

When watching TV or reading magazines, it can get easy to mindlessly watch short, passing advertisements go by without giving a second thought to what they are actually trying to say. Advertisements have become such a normal staple in our society that often times we forget that they are there for a reason: to convince people to do something. Whether its buying new clothes or buying a car, advertisements can persuade people to make decisions that are good for themselves, or ultimately good for the company. Either way, they try to convince people through a series of techniques or frameworks that are mostly hidden within the advertisement. Ironically if the message were portrayed very straightforwardly, it would lose people's interest because most of the time, they are for things that people don't necessarily need or wouldn't be inclined to purchase. But how exactly do they do it? After all, a keen eye will soon tell that advertisements all have a similar style in nature. In this paper, we will be exploring those techniques and frameworks that make advertisements and campaigns become powerful tools for persuasion by focusing on one particular campaign: the Axe body products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a typical Axe campaign, the following things are not surprising to see: attractive men and women in relationships filled with romance and sexual chemistry as well as catch phrases such as "making love and not war" or "leaving a man, coming back a hero." These are common examples that show how Axe campaign for men's hygiene uses its methods of the contrast principle, the halo effect, and peripheral cues. But while this methods might seem specific to just these commercials, they are in fact the same methods that many advertisements use in order to convince people to buy certain products over others. Previous research shows that these methods

have been used by common mediums such as magazines and TV commercials and resulted in positive effects in groups of consumers. The research presented will be exploring the different methods that advertising companies such as Axe use in order to persuade consumers to buy their products. It will also be describing evidence behind the methods that show how these advertising campaigns are successful.

The first study discusses the American advertising industry and how it has shifted its schema of identities of men in mainstream media. According to the research by Deana Rohlinger, the mainstream image of a man has evolved into a more sexualized and objectified version than its other counterparts. Rohlinger argued that these advertisement changes are due to the evolving values of the American public. To study this, she gathered highly popular men's magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *GQ*, and *Men's Health* and gathered demographic information on each of their target audiences. Then a coding scheme was created in order to "analyze the depictions of masculinity in the sample" (Rohlinger, 2002). The coding schemes were based on many historical analysis provided by past scientists where "nine main depictions of masculinity were identified: the hero, the outdoorsman, the urban man, the family man/nurturer, the breadwinner, the man at work, the erotic male, the consumer, and quiescent man" (Rohlinger, 2002). Coders studied the advertisements present in these magazines and analyzed how often these depictions of male identity were visually portrayed.

Based on the analysis, Rohlinger found that the erotic male was the most prominent depiction out of all the others. According to her data, men in these advertisements were seen as "an ideal that individuals seek to achieve, and hence provide the foundation for a masochistic or punitive relationship with one's own body" (Rohlinger, 2002). This meant that as the eroticized male image became the standard image of a man, viewers of these magazines arguably became

more comparative and critical of their own bodies. The results from this study give evidence to how the contrast principle works in advertisements.

The contrast principle theory states that juxtaposing two different things can result in a greater effect of their differences to people than when they are apart. In the case of advertisements, companies utilize the contrast principle by presenting attractive people in commercials, which then causes consumers to compare themselves with these onscreen images. Comparing with the physicality of highly perfected models may influence consumers to judge their own bodies more harshly than if they were just looking at themselves with no one to compare. But it is not just with bodies. By placing very attractive women, products, cars, and symbols of success and fame, advertising companies can also cause consumers to compare their social and economic situations. The contrast principle in effect makes them more aware of their own flaws and of the things they don't have.

Rohlinger argues that while there are other portrayals of manhood, the more popular erotic male is slowly taking over as "the depiction that dominates mainstream conception of masculinity" (Rohlinger, 2002). This is how many companies are marketing their products. By portraying this erotic male as the standard image of true masculinity, it can cause male consumers to buy products and conform in hopes to being recognized as the type of man celebrated by mainstream culture and the media. Rohlinger's results claim that this is why many advertising companies utilize attractive models in their commercials. By using the contrast principle, these commercials can spark shame and insecurity, which can influence an individual to buy these products simply to conform to mainstream culture. The research reports that the contrast principle is the most effective when images are both culturally and commercially

supported because it causes consumers to be more aware of a mainstream ideal that is constantly integrated into their everyday lives.

While advertisers incorporate the contrast principle to get consumers to conform to the norm, it is important to another factor that makes commercials so effective: the halo effect. The halo effect is one method used in advertisements to get consumers to think positively of a product. This effect occurs when a popular celebrity or person positively influences people's perceptions about a product simply by association. Many advertisers use this by having well known actors and actresses advocate as spokespersons or models for a commercial or campaign. Because many celebrities are both talented and well liked by the public, their one attribute of attractiveness or acting skill can cause people to think that they are trustworthy despite there being no tangible proof of their character. In this study, researchers Neil Beckwith and Donald Lehmann focus on "the differences among individual's attitudes toward several distinct stimuli at one specific time" (Beckwith and Lehmann, 1975).

In order to study this, the researchers gathered respondents who answered questions about a sample of 20 TV shows while using 6 attributes to describe them. The attributes in the study were "action, suspense, humor, personal involvement, well produced and directed, and topical or educational value" (Beckwith and Lehmann, 1975). The results showed that when the attributes were vague and harder to understand, the halo effect had more of an influence for the individual's beliefs about the TV show than when they were clear. And while the study states that the halo effect was not a dominating factor of the attitudes and beliefs, it did say that it affected people's beliefs and attitudes about products. The halo effect depended on how important and popular these objects or people were perceived to be.

The results in this study highlight the reasons why advertisers utilize the halo effect in commercials. According to the research, if consumers do not have a lot of information on the product, they are more willing to buy it if there is a positive perception around that product. Since attractiveness creates a halo effect, it causes the consumer to perceive an attractive celebrity as also a good person and therefore would trust their endorsement of the products more. While this might not be a conscious thought process, it is a mental shortcut that many consumers use if they do not have enough information to make a knowledgeable decision. The halo effect is the most effective when there is little familiarity with the quality of the products. This would apply the most to products with little differences in their quality. Commercials for products such as weight-loss programs or fast food restaurants use celebrities for this very reason despite the spokespersons having no relation or knowledge of the respective industries.

While the halo effect and contrast principle both influence a consumer in the decision making process of buying, advertisers tend to really rely on one strategy: appealing to people through peripheral cues. Peripheral cues are used when people do not have the mental ability or the motivation to carefully process a message through the central processing method, which occurs when people have to deeply and carefully consider a decision. It also tends to happen when people do not have lots of information necessary in order to accurately judge products. In fact, the halo effect is one method of peripheral cues that advertisers use.

In a study on peripheral cues, Patrick Vyncke wanted to understand its effects on consumers. The cues were organized as sexual attractiveness, sexual charm, male charm, and female charm. They were incorporated into advertisements and participants were shown two versions. Some had more than one manipulation where they increased the cues or decreased the cues. For example, "Since we were interested in checking the specificity of certain cues, we also

created these ‘sex-reversed’ ad sets” (Vyncke, 2011). Participants were then asked to rate the advertisement likeability based on the images that they saw. The results of the experiment showed that the manipulations with incorporated peripheral cues were successful in getting participants to prefer these advertisements rather than the other images. Vyncke discussed that peripheral cues “can elicit an affective reaction and therefore increase advertising effectiveness” (Vyncke, 2011). By manipulating these images, he found that they triggered emotional reactions. Vyncke also found that if these manipulations were too blatant, it would lead the consumers recognizing the effects on the images and feeling “betrayed” (Vyncke, 2011).

This study implies that the central processing system and consciousness are perhaps not the primary way in which people process things. It also suggests that advertisements become enhanced when they include peripheral cues that are subtle but appealing. In terms of advertisements, they are more effective in likeability when there are peripheral cues incorporated into images because they are visually appealing and stimulating for the mind. In fact, over enhanced visuals would eclipse any opportunities for possible central processing that may change the consumer’s mind. And while there are some commercials that have central processing cues, it is difficult for many because so many products are similar in nature. For example, all deodorants have the same purpose, and all soaps perform the same, etc.

This is why many companies use peripheral cues such as visuals, humor, and catchy phrases. They grab the attention of consumers long enough to increase their likeability, which in turn increases the chances of them buying their products. While peripheral cues do not have any long lasting effects, they are effective enough for consumers to choose one product over another simply because of the way that it’s presented. They are most effective when they are subtle and unnoticeable. Companies that cater these cues to their targeted consumers will probably find

them to be more effective than those that try to reach a broad audience. For example, product geared towards men would benefit from peripheral cues such as female sexual attractiveness because those are types of things that are most likely to grab the attention of young men. If it were a commercial targeted towards young women, then male charm would be the appropriate cue to utilize. By specializing these peripheral cues, companies would be more likely to appeal and create a more positive brand image to their desired consumers.

Advertising companies incorporate the halo effect, the contrast principle theory, and peripheral cues into their commercials in order to appeal to their targeted consumer group. The majority of these commercials appeal to the periphery route, as they are all visually stimulating and play on emotion and desire. Because commercials and advertisements are not things that consumers actively seek out, advertisers use these methods to instantly keep consumers interested. Through previous research, it is suggested that companies such as Axe use these techniques in order to artificially induce compliance and to persuade consumers that their products are worth buying.

CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS

Advertisements are carefully constructed media created for persuading people to purchase products that they might not usually buy. Advertisers will construct the brand or an image of a product through a variety of techniques to enhance persuasion. Awareness of these methods gives consumers knowledge to deconstructing the creation process and whether or not the techniques are successful. One particular campaign, Axe's products for men, combines multiple persuasion methods to appeal to their targeted group: young men in their twenties and thirties. Axe is a body product brand started by a French company called Unilever. Many of the advertisements are filled with components that appeal to young men such as young attractive

women, success, and the idea of being a hero. Axe tries to persuade these men in buying their products through the contrast principle theory, the halo effect, and peripheral cues in their commercials and advertisements.

In the past, Axe has been known for shaping their commercials around the concept of the products helping normal men “get women”. Their commercials effectively show how normal men, who are unsuccessful in attracting women, use Axe and suddenly attract a hoard of pretty girls. It was very popular among middle school and high school students at the time of their earlier advertisements because it targeted the insecurity of young boys and their fear of being seen as unattractive. Some of their later advertisements contained more sexualized images in hopes of targeting more of these insecurities and desires in young men. But these provocative advertisements in turn made the public think lesser of Axe. In more recent years, the company has started creating advertisements that speak more towards the desire of men to be seen as truly masculine. They have shifted their brand image from a product that not only helps men attract beautiful women, but also ultimately turns regular men into societally validated “real” men, a label that a lot of boys and men struggle to achieve.

Based on the content of the commercials, Axe targets young men in their twenties and thirties. The underlying message of these advertisements address men’s desires to legitimize their manliness by being seen as cool and successful in having beautiful women, who virtually act as accessories. Older men are not the target audience due to the fact that older men tend to be married and are less concerned with the issues of attraction and manliness. In terms of channels used for dissemination, Axe heavily uses their funds to create TV spots and commercials that also appear on YouTube. Although they have magazine advertisements or billboard signs, their main focus seems to be on commercials. Axe commercials use to heavily populate the public

sphere, but their presence lessened in the past couple years as people have started to deem the content as overly stereotypical. Axe advertisements have been less mentioned in relation to other popular items such as Old Spice, who use similar advertising tactics, but in a less controversial, demeaning manner. The company targets the insecurities of young men and promotes their products as an effective tool to overcome fears and desires of their age group.

One of Axe's main methods for their advertisements is the contrast principle theory. Axe adopts this principle effectively by influencing the consumer to compare themselves to the attractive men or the average men who later achieve a greater status through getting women. The first method is by having very attractive men as the main characters with beautiful women as their co-stars. By depicting these men as successful characters surrounded by factors commonly desired by the target group, it can cause men watching these commercials to compare themselves with the actors they see on screen. Male consumers would probably see themselves as inadequate or not "real" men because they do not have these things. This tactic would have a greater chance in persuading them to buy the product because Axe provides a method to achieve the status they desire on screen.

The second method is where the men in the commercials are similar to the men in the specified target group. This is shown in one particular advertisement, where a professor educates college students in an environment that resembles a TED talk. The professor starts explaining a very serious epidemic: women are getting hotter by the years and ultimately present a greater danger to men than they ever did before. He then presents a video that shows young, nerdy men stumbling and embarrassing themselves in front of very attractive women. The professor presents them with men using the new Axe Black Chill as a solution, saying this product is what

will protect them from becoming fools in front of women who are increasingly getting hotter. The advertisement ends with the words “Keep Your Cool” (Axe, 2013).

At a surface level, the men onscreen look normal. But it would increase the chance that men viewing the commercials would still compare themselves to the men onscreen because they emotionally connect to the situations presented in the commercial. By presenting common dating experiences of average men, the commercial can cause men to identify with the characters onscreen. This could lead to greater chances of them buying the product because they think the product was made for men like them. In the case of Axe, their commercials are effective in using the contrast principle because they accurately illustrate the desires and anxieties of young men while simultaneously presenting them with an easy solution. It’s simple, easy to understand, and they make it relatable to all average men by either depicting idealistic dreams of young men, or portraying average men achieving greater results.

Rohlinger’s study shows that the images of men as erotic males and heroes were the ones that stood out to target audiences of male magazines such as *GQ*, as the most masculine characters when compared to other known male roles (Rohlinger, 2002). As the erotic male is becoming a mainstream image for what constitutes as real masculinity, Axe uses this image with the contrast principle for persuasion. Because they know and use the target group’s shameful and insecure identities, they can easily pinpoint and show similar situations while placing the Axe product as a successful solution their fears. But since many women buy men’s body products for their significant others and deem Axe advertisements as too provocative, their advertisements would be more effective if they did not use sexist portrayals of women. Then it would avoid triggering people to critically think about gender equality and representation in their advertisements. Changing their portrayals would thus cause their advertisements to slip through

the peripheral route of people's minds and would be more effective in persuading people to purchase their products.

In past commercials, Axe's campaign would try to appeal to young men by claiming that their products made men more attractive to women. But as people became more aware of the messages underlying the text, they started to become more critical of Axe's sexist portrayals of women. In recent years, Axe has changed their branding image by focusing more on how their products are a solution to turning men into "real" men. The halo effect is effective in portraying this because they show good-looking men in desirable environments using Axe products to endorse that real manliness comes with using their products. Having good-looking people as visual advocates can make consumers believe that what they're advocating for is useful and true. If less attractive people were showing the benefits of Axe, consumers would be less likely to buy into their campaign.

Recently Axe has been focusing on the archetype of the hero. Historically as well as in popular culture, heroes have been lauded as true manly men. In recent times, astronauts and soldiers have positive connotations in America as men who are heroes that serve our country. Axe takes this idea of the hero and uses its connotations as a halo effect to get consumers to associate their products with manliness and honor; attributes that are valued by men in society. In one commercial, the camera follows the stairs where astronaut gear is everywhere and a pretty woman lies in bed. It pans to an attractive man taking a shower while looking out to the window, which shows his spaceship shuttle crashed into the ground. The commercial then shows the words "Shower like a hero" (Axe, 2013).

Researchers show that the halo effect is one way that advertisers persuade consumers to think highly of their products because they respond to it affectively. As public figures in our

country, many men may respect these roles and would associate a positive connotation to the product because of the connection with respected public figures. And since Axe's products are not unique in nature, they use attractive role models with positive connotations in hopes that affective reactions to these men's' occupations would influence consumers' judgments of the product. Axe uses the halo effect successfully by using well-known male role models in society such as astronauts or soldiers that are known as respectable "true" men to influence the public's opinion of their products. It is one strategy they uses to appeal to their target group in a more effective way than just showing pretty women around average men.

The accumulation of all of these methods leads to one that perhaps Axe uses the most: peripheral cues. Peripheral cues are used when there are not a lot of differences between certain products, and where the focus is on selling the branding of the product than the product itself. Common peripheral cues that Axe uses are aesthetically pleasing people, objects of desire, and beautiful environments, which are used to appeal to people who are not centrally processing the product's information. They are effective when the audience doesn't really have the ability or the motivation to process the message. And because these commercials usually happen in between TV shows, the peripheral cues in Axe advertisements work pretty effectively. They take appealing images that young men value and juxtapose their products with these things so that consumers would associate attractiveness, success with girls, and being manly with the consumption of Axe.

An examples of their print advertisement shows this method with the words "The cleaner you are, the dirtier you get" while portraying a clean man in the shower, and an attractive naked woman spraying cream on herself (Adpressive, 2013). For someone who does not have the time or the motivation to interpret commercial messages, this advertisement is very easy to

comprehend: Axe helps regular men get very attractive women. By using short and simple catch phrases and very strong visual images, it can catch the attention of someone who might not be particularly interested in body wash.

As a whole, Axe uses these cues very well because their commercials and advertisements are heavy on affective influence, which is an emotional factor that depends on appealing images and easy to comprehend phrases. Vyncke discovered this in his study, when he found that pleasing visuals are very effective in persuading people's affective opinions on the products, but can cause consumers to feel betrayed when advertisers use images that are too blatant in manipulation (Vyncke, 2011). In some advertisements, Axe presents their images as appealing with subtle enhancements. But some images such as the advertisement mentioned above, can be too blatant in visual manipulation and can cause consumers to dislike the product. And while peripheral cues are successful in persuading people that are not knowledgeable or interested in their products, it is easier for their opinions to change because the information goes through peripheral processing and not central.

Based on its connotation in popular culture, Axe is successful in getting their image and brand known among other body washes for men, but when their images are too graphic, it can cause consumers to lose interest because they become aware of the blatant attempt of advertising. And since many consumers are uneducated about body wash quality, it is questionable to say that their products are of good quality. If they provided more information about the product, perhaps by introducing scientific evidence to legitimize the quality of the product, then their consumers might stay more faithful to the product because ultimately opinions based on peripheral cues are short lived.

Although Axe is a campaign that is successful in setting up their brand as a product that validates real manhood through the contrast principle, the halo effect, and peripheral cues, it does not use any central processing information, which makes it not as effective in keeping consumers faithful. Many of their advertisements feel superficial and flashy, with no real information on what makes their products better in performance. In fact, an accumulation of these flashy advertisements that focus on over sexualized women can be problematic. It can cause viewers to see objectified women as a necessary factor for single, average men to be considered “real” men. As writer Julie Zellinger from the Huffington Post puts it, “their body spray makes men more attractive to women—who they present as brainless (sometimes headless) objects who exist to please men” (Zellinger, 2013). The lack of depth in providing evidence to back their claims and the sexual objectification of women as accessories makes Axe’s campaign solely based on visuals and branding, making it vulnerable to the loss of consumers when other brands with real information come to persuade the same target group.

Resources

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