PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE AND AD SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

Persuasion knowledge refers to consumers’ recognizing and evaluating marketers’ persuasion goals, attempts, and tactics and also the efficiency and appropriateness of these tactics. Consumers decide how to execute coping tactics by using this knowledge. Ad skepticism is also an important skill and a critical approach for consumers to evaluate and cope with an advertisement in the marketplace. It means someone’s having a tendency of doubting and disbelieving the claims of every advertisement. A review of past studies indicates that having higher levels of persuasion knowledge is positively related to being more skeptical of advertising.

Keywords: Persuasion Knowledge, Ad Skepticism, Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Persuasion, which is an indispensable and integral part of communication, has an important role in marketing communication. Marketers make an intensive effort to encourage consumers to purchase. They aim to convince consumers especially with advertising messages communicating that the product or service mentioned in the ad is most suitable for them. Ehrenberg (2000) suggests that “if it is an ad, it must be trying to sell.” In this case, persuasion is needed.

Information about one or more product attributes is communicated in a persuasive way in advertising. If the communication is persuasive enough to improve consumers’ attitudes about that attribute, their attitudes towards the overall brand will also improve (Leighton, 2009:2).

Persuasion means, “attitude change resulting from exposure to written or spoken messages delivered by a source to a recipient” (Olson and Zanna, 1993:135). O’Keefe (2002) describes persuasion as a deliberate attempt to influence the mind of the opposite side through communication where he/she is free to a certain extent. According to Uztuğ (2003), any communication even without intent to persuade is a persuasive communication if it causes a change in the receiver’s attitudes, beliefs, or actions. Briefly stated, the aim of persuasion is to influence the opposite side by using different methods and motivate him/her in the desired direction.

When marketers use persuasion in their advertising and sales presentations, they look for ways of influencing consumers. At the same time, consumers try to interpret and cope with marketers’ tactics used in these attempts and develop personal knowledge about persuasion. This knowledge helps them identify how marketers try to persuade them. People learn about persuasion from social interactions with friends, family, etc., from conversations about influencing people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, from observing marketers and from news commentaries about advertising and marketing tactics. Over time, the effects of persuasion attempts by advertisers or salespeople on people’s attitudes, thoughts, and behavior will also change, because people respond to these attempts by their persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Being aware of marketers’ persuasion efforts and evaluating messages by using persuasion knowledge will help consumers to decide more consciously.

2. Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge enables people to “recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasion attempts and select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate” (Friestad and Wright, 1994:3). It refers
to consumers’ knowledge and beliefs about marketers’ persuasion goals and attempts (e.g., in advertising), marketers’ tactics, the effectiveness and appropriateness of these tactics, and also beliefs about one’s own coping tactics (Hibbert et al., 2007). Consumer’s awareness of persuasion attempts and thoughts about marketers’ goals, intents, and tactics constitutes his/her persuasion knowledge and this knowledge helps him/her to cope with these attempts (Aytekin and Ay, 2014:353).

People’s experiences in persuasion episodes ensure them to understand persuasion process. However, it is not necessary to rely solely on what they figure out from their own private perceptions. Some of these perceptions are confirmed when they describe their perceptions to others and hear or read what others say about persuasion. Persuasion is also conceptualized socially out of these personal perceptions and interpersonal communications. Over time, people augment and modify what they learned from this social information. This expertise can be obtained from many sources. Consumers can learn from third party observations of everyday persuasion attempts and regularly comment among themselves on advertising, store atmosphere, package design, and sales tactics. They also have to take part in persuasion episode by experiencing a range of situations, such as recognizing marketer’s persuasion tactics, analyzing in which case this tactic is motivating, evaluating its efficiency and deciding how to cope with this persuasion attempt so as to have expertise in persuasion. Cognitive effort (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987), which is one of the required dimensions to have expertise, will decrease when experience of coping with persuasion is enhanced. However, less experienced consumers cope with persuasion in different ways (Friestad and Wright, 1994:6-7, 12):

- Rigid and absolute convictions (e.g., “all TV ads are misleading”),
- Total inattention to an attempt by an advertiser or a salesperson,
- Strong internal denial of information in a persuasion attempt by a trusted advisor or a friend who is trying to sell. (The consumer does not want to think that he/she is a persuasion source.)
- Total dismissal of all ads or sales presentations that use particular tactics in any situation,
- Dependence on friends’ interpretations about a sales presentation or an ad message rather than on his/her own responses.

People draw on their beliefs about persuasion to cope with other people’s attempts, because persuasion-related tasks are so important in everyday life. The acquiring and sharing of persuasion expertise is an ongoing sociocultural process. For example, distinguishing between program material and advertising material on TV may require using one’s persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1999:186-187) and acquiring of persuasion expertise will help him/her in this effort.

Persuasion knowledge has different dimensions depending on whether it applies to the persuasion process itself, to the messages about product or service, and/or to the source of persuasion, such as advertiser, salesperson (Hove et al., 2011:527). According to Artz and Tybout’s (1999) intuition, increasing the credibility of the source will increase persuasion. However, their research reveals that this proposition does not always hold. They suggest that it does not always mean that enhancing source credibility will also enhance the persuasion. Characteristics of the message can influence whether source credibility enhances, undermines, or has no effect on persuasion. Yalch and Elmore-Yalch (1984) examined the effects of source expertise and whether message claims were quantified (e.g. “many people do 95% of their banking using automatic teller machines” versus “many people do virtually all their banking using automatic teller machines”). They found that greater expertise led to greater persuasion when the message included quantitative information. They also suggested that expertise had no effect when the message was non-quantitative. According to this result, we can say that consumer must consider not only the source’s persuasion behavior but also message content to cope with persuasion.

Petty and Cacioppo (1979) state that “increased involvement should be associated with increased persuasion.” Increased involvement enhances the importance and processing of message content in producing persuasion. In another study of Petty and Cacioppo’s (1984), the results show that increasing the number of arguments in a message can affect persuasion whether or not the consumer scrutinizes the actual content of the arguments. Tormala and Petty (2005) also examined whether more persuasive information in a message can influence persuasion even when the actual amount of information does not vary. The results indicate that the perceived amount of persuasive information about a target stimulus can be manipulated to increase persuasion, even when the actual amount of information is constant.
In short, we can say that persuasion knowledge is an essential resource which helps one to realize and evaluate dangers and threats both as a consumer and as a person who lives with others in society. This knowledge will help him/her to make the right decision.

3. Skepticism toward Advertising

Skepticism is associated with doubt in philosophy. According to Sextus Empiricus, “everything is elusive, nothing is certain and everything can be queried.” A skeptical mind generally doubts “that which is not proven in an obvious way” (Pechpeyrou and Odou, 2012:47). If someone is skeptical, he/she may doubt almost everything.

Skepticism toward advertising (also referred to as ad skepticism) in general is “the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims” (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998:160). Ad skepticism is only about advertising and is conceptualized as a marketplace belief. Consumers may believe that advertising can be trusted to some degree in terms of socialization and their experiences. The highly skeptical consumer should be more likely to disbelieve every ad claim and the less skeptical consumer more likely to believe every ad claim.

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) also examined the skepticism toward different sources of product information. The results indicated that advertising was the least believable of the five sources (advertising, salespeople, friends, Consumer Reports and government agency) of product information (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 2000).

Ad skepticism is a critical approach to evaluate and cope with an advertisement. It seems to be an important skill for consumers in the marketplace. If a consumer is skeptical, he/she is more likely to examine the ad claims in a critical way and not accept them at face value. Such critical evaluations may help him/her to give the right purchase decisions. Ad skepticism may evolve as a defensive coping with advertising (Özdoğan and Altıntas, 2010; Koslow, 2000). Skeptical consumers may be more defensive to persuasion.

One of the most noteworthy dimensions of resistance is a general distrust of proposals. Consumers are likely to become guarded and wary when faced with a proposal, offer, or message because they are aware of the persuasive intent of the marketer. It is also expected that consumers who are high in ad skepticism have a tendency to avoid even personalized advertising, which include using their names and other personal information (Knowles and Linn, 2004; Baek and Morimoto, 2012).

Chan et al. (2013) argue that even though consumers’ attitudes toward advertising by medical professionals are in general favorable, they are worried about misleading information in these advertisements. In their study, they found that younger respondents and respondents with higher education were more skeptical toward advertising by medical professionals. However, older respondents and respondents of a lower educational level were less skeptical. According to Chan et al. (2013), the reason of this may be that older people and people with lower education may have a higher need for medical services. In this study they also found that respondents with a higher level of knowledge of the regulation about advertising media were less skeptical toward advertising. They suggest that ad skepticism may be due to lack of knowledge of advertising practices.

In Freeman and Shapiro’s (2014) study, children between the ages of 8 and 12 (preteen-age group) were surveyed and the results indicated that this group’s skepticism about the truthfulness of promotional messages was negatively related to their liking of promotional tactics (e.g., advertising on mobile phones, product placements in video games). They argue that as preteen-age group becomes more skeptical, they are more likely to avoid the message or transfer their dislike onto the brand. Also in Tutaj and Reijmersdal’s (2012) study about online advertising, the results showed that a negative perceived advertising value is strongly associated with advertising skepticism.

Amos and Grau (2011) suggest that “skeptics should have lower buying impulses and should focus more on the ad in aggregate.” In their study, they found that consumers who had higher ad skepticism did lower impulse buying. Because they prefer long time evaluation and do not decide immediately.

There are also studies about skepticism in terms of cultural and subcultural differences. Huh et al. (2012) examined and compared direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) skepticism between Korean and Caucasian Americans by undertaking consumers’ cultural values (collectivism vs. individualism). They found that Korean and Caucasian Americans are more similar than different regarding DTCA skepticism. The results also indicated that more collectivistic respondents were less skeptical about DTCA than their more individualistic counterparts.
4. The Relationship Between Persuasion Knowledge and Ad Skepticism

Acceptance of ad claims as true is a function of persuasion in many situations, a close relation between ad skepticism and the persuasive effect of ads should be expected. If consumers have a tendency to disbelieve ad claims, one of the ways of persuasion is closed. Consumers’ increasing marketplace experiences result in increased awareness of exaggeration and the selling motive of advertising. This awareness increases skepticism. However, further improvements in persuasion knowledge should result in decreases in ad skepticism, because consumers learn when and how to use and trust ad claims (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998).

Boush et al. (1994) tried to learn whether consumers approach advertising with a well-informed mind or have a tendency to reject or to believe every claim in advertising. The results indicated that having higher levels of knowledge about advertiser tactics was positively related to being more skeptical of advertising.

Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) mention about the crucial role of marketplace knowledge in adolescent skepticism toward advertising. They found that marketplace knowledge was related positively to skepticism. They suggest that greater knowledge of the marketplace may give teens a basis to evaluate ads. Thus, they are more likely to recognize advertisers’ persuasion attempts and also are better able to tell whether the ads are truthful or misleading. This suggestion overlaps with both Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) and Boush et al. (1994).

John (1999) focuses on what children know or believe about advertising and how they respond. She suggests that advertising knowledge is acquired for children to use it as a cognitive filter or defense when they are exposed to persuasive message. For example, around the age of 7 or 8, children begin to see the persuasive intent and understand that advertisers are “trying to get people to buy something.” By the time children reach the age of 8, they not only understand the persuasive intent in advertising but also recognize the deceptive advertising. McAlistter and Cornwell (2009) suggest that “to understand persuasion in advertising fully, a person must have the capacity to distinguish his or her own wants and needs from the desires of advertisers.” We can say that children who reach the age of 8 have the capacity for this differentiation.

Coulter et al. (1999) suggest that consumers are active readers of advertising, so they may or may not respond as the advertiser expected. They may or may not feel guilty when they see a guilt appeal in an ad. Coulter et al. (1999) argue that three factors seem to be important: “persuasion knowledge, ad credibility and inferences of manipulative intent”. Accordingly, when consumers see guilt appeals in an advertisement, they refer to their persuasion knowledge and make cognitive evaluations, assess ad credibility and advertiser motivations. Persuasion knowledge and consumers’ experiences with particular guilt appeals are likely to influence their reactions to ads, and also when consumers perceive that ad is credible, they are more likely to have a positive attitude to the advertisement and feel guilty. But if consumers perceive that an ad is unreliable, they are likely to have a negative attitude to the ad and become annoyed, and not feel guilty.

Thompson and Malaviya’s (2013) study about persuasion and consumer-generated ads indicates that consumers do not necessarily perceive consumer-generated ads as more trustworthy than ads created by professional firms. Consumers seem to realize that an advertisement needs to be persuasive and evaluate the effectiveness of the message by using their perceptions of the ad creator’s competence. They find that attributing an advertising message to a consumer can prevent persuasion. Also the results show that disclosing a consumer source triggers skepticism about the competence of the ad creator and identification with the ad creator.

Deighton et al. (1989) mention about using drama in advertising. While an argument in advertising appeals its claims objectively and is processed evaluatively, a drama in advertising is more subjective and is processed empathically. Viewers respond to dramatized advertising emotionally. For Deighton et al. (1989), despite the absence of propositions, evidence, reasons, claims, and other traps, drama is persuasive. They argue that drama is more persuasive than argument even though it is less likely to elicit persuasion. Consumers use their persuasion knowledge even if they respond emotionally.

Kirmani and Zhu (2007) investigated the impact of being promotion-focused or prevention-focused on persuasion knowledge. According to Higgins (1997), promotion-focused people perceive their goals as hopes, wishes and aspirations, but prevention-focused people perceive the same goals as duties, obligations and responsibilities. Kirmani and Zhu (2007) propose that a prevention focus person
increases sensitivity to the advertiser’s manipulative intent when compared with a promotion-focused person. They are more likely to focus on negative information and use avoidance strategies when they are watching an ad. They may think in terms of how to avoid being unduly persuaded, because they want to make a good decision. Thus, they may be vigilant against manipulation, activate their negative persuasion knowledge and have greater skepticism about ad claims even in the presence of ambiguous cues. In contrast, promotion-focused people are likely to have skepticism only when advertising message make manipulative intent highly salient. The researchers argue that motivational factors impact the use of persuasion knowledge and being vigilant against persuasion.

Obermiller et al. (2005) suggest that more skeptical consumers like advertising less and rely on it less. In addition, they respond more positively to emotional appeals than to informational appeals. In response to informational appeals in advertising, the more skeptical consumers have more negative attitudes toward the advertised products, but in response to emotional appeals, they have more positive attitudes. LaTour and LaTour (2009) found that consumers who were skeptical about the claims in advertising and noticed the falsity at exposure were still positively influenced by the ad message. Despite skepticism, emotional appeals might positively influence the consumers.

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) argue that consumers who have high persuasion knowledge are not impossible to persuade, it may be difficult to persuade them because they are more in control of their responses to persuasion attempts of marketers. In contrast, consumers with very high skepticism toward advertising may be impossible to persuade, because they would not believe any ad claims.

5. CONCLUSION

Persuasion has an important role in both in the marketplace and social life, because someone generally tries to persuade the opposite side by using different methods and tactics and wants to motivate him/her in the desired direction. It is a deliberate attempt to influence someone’s mind and the purpose of persuasive communication is to cause a change in the receiver’s attitudes, beliefs or actions. Marketers use persuasion tactics in their advertising and sales presentations to influence the consumers, because their aim is to encourage them to purchase. They communicate in a persuasive way to convince them that their products or services are the most suitable for everybody especially with advertising claims. However, consumers try to clarify the marketers’ goals and attempts. They need to cope with their persuasion tactics, so they develop persuasion knowledge. This knowledge helps them identify how marketers try to persuade them. Persuasion knowledge enables consumers to recognize, interpret, and evaluate marketers’ persuasion attempts and to cope with the persuasive tactics in a proper way.

Ad skepticism, which is the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims, is an important approach for consumers to cope with advertising. Skeptical consumers are more likely to examine the ad messages in a critical way and they doubt every claim in advertising so that they can improve defense against tactics of marketers. If a consumer is high skeptical about ad claims, it may be impossible to persuade him/her, because he/she would not believe any of them. Consumers’ increasing marketplace experiences and persuasion knowledge result in increases in awareness of persuasive intent of advertising. This awareness also increases skepticism. As a result, it may be impossible for marketers to convince a consumer with high skepticism and persuasion knowledge.

REFERENCES


