

Assessment of Purposeful and Considerate Meaning of Advertisements

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Abstract

Advertisements are an integral part of marketing products and ideas. Producers of advertisements constantly manufacture needs on consumers. Within the framework of consumer capitalism, the needs of the consumers are manufactured through their exposure to advertisements in billboards, and in the print and electronic media. In KSA, most of the advertisements on the billboards and in the print media and electronic media are aimed towards the upper-middle class consumers. It is often thought that the purposeful meanings of the producers of the advertisements are passively received by consumers in almost an identical way. But the researcher strongly believes that in the reception of meaning the consumers actively participate by considering the meaning in the first place. Also, this research intends to explore the mindsets of the consumers regarding the advertisements of certain products. To obtain, this project attempts to find out the patterns of decoding the messages in the advertisements and to see whether there is any pattern of resistance in the consumers to the strategies employed in the purposeful meaning of the messages of the advertisements.

Key Words: Advertisements, Consumer, Manufacture, Marketing, Mass-media

Introduction

Advertising is a way of communicating some message while media is the medium through which communication to the mass market is carried out. Media and advertisements are two sides of the same coin – a coin that is inseparable from the lives of the inhabitants of today's capitalist society. They not only represent, but also control our physical and psychological worlds. Advertisements have entered our homes in the forms of both information and entertainment. Television is like a fixture water tap. If you switch on the TV, a flow of audiovisual messages pours in. Then there are the radio, newspapers, magazines, CDS, and DVDS, and of course, the internet. Our physical and psychological makeup has been completely appropriated by the

“corporate speech”. A walk on the streets exposes us to the gigantic billboards and posters clamoring messages of the corporate world. Through these propagandas of entertainment and news media, we are told what to know, how to think, what life style to adopt, and above all, since we are held as mere consumers, what to desire and what to buy.

Modern advertisements are being promoted and popularized by targeting the specific customer groups of the specific products. Along with the rising consumerism, the advertising strategies are being reformed every day. Previously, a company first produced a product and then advertised it for marketing. But today, they first create the target consumer and their taste, and then market the product. Through advertisements, the companies make use of the public sentiment and their weak and sensitive points to sell the product which is alarming. They convert the strangers to customers that govern the communication medium. This new policy of marketing is dominating our whole social and economic system. Therefore, the researcher were planned to assess the purposeful meaning and considerate meaning among the Saudi community in a particular region.

Purpose of the Study

In the society that we live in today, it seems that everywhere we look we are surrounded by advertisements whether they are television or radio commercials, billboards, or press advertisements. Obviously, the main purpose of advertisements is to get the consumer purchase the product in question. The message within the advertisement has to be as persuasive as possible and should ensure that certain emotions, feelings, and values are awakened in the consumer. Print advertisements are an extremely effective way to reach a mass audience. Obviously, because the advertisements are in print, the use of color, text, and photography are all key factors in ensuring a successful campaign. Advertisements cannot simply attempt to sell the product in question; they must make it appealing to the consumers. It is important that advertisements not only attempt to make clear the attributes of the product they are trying to sell, but also ensure that these actually mean something to us – the consumers (Williamson 197;p.12).

Advertisements are either loved or loathed, and are, therefore, worthy of study because they generate these feelings. J. Williamson provides the basis of the argument for studying adverts with the following statement: ‘pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence’ (1978; p.11) Being so widespread and obviously influential (if advertisements had no effect, then

companies would not spend so much money on advertising), therefore, worthy of study for many reasons. These reasons can be split into two main groups: the adverts themselves, and the effects they have upon the society in general.

Adverts can be studied in terms of appearance, the language used in them, their structure, their meaning, the reactions they cause, and aesthetically as an art form. By studying them in these terms, we are able to investigate, and dissect the advertisements in order to discover how they work, and what makes us buy those products, or even what resists us from buying them. It would be interesting to discover that though the advertisers design advertisements to attract the consumers, many of the active audience, in this case the consumers take up different strategies of resistance which holds them back from buying the product. Is it that every consumer will react to the advertisements in the same way? We, as individuals, are far more independent than advertisers who want to grab us as believing audience.

The difference between the meaning purposeful by the producers of the advertisements, and the meaning considerate by the consumers indicates the mindsets of the consumers. In an attempt to decode the message of the advertisements the consumers often take up certain strategies of resistance to the deliberate meaning of the advertisements.

Research Question

What is the difference between the purposeful meaning of the advertisement and the considerate meaning by the consumers?

What sort of strategies of resistance do the consumers employ while decoding the message of the ads?

Literature Review

Advertising is defined in Webster's dictionary "as the action of calling something to the attention of the public specially by the paid announcements, to call public attention by emphasizing desirable qualities so as to arouse a desire to buy or patronize: promote." Jhally (1990), in his book *The Codes of Advertising*, argues that 'advertising is the most influential institution of socialization in modern society' (p.1) Advertisements are a common and accepted part of daily life, in print in magazines and newspapers, as well as in vision on television and cinema screens, and, increasingly on the internet as well as on radio. Greg Myers (1994) explains in the Introduction of his book *Words in Ads*: 'Ads are common culture in a way that even the most popular movies or books are not' (p.8). Vestergaard & Schroder (1985) add: the main reason behind commercial advertising is to increase familiarity and goodwill with the name and image of the company, rather than the actual product itself (*The Language of Advertising*, p.1)

In his book *Decoding Advertisements*, Williamson argues that one of the most influential ideological forms in contemporary capitalist societies is advertising. She claims that

advertisements are omnipresent and, thus, appear autonomous, so that they have “a sort of independent reality that links them to our own lives” (p.11). Camera angle, close ups, sound effects, accessories and props and other effects cover a visual series of motivation that draw on specific existing myths to grab the minds of the audiences. Myths, therefore, create an access to the target class. Thus, understanding the structures would lead us to find the specified target group.

Advertising is a mass mediated communication, which is a paid form of public presentation and expressive promotion of ideas. It is a pervasive and impersonal medium, and, it is aimed at the mass. The manufacturers usually determine what goes into their advertisements. It is a means of communication the purpose of which is to inform the potential customers about products and services and how to use and obtain them. Every major mass media is used to disseminate these messages, such as television, radio, movies, magazines, newspapers, billboards, videogames and the internet. In this late capitalist consumerist society, using Fredric Jameson's phrase, an advertisement is an integral part of our social and economic system. It has evolved into a vital communication means between the consumers and business companies. In market-based economics, consumers learn to rely on advertising for information they can use in marketing purchase decisions. Promotional strategies play an important role in the marketing programs of the companies as they attempt to communicate with and sell their products to their customers. Sponsorship of events is also a major buzz in today's consumer society. This strategy serves a dual purpose. On the surface, it gives the explicit look of a corporation that is not only generous, but is also concerned for the greater good of the society, which invariably pacifies consumers. However, the underlying motive of actually "arresting the human intelligence long enough to" be exposed to a certain target audience remains implicit.

Objectives of an Advertisement

- To maintain demand for well-known goods
- To introduce new or unknown goods
- To increase demand for well-known goods

Requirements of Successful Advertising

- Attracting attention
- Stimulating interest
- Creating a desire
- Bringing ideas into action
- Creating awareness

In order to persuade, or to be effective, the advertisement must communicate to the audience to receive the product to their purposes. For example, the advertisement is trying to sell a particular product; it must persuade the audience that for some functional or emotional reason they need to purchase the product. Advertising is a two-way communication process. Not only must the advertisement effectively communicate the desired message, but also for the advertisement to be effective, the communication must be sent and received.

Advertisements have their own particular language. Their aim is to communicate information about the company and the image they want to create to the audience, or rather the buying public. Words are most often used in advertisements to reaffirm the impression that companies want the audience to feel. Words are frequently used to tie the pictures/images created in advertisements to the product they are trying to sell. Language is used in advertisements to implant ideas/images into the minds of people. It is these images that are later remembered, whilst the words themselves are often forgotten, says Dyer (1982) in *Advertising as Communication* (p.86). The language of images is the predominant language of advertisers, as the structure of advertisements confirm.

Now, the image that is generated in the minds of the audience or readers is totally the product of prior interactions or ranges of experiences the audience or reader has of the subject. The mind recreates from the information stored to create an understanding of what is being said. Thus, during this recreation, general beliefs, myth and social beliefs keep strong hold in the meaning derived from the sign. In this research, it plays also a strong role as it deals with the advertisers' purposeful meaning, the consumers' general meaning, and also patterns of resistance associated with it.

Mass media codes offer their readers social identities which some may adopt as their own. But readers do not necessarily accept such codes. Where those involved in communicating do not share common codes and social positions, decoded meanings are likely to be different from the encoder's purposeful meaning. Umberto Eco (1965) uses the term 'aberrant decoding' to refer to a text which has been decoded by means of a different code from that used to encode it. Eco (1981) describes those texts as 'closed' which show a strong tendency to encourage a particular interpretation – in contrast to more 'open' texts. He argues that mass media texts tend to be 'closed texts' and because they are broadcast to heterogeneous audiences, diverse decoding of such texts is unavoidable.

The advertisers must know what makes the consumers buy products. Consumers are affected by cultural, social, and even psychological influences. Social class, family, lifestyle, age, gender, sexual orientation, education, occupation, income, motivation, and also personality play a vital role in this regard. Well-researched advertisements will

always bring consumers to buy the product, no matter how bad the product is! The answer is that advertising can persuade people to buy inferior products, but only once – says Ogilvy (1983) in *Ogilvy on Advertising* (p.215). When the consumer finds the product to be of inferior quality, s/he never buys it again.

Thus, advertisements of today are well researched. But still, the difference between the deliberate meaning of the advertisers and considerate meaning of the consumers remains the centre of our attention, because newer attracting strategies of the advertisers might lead to newer resistance strategies of the consumers. This is where the justification of this research lies.

Methodology

The method of research is to trace the difference, between the deliberate meaning of the advertisers and the considerate meaning of the consumers. The current research intends to find out the patterns of resistance, if there is any, in the consumers in trying to decode the meaning of the advertisements.

The researcher administered the questionnaire to collect the data from the Saudi community, KSA in region of Aseer Province:

1. Questionnaires – since this research required information from the consumers and the advertisers, two separate sets of questionnaire were prepared to gather data. Five advertisements were chosen randomly to elicit responses from the consumers who came from different social classes and age groups.
2. Interviews – some of the consumers and an advertising agency were interviewed to ensure the validity of the comments they made in the questionnaire.
3. Books, journals, and internet – Data was also collected from different books, journals and internet websites.

Participants: consumers of different age groups who are frequently exposed to the media. A total no. of 35 participants was interviewed.

Limitations: The researcher faced some very specific problems in conducting the research work. First, the researcher had to carry laptop or pictures of the ads because many interviewees failed to recall the ads. Moreover, the advertisement agencies did not seem to co-operate very well except one. So, the researcher could not gather as much information from the agencies as expected. Despite these problems, the researcher tried her best to maintain the validity and reliability of the research.

Data Analysis

With regard to the data analysis, the consumer audience and the advertising agency were selected and administered the questionnaire and also the interview sessions were scheduled for the respondents to analyze the data.

- a) Most of the consumer audience interviewed (71%) informed that they were more familiar with the electronics media, such as television. The rest 29% are said to be familiar with all three media – print, electronic and billboards.
- b) Regarding the most effective media to convey message, 71% consumers opted for television, 28% for daily newspapers, and only 1% for radio and others.
- c) 42% informed that advertisements persuade them to buy things. Another 29% informed that they were sometimes convinced and the rest 29% remain unconvinced by ads of products.
- d) 42% of the interviewed consumers said while buying that they would go for the most advertised product, while 29% and the rest of 29% opted for the branded products or asked for opinions from other consumers before buying a product respectively.
- e) 57% of the interviewed consumers said that they were somehow convinced to buy products by watching their ads. 43% informed that advertisements never convinced them to buy any product.
- f) The difference between the purposeful meaning of the advertisement and the considerate meaning by the consumers regarding certain products are listed in the following table:-

Table: Purposeful Meaning VS. Considerate Meaning

Products Advertised	Purposeful Meaning	Considerate Meaning (%)
Ponds white beauty	Makes you achieve things	i) Makes people beautiful-43% ii) Brightness is the key to success-43% iii) Buy the product – 14%
Pepsi	Pepsi is refreshing and cool	i) Pepsi a refreshing drink – 72%

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii) Means nothing – 14% iii) Buy the drink – 14%
Almarai Yougurt	helpful for delicious cooking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Essential to cook delicious food- 43% ii) It turns into a good cook-14% iii) Buy the product- 14%
Lux soap	Simply cleans the skin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Makes you glamorous-71% ii) Lux makes your skin smooth-15% iii) Buy the product- 14%
Samsung mobile	Very colorful, youthful, vibrant and good networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) To entertain people and attract the young generation 57% ii) New offers and better charging than others-29% iii) Buy the product- 14%

Interview with the Agency:

The interview session was completed through a semi-structured questionnaire and direct interview with the advertising agency. The interview with the agency revealed a number of interesting findings. Just like Ogilvy, advertisers believe that when one keeps repeating a lie/ an illusion ten times, it becomes a truth. So, whether the advertisement is successful in deriving its desired consequences or not, they need to play it over and over again, so that people will at least remember it as an option to buy.

In the case of the advertisement of Ponds White Beauty cream, the advertisers say that no meaning has been created by them for the audience. It is a belief in this society that fair skin is desirable in every sphere of life. Thus, the advertisers leave the audience with a story of the same tone. They believe, they have told the audience exactly what they wanted to believe, which ultimately earned them a favorable response. One important thing to be mentioned here is that the tone of the advertisement will differ with the product advertised. Some advertisements are designed just to inform the people; they do not need to act on it, for example – the HIV awareness campaigns shown on TV, radio, and billboards. Other sorts of advertisements demand response from you – that knowing about the product is not enough, you need to buy it as well. This is what the advertisers call purchase behavior.

While being asked about whether the advertisers take feedback from the audience after the advertisement goes on air, the answer was that they make comprehension study on the advertisement. They base their study on three criteria:

- i) Understandability study: if people have understood the message or not
- ii) Memo ability study: whether people remember the advertisement or not
- iii) Like ability study: if the audience like the advertisement or not

While being asked about whether the feedback always matches their expectation, the answer came to be negative. It is because advertisers manufacture and manipulate people's needs. In doing that, they tend to manage how people would take the advertisement. The consumers more exposed to advertisements will behave in one way; the less exposed ones will behave in another way. People have options now. They can switch from one channel to another. As a result, advertisers have always started updating themselves which led to improved advertisements.

Advertisements have changed a lot regarding the selection of the most powerful media in conveying the message of the ads to the consumer audience. Only five years back, the television or radio was the most powerful media and billboards worked as a 15 second reminder. But the most amazing fact now is that experiential advertisement is the most effective tool to communicate with the consumers. By experiential advertisement, they mean

going door to door with the product and prove the superiority of the product in front of the consumers. The launching of the washing powder – surf excel detergent was done in this manner and the advertiser claims that they received the desired response from the consumers. Moreover, the whiteness supplied with the detergent significantly increased the sale.

Another significant change that came regarding the age group of the target audience is that the youth are no longer limited to the age group of 18-28. Even at the age of 45, people can think, behave, and dress as a youngster. So, advertisers now direct their advertisements keeping this change in mind.

Thus, in view of the above circumstances, advertisers are facing constant challenges. But the good thing is they do not mind the challenge because to them more challenge means more money. (Reference: interview with Asiatic Advertising Agency taken on 12 June 2019).

Conclusion

Advertising is constructed by the society to meet its needs, to ensure that people have the products they require in order to make their lives as easy as possible, and that all their every needs are met. It is made by people for people, to help prop up the economy and maintain the standard of living. In addition to being a construct of society, advertising also plays its part in constructing the society that creates it. This manipulation is done in many ways – the use of stereotypes, the reliance by the media on the sponsorship that comes from advertising, and the way that advertising campaigns tell us who or what we are, or rather who we should be.

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