

# Psychology Behind Advertising: A Literature Review

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**Abstract :** A rapid revolution has been witnessed in the planning and making of advertisements. In the present world, significant attention is paid to even the minute details of an ad. Now the details like color schemes, characters, images, costumes and so on are handled by experts. Ad makers hire experts for different components of an ad. All such elements share one thing in common, and that is "targeting the right audience." As a result, consumer psychology and other such psychological principles have gained popularity in the field of advertisements industry. This review of literature provides influences of advertising and exploration of applications of psychology in the field of advertising. It will address the views of prominent psychologists related to the advertising field as well as psychological persuasion techniques. The paper continues with some of the significant aspects of the psychology behind advertising like conditioning, judgment, attitude, and perceptions. Although advertising effects are sometimes ignored/not paid attention to. However, it can and does have significant effects on our lives.

**IndexTerms - Persuasions Advertising, Psychology, Subliminal Messages, Decoy Effects, Positive Associations**

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are various definitions of advertising. Advertising is the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive about products, services, or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media[1]. In most cases, the advertisements aim to either change our cognitions or install "cognitions" in us. The word "cognition" used here denotes the pattern of thought of an individual. Changing views or cognitions of a person is not a one-day act and takes time. This is the reason why ad-makers insist on repeating their advertisements as far as possible. Continuous exposure to advertisements, thus, exert conditioning effects that can change the cognitions as well as the behavior of the targeted individuals. It can be argued that the conditioning effects exerted by advertisements follow the pattern of both classical conditioning [2] as well as social learning theories [3].

The various mediums of advertising are-

- Online advertising
- Mobile advertising
- Television
- Newspaper and Magazines
- Outdoor advertisings like billboards and cinema.

The advertising industry does not work in isolation. It comprises several units that range from content writers, copy editors, researchers, and designers to studios where such ads are created and processed, celebrities who are hired for shooting the ad, media channels and so on. Similarly, there are several agencies in the advertisement industry that convert the ideas of a client into a digital medium appropriate for creating advertisements.

This paper starts with a formal but brief introduction to the history of advertising, including some of the prominent names in this field. These psychologists are the ones whose efforts and works have been carried forward, and many of them hold validity even today. The next part of the paper discusses in detail the techniques, especially persuasion techniques used in the field of Advertising. Finally, the paper concludes with some of the suggestions that can benefit consumers exposed to aggressive advertising.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### I. Historical Contributions of Psychologists to Advertising

Advertising turned into a noteworthy power in industrialist economies in the mid-nineteenth century [4]. As production of goods increased, producers felt the need for expanding into new markets. The problem with the new market was that consumers were unaware of the quality and nature of goods being produced by the producers. Hence, producers decided to use advertisements as a means of promoting their product. It is worthwhile to note that not only producers were looking for advertisers, but the advertisers were also looking for implementing consumer psychology in the field of advertising. This was also the period when psychologists and researchers from various parts of England and other countries started working extensively in the field of consumer psychology. There were many prominent researchers and personalities in the field of consumer and advertising psychology. However, this paper focuses on the contributions of four psychologists in the field of advertising psychology. These four psychologists are-

- A. Harlow Gale
- B. Walter Dill Scott
- C. Harry Hollingworth
- D. John B. Watson

#### A. Harlow Gale

It is said that Harlow Gale formally started the practice of studying consumer psychology systematically and scientifically. For this purpose, he sent questionnaires to around 200 business in Minnesota in 1985 [5]. His purpose was to gain insight into the working of the business.

**B. Walter Dill Scott.**

Walter Dill Scott was the author of the book "The Theory and Practice of Advertising," which was published in 1903. Scott introduced the concepts of "Commands" and "Coupons" in the field of advertising [6]. Commands were used in more of an imperative sense and were used for highlighting the features of a product. For example, - "Use this energy drink for being active and healthy." Coupons were included with the product, for example, included in the pages of a magazine or newspaper. Consumers were required to fill the coupons containing questions related to the product and mail it back to the company. Scott's ideas were unique as compared to his precursors. What Scott engaged in can be termed as "deliberate advertising" where producers make direct attempts to persuade the consumers to buy their products.

**C. Harry Hollingworth**

Harry Levi Hollingworth was born on May 26, 1880. He was as a pioneer in the field applied psychology and using psychological principles in the field of advertisements [7]. The works of Harry Hollingworth were more focused on advertising techniques as compared to his predecessors. Perhaps the most famous work of Hollingworth was investigating the effects of caffeine on humans. The federal government then sued the Coca-Cola company of including caffeine in its products. Hollingworth was assigned the task of investigating the effects of caffeine. The plan and design of the experiment conducted by Hollingworth involved methods that were completely innovative, radical, and was never tried before in the field of psychology. His career shot to fame when he was able to nullify the charges imposed on the Coca-Cola company by the federal government [8].

**D. John B. Watson**

John B. Watson is known for popularizing behaviorism as a school of thought [9]. However, Watson works were not just limited to behavioral principles but also involved applying these principles to various domains. In the field of advertising, Watson successfully administered several high-profile advertising campaigns. He was mostly associated with advertisements of personal care products like Ponds cold cream [10].

Watson also used the concept of "testimonial" advertisements. An example of Watson's use of testimonials can be seen in the campaign he developed for Pebecco toothpaste [11]. In the ad, a woman is dressed seductively, and promoted the use of smoking, provided the consumers to keep on using the Pebecco toothpaste. The toothpaste had no health benefits to counteract the effects of tobacco. However, the advertisement, in this case, was paired with another stimulus (the woman) to increase the sales of the toothpaste.

**Current Psychological Concepts in Advertising****A. Persuasion and Advertising**

An essential aim of advertising is to change our ideas about things we want and need, and if this is so, then advertisers have to persuade people to buy their products. As such, persuasion techniques have become the backbone of advertisements. Persuasion is a The method of changing a person's cognitions, feelings and behaviors toward some object, issue, or person are called as persuasion [12].

**B. Psychology Behind Persuasion Techniques of Advertisements**

The persuasion techniques can directly follow the use of psychological concepts to achieve maximum effect on viewers. Some of the standard persuasion techniques used in advertising are-

**B.1. Run Emotional Ideas**

Consumers relate more with the appeals based on emotional and psychological principles as compared to appeals based only on functional features of a product [13]. Because there are cultural differences in terms of emotional appeals and such stimulus, therefore there are different strategies of advertising all over the world. Indians are generally targeted on the emotional domain. Examples are- Indian car sellers target the emotional aspect like a big car for the entire family, khyshiyon ki chabhi, and so on. Whereas the same car company in the US will focus more on technology, safety features, and so on.

**B.2.Affective Conditioning**

Elements that are capable of triggering positive emotions are used in advertisements to increase the appeal of such ads. Basically, the advertisers pitch their product with lots of positive triggers, for example, a laughing baby, a happy couple or a happy family, peaceful music, and so on. The logic behind such advertisements is based on the principles of affective conditioning. In affective conditioning, there is a transfer of our feelings from one set of items to another [14]. So, when advertisers pair their products with items, which are generally perceived in a positive or optimistic way by the consumers, the conditioning effect may kick in and make the consumers feel the same level of positive feelings about the targeted product. Such conditioning effects can then serve as motivators for the consumers to buy a certain product from a certain brand.

**C. Advertising Tools for Boosting Sales**

Apart from the techniques mentioned above, the following tricks are applied (in general) to boost sales. These include-

**C.1.Reciprocity**

In social psychology, reciprocity is a social norm of responding to affirmative action with another positive action, rewarding kind actions [15]. Because of reciprocity principles, humans feel obligated to repay gifts or favors, maybe in the present or the future. Example –Software's giants often sell a part of their product as free trials. The idea behind the free trial is to lead customers to gain confidence and form an emotional bond with the product. However, the ultimate idea is to pursue consumers buying full-term membership of the product.

**C.2. Authority**

This technique is being widely used, especially to promote cosmetics and healthcare products. Generally, people will follow the lead of credible and experts. Example-In the ads of toothpaste like Colgate or Sensodyne, usually dentists are shown to lead viewers to believe that the advertised toothpaste is best than the others.

### **C.3. The Use of Color**

Color is a significant source of data when individuals decide to buy [16]. Prudent use of colors can not only lead to distinguishing goods from rival producers but can also influence moods and emotions in both positive or negative ways. [16]. Hence, the choice of colors can affect the sales of the product.

### **C.4. Subliminal Messages**

The use of subliminal messages has been controversial. A subliminal message is a signal or message designed to pass below (sub) the normal limits of perception [17]. The conscious mind might not detect subliminal messages (but detected by the unconscious or deeper mind). The trick here is to show these messages during a movie at subliminal levels, preferably before the interval to arouse desire among viewers for buying the advertised products like soft drinks or popcorns.

Making false claims about a product is absolutely a lie but hiding information about something/not stating the entire fact is not a lie. Advertisers very well use this fact as they knowingly put attractive claims like- "Number 1 Brand, or America's Number 1 home Appliance" and so on. However, what they hide is the real description of the statistic test that was used to arrive at these results. Examples- Fair and Lovely Claim, Colgate-India's No 1 Dentist Brand or Dettol-Kills 99.99 % germs and so on. An asterisk mark always follows these statistics as advertisers don't give out the full comparison basis and techniques used while making the claims. By No 1 brand, it is not necessary that they are Number 1 in terms of quality; it may merely mean being ahead in sales and that too for a particular year and the particular age group.

### **Techniques Used by Consumers**

Like advertisers use various techniques to sell their products, consumers also use a wide variety of measures to ensure that they are buying the right product from the right manufacturer. Some of the techniques used by consumers before making "purchasing decisions" includes-

#### **1. Income Effect**

When the income of the people rises, they tend to buy more branded products as compared to low-end products [18].

#### **2. Consensus**

When uncertain regarding buying a thing, people often look to the actions and behaviors of others to determine their own. Examples- Before buying a mobile phone or a new car, people often do much research and also take suggestions from others.

#### **3. Window Shopping**

Consumers may browse through or examine the items in a particular supermarket or shop, without the intention of buying the products in the present or immediate future. Window shopping provides ideas about the price and choice of products. Such information can be used by consumers to make rightful buying decisions in the future.

#### **4. Online Shopping**

Online platforms have dramatically changed the shopping behaviors of consumers. Now, consumers, especially the youths, are increasingly using more online products. Before buying an expensive item that is available both online and offline, consumers may engage in checking the platform from where they can get the best product in the best price range. Online retailers have been successful in challenging the monopolistic hold of offline retailers. Before the growth of online marketing, consumers were unable to cross-verify the prices charged by the sellers on the goods related to fashion and accessories, electronic item categories like mobile or computers and their accessories and so on. However, with rapid growth in access to the internet by the consumers and opening up of several online marketing platforms, it is the consumers who have been benefitted due to more availability of consumer tastes and reduction in prices of several items due to competition between the various offline and online sellers.

### **Some Advertising Facts**

1. By the time we reach age 65, we will have seen approximately 2 million TV commercials.
2. More than \$500 billion a year is spent on advertising worldwide
3. Some of the famous advertising quotes used in Indian ads include
  - Amul: The taste of India,
  - Surf: Daag Acche Hain,
  - Maggi: Taste Bhi, Health Bhi
  - Hero Honda: Desh Ki Dhadkan

## **III. CONCLUSION**

The advertising industry uses a variety of techniques to persuade consumers. So, does it mean that consumers are helpless? The answer is, "No." The reason is that there is competition in every sector, from simple nail polish to sophisticated Air Conditioners; consumers have a wide variety of choices available. Hence it can be true that advertising affects consumers, but it is also true that at any given time, consumers are exposed to a variety of ads for the same category of products. Moreover, the expansion of online shopping sites and use of the internet have made the advertising industry a more of like "Do or Die" industry. With the use of the internet, consumers can quickly check the claims of advertisers and even look for alternative products. Nonetheless, it can be said that Advertising has and had been making a significant effect on consumer's decisions. Some of the few tips that consumers can use to increase their rationality are-

1. Parents must check the type of advertisements to which their children are being exposed.
2. For online surfing, extensions like Ad-block work the best to prevent advertisers from sending you pop-ups messages forcefully.
3. Any persuasion technique works only when we let ourselves blindly with the stated information about a product. To increase prudence, consumers can cross-check information and should verify all the claims before making any final decision.

4. Consumers must be cautious about the misleading health-related products such as Magical Pills to increase height, lose weight, and so on.
5. Finally, consumers must also be careful regarding the online scams and advertising behind the online scams like emails with lottery prizes, and unbelievable discount offers, etc. are often used to get bank details or credit card information of the users which later are used for illegal purposes.

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