IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL JUDGEMENT THEORY FOR PERSUASIVE ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

Advertising is generally aimed at increasing demand, influencing people to change brands or motivating people to make a purchase; advertising messages are designed to induce and lure consumers to buy particular products or services. The way the consumers perceive an advertising campaign will, therefore, determine how they will respond to the advertisement. Thus, the researchers embarked on a self affirmative discourse of the implications of social judgement theory for persuasive advertising campaigns. The discourse shows that advertisers must use persuasive strategies that will make the consumers to be loyal to their brands; more so, the strength of the social judgement theory is that it illustrates the most important elements that motivate people to buy a product and it also shows what the connections are between the motives and attributes of products or services. An understanding of the social judgement theory is important to companies because it helps companies to spend money on advertising campaigns more effectively. It was, therefore, concluded that social judgement theory helps the consumers to interpret advertising campaigns and decide whether to act positively or negatively. The researchers recommended that advertising campaign planners must ensure that they use techniques that will make consumers to interpret advertised products, goods and services from a positive angle; more so, celebrities used in association with advertising campaigns must be seen to be credible, as this will go a long way in positively influencing the consumers.

Keywords: Implications, social judgement theory, persuasion, advertising, campaigns

Introduction

Advertising is the communication that is aimed at persuading consumers to buy a product, goods or service. Asemah (2011) notes that every business function requires an efficient communication system in order to ensure successful performance. Advertising, as it is called today is a specialised form of marketing communication. As a consumer, you are exposed to hundreds and thousands of commercial messages every day; they may appear in the form of billboard, newspaper advertisement, television commercials, etc. Advertising is one of the most powerful communicational tools that almost every company uses in order to promote its products or services (ASA, 2008). Advertising is a form of communication for marketing and it is used to encourage, persuade or manipulate an audience (viewers, readers or listeners; sometimes a specific group) to continue to take some new actions. Most commonly, the desired result is to drive consumer behaviour with respect to a commercial offering.

Arens (2008, p. 7) sees advertising as “the structured and composed non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about products, services and ideas by identified sponsors, through various mass media.” The definition given by Arens (2008) is closely in line with that of Dominick (2007, p. 321) which says that “advertising is any form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services, usually paid for by an identified sponsor.” Therefore, since advertising is aimed at persuading the people, the way they perceive the advertising, will go a long way in influencing them. This implies that the judgement the consumers give to any advertising campaign will determine their reactions.

Social judgment theory (SJT; Sherif, 1936; Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall, 1965) is based on the idea that the effect of a persuasive message on a particular issue depends on the way that the receiver evaluates the position of the message (Smith, Atkin, Martell, Allen and Hembroff, 2006). Formulated by Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland in 1960s, social judgement theory suggests that understanding a person’s attitude on subjects can provide a clue for us to approaching persuasive effort. The theory
proposed that when people receive a message, they accept or reject the message based on their judgementsal processes and effects (Sherif and Hovland, 1961, cited in Teng, Khong and Goh, 2014). Specifically, people compare messages with their pre-existing attitudes and make evaluations about the message based on their anchors on this topic or messages. Hence, attitude change is considered two-step process: firstly, people evaluate the position that advocated message anchor. Secondly, the attitude changes with the judgement (Teng et al 2014). Given advertising’s prominence in the domain of persuasion, it is not surprising that theories of persuasion have played a central role in scholarly research on effects of advertising. One of such theories is social judgement theory. Thus, the study focuses on the implications of social judgement theory for persuasive advertising campaigns.

Overview of social judgement theory

Social judgment theory seeks to explain how an audience processes messages. The new information is compared to existing beliefs and a decision to accept or reject the information is made. The beginning of social judgement theory can be traced to early experiments on attitude and persuasion in social psychology, but it was first given its foundations with the work of Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland in 1961. Thus, it can be said that the theory was developed by Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland in 1961. The theory says that the audience interprets and judges a message and takes a position. The theory focuses on the internal processes of an individual’s judgement with relation to a communicated message (Asemah, Nwammu and Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). Social judgement theory proposes that people make evaluations (judgements) about the content of messages based on their anchors or stance on a particular message (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Sherif, 1965, cited in Asemah et al 2017). In addition to an individual’s anchor, each person’s attitudes can be placed into three categories. First, there is the latitude of acceptance, which includes all those ideas that a person finds acceptable. Second, there is the latitude of rejection, which includes all those ideas that a person finds unacceptable. Finally, there is the latitude of non-commitment, which includes ideas for which you have no opinion; you neither accept nor reject these ideas. A person’s reaction to a persuasive message depends on his or her position on the topic (Sherif and Hovland, 1961, cited in Asemah et al 2017). The theory, therefore, focuses on people’s assessment of persuasive information. The five basic principles of the theory as noted by Asemah et al (2017) are:

i. People have categories of judgement with which they evaluate persuasive communication. When presented with a situation in which a person must make a judgement, a range of possible positions can be taken in response.

ii. When we receive persuasive information, we use our categories of judgement to judge the information; thus, as individuals evaluate incoming information, they decide which category of latitude it belongs. There is latitude of rejection, latitude of non-commitment and latitude of acceptance. The one that falls within the latitude of acceptance will influence the receiver positively.

iii. Our level of ego-involvement affects the size of our latitudes; the size of the latitudes is determined by the level of involvement or ego involvement one has with the issue at hand. Ego-involvement refers to the importance an issue is to our self-identity.

iv. We tend to distort incoming information to fit our categories of judgement; people tend to alter incoming information to fit their categories of judgement. Thus, when a piece of information is presented with a persuasive message that falls within the latitude of acceptance and is closest to the individual’s anchor; people will accept and adapt the new information and create a new position. The closer the information is to one’s own anchor, the more readily accepted and perceived to be the original position all along. Conversely, if the message is so far away from the anchor, it will be rejected.

v. Small or moderate differences between our anchor positions and the one being proposed will cause us to change; large discrepancies will not. This implies that for persuasion to occur, the discrepancies between the anchor and the advocated position are so small to moderate that contrasting will not occur, allowing for the consideration of the communicated message. Under these
conditions, persuasion or change is possible (Asemah et al. 2017).

Persuasion and persuasive advertising
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. Persuasion is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviour regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice (Perloff, 2003). Miller (1980), cited in Perloff (2003) proposed that communications exert three different persuasive effects; namely: shaping, reinforcing and changing responses. Shaping entails shaping attitudes associating pleasurable environments with a product, person or idea; reinforcing entails designing communication messages to reinforce a position that people already hold, changing is perhaps the most important persuasive impact and the one that comes most frequently to mind when we think of persuasion; communications can and do change attitudes. 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.

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. 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 (Kenechukwu, Asemah and Edegoh, 2013).

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.

Persuasive advertising, as noted by Kenechukwu et al. (2013) 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 (Kenechukwu et al. 2013).

Creating positive interpretations for advertising campaigns through advertising appeals
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 (Kenechukwu et al. 2013). 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 focuses 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 (Kenechukwu et al. 2013).

Professionals in advertising, instead try to appeal to the emotions, social preferences or other aspects of their target demographics. They tend to use words, images and music to demonstrate how purchasing a given product or service will increase one’s social standing, happiness, attractiveness or other aspects of one’s self. Advertising appeals aim to influence the way consumers view themselves and how buying certain products can prove to be beneficial for them. The message conveyed through advertising appeals influences the purchasing decisions of consumers.

To meet the varying demands of their target consumers, advertisers commonly use rational appeal and emotional appeal in their advertising in an attempt to influence consumer behaviour (Chu, 1996, cited in LiYin 2011). By rational advertising appeal, the product can be emphasised by its benefits, in which the consumers’ self-benefit is the key proposition and the function or benefit requested by consumers of the product or service is articulately presented in advertising. On the other hand, emotional advertising appeal places stress on meeting consumers’ psychological, social or symbolic requirements, where many purchase motives come from. Kotler (1991), cited in LiYin (2011) defines rational appeal as rationally oriented purchase stimulated by directly giving explanations of a product’s advantages. Rational appeal focuses on the benefits consumers may enjoy. In an advertisement, it emphasises that a product or service could achieve the function and benefits consumers desire. He defined emotional appeal as the stimulation of consumers’ purchase intentions by arousing their positive or negative emotions. Positive emotional appeal covers humour, love, happiness, etc, while negative emotional appeal involves fear, a sense of guilt, and so on (LiYin 2011).

According to Belch and Belch (1998), cited in LiYin (2011) advertising appeal is applied to attract consumers’ attention. Advertising appeal aims at influencing consumers’ attitude and emotions about a related product or service.

Review of previous studies
Usman (2013) investigated the creation of effective advertising in the persuasion of target audience. The study mainly concerned with the advertisement campaigns to target the audiences belonging from the different cultures. Usman’s findings showed that the framework proposed is quite effective to meet with consumer requirements and the practical implications of the study are seemed to be enthusiastic which enlightens that the consumer prefers the advertisement which affects them the most. YiLin (2011) carried out research to investigate the impact of advertising appeals and advertising spokespersons on advertising attitudes and purchase intentions and to compare the effectiveness of the influences of different types of advertising appeals and different types of spokespersons on purchase intentions. The findings of the scholar showed that advertising appeals have a significantly positive influence on advertising attitudes and rational advertising
appeals are more significant than emotional appeals; the findings also showed that spokespersons have a significantly positive influence on advertising attitudes and celebrity spokespersons are more significant than experts. LiYin (2011) also discovered that the influence of the combination of rational advertising appeals and expert spokespersons on advertising attitudes is more significant than the combination of emotional advertising appeals and expert spokespersons and that advertising appeals have a significantly positive influence on purchase intentions.

Kruti and Alan (2009), cited in Kenechukwu et al (2013) 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), cited in Kenechukwu et al (2013) insists that devices of persuasion always have beliefs 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. Kenechukwu et al (2013) in a study of the language of persuasion in advertising discovered that persuasion plays a very significant role in advertising campaigns.

Janssens and De Pelsmacker (2007), cited in Asemah and Omosotomhe (2016) investigated the impact of the intensity of fear appeal, the valence of the medium context and the individuals’ trait anxiety and personal relevance on the responses of 197 individuals to anti-speeding advertisements. Their findings showed that a high level of fear attracts more attention; a negative valence context leads to a more positive anti-speeding attitude. Their results were largely replicated for drivers, but not for non-drivers for whom there was only an attention-getting effect of high fear appeal.

Thornton (2005), cited in Asemah and Omosotomhe (2016) also carried out research on patterns within fear appeal anti-speeding television commercials. Thornton (2005) notes that many road safety advertisers used fear appeals, such as “shock” advertising, that result in fear arousal, leaving the viewer feeling extremely tense. Thornton's findings indicated that television advertisements that employ fear-relief patterned messages; that is, fear arousal, then a clear visual and verbal recommendation to slow down, were more effective than fears only patterned messages, that is, fear arousal and a brief warning only to reduce driver speed. Witte and Allen (n. d), cited in Asemah and Omosotomhe (2016) in their study examined the implications of fear appeals for effective public health campaigns. In their study, fear appeal literature was examined in a comprehensive synthesis, using meta-analytical techniques. The meta-analysis suggested that strong fear appeals produce high levels of perceived severity and susceptibility and are more persuasive than low or weak fear appeals. The results also indicated that fear appeals motivate adaptive danger control actions such as message acceptance and maladaptive fear control actions such as defensive avoidance or reactance.

Applicability of social judgement theory for persuasive advertising campaigns
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 (social judgement). 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 (Folkerts and Lacy, 2004, cited in Kenechukwuet al 2013). Since 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, advertisers must design advertising campaigns in such a way that the consumers will interpret the messages positively.
Differentiation of a product alone does not necessarily make it sell; it is ultimately the connection that a consumer perceives with a product that makes it desirable. The strength of the social judgement theory is that it illustrates the most important elements that motivate people to buy a product and it also shows what the connections are between these motives and the attributes of the product or service. An understanding of the social judgement theory is important to companies because it helps companies to spend money on advertising campaigns more effectively. This is because if the underlying values of consumers are not aligned with attributes of a product, they will not be interested in buying it; the interpretation will be negative. Wimbush (2017) avers that commercial and print advertisements use some form of appeals to reach potential customers; advertisers use appeal to influence a customer to purchase a product or support a cause. Appeals speak to an individual’s need, wants or interest. The most common advertising appeals include use of fear, humour, rational, sex or bandwagon propaganda. Social judgement theory comes to play here because the interpretation consumers give to the advertising appeals used in any advertising campaign will determine whether or not they will be persuaded to patronise whatever is being advertised. Thus, Bradley (2017) argues that the emotional appeal pulls on the customers’ heartstrings to get them to purchase a product or service because of its high quality, its use as a status symbol or its connection to the individual’s deep-seated interests. The rational appeal, on the other hand, is concerned with an appealing price point and highlighting the benefits of owning the product. The rational appeal is widely used by small businesses to fend off competition.

The implication of social judgement judgement theory for advertising campaigns is that formative research should be conducted to determine the audience’s latitudes of acceptance, rejection and non-commitment for the particular social norms that will form the content of the messages with which the audience will be saturated. Messages that fall within the latitude of non-commitment should result in perception and behaviour change, whereas messages that fall in the latitude of acceptance are less likely to be accepted due to assimilation effects. Messages in the latitude of rejection should not result in perception or behaviour change due to contrast effects. Further evidence for this claim comes from Thombs, Dotterer, Olds, Sharp and Raub (2004), cited in Smith et al (2006) who note that their SNA campaign failed because the majority of students did not find the statistics used in the campaign to be credible and from Granfield (2002) who found that a campaign failed due to the fact that students rejected the message because they did not trust the source. In both cases, campaigns failed because the social norms messages were not believable or credible and thus were rejected (Smith et al 2006). In advertising, it is not enough to have witty copy and a wonderful product; companies with the most successful brands are those that imbue their products with a sense of personality by maintaining a consistent feel and tone of voice in their advertisements. A brand's tone of voice performs several crucial functions when it comes to compelling a customer to buy a product (Time, 2017). The judgement given to the tones is a deciding factor as it concerns brand loyalty. Advertisers must use persuasive strategies that will make the consumers to be loyal to their brands. Brand loyalty can only be possible when the consumers give the campaigns a positive interpretation. Thus, it is crucial to use techniques that consumers will interpret to be good. The persuasive strategies used by advertisers who want you to buy their product, as noted by Anonymous (2017) can be divided into three categories; namely: pathos, logos and ethos. Pathos appeals to emotion; an advertisement using pathos will attempt to evoke an emotional response in the consumer. Sometimes, it is a positive emotion such as happiness; an image of people enjoying themselves while drinking pepsi. Other times, advertisers will use negative emotions such as pain; a person having back problems after buying the "wrong" mattress. Pathos can also include emotions such as fear and guilt: images of a starving child persuade you to send money (Anonymous, 2017).

Logos is an appeal to logic or reason; an advertisement using logos will give you the evidence and statistics you need to fully understand what the product does. The logos of an advertisement will be the "straight facts" about the product; for example, Peak milk contains 28 nutrients (Anonymous, 2017a).

Ethos is an appeal to credibility or character; an advertisement using ethos will try to convince you that the company is more reliable, honest and credible; therefore, you should buy its product. Ethos often involves statistics from reliable experts, such as nine out of ten dentists agree that crest is better than any other brand. Often, a celebrity endorses a product to lend it more credibility.
(Anonymous, 2017). All these are very important when it comes to forming a judgement concerning any advertising campaign that is been carried

Conclusion

A persuasive communication employs persuasive techniques to influence the consumer. Thus, social judgement helps the consumers to interpret the advertising campaign and decide whether to act positively or negatively. Thus, advertising campaign planners must ensure that they use techniques that will make consumers to interpret advertised products, goods and services from a positive angle. More so, celebrities used in association with advertising campaigns must be seen to be credible as this will go a long way in positively influencing the consumers.

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