

Advertising, Language and Culture

Joseph Adepoju Tejumaiye, PhD

Department of Mass Communication

University of Lagos, Nigeria

+2348098089132

Omowale T. Adelabu, PhD & IfeKristi T. Ayo-Obiremi

Department of Mass Communication

Redeemer University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

adelabuo@run.edu.ng; +2349050691210

ifeyoobi14@gmail.com; +2348134433425

Abstract

The researchers examined the controversies surrounding advertising, language and culture which had been for a while as some scholars opined that language and culture should not necessarily be a primary determining factor in advertising messages. Others, however, argued that language and culture are significant aspects of peoples' lives that cannot be ignored and should be considered in advertising messages. The study is hinged on the culture-oriented and high context versus low context models. It was concluded that advertising does not debase language and neither does it debase culture; rather, it promotes it; albeit, the debate on the relationship between advertising and culture has not ended. To this end, the researchers among others recommended that the role of language and advertising in the construction of culture should be to spread the message of modernity without sacrificing that which is ethical and condemning that which is unethical.

Keywords: Advertising, Language, Culture, Society, Behaviour

Introduction

One phenomenon out of several influencing purchasing behaviour is advertising. However, there are controversies on the use of language in advertising and the role of same in cultural influences; while advertising practitioners argue that the role of language in advertising is complementary and that for advertising to speak with people, descriptive, colorful, picturesque, warm, humane and personal tone are required (not minding the rules of grammar), critics of advertising opined that for there to be effective understanding of messages, the rules of grammar are sacrosanct and must not be violated in any form. While this controversies rages, the culturalist argued that man is a cultural being and that actions of man are traceable to his totalities – his culture.

There is no doubt that culture differs from place to place. Therefore, what is cultural in Japan may not be in Nigeria and different scholars have defined it in different ways. Culture is strictly a human creation (Tejumaiye, 2004, p. 3) that includes food, dressing, social habits, arts, music, religion, language and other ethics like sitting, greeting, behaving with older and younger ones and other habits (Zimmermann, 2017).

According to McQuail (2000, p. 93), –culture is something collective and shared with others, there is no purely individual culture. He continued thus: –culture has some symbolic form of expression whether intended as such or not; it has some pattern, order or regularity and, therefore, some evaluative dimension. He asserted that –there is (or has been) a dynamic continuity overtime, culture lives and changes, has a history and potentially a future. Perhaps, the most general and essential attributes of culture is communication, since cultures could not develop, survive, extend and generally succeed without communication.

The intent of advertising is to communicate a message (usually paid for) and inform people about something to influence them to purchase or try it out (Pahwa, 2020). By inviting people to try their products; companies also invite criticisms and attacks if their products do not live up to the promised benefits. This assertion is not only true, but it confirms Harry Groome’s description of advertising as a method of mass communication combining economy, speed, responsibility and control. None-the-less, it is safer to buy advertised products than unadvertised products. Due to its ubiquitousness, advertising has been criticised and attacked. Critics said that advertising is untruthful; that it is manipulative; makes people materialistic; excessive and deceptive. Other charges include: advertising perpetuates stereotype; it takes unfair advantage of children; it negatively influences the mass media; it destroys culture and it debases language. Thus, the researchers examined the roles of advertising in language and in the construction of culture.

Research Questions

Questions of interest include:

1. Does advertising debase language?
2. What role does advertising play in culture?
3. Does advertising enhance or destroy culture?
4. What role does advertising play in the construction of culture?

Theoretical Framework

To examine the questions above, culture-oriented model; high context cultures versus low context cultures model and some thoughts on the origins of language were examined. The culture-oriented model emphasises cultural differences among people; it recognises that people share certain needs and these needs are met differently in different cultures. The model preaches that emotions are basic to all humanity, but that the degree to which these emotions are expressed publicly varies from culture to culture. For instance, the camaraderie typical in an Australian business office would be unthinkable in Japan. The informal first name basis relationships common in North America are frowned at in Germany where co-workers often do not use first names.

High-context cultures versus low-context cultures model argues that the functions of communication (advertising) is the same in all cultures, but the expression of messages varies in different cultural settings (Hall, 1973, 1977). The crux of this model is a distinction between high context-cultures and low-context cultures. In high context

cultures such as Japan, China, Yoruba, Igbo, Italy, Russian, etc. the meaning of a message can be understood only within a specific context unlike low context cultures such as English, in which message(s) can be understood as an independent entity. For instance, Coca Cola's use of -coke adds life in English translated into Chinese reportedly reads, -Coke brings your ancestors back from the dead. A simple, easy to understand courtesy in English welcoming you into a hotel translated in Japanese language reads: -you are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid. Also, from a Moscow weekly, a simple statement stating that an exhibition of painters takes place yearly translated into English reads: -There will be a Moscow Exhibition of Arts by 15,000 Soviet Republic Painters; these were executed over the past two years. A laundry advertisement in Rome says: -ladies leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time. From the aforementioned, advertising messages constructed by writers from high context cultures might be difficult to understand in low-context cultures because they do not get right to the point. In contrast, messages constructed by writers from low context cultures may be difficult to understand in high context cultures because they omit essential contextual detail. According to Michioka (n. d.), in Japan, differentiation among products does not consist of explaining with words the points of difference among competing products as in America. Differentiation is achieved by bringing out the people appearing in the commercial—the way they talk, the music, the scenery, rather than emphasising the unique features and dissimilarities of the product itself.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research study that describes, explains and interprets existing literature. This method is less structured than quantitative research as it is built on inductive reason (Williams, 2007). The qualitative integrative literature review is specifically selected for this research as the method helps to examine scholars' positions on relationship that exists among advertising, language and culture in advertising messages. The integrative literature review method is used when the aim of the research is to assess, critique and synthesise the literature (Snyder, 2019). Integrative literature reviews address topics that overview knowledge of scholars, their positions and then concludes based on their opinions. For this study, opinions and criticisms of scholars on the use of language in advertising are examined as well as opinions on the relationship between culture and advertising. The conclusion is drawn from the different opinions.

Discussion of Findings

Thoughts on the Origin of Language

While no one can say with precision the origin of language, it is however a known fact that spoken languages developed well before written languages (Yujiang, 2019). Otto Jespersen (1921) in Sarkar (2020) disagreed with many scholars' view that -the origin of speech is unknowable. In his opinion, human language originated, while human beings were enjoying themselves and he said -language was born in the courting days of

mankind. A school of thought said that there is a divine source to human language. This school of thought argued that there is an original language which is God given. The hypothesis is that if infants were allowed to grow up without hearing any language, they will spontaneously begin using the original God given language. James IV of Scotland carried out this experiment around 1500 A.D and the children were reported to have started speaking Hebrew (Jones, 2016). An Egyptian pharaoh, *Psamtik*, also did same experiment with two newborn infants around 600 B.C, after two years in the company of sheep, the children offered not an Egyptian word, but the Phrygian word “-bekos” meaning bread (Jones, 2016).

Another school of thought argued that language has in it the –natural sounds source. The suggestion is that primitive words could have been imitation of the natural sounds which early men and women heard around them, that is, when an object flew-by, making a LAW-LAW sound, early human beings imitated the sound and used it to refer to the object associated with the sound. The issue, however, remains that while it is true that a number of words in any language are onomatopoeic, it is difficult to see how most of the soundless and abstract entities in our world could have been referred to in a language echoing natural sounds. A variant of the natural sounds source suggested that the original sounds of language came from natural cries of emotion such as: pain, anger and joy. To this end, an expression like *OUCH* came to have its painful connotations. The problem with this view is that it has been found that noise people make in emotional reactions contain sounds which are not used in their language. A proposal known as the *Yo-Heave-Ho Theory* said that the sounds of person involved in physical exercises could be the source of language, particularly, when the physical exercise involved several people and had to be coordinated. While this theory places the development of human language in some social context, that human sounds produced may have had some principled use within the social life of the human group should not be doubted. As interesting as this theory is, it remains a speculation and it does not answer the question regarding the origins of the sounds produced. After all, Apes and other primates have grunts and social calls: but they do not seem to have developed the capacity for speech (Chomsky, 1977).

The –Oral-gesture source proposes a very strong connection between physical and oral gesture. The proposal adduced that a set of physical gestures was developed as a means of communication, then, a set of oral gestures specifically involving the mouth developed in which the movements of the tongues, lips, etc. were recognised to patterns of movement similar to physical gestures. The problem with this proposal is that there are many oral messages which cannot be gestured; for example, how would you put in gesture the expression - you think you are older than me?

There is also the –Physiological adaptation proposal. This proposal concentrates on some of the physical aspects of humans which are shared with other creatures. While these physical features by themselves would not lead to speech production, they are good clues that a creature possessing them probably has the capacity for speech. These features include: human teeth, human lips, human mouth, human larynx, or the voice box, human brain etc. As sound as this proposal is, however, it is factual that some of these physical

human features if not all, are possessed by human beings who are deaf and dumb; except we agreed that the sound the deaf and dumb make is their language?

Albeit, the debate on the origin of language continues; whatever theory is used to explain the origins of language, what is apparent is that language is indispensable in dynamic consensuses both among human beings and even animals. According to Yule (2002), language possesses these properties: (1) Displacement (2) Arbitrariness (3) Productivity (4) Cultural transmission (5) Discreteness (6) Duality (7) Vocal auditory channel (8) Reciprocity (9) Specialisation (10) Non-directionality and rapid face.

Advertising and Language

The word advertising is a gerund form of the verb word *advertises*. Advertising, however, in contemporary usage is a noun. The word advertising has two origins: (1) Middle French and (2) Latin. Middle French as it has *advertiss*, stem of *advertir* meaning “to inform.” The Latin origin has it as *advertere* –to turn inward (Akrani, 2012). A critical comparative-juxtaposition of the etymology of the word advertising with its contemporary usage shows that the word has actually gone through changes. Today, the word is used not in the sense of informing alone, nor in the form of turning the mind inward (perception of a phenomenon) but in the sense of informing, persuading, reminding, reinforcing and comparing phenomenon with phenomenon in same class or category or in different class/category. Contemporary usage of the word (advertising) has metamorphosed into an acceptance of the role of the sponsor of the message and his overbearing influence on the message content and the timing of the message for exposure. The concept advertising in current usage is incomplete without a mention of the mass media as the channel of exposure vis-à-vis message being paid for and exposed to anonymous mass audience.

Advertising is a means of communicating product features to consumers. It is a mini sub of the marketing mix, the major subs being: product, price, place of distribution and promotion. As a means of communicating product features to target audience and prospects, advertising has taken on the toga of advocacy, identifying with the totalities of man (culture) in order to convince man. In convincing man, words are used. The facts that words are used denote that language is sine-qua-non in advertising messages. Albeit, there are some television advertising messages in which no single word was spoken, rather, what you see are pictures and movement of people. A good example is the Benson and Hedges television advert that appeals to high class status and wealth advertisement. Nevertheless, these forms of advertisement are rare, especially in this part of the world but are common in the developed world. They are common in the developed world because their use is a function of the popularity and general acceptance of the product used for.

One of the earliest means of communication used by man as an individual or collectively is language. Language is so pivotal to man and the society that an anonymous scholar described it as –the wheel upon which the society moves, it is the beginning, the middle and the end of man and the society; without it, man and the society will cease to exist. To stress the significance of language, it will be recalled that the

Holy Bible in Genesis chapter one verse three says, “*And God said, let there be light; and there was light.*” This presupposes that a language was used or spoken. What is being stressed here includes that the world we live is language(s) based.

The Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary says language refers to (1) the words, their pronunciation and the methods of combining them used and understood by a large group of people. (2) The audible, articulate and meaningful sound as produced by the action of the vocal organs. (3) A systematic means of communicating ideas by signs or marks with understood meaning. (4) The words and expressions of a particular group or field, among others. These descriptions not only stress the meaning of language; but they also state the fact that there is nothing man does that he will not use language. Note that language is not limited to the spoken words, signs, signals and other spoken gestures are also languages. All these verbalised and non-verbalised expressions are greatly used in advertising messages and they constitute the core of understanding advertising messages. Stressing the relevance and importance of language in advertising, the meaning of a message is subject to the rules of language. In all, there is in absolute, nothing that can be done or accomplished in advertising without the use of language. This statement is premised on the fact that for the purpose of advertising to be achieved, the target audience must be convinced and the way and manner to convince them is via communicating with them through different language(s). However, there are controversies on the use of language(s) in advertising messages. The controversy centers on the claim that advertising debases language.

Does Advertising enhance or Debase Language?

This above question is as old as advertising; till date, no perfect answer has been found. Critics have given their views, just as defenders of advertising. The critics argued that the language of advertising is too breezy; too casual and too informal. They said that advertising does not obey the rules of grammar and that often times, the use of language in advertising violates decency rules just as it encourages children to learn ungrammatical and tasteless expressions. Some examples of these ungrammatical and tasteless expressions included: –Shine shine Bobol of star larger beer; –Rain coatl of Gold Circle Condom; –Glol of Global com, –Jagajagal Road of Dunlop Elite tyre. Other examples include: the use of two, three or four exclamation marks to convey messages; the use of a comma or a full stop where grammatically nothing needs used; the use of question marks where none are needed, among others.

However, advertising practitioners and defenders of advertising argued that advertising does not debase language. They stressed that though advertising uses informal language, but what is of importance includes that messages are understood by the targeted audience. They argued that there is need to be flexible on the use of language in advertising so that meanings are achieved and that to achieve commonness between advertising messages and the targeted audience, descriptive, colorful, picturesque symbols and languages are used. This explains why breezy languages are used, that is: to achieve commonness. Advertising scholars and advertising practitioners also stated that advertising message is somehow poetic and that the license poets enjoyed in their use of

language is the license they enjoy. In all, they argued that readability studies have shown that people respond better to a down-to-earth, conversational tone than to a more dignified correct tone. This explains why advertising copywriters develop a style that is descriptive, colorful, picturesque, as well as, charming, full of warmth and personality to communicate with the target audience. Also, they stressed that because of the need for brevity, copywriters use simple, lively, full of personality and punctuation marks to build a conversational tone than to construct purely grammatical sentences.

Culture: Meaning(s), Characteristics and Importance

One of the ways to define concepts is to look at the etymology of such concepts. The concept –culture| is from the Latin word ‘*cultura*’, from ‘*colere*,’ meaning, –to cultivate|(Zimmermann, 2017). Taylor in Prinz (2011) described culture as –that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. | Kluckhohn (1951) in Lebron (2013) conceived culture as consisting of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting that can be acquired and transmitted by symbols mainly.

Every society possesses a culture. This explains why some immigrants have problems in adjusting to life in a new country. While society is a group of people united by social relationships, their culture is their way of life. What separates Spain from Morocco is not just a political boundary. Moroccans and the Spaniards speak different languages, eat different foods, wear different kinds of clothes, observe different customs, hold different beliefs and differ in many other ways. Culture is seen to be a –sum total of human achievements, material, capable of transmission, socio logically| (Mazumdar in Kaur, n.d.). Cultures interpret our surroundings for us and give them meaning and allow us to express ourselves. Language, religion, science, arts, notions of right and wrong and explanations of the meanings of life–these are all parts of the cultural system of a society. Sociologists use the concept of society to identify people according to their relationships with one another, they also use the concept of culture to identify people according to what they believe, what they do, what they know and how the act (Stark, 1995, p. 43). Culture is such a broad and dynamic concept to the extent that it is the totality of man. For instance, *technology* whether it is bows, arrows or even computers, is as much a mental as a physical phenomenon. Technology does not exist naturally, it is created; a stick is not a club until a human picks it up and hit things with it. To an ant, a statue is only another piece of rock. As a human creation, culture is strictly a product of human society. This explains why every society has its distinctive ways of life and also why conflicts often arise between and among people with different cultural backgrounds who found one another having to take collective stand on socio-cultural, economic and political issues.

Culture is something collective and shared with others as there is no purely individual culture. Culture has some symbolic form of expression, whether intended as such or not, it has some pattern, order or regularity; therefore, some evaluative dimensions (Wiley, n. d.). McQuail (2000, p. 93) concluded thus: –There is a dynamic continuity over time, culture lives and changes, has a history and potentially a future.

Perhaps, the most general and essential attribute of culture is communication since cultures could not develop, survive, extend and generally succeed without communication. Studying culture involves being able to recognise and locate it; this is because what is known as culture is the totality of human beings. To this end, there are three places to recognise and locate culture among human beings. These are: (1) In people (2) In things that is texts, artifacts and (3) In human practices (socially patterned behaviors). These three places no doubt embodied the totality of man. In essence, if man is to be studied, he is either studied from what he does regularly; what he does as a member of a group (socially patterned behaviour) and lastly, the products of his hand (texts, artifacts) as a response to his surroundings (natural, artificial and other man). Viewing culture in the mentioned three ways have some implications for the study of advertising, this is because every aspect of the production and use of advertising messages has a cultural dimension. For instance, studies in advertising can focus on people as producers of culturally meaningful texts or readers of texts from which they take cultural meanings. Studies in advertising can focus on the texts and the artifacts themselves (films, books, newspaper articles, magazine features) and on their symbolic form and possible meanings. Also, studies can focus on the practices of makers of advertised products or of users of the products.

Advertising and Culture

Arising from the fact that the totalities of man are cultural; therefore, even advertising messages are design to conform to the culture of the people it is designed for. What feels normal, desirable and right are influenced by culture and advertisers/organisations that try to move people away from their culture are making it difficult for those consumers to choose their brands/services (Williams, 2019). Americans love to eat hot dogs, peanut butter, corn on the cob and apple pie. Canada, Russia and Germany—every country has its own favourite specialties. It is nearly impossible for an advertiser to change these tastes. Culture is such a multi-dimensional concept, including tangible and intangible items, that together, define a group of people or a way of life and these concepts, values and behaviours are learned and passed on from one generation to the next. The boundary each culture establishes for behaviour is called norms and norms are simple rules that we learn through social interaction that specify or prohibit certain behaviours.

One the ways culture is passed from generation to another is through the mass media. It will be recalled that as far back as 1948 (73 years ago), Lass well wrote that the main functions of mass communication are: surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts of the society in response to its environment; and the transmission of cultural heritage. The aforesaid should be perceived and understood from the perspective that advertising is one of the adjuncts of mass communication. Therefore, just as mass communication is said to perform the functions mentioned, the functions are actually performed via its adjuncts such as: advertising, public relations, print media and electronic media, book publishing as well as, films and cinematography. In Nigeria, advertising performs different cultural functions which include:

- a. The use of local (Nigerian) artistes to act out commercials.
- b. The use of local (Nigerians) artistes' in commercial who uses home grown approaches to act out commercials via the way they speak; their carriage and their mien.
- c. The use of local (Nigerian) attires in commercial messages. For instance, there is hardly any commercial message that featured Chief Zebrudaya in which he adorns foreign clothes.
- d. The transmission of local (Nigerian) cultures via extolling same; for example, Seaman Aromatic Schnapps.
- e. Advertising also performs cultural function via the use of notable local (Nigerian) environment, such as places of monument like the Zuma rock, Olumo rock, Slave House in Badagry, the Argungu Festivals among others.
- f. Advertising also teaches/spreads cultural beliefs via its message such as the MTN papa Bomboy commercial message; the life is good MTN commercial messages; the Airtel messages; among others.
- g. As part of disseminating cultural beliefs, it will be recalled that many advertisements on the mass media, particularly, television tries not to disparage Nigerian cultures. Rather they try to spread, remind and refresh our memory on same. Examples includes: Royco advertisement; three crowns and peak milk advertisements which feature women drinking pap, etc.

In all, while it can be argued that local cultures are used to disseminate advertising messages, it is on record that there are still many advertisements on our mass media that uses foreign approaches in the execution of their advertising strategy. For instance, it is on record that advertising messages such as: *Fanta Singapore*; *Fanta Brazil*, *7up the difference is clear animation*; cowbell animation advertisements among others did not use any known Nigerian culture in their messages. The aforementioned advertisements among others lead to the question: does advertising enhance or destroy culture?

Does Advertising enhance or destroy Culture?

Critics of advertising were of the opinion that advertising destroys culture. They argued that situations whereby foreign cultures are stylishly and in a subtle and stealthy manner imposed on the culture of countries are not only productive, but it also holds down or destroys the culture of the local countries. They were quick to point out that though advertising is meant to be an embodiment of culture of people; that where the culture of a people is indirectly imposed on other groups of people, then advertising has stultified the growth of the groups of people in which foreign culture is imposed. Critics of advertising are also of the view that advertising in its messages often times debase culture by way of over-simplification or over-glamourisation of such culture. They are quick to point out that for instance, sweet containing menthol are traditionally meant to arrest cold, catarrh and cough. That situation where such products are glamourised as fun is not only untrue, but also negates cultural practices, particularly, in Africa. Another example of advertising message which exaggerates culture, particularly in this part of the world, is the flourish gel television advertisement in which the gel was associated with wealth and affluence.

The question is: what has a gel (toothpaste) got to do with a yacht and a private jet?

The defenders of advertising on the other side of the divide said that advertising does not destroy culture and that it actually enhances it. They argued that the way to counter cultural imperialism argument is to use the locals as artists to act out commercial messages. They said further that cultural imperialism argument of the critics is not water-tight as the solution is as afore said, that is to use local artistes to act out advertisements. Advertising practitioners and advertising scholars argued that the over simplification or the over-glamourisation argument of the critics cannot stand in that simplicity is the hallmark of creativity. They said that the best way to convince target audience is to be easy and simple, these advertisements had done via simplifying complex cultural phenomena for easy recall and remembrance by consumers, so as to positively influenced consumers in their purchases.

Another argument of the critics concerns the role advertising and language play in the construction of cultures. The critics said that because culture is a dynamic phenomenon and language(s) is one of the means of expressing culture, then, it behooves advertising (since it uses languages and culture as indicators) to ensure that cultures are preserved. Where there is need for some changes in culture, advertising should subtly express the changes in a manner that does not disparage culture. As sound as the argument of the critics is, however, it needs to be stated that culture is a dynamic phenomenon. While it is a fact that there is no purely individual culture; it is worthy of note that culture lives, has a history, has a future and it is never constant. This is where the role of advertising comes in, that is: to spread the dynamism inherent in culture via its messages to the people. A very good reference point in this case is the –He who drinks Seaman Aromatic Schnapps, respects tradition campaign. In the same category is the –three crown milk three women and the pap campaign; the MTN cattle rearer campaign; also, is the MTN woman selling fish campaign just as the _Airtel SmartRecharge and Data is Life advertisements.’

Conclusion

The controversy between and among advertising, language and culture is an enduring one: the debate continues. Critics and scholars have opined in different articles and writings why advertisements seem to debase language and how language is misconstrued in advertising messages. Counter arguments of critics however aver that instead of seeing advertisements as opposition to proper language, simple yet correct grammar, syntax and symbol should be used properly in advertisements. The debate continues because culture is a dynamic phenomenon, just as the world we live. Besides, construction of culture is always an on-going feature of contemporary living. Meanwhile, the totalities of man are inherent in culture, that is what he does; how he does things; what he thinks; how he thinks; his character; his attitude; his relationship; the way he eats, sleep, walk, talk among others. Since language is a sine-qua-non in advertising and advertising is almost indispensable in today’s life and existence; then, it goes without saying that the role of language and advertising in the construction of cultures should include:

1. To be the purveyor of positive cultural beliefs.
2. To be at the vanguard of positive behaviour and attitudes.

3. To spread the message of modernity without sacrificing that which is ethical and condemning that which is unethical.
4. To disseminate cultural messages on the premise that advertising educates, reinforces and builds attitudes.
5. To discourage anti-social and anti-development behaviour via the avoidance of such in messages design and execution.

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