to an existing campaign or cause but is rarely part of a '360 campaign' as advertisers like to call them.

4.4. *What is the female contribution to the creation of subvertising?*

In the context of women's involvement in subvertising, the study reveals a recognisable presence of women within a range of subvertising groups. Six of the ten experts corroborated the presence of women in various subvertising groups, such as *Brandalism*, *Special Patrol Group*, *Antipub*, *Consumehastamorir*, *Proyecto Squatters*, *Sister Uncut*, *Viernes*, *Adbusters* and *DifusionV*. A consensus of 7.3/9 confirms the involvement of women in these collectives, though a predominance of men is recognised, as is observed in other professional fields. An agreement of 5.7/9 was also reached that, in certain subvertising actions carried out in public places, women could be at greater physical risk than men for reasons of their gender.

With regard to authorship, the experts considered (6.9/9) that the anonymous nature of subvertising may hide women's activism, limiting the extent to which their contributions are recognised. As participant 9/MT puts it, "There's more and more of us taking action. I personally like to do all-female teams so in the documentation (even though you don't see faces) it's visibly women taking action."

The participants' opinions added important nuances to the discussion on gender, underlining that "Subvertising is supposed to be a space for resistance, freedom and action regardless of gender" (3/AD). The importance was also highlighted of a critical re-evaluation of global knowledge and wisdom, considering the viewpoints and experiences of marginalised peoples and cultures, taking into account the fact that "It's also important to acknowledge the emergence of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms the Epistemology of the South" (5/VC). It was also stated in this section that "(...) there is a lot to be done, but not with the neoliberal feminism of the 'glass ceilings' whose shards are then picked up by the poor and precarious migrant cleaners" (6/FC). These statements show the need to extend the framework to recognise and value women's perspectives in subvertising, suggesting a deeper reflection on intersectionality and diversity within the movement.

4.5. *What is the future of subvertising?*

In response to the objective established in this research of examining subvertising's possible future, the questions regarding subvertising's future evolution focus on its means of dissemination, formats, women's involvement and international collaboration.

Regarding the means and formats for dissemination, a consensus of 7.7/9 was reached on the need for subvertising to adapt to digitalisation in the sector to ensure its durability, but "(...) without losing dominance in the physical world. It will be like everything else, a phygital hybrid." (8/JL).

On the involvement of women, an increased presence of women is expected in subvertising (6.9/9), which is considered a positive evolution towards greater equality and visibility of feminist issues (7.6/9).

In terms of international collaboration, increased co-operation is expected (7/9) between countries to address common problems and share resources. Furthermore, local and global issues are increasingly interconnected (7.6/9): "(...) the global and local dimensions are increasingly going hand in hand, in line with what environmentalists advocate in their classic slogan" (6/FC).

Finally, on the future of subvertising, participant 7/JP points out the critical nature of the movement:

The future of subvertising will depend on both its ability to adapt to changes in the capitalist system and its level of effectiveness; and above all it will depend largely on the capacity for critical reading on the part of the media audiences of concentrated power, on the potential for dissidence, rebellion and disobedience of the people, on the possibility of unfolding the creative potential of the human being and direct it towards practices of activism and resistance.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Subvertising is a form of activism that amplifies social issues and maintains an inherently critical stance towards the established system. Since emerging in the 1980s, it has evolved into a predominantly urban phenomenon while adapting to new digital media and formats. It consists of a variety of currents that have had a notable influence on the formation of this multidimensional phenomenon and an evolution can be observed from purely artistic influences towards more recent social movements. The current digital environment facilitates both its dissemination and collaborations between subvertising groups, creating a movement in expansion that continues to gain relevance in a global neoliberal context that calls for critical perspectives that promote citizen-led forms of expression. Although its future is uncertain, it seems to be conditioned both by its ability to adapt to changes in the capitalist system and by its effectiveness in practice, factors which, according to its trajectory so far, are likely to come to pass.

Whereas previous definitions would define subvertising as a reactive practice responding to specific adverts (Katyal, 2012), dependent on advertising (Abarca, 2010) or, in more general terms, simply as a jamming practice (Harold, 2003), the definition resulting from the panel of experts proposes a proactive approach, one that extends its reach to address the capitalist narratives that are inherent to the system, as is manifest in advertising practices. This does not mean that subvertising does not respond to certain campaigns, but rather that its nature and ability to create and spread critical messages is an autonomous way of providing meaning in a consumerist and capitalist context. As a result, it can be concluded that the agreed definition of subvertising succeeds in drawing together the multiple facets of this phenomenon, granting it greater autonomy as a critical system of communication, and thus adds to other previous more reductionist approaches that considered subvertising as dependent on its interventions relating to advertising messages.

The panel of experts agree that subvertising is a phenomenon which, although it emerged subsequently to the culture jamming movement, in certain contexts it does apply jamming practices. Accordingly, the panel agree with Dery (1993/2010), who classifies subvertising as a form of jamming. It could therefore be said that although subvertising uses practices related to jamming, culture jamming does not always use subvertising practices.

We argue that while subvertising shares common ground with jamming tactics, such as overlapping methods, ideological critiques, and the appropriation of media, it can be differentiated by its specific emphasis on commercial brands and the advertising industry's role as a mouthpiece for systems of power. This distinction holds particular significance for academic research, as it

shapes the selection of terminology and keywords, facilitating more precise retrieval of information on subvertising practices often subsumed under the broader category of jamming.

Within this framework, subvertising emerges as a playful activism that, despite risks of vague activism (Harlow & Guo, 2014), disseminates social critiques in engaging ways. This technique amplifies critical messages while turning deep anti-systemic critiques into appealing, accessible forms. Research supports the view that, despite ethical concerns in playful activism, it effectively serves as a persuasive medium (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022). This skill is vital in today's communication landscape, where visibility is shaped by corporate algorithms (van Dijck et al., 2018). Capturing attention and impacting audiences is a significant achievement.

The expert panel's input confirms that the conceptualisation of subvertising as a communicative practice is characterised by a duality, being recognised both as a social movement with an underlying ideology and as an accessible tool for a range of social issues, which coincides with the conclusions reached by Carducci (2006). In semiotic terms, this duality reflects a semantic dimension of subvertising as an agent of social change and a pragmatic dimension as a tool through which citizens are able to articulate a critique of the challenges posed by advertising in a neoliberal social context.

One conclusion obtained from this research is that subvertising can be thought of as an autonomous communication phenomenon that does not depend solely on the exercise of responding to a social context dominated by *allvertising* (Leal-Rico et al., 2024). This study suggests that subvertising is not limited to reacting to controversial corporate messaging; it also shows initiative by creating and circulating original messages of public benefit. This proactive approach aligns with the description of subvertising identified by Maier and Mafael (2024), described as *social/political adbusting*, whereby an ad can be used as a platform of expression and not necessarily as the target of any criticism. In this regard, contemporary subvertising revolves around the forms, aesthetics and linguistic aspects of advertising, without making any direct reference to a specific commercial advertisement. This approach stands in contrast with the position held by Dewhurst and Kozinets (2014), who restrict subvertising solely to the practice of modifying existing advertising, thus underestimating its capacity to create original content. This conclusion identifies an evolution in the field of subvertising, which has overcome its historic links with the concept of *détournement* and no longer needs any existing advertising for subvertising to be practised, but rather a shift can be made in advertising media, formats and codes, without the need for any specific piece of advertising to be used as a starting point.

The experts on the panel mostly agree, indicating that subvertising makes it possible to launch an attack on advertising, as a loudspeaker of economic neoliberalism, through messages that encourage taking a critical view of consumerism in a society that is saturated with advertising messages. This integrated and pragmatic view of advertising contrasts with the rejection by one participant, who takes an abolitionist view of advertising as a communication paradigm, adopting an anti-advertising stance. Subvertising, therefore, can be seen as a practice which, while challenging capitalism's excesses, can also advocate for preserving a dynamic and participatory social and cultural fabric.

Another conclusion from this study highlights the versatility of subvertising with regard to the types of agents to whom this practice can be of use, which includes not just activist movements but also individual and corporate actors. In turn, the legitimisation of subvertising has evolved over time, from early approaches that focused on adopting the language of its adversary (San Nicolás, 2004) or combatting advertising pollution (Moreno, 2015), to current agreed justifications by the panel of experts, who highlight the practice as a social right to criticise the prevailing system and citizen-led participation in generating practices that counter its negative aspects.

With regard to the social concerns that are voiced through subvertising, the range of social issues identified in the prior review remains unchanged, although there is increasing emphasis on more contemporary issues, such as feminism, and most particularly environmentalism. Despite any future uncertainty in determining the social causes that subvertising practices will go on to defend, the multiple references by the experts to environmentalism and the environmental battles faced by society highlight the importance of this concern for citizens and suggest that this will be the focus of subvertising activism in coming years.

The media transformation that the internet has brought about has marked a turning point in subvertising practices. Nevertheless, this study concludes that this practice retains its focus on physical interventions which, once created, are digitalised and shared online, for a much wider circulation. This physical nature corroborates the citizen-led and democratic link that is inherent to subvertising. As predominant channels of circulation, social media platforms have expanded the dissemination of messages, in line with the boom in participatory culture theorised by Jenkins. Interaction between the digital and the physical reflects a dynamic and adaptive strategy. However, implementing integrated campaigns seems less common than expected, suggesting an additional area for exploration and definition in subvertising practices.

The future of subvertising merges physical and digital realms, adapting to the digital era without losing its physical presence. Increased women's involvement signals progress towards equality and better visibility of feminist issues. With regard to gender issues, the panel of experts views subvertising as a platform for activism, resistance, and action, while aligning with the perspectives of Banet-Weiser (2018) and Lekakis (2023) in their promotion of intersectional feminism. This approach can help confront post-feminism, which, under the guise of empowerment, reduces feminist proclamations to mere individualistic messages, disconnected from the structural transformation needed to achieve intersectional gender justice.

Greater international collaboration will emerge to tackle common challenges, underscoring interconnectivity between local and global problems. Experts suggest the future success of subvertising relies on adaptation to changes in capitalism, overall effectiveness, and citizen-led critical engagement awareness.

This study emphasizes the need for further research into subvertising's role in the contemporary communication. Future research could assess subvertising's impact on brands and consumer reactions. Additionally, exploring its potential for enhancing citizens' critical awareness of media issues is vital as challenges in equality, sustainability, and development persist. Analysing case studies may reveal current practices and their evolution. Given the media landscape's rapid changes, research should focus on how these practices adapt.

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