



Ethical Dilemma in TV Ads: A Case Study of Selected Pakistani TV Ads within Rhetorical Traditions

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Abstract

Advertising is an unavoidable reality in the modern consumerist world. The ambivalent nature of advertising has made it the subject of vibrant discussion among the marketing critics. But it is an undeniable fact that it has the sole objective of persuading the people to buy more products more often for more money. Pakistani TV commercials tread the same track and aim at influencing the consumers to the core for grabbing their hearts in order to get access to their wallets. In the quest for persuasion, these commercials make active use of rhetorical devices and logical fallacies. This paper examines some of the TV commercial ads within rhetorical tradition and attempts to show that advertising as a discourse is steeped in maximization of benefits of the stuff with a total disregard to any ethical consideration. The study makes a textual analysis of selected TV ads within rhetorical traditions. It concludes with logical, though not final, findings that ads coax the consumers with sneaky techniques and seductive images in order to attract their eyes.

Key Words: Rhetoric, Ethics, TV ads, Logical Fallacies

1. Introduction

The world of advertising is an ideological stripe that manipulates audience exactly in the manner that spin doctors and image consultants manipulate them. This manipulation is carried out through diverse means noteworthy among which is rhetoric. Zyman (2002) perceives awareness as the basic function of advertising (p. 13). Rhetoric, on the other hand, also aims at discovering means to make truth more probable to audience who are not that much convinced about it¹. Furthermore, Aristotle saw rhetoric as the supreme art of persuasion. He declared rhetoric a neutral means by which one could accomplish noble or ignoble ends. According to him, rhetoric could do the greatest good or the greatest harm depending on its use. His *Rhetoric*², therefore, emerges as a

¹ Cited by EM Griffin (2012) in *First look at communication theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, p.290).

² Cited in *Norms of rhetorical culture* (1993) by Thomas .B. Ferrell (New Haven & London: Yale University Press).



prototype, for both the inquiry and the practice of rhetoric. Since, advertising is also fundamentally about persuading the consumers to buy the products; therefore, one can say that rhetoric and advertising share the same board both aiming at bringing about persuasion. But rhetoric as an art has never insulated itself from negative connotations. Ferrell (1993) aptly remarks that rhetoric as a discourse is the least trustworthy subject in the Western culture (p. 9). Moreover, rhetorical performers themselves include within their verbal artillery the denigration of their opponents' discourse as "mere rhetoric." Quite often we hear people saying that what we need on problem X is less rhetoric and more action from the people concerned. The seductive connotation extended to the term rhetoric can safely be applied to the world of advertising. This extension, on the one hand, fixes the world of advertising in tawdry framework and, on the other hand, brings forth its unethical side.

In this study, I want to analyze the world of advertising from the perspective of rhetoric, while at the same time holding out some hope of focusing on its unethical dimension. Ferrell (1993) argues that theory in rhetorical tradition does not propose to find and explain what is already present; rather, it is about discerning what is implicit in the uncertainties and frailties of human affairs. Expanding the argument he further says that the job of any literary theorist is to find one dark secret at the core of every text, whether it is death, the phallus, the other, the hegemony of the gaze or some ghoulish synthesis (p. 4). Following this rhetorical tradition, the purpose of current study is to unfold some dark secrets at the core of TV commercial texts.

2. Literature Review

Advertising has become an unnecessary evil in the modern consumerist society. It has attained a de facto umbilical cord liaison with the modern industrialized world. The first thing that pops into people's minds about advertising is that it is a 30 or 60-second commercial. Zyman (2002), however, in his landmark study *The end of advertising as we know it* tries to shatter the traditional ideals about advertising. Advertising for him is an overarching term. It is not just 30 or 60-second video clip that is aired on TV, but it the way the product is being packaged, the spokespeople that the company hires to endorse it, the way the company treat its employees and the way they in turn treat the customers, the annual reports, the promotional materials, the articles that get written about the company, the events that the company sponsor, and even the way the



company handles unexpected business successes and failures. In short, everything the company does communicate something about its brand to its customers and prospective customers.

Kilbourne (1999) considers advertising a propaganda. Advertising, according to her, has assumed very powerful influence because it is not recognized as propaganda. We hold the misguided belief that advertisements do not affect us; they rather shape our attitude and define our dreams.

Benett and O'Reilly (2010) regard consumerism as an inescapable reality in the modern world. They discuss the homogenizing and totalizing nature of consumerism and maintain that a consumerist lifestyle magnifies the strain of everyday living. The psychological effects of consumption are fleeting; no sooner is the object brought home and ensconced in the closet than we crave the fix of something else gift-wrapped. Even as buyers fill every inch of their personal space with more stuff, they continue to feel empty inside---perhaps because the very act of consumption takes so much time and thought, leaving little room for personal relationships or activities that enlighten and inspire. Benett and A. O'Reilly (2010) believe that prosumers catalyze and streamline the modern merchandizing. Being leading-edge consumers, they tip the scales of power away from manufacturers and retailers and toward themselves. The initiation of decluttering movement which preaches that happiness lies in owning fewer things is a counterbalance to this squandering of scarce resources and is a welcome shift away from mindless consumption rooted in profound discontent.

Xing-Yu, Chang and Lee (2021) in their interesting study discuss the role of spatial distance in enhancing or devaluing consumers' perceptions of the brand. They believe that consumers show more favourable attitude towards the brand whose brand image is associated with status and luxury. Consumers readily pay for such products as the distance between the visual representations of the product and the consumer increases. On the contrary, for popular brands the opposite is true. Since their brand image has a broad appeal and social connectedness, the closer the distance, the more favorable is consumers' attitude and the higher their willingness to pay a premium. Their findings provide useful insights to marketers on the use of visual cues in advertising and product displays.



Melnyk, V, Francois, M. & Valentyne (2022) refer to social norms that mould consumers' behavior. However, it is not easy to determine the circumstances that may facilitate or obstruct this phenomenon. These social norms cover a wide range of contexts involving the purchase, consumption, use, and disposal of products and services as well as socially approved and disapproved behaviors. Their study suggests that the effects of social norms on approved behavior are stable across time and cultures, their effects on disapproved behavior, however, has grown over time and is stronger in survival and traditional cultures. The study is significant because it spotlights the interface between consumerism and social norms.

3. Advertising and Consumerism

The characteristic motive behind advertisements is promoting consumerism. And as Benette & O'Reilly (2010) observe that consumerism strives to dupe men into believing that consumption is the road to happiness. It tries to make man a spending and producing machine (pp.3-4). Marketing, as Zyman (2002) brilliantly states, is "about communicating the benefits and features of a product or service in a way that will make customers feel that their life is easier or simpler because of it." (P. 5) Advertisers achieve this end not just through thirty-second TV spots, but they apply every possible tool at hand so as to project the identity of the consumers onto the products. One such psychological tactics is the association of products with celebrities. Hence, consumers may or may not buy Head & Shoulders shampoo for its inherent values but they might buy it simply because the famous cricket star Shahid Afridi recommends this product in the TV ad. Similarly, Q Mobile is quite persistent in hiring every old and new celebrity as its brand ambassadors. The TV commercials of the company demonstrate the physique and beauty of the celebrities more than the specifications and the virtues of their brands.

3.1. The Dark side of TV Ads

Advertising, as it is generally understood, is the art of keeping the company's before the public. However, in the process of publicizing their brands, the advertisers sideline the functionality of the product and overemphasize the nonfunctional and psychological aspects of the products. They try to colour the personal identity of the buyers with the products. Hence, close-up toothpaste may not make the teeth as much healthy as it would ensure a romantic liaison. It can lead ineluctably to a passionate relationship. Toyota Corolla might be a well-made and efficient



car but the ad condones the functionality of the car and focuses more on the ensuing strong familial relationship between the father and the son that the car might actuate.

These commercials propagate false consciousness³. It promulgates the theory that emotional catharsis lies in material things. Parents do not have to worry about the health of their children for Dettol soap is there to kill hundred germs though these germs are never specified to the consumers. The soap is advertised as an elixir. Parents just need to buy this product and then let them be apathists regarding their kids. *Taza Dum* tea energizes you to an unimaginable limit. It can turn a coward into a brave and can solidify the potent potential of the viewers. Molty foam guarantees a cordial marital life. It concretizes the existing emotional bond between a father and a daughter. You cannot become a good father unless you buy Molty foam for your daughter on the eve of her wedding. If you need to sit before TV and to enjoy the warm company of your kith and kin, bring Coke soda home. It makes the cricket match more exciting and can even turn the result in your favour. The ad strikingly illustrates the illusionary side of the advertising world. For what can be more illogical than the assumption that the mere drinking of soda can change reality depicted on TV screen. That's why O'Toole (1981) accurately views advertising as something below average human intelligence (p.11).

Similarly, modern cooking oils tie people together at home. They may not have any affection running in their family but if they consume *Dalda* or *Habib* cooking oils, they stay united and happy. *Wall's Kulfa* ice cream integrates the disjointed family members. The ad demonstrates the fast-track life of modern time where everyone rushes to carry out their due responsibilities including the little girl who breaks up with her grandfather in order to watch her favorite show on TV. It is only when the mother sets the table with ice cream that all, including the girl, run to sit around the table and start enjoying the much-needed warm company with each other. *Kulfa* ice cream now serves as a binding force generating warmth and care among family members.

The objectification of emotion has become order of the day in TV commercials. Packard (1980) points out that manufacturers sell hopes and promises to consumers (p. 35). The ideational

³ A Marxist term used by H. Bertens (2001) in his book *Literary Theory: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, P. 85). The term stands for an illusory state where reality is distorted through an ideology and people are made to believe in artificial as something natural.



association of the merchandising attracts people and they come not to buy the products but the ideas and the images associated with the commodities. Sara may love her mother only when she makes *Rafhan* custard for her. The initial sign she displays on her embroidered cloth is Sara. When her mother turns up with the custard, she proudly knits: “Sara loves Ammi.” A daughter’s love for a mother rests in dessert.

Most of the ads encourage withdrawal from social arena and facilitate the consumers to sequester themselves in their homes. The home is presented as a place where no family ties run but as a repository of diverse stuff that showcase our appetite for comfort. The purchase of *Kenwood* split AC makes you stay at home. It is starkly emblematic of the fact that modern tech has replaced deeply-run family relations and has made people home lovers. Advertising may even resort to Diderot Effect⁴ in order to sell more stuff to more people more often and for more money. They are pretty conscious of the fact that a single, irresistible luxury purchase has the potential to set off a chain reaction of new purchases to complement it. It has engrossed consumers in an ongoing cycle of acquisition, endlessly trading up and seeking the next new thing. Once new furnishings in place, the room needs to be redone with new *Bright* paint. The mushroom growth of new mobile companies and newer and newer mobile sets also reflect the same gloomy reality. Consumers are consistently tempted to discard the old and buy the new.

Most of the TV ads display linguistic naiveté⁵. They try to establish an orthodox relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolized. In exchange for plunking down cash for a product or service, we are rewarded with whatever golden glow we seek: social status, sex appeal, superiority, adventure, elation etc. It is pretty clear that advertisers now have started targeting male beautification issues. Initially, beauty was considered the exclusive property of women. But now males are also presented as beauty obsessed. “Fair and Lovely” gives males a dashing look and makes them presentable and appealing to women. It is the same sexual appeal

⁴ The phenomenon is named after eighteenth-century French philosopher Denis Diderot whose fancy new dressing gown inspired a runaway spending spree as he sought to live up to its high standard. See B. Andrew & O. Ann (2010). *Consumed*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 30)

⁵ The term is used by S.I Hayakawa (1947) in *Language in Action* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, P. 27). Linguistic naiveté means that there is a necessary connection between symbols and things symbolized (between words and what words stand for). When people are more attached to verbal maps (pet theories) than factual territories, they exhibit serious linguistic naiveté.



and desire for social status that makes men users of the face wash product as shown in the ad. P. Slater correctly observes that advertisements are covert porno messages for, like overt pornography, they also arouse sexual excitement in the audience⁶.

4. Rhetoric and TV Ads

Aristotle states artistic (internal) and inartistic (external) proofs that a rhetorician can come up in order to mesmerize the masses. Among the three kinds of artistic proofs (logical, ethical and emotional), advertisers, by and large, misapply all the three types of appeals. Sirf Excel ad promotes filthiness with no moral considerations. The catch slogan of the ad: “dirt is good” belies any ethical standard. The claim made in the ad is highly ambiguous: “Sirf Excel removes stain in half time.” One really wonders what is half time: 30 seconds or 30 minutes or 30 hours. The ad encourages children to play in the mud and show their mums paying an appreciatory service to their filthy habits. This lackadaisical attitude to the dirt is due to the fact that *Sirf Excel* guarantees absolute cleanliness. One can say that the ad is not as much about cleanliness as it is about filthiness. Also, the breach of moral code is at the heart of the ad where involvement in unhealthy activities receives smiley faces.

While Sirf Excel may promote unhygienic physical habits, *Haj Mola* persuades the audience to give in to gluttony. In the given ad, Shahid Afridi, the cricket star, is shown as an expert on digestive problems. When he has over loaded himself, he is advised by two kids to take *Haj Mula*. The eating disorder no longer survives the moment he has tried the recipe. The ad, definitely, seems to be the promoter of unhealthy eating habits. It tries to make the truth appear probable through always stock-in-trade technique of presenting a hero. But whoever plays in the ad, it is a testifiable fact that it challenges the ethical fabric of nutrition by advocating eating disorder. The same filthiness one sees in ketchup ad. Once again children are the target of this ad. They resort to any hygienic and unhygienic act in order to stuff themselves with ketchup. One child eats the fallen stuff on his shirt even though the child seems a school student. The hidden message of the ad is pretty clear; children are educated to make the best of anything no matter how unhealthy the thing might be.

⁶ Quoted by J.O'Toole(1981) in *The trouble with advertising*.(New York & London: Chelsea House, P. 12).



The mother-son relationship is commercialized in *Shan Masala* ad. Kilbourne (1999) says that ads objectify emotion (p.27). The moral qualm one witnesses in the ad is the codification of this sacred relation in the spice product. The vacuum that the absence of mother creates can safely be filled with Shan. This anomalous objectification of human values can be seen in another mobile ad where a female body is commoditized as a mobile set. The slimness of the phone is demonstrated through slimness of a female body. In another ad, *always* products are cited as reasons for academic achievements. The product is presented as the ultimate solution for any female-related problems. Confidence, performance and intelligence are associated with the product. All a girl has to do is to wear the product and enjoy social and educational excellence. The crying woman just needs to get a Homage UPS and all her worries end. True solace lies in electronic products only.

5. Logical Fallacies at Work

Advertisers, as a matter of fact, may resort to any ethical or unethical means in order to achieve a persuasive effect. In their quest for persuasiveness, they try to deceive consumers into feeling that their products possess unparalleled excellence thereby tempting them to purchase the products. The arguments presented in the ads, if examine closely, reveal some logical fallacies⁷. These fallacies weaken the structure of ads and highlight the logical disconnection between the claim, the reasons and the evidence presented in the ads. The use of logical fallacies is like a mirror-image revealing the dark and unethical sides of TV ads. It shows that advertisers are more concerned with persuasion than with arriving at truth.

5.1. Faulty Use of Authority

One such fallacy is the faulty use of authority. It occurs when someone who is an expert in one area is used as an authority for another unrelated area. Every day we are confronted with this fallacy in media commercials and advertisements. Soap industry mostly employs this logical fallacy in their ads. For instance, in *Safeguard* ad, the little girl who is speaking like an intellectual giant warns her younger brother not to eat his food before washing the hands with safeguard. When she is asked about this piece of knowledge, she quotes her mother as an authority. One can really

⁷ Logical fallacy means error in logic. The term is used by G. Goshgarian & K. Krueger (2009) in their book *Dialogues* (New York: Pearson), pp. 48-60.



question the authenticity of the authority. Any specialty in one area does not imply specialty in another area. Domesticity is no green card for verifying hygienic concerns. Life Buoy soap and Dettol soap are other ads where this logical fallacy is employed. In these ads, mothers are presented as authorities over physical hygiene without having any specialty in this area.

5.2. Bandwagon Appeal

Another logical fallacy frequently practiced in TV ads is Bandwagon Appeal. This fallacy encourages collectivism among the consumers asking them to buy a particular product for everyone is buying it. It plays on people's fear of being different, of being excluded: "Intelligent mothers use Habib cooking oil"; "Samsung Galaxy is Pakistan's best-selling smart phone." Similarly, Volta is Pakistan number 1 battery. The basic appeal made in these ads is that of belonging to the group, behaving like the majority. If the customers do not want to be left out, they had better get on the bandwagon and do and think like the rest of Pakistanis.

5.3. Dicto Simpliciter

While Bandwagon Appeal may facilitate communal identity, Dicto Simpliciter makes a sweeping generalization providing no space for exceptions. Almost every toothpaste ad features a dentist who recommends a particular brand. It is generally accepted that dentists are in better position to understand our teeth. But this "rule of thumb" is wrongly employed for being a dentist does not necessarily mean expert in dentistry. There are exceptions to this simplistic generalization. This may even be witnessed in the ads themselves where different dentists recommend different brands of toothpaste. The arguments in these ads exploit stereotypes prevalent in a given culture. And this is what exactly can be seen in ads which feature women as the best cooks or caretakers. Being a woman does not essentially mean a good cook or a good caretaker. It is true that cooking and care are areas where women excel, but such approach does not account for exceptions to the rule---working women who are weaker at cooking or caring than the average household women.

5.4. Stacking the Deck

In addition to these logical fallacies, majority of the ads also make active use of stacking the deck strategy. They give only the evidence that supports their premise while disregard the contrary evidence. U-Fone and other mobile networks show only the rosy side to the customers



and withhold the thorny side. So, very proudly they announce packages but sideline the fact that customers can have these packages to the same networks, not to a different mobile network. They also generally hide the taxes that would be deducted on availing these services. Soft and Energy drinks proclaim their products as highly energizing without making a mention of the amount of sugar loaded into them. The same apply to all oily products which proudly display the have-not fats but never show the have- fats of the product.

6. Conclusion

Advertising aims at disorienting the psyche of the audience and turning them into passive conformists. It sometimes takes human intellect as something highly malleable which can easily be moulded through the much-maligned craft of rhetoric. It is also worth asking here where the ameliorative tendencies of advertising might be found. The ads shown on Pakistani TV are not only rooted in rhetorical traditions but also violate the moral code by promoting certain undesirable habits. In the existing world of hyperconsumerism, the individual person itself has become a product to be forever tweaked and enhanced, made better and better and consequently is becoming less and less authentic. Consumerism is creating a society that rewards artificiality and evinces little interest in depth.



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