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BEHIND ADVERTISING: THE LANGUAGE OF PERSUASION

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Abstract

Advertising is a force that makes it possible to sell more merchandise due to its persuasive nature. As a tool of marketing communication, advertising is the structured and composed, non-personal communication of information. It is usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature. The language of persuasion is employed for successful advertising campaign thereby, boosting patronage of idea, product or service. The persuasive nature of advertising however, has generated criticisms and controversies. Advertising has been vigorously attacked on the ground that it is unnecessary and wasteful and that through it, people are induced to buy worthless products. It is further argued by the objectors that much advertising is misleading and untruthful. Thus, this paper examines how consumers can be persuaded to patronise goods and services advertised.

Keywords: Advertising, Persuasion, Persuasive Advertising and Advertising appeal.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is a paid mediated form of communication from an identifiable source and designed to persuade the consumer to take an action. A persuasive communication employs persuasive techniques to catch consumer's interests. People react to the same advertisement differently and make decisions on how to spend their available resources on consumption related items. To decide on the above variables, the prospective consumer is forced to choose a particular product due to the persuasive language behind the advertisement.

Advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas or products by an identifiable sponsor. The definition identifies fundamental elements. First, it is a paid form of



presentation, which emphasises that advertising space or time must be purchased. It is non-personal, meaning that it is not a direct or personalised presentation to one individual, but to the masses. Identified sponsor refers to the identification of the brand or the advertiser that is communicating. [Arens et al. \(2008\)](#) define advertising as the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products (goods, services and ideas) by identified sponsors through various media. The whole essence of advertising is to make customers to be loyal to the products advertised. Brand loyalty as noted by [Jacoby \(1971\)](#), cited by [Afzal et al. \(2013\)](#) suggests that brand loyalty is the purchase response of an individual or consumer for one or more alternative brands over a time period, deciding from a set of alternative brands.

The language of persuasion is very important for a successful advertising campaign. Most advertising is intended to be persuasive in order to boost patronage of idea, product or service. The goal of most advertising messages is to persuade the audience to believe or do something. So then, what is persuasive advertising? The heart of advertising lies on its ability to sway buyers to buy particular product as well as 'force' them to maintain such patronage. It then means that it is not enough to design good advertising copy; such copy must be capable of persuading prospective buyers to make right choice in buying decisions.

Persuasive advertising refers to a persuasive type of marketing communication designed to win converts who are lured to patronise the goods, services or ideas advertised. [Kruti and Alan \(2009\)](#) assert that persuasive advertising is intended to induce people to buy. This becomes more important as the product grows or faces increasing competition. The advertiser now needs to give more reasons or enticements to lure consumers. The goal of most advertising messages is to persuade the audience to believe an idea or buy a product. The language of persuasion in advertising therefore, is an important media literacy skill. [Aliede \(2002\)](#) writes that most advertisements are persuasive in order to win converts who are lured to patronise the goods, services or ideas advertised. It could be to convince people that a particular product would benefit them. This study, therefore, attempts to discuss in clear terms, the language of persuasion that is behind every advertisement and to find out if actually persuasive advertising is easily manipulated.

Impacts of Advertising: A Socio-economic Perspective

The goal of advertising is not just to sell products and services, but also, to persuade consumers to act or think in a particular way. The social impact of advertising is anchored on the premise that advertising shapes and mirrors society. Advertising takes place in the society by man and for his benefits. It then means that advertising also mirrors culture and society. Advertisements are designed to reflect culture and appeal to the sensibilities of people in a given society. The chemistry of colour in advertisements speaks volumes of a given society. Advertising's persuasive nature makes it an influential institution of socialisation. The sociology of advertising therefore, refers to a sociological look at the role of advertising in influencing and shaping society. In shaping the



society, advertising creates brand equity and generates sales, both of which lead to increased wealth. It adapts and mirrors trends in society. However; social impacts of advertising have social costs (Folkerts and Lacy, 2004). Critics of social costs of advertising argue that advertising can be manipulative and can influence news and entertainment. Advertising serves society in positive and negative ways. Certain advertisements are widely accepted in a given society while others are treated with utmost dislike and scepticism; for instance, advertising products such as tobacco has now been banned in most Western and developing countries or its advertisement censored and regulated by relevant agencies.

Advertising is a major component of modern economies, for instance; it is expected that advertisers in Nigeria spend about 2 percent of the gross domestic product to promote their wares through print or electronic media. Arens *et al.* (2008) point out that the economic effect of advertising is like the break-shot in billiards or pool. The moment a company begins to advertise, it sets off a chain of reaction of economic events. The essential role of advertising in a modern consumer economy is obvious if you think about how people decide what to buy.

The economic impact of advertising has somewhat been an object of controversy and criticisms. Advertising is both applauded and criticised not only for its role in selling products, but also for its influence on the economy and on society. Folkerts and Lacy (2004) clearly capture these controversies and criticisms. Critics debate whether advertising raises or lowers the price of goods. In some instances, economies of scale allow producers in response to demand created by advertising, to manufacture larger quantities at a lower price. However, many critics argue that advertising, particularly on television, is expensive and that the cost of such advertising is often added to the product price. Notwithstanding these controversies surrounding the economic impacts of advertising, it is obvious that advertising can also introduce efficiency into the economy by allowing comparison shopping without in-person inspections of all the alternatives. Efficiencies also can result when advertising alerts consumers to superior and less costly products and services which displace outdated, outmoded and inefficient offerings (John, 2003).

Psychology of Advertising: A Consumer Behaviour Perspective

Psychology is the scientific study of human and animal behaviour. Human behaviour affects buying decisions adversely. The psychological dimension of advertising hinges on the fact that the behaviour of the consumer affects the effectiveness of the message. Advertising is clearly an attempt to change attitude by compelling consumers to buy the advertiser's product.

Psychology of advertising refers to a psychological study of the impact of consumer behaviour on his buying decisions. It equally looks at tripartite psychological ties: advertiser, consumer and product/service. Folkerts and Lacy (2004) write that advertising uses social images and appeals to people's psychological and physical needs. Its content may sell a product or persuade people to



adopt a specific lifestyle. Psychologists use mental imagery in application to advertising in order to give advertising a theoretical basis.

Psychologists first, analyse human mind into its various activities and then analysed advertisements to discover what there is in them that may or may not awaken the activity desired. To compensate for the absence of visuals in radio commercial, the consumer therefore stimulates his imagination and creates a mental visual of the message. The mind is like a memory bank and stores memories in the mental files. Due to the complexities of stimuli such as advertising, consumers hardly store all the brand names in one file. Webster (1992) states that because of our limited memory, we resist opening new mental files and we avoid accepting new information inconsistent with what is already filed. The experience consumers receive from using a brand solidifies their perceptions of it. These fixed perceptions can rarely be changed through advertising alone. The result is that a consumer is limited not only by the physical capacity of the human senses but also by one's feelings and interests. Arens *et al.* (2008) recommends the use of psychological screens to evaluate, filter and personalise information according to subjective emotional standards.

Another way to study the psychology of advertising is to look at consumer behaviour and how consumer process information. Understanding the needs of the consumer is essential when it comes to creating the right advertisement. This is because marketers need to understand the buying behaviour of consumers while designing their advertisements for the desired impact.

Consumer behaviour refers to activities; actions and influences of people who purchase and use goods and services to satisfy their personal or household needs and wants. Consumer behaviour studies the characteristics of individual consumers in an attempt to understand people's wants. Hoffmann (2007) defines consumer behaviour as the study of how people behave when obtaining, and using products (and services). Factor that influence consumer behaviour include cultural, personal, social and psychological factors.

Culture is simply a way of life of a given society. Generally accepted cultural norms and values of a given society can affect the behaviour of consumers towards certain products and services; for instance, pork is not likely to make optimum sales in areas where religious sentiment is attached to pork. Culture, therefore, is shaped and shared by homogenous groups of people.

Personal factors such as a buyer's demographics and psychographics, personality and self-concept affect his purchasing behaviour. The occupation of an individual plays a significant role in influencing his/her buying decisions.

Social groups such as reference groups, family members, relatives also affect consumer behaviour. Every individual has some people around who influence him/her in any way. Family also plays an important role in influencing the buying decisions of individuals.



The mental and emotion state of a person affect his buying behaviour. Motivation, perception, learning and beliefs and attitude are all psychological factors that affect buying behaviour. An individual's personality also affects his buying behaviour. Every individual has his/her own characteristic personality traits which reflect in his/her buying behaviour.

Understanding the Language of Persuasion in Advertising

Two variables exist here: language and persuasion. Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Words, texts and sentences are attributes of a language capable of changing the meaning as well as the mood of advertising messages. In human communication, language is one of the major tools of thought. The words of a language or the units of meaning can be combined into a stupendous number of sentences to represent the relationship between objects or events in the world around (Kenechukwu, 2012).

On the other hand, persuasion means 'to induce people to take a desired action.' Advertising messages are designed to induce and lure consumers to buy particular products or services. One's reaction to persuasive advertising however, depends in part on the message and to a considerable extent, on the way in which one perceives or interprets advertising messages. To achieve persuasive advertising, all the components in advertising campaign are so designed in order to entice consumers into purchasing specific goods and services, often by appealing to their emotions and general sensibilities. The assumption here is that consumers already understand the basic nature of product but need to be convinced of the desirability and the benefits of that set of particular goods and services apart from the competition. The goal of media messages is to persuade the audience to believe or do something. The effort to persuade is not a serious problem for consumers as long as they understand the purpose of advertisement. Many advertisements serve the basic media social function of coordinating economic activities (Folkerts and Lacy, 2004). Persuasion is the use of messages to influence an audience (Asemah, 2012). Nweke (2001), cited in Asemah (2012) says persuasion is a systematic and skilful method of creating awareness aimed at changing or strengthening opinions, attitudes, beliefs or values, for a more positive outcome. This perhaps explain why Ugande (2001), cited in Asemah (2012) avers that persuasion is a skilful presentation of ideas and messages, with the various publics, with the intention of producing the desired result. It can be viewed as series of messages designed and initiated with the intention of making the recipient to voluntarily accept or internalise new ideas, beliefs, values and attitudes, in order to act in the desired way towards realising the ultimate reward for the communication effort. As Marston (1979) rightly points out that human cooperation can be actually sought in three basic ways: power, purchase and persuasion. Of the three, persuasion is most strongly desirable. Persuasion is the key factor in the practice of integrated marketing communication and the essence of all purposeful communication. Persuasion emphasises seeking the most effective way of influencing the attitudes and behaviours of the recipient in the communication process, to enable the recipient view the message from the perspective of the originator of the message.



Kruti and Alan (2009) explain that the persuasive effect of advertising message is governed by not only what is said, but also by how it is said. The advertiser has to turn the big idea into a real advertisement that will capture the audience's attention and interest. Graeme (2005) insists that devices of persuasion always have belief and values at their heart. Classically, advertisements are about rewards or punishment – it is good to purchase; it is bad not to purchase – based on core values about love of family, the importance of self image and so on. Criticisms have equally surrounded persuasive advertising especially when the elements of persuasion are stressed beyond the confines of truth. One argument against the persuasive power of advertising is that 'advertising is propaganda.' Graeme (2005) suggests that market domination by a few companies means that people are deprived of alternative sources of information about products. Another criticism is on the construction and deconstruction of advertising texts and its effects on children's socialisation. Children find it difficult to construe advertising texts appropriately thus; they erroneously accept make-believe characters as real models Meyrowitz (1985). Cutlip and Centre (1978), cited in Ugande (2001) provide the following guiding principles of persuasion:

- i. **Identification Principle:** Most people will ignore an idea, an opinion or a point of view, unless they see clearly that it affects personal fears, desires, hopes or aspirations. Your message must be stated in terms of the interest of your audience.
- ii. **Action Principle:** People seldom buy ideas separated from action taken or about to be taken by the sponsor of the idea or action that the people themselves can conveniently take to prove the merit of the idea. Unless a means of action is provided, people tend to shrug off appeals to do things.
- iii. **Principle of Familiarity and Trust:** We buy ideas from only those we trust, we are influenced by or adopt only those opinions or viewpoints that we regard as credible.
- iv. **Clarity Principle:** The situation must be clear to us. The things we observe, read, see or hear; the things that produce our impressions must be clear, not subject to several interpretations. To communicate, you must employ words, symbols or stereotypes that the receiver comprehends and responds to.

Analysing Persuasive Techniques in Advertising

Persuasive advertising is designed to employ a variety of techniques to grab the consumer's attention and interest to establish credibility and trust, to stimulate desire for the product and to motivate the consumer to act positively. To understand persuasive technique in any advertisement, it is essential to consider three factors. First is to consider the advertising message and the audience. A careful study of the content of the advertising message and demographic and psychographic attributes of the audience to whom the advertising messages are directed. Second is to spot the persuasive technique employed in the advertising message. Here, we look at who appears in the advertisement and his credibility as a role model. Does the advertisement appeal to emotion or to logic? To achieve this, it is important that the language in the advertisement be properly constructed to 'force' the consumer to make preference for the product or service. The



third factor is to understand the intended effects on the target audience. Below are few persuasive techniques in advertising:

Name Calling

Name calling otherwise known as *ad hominem* is a persuasive technique that gives a person or product a bad name in order to reject or condemn it. Persuaders employ this technique to make consumers reject a product or service on the basis of the negative attributes instead of looking at the available evidence. This makes consumers focus attention on the attack rather than the issues.

Plain Folk

Plain folk shows ordinary people using or supporting a product or candidate. It strengthens the down-home 'authentic' image of products like pickup trucks and politicians. Candidates for public offices employ this technique often to win voters over to their sides. Consumers also trust the product because it is good enough for regular 'folks.'

Card Stacking

It involves deliberate use of false context to give a misleading impression about a product or service thereby selecting only favourable evidence that can convince consumers to buy a particular product or service. It is built on half truth whereby the advertiser provides only part of the story to give a misleading impression. The advertiser only picks those facts and arguments that support his case.

Bandwagon

Bandwagon is a persuasive technique that hinges on the argument that a person should believe or do something because 'everybody else' does. Many advertisements show lot of people using a particular product imply that since everybody is doing, one should 'jump on the bandwagon.' The campaign line is 'jump aboard the bandwagon, follow the crowd and don't be left out.' The bottom-line is that consumers buy the product because they want to fit in on the assumption that if others buy it, the product must be good indeed.

Glittering Generalities

Glittering generalities emphasise highly valued beliefs such as the use of virtue words such as peace, freedom which persuaders employ in the hope that consumers will approve and accept these statements without examining the evidence.

Bait and Switch

This refers to a dishonest tactic in which a salesperson lures customers to store with the promise of a bargain. Bait and switch is advertising on item at an unusually low price to bring people into the store and then 'switching' them to a higher priced model by claiming that the advertised product is out of stock or poorly made.



Testimonials

Here, advertising messages often show people testifying about the value or quality of a product or endorsing an idea. It includes a list of well-known individuals who endorse such product or service. Also known as celebrity spokesperson, consumers transfer admiration or respect for the celebrity to the product.

Humour

This is a powerful tool of persuasion that uses amusement to grab and sustain attention to a product or service. Advertisement can be designed as to arouse laughter but provides little information about the product or service. In creating laughter, advertisers show their product or service in attempt to connect that good feeling to their product or service. This is very effective because consumers remember advertisements easily and associate positive feelings with the product.

Creating Advertising Appeal

Advertising appeal triggers emotion and grab mass attention. It is defined as an igniting force which stimulates the consumer mindset towards the products or services thereby influencing the way consumers view them and how buying certain products can prove to be beneficial for them. By appeals, we mean the strategies an advertiser uses to present a product or service. It could be presented in terms of beauty or taste qualities. Appeals may be emotional or rational. It is emotional when it affects how we feel, taste, smell, hear or see. In other words, emotional appeal is related to an individual's psychological and social needs for purchasing certain products or services. In the second are the rational appeals which appeal to reason – to the thinking mind. It suggests aims to focus on the individual's functional, utilitarian or practical needs for particular products and services. It is suited for business to business advertisers and for products that are complex and that need high degree of attention and involvement.

CONCLUSION

Advertising promotes sales of a product or service by informing the masses about its features. Behind the advertisement, the language of persuasion is employed to help advertisers sort out complex emotional arguments, define key issues and problems facing advertising activities. Persuasive advertising seeks to entice consumers into purchasing specific goods and services by appealing to their emotions and general sensibilities.

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