

Persuasive Communication Strategies: Pictures, Source Credibility and Fear Appeals.

Dr. Aborisade Philip Olubunmi

Associate Professor/Head of Department, Media and Communication,
Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti;
Nigeria
aborisade@hotmail.com

Ogechi Ofurum

Mass Communication Department
Afe Babalola University,
Ado Ekiti Nigeria

Loko Ebiwoni Tob

Mass Communication Department
Afe Babalola University,
Ado Ekiti Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Persuasion is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince people to change their attitudes or behaviors through the transmission of messages in an atmosphere of free choice. Against this background, this article takes a look at the uniqueness of persuasion as a function of Communication. The article discusses the key elements used in persuasion such as pictures, credibility of the source and fear appeals. In examining persuasion in communication with considerations to the role of pictures, source credibility and fear appeals in communication, the author relied primarily on secondary data to unveil the role of picture, source credibility and fear appeals in persuasive communication. The article aims at ascertaining the potency and limitation of these elements in persuasive communication. Relevant literature was reviewed to deduce the impact and shortcomings of each of these elements. The article is anchored on the agenda setting, persuasion, inoculation and cognitive dissonance theories to present a meaningful argument on persuasion as a function of communication. For persuasion to be effective, the article's findings reveal certain elements are used foster changes in behaviour such as pictures, source credibility and fear appeals. The article discloses that Pictures are essential in creating a mental impression of the scenario and driving home points by providing evidence for a convincing argument. It also reveals that credibility of the source of a message or information is equally germane in persuasive communication. Essentially, the author argued that Fear Appeals are also used in inducing change of behaviour as it proposes a risk or danger if behaviour is not change, altered or modified.

Keywords: *Persuasive Communication, Pictures, Credibility of the Source, Fear Appeals. Transmission of Information,*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is fundamental to man as it has existed from time immemorial. Through the years, irrespective of cultural, religious and societal differences, men have sought ways to communicate with one another. Through the times and tides of life, communication have developed to becoming as indispensable tool in all fields of endeavour from the home front to the business world.

Communication could aim at transmitting information between individuals, groups, businesses and across national borders. Regardless of the unique elements of the communication process, each communication route must have a goal. Miller (1980) proposed that communication exerts three different effects; shaping, reinforcing and change responses. Such responses are modified by symbolic messages which are sometimes linked with cohesive elements but most often involves appealing to the reason and emotions of the target audience.

Broadly speaking, communication performs the functions of information, education, entertainment and persuasion. Persuasion is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviours regarding issues through the transmission of messages in an atmosphere of free choice.

Persuasive communication gained its historical roots and grasp from rhetoric. However, the study of persuasion took an empirical focus during the interwar periods. This was because of prominent changes in the society during the first and second world wars resulting in several upheavals in the society. From unemployment to inflation, economic and institutional deterioration and a lot more. These led to a study by a Psychologist named Carl Hovland of Yale University.

Carl Hovland and his group began to explore the influence of propaganda on attitude and troops morale. Hovland and his collaborators provided some initial research on virtually every variable of interest to persuasion researchers today including the source credibility, the message and the appeals utilized. Putting in perspective the intelligence and self-esteem of the recipient and as such, key elements used in persuasion are pictures, credibility of the source and fear appeal.

In the field of communication, the use of pictures are essential. Pictures are used to tell stories, emphasize on a point and elaborate on reality. However, understanding is predisposed by our cognitive abilities and processes, which are further influenced by various factors. Therefore, it is expedient to perceive and interpret pictures from the standpoint of the totality of the picture and not in isolation.

Moreso, credibility of the speaker plays an essential role in inducing change in behaviour whilst the latter relies on threat to motivate the target audience towards an action.

Today, in all fields of communication, public relations to advertising, public health communicating and community relations, marketing and business, persuasion is evident.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on a couple of persuasion and persuasion related theories. Essentially, the theories explain the use of model to depict the concept as it bothers on persuasion in communication. Looking at how persuasion in communication influences behaviour, public opinion and societal reality. These theories are relevant to the study because they capture how pressure can influence behavior, public opinion and societal reality. This can be viewed in

connection with how picture, source credibility and fear appeals are elements that enable persuasive communication to influence individuals to change their behaviour.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

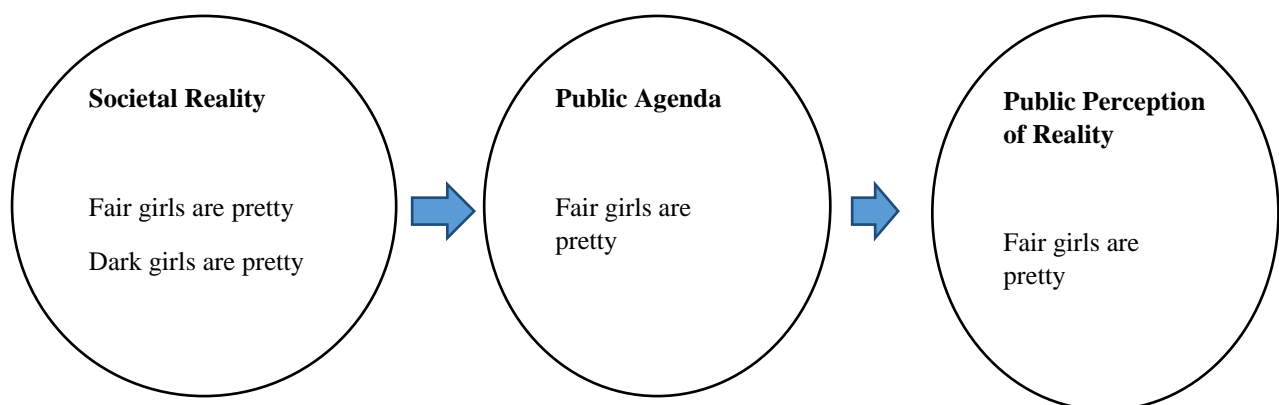
Today's mass media engages in various forms of persuasive communication. From images used in advertising to testimonials of witnesses and reporters in news stories, persuasion is prevalent.

Agenda setting theory is founded on the premise that the more coverage an issues receives, the more it becomes significant to the masses. The agenda setting theory was first put forward by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1973.

The theory states that, there is a two way relationship between the media and the society. The media mirrors on the society by reflecting on the societal happenings, culture, norms, religion and values. The media plays a fundamental role in deciding on what stories to focus on and what to be accredited as news worthy.

The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but is it stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". This is achieved through persuasive communication. To buttress my point further, the agenda setting model is used to clarify the concept further.

Figure 2:1: The Agenda Setting Model



Source: Researcher's Input, 2016

By focusing on particular issues in the society, the media persuades in their communication with the aim to influencing the thoughts, feelings and subsequently the behaviour and attitudes of its audience. Thus, the media sets the agenda which consequently determines the public agenda and societal reality.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

THEORIES OF PERSUASION

Congruity Theory: the theory is credited to Osgood & Tannenbaun in 1955. The theory predicts that if there are two contradictory people, sets of information or concepts on which Judgment must be made by a single observer, the observer will experience pressure to change his/her judgment on one of the sides. However, if the two sets of information are similar, then, there will be no problem and the observer will not experience pressure of any kind.

The peculiarity of Osgood and Tannenbaum's congruity theory is hidden in its strong orientation to communication and persuasion. Heiders (0) –other person-is here conceived as

a source (s).The object (x) equals the concept (c) and Heiders's perceiver or person (p) is the audience (A).

A typical situation of congruity theory is: (S) makes a statement about a (C) that can be either positive or negative and (A) has attitude toward both (S) and (C) what a source states about concept is the only element that can vary.

COGNITIVE DISSONANACE THEORY

This theory was developed by Leon Festinger in 1957. He theorized that human beings constantly strive for mental consistency. In other words, the theory states that our cognition (thoughts, beliefs or attitudes) can be in agreement or disagreement with our behaviors. In this case, however, when we detect conflicting dissonance or cognition, it gives and/or inculcates in us a sense of incompleteness. For example, a person who is addicted to smoking cigarette but also suspects that it could be detrimental to his health suffers from cognitive dissonance.

Festinger suggests that we are motivated to reduce this dissonance until it is in harmony with itself. This means that we normally strive for mental consistency. Four basic ways of reducing dissonance as suggested by Festinger are:

- Changing our minds about one of the facets of cognition
- Reducing the importance of cognition.
- Increasing the overlap between the two, and
- Re-evaluating the cost or reward ratio.

Revisiting the example of the smoker, he can either quit the habit of smoking or in the final analysis, evaluate the risk or danger of smoking to his health.

INOCULATION THEORY

This theory was developed by Williams J. McGuire in 1961 to explain more about how attitude and beliefs change and more importantly how to keep existing attitudes and beliefs consistent in the face of persuasion attempts. The theory as proposed has been assessed in various contexts including politics E.g. Pfau et al., 1990; see Compton & Ivanov, 2013, for a review), health campaigns (e.g Pfau and Vanbookern, 1994; see Compton, Jackson & Dimmock, 2016, for a review), marketing (e.g Compton, 2011) among others see Bans & Rains, 2010, for a meta-analysis, and compton,2013, for a narrative overview.

Inoculation theory states that to prevent persuasion, it is necessary to strengthen pre- existing attitudes or opinions. In other words, the receiver must be made to be aware of the potential vulnerability of an existing position. This establishes threat and initiates defense to future attacks .The idea is that when a weak argument is presented in the inoculation message, processes of refutation or other means of protection will prepare for a stronger argument later.

It is critical that the attack is strong enough to keep the receiver defensive but weak enough to not actually change those pre-existing ideas. This will hopefully make the receiver actively defensive and allow them to create argument in favour of pre-exiting thoughts. The more active the receiver become in his or her defense the more it will strengthen their own attitudes, beliefs or opinions (McGuire, 1964).

EMPERICAL REVIEW

This study aims at underscoring the essence of persuasion in communication and as such, exploring the various elements used in persuasive communication

To this effect, this section will involve exploring relevant literatures on the components of pictures, source credibility and fear appeals in persuasion communication. Thereby deducing the possible limitation of the elements.

PICTURES AND PERSUASION

It is believed that a picture can tell a thousand story. However, these stories are dependent upon how we view and understand the picture. Invariably, the interpretation given to any picture is influenced by our perception. It is therefore imperative to understand our perception of pictures as it influences the impact of the picture on the target audience in a persuasion driven communication.

Perception is a person's ability to be aware of and understand what is happening in his or her environment. A picture is a space object, it is a resembling representation of the object it is made upon in a plane surface.

Pictures are physical objects used in representing people, places and things. Pictures have their own sizes, shape, colour and location and the perception of pictures is simply the way we perceive pictures in its totality, not in parts.

The goal of perception is to take in information about the world and make sense of it, cognitive mechanisms are necessary to provide the means to interpret and understand the materials our senses brings to us.

In the social history of art that emerged after the 1970s, images were examined for their ability to represent meaning that had been socially and historically suppressed, to disrupt ideologies, to provoke a revolution or alternatively, to buttress existing relations of power. Invariably, in persuasive communication, pictures are used to create a convincing argument.

These is evident in the usage of pictures as magazine covers, pictorial representations of criminals and victims in news stories, public health communication, advocacy advertising and product marketing and as such, pictures are vital in persuasive communication.

SOURCES OF CREDIBILITY AND PERSUASION

We use sources as a means of supporting the arguments we make. This means that it is imperative for the sources to be credible, especially in the media world and especially with the development of the new media. As it is today, anyone with the access to the web can post any information on it. Ironically those information could look credible at first glance but a close inspection could provide a varying feedback.

As defined by Tormala, Brinol, & Petty (2006), source credibility refers to a message source's perceived expertise and trustworthiness. Source credibility has a rich history in persuasion research as in an early investigation, Hovland and Weiss (1951) demonstrated that high credibility sources produced more attitude change than low credibility sources.

Credibility is classically ascertained by considering the source of information. If the attributed source of a piece of information is a credible person or organization, then according to conventional wisdom, that information is probably reliable. In all fields of communication with the intent of persuasion, credibility of the source is an element used in enhancing persuasiveness which fosters a likely change in attitude and behaviour. Source

credibility usually influences attitude change through peripheral route but central processing of a person's credibility could occur when a controversy erupts.

A critical point found in the study is that the effect of the speaker's credibility may decline over time if the content of the message becomes separated from the source in the hearer's memory. This decaying link between the message and the speaker's credibility is called the sleeper effect.

It is believed that the sleeper effect can be of advantage if the credibility of the speaker is medium or low but with strong arguments offered as people will remember the strong points presented in the message and forget the credibility factor. It could also work to a speaker's disadvantage when his or her credibility was initially high but declined over a period of time essentially, if it is due to questionable factors.

FEAR APPEALS AND PERSUATION

The application of emotional appeal in persuasive communication is significant in achieving the desirable feedback. According to Stiff & Mongeau(2003), emotional appeals ranges from humour to sympathy. However, fear appeals have received the most attention from persuasive scholars and practitioners because, "fear appeals are among the diciest weapons in the persuaders' arsenal. This is because they evoke fear, a strong emotion with psychological correlates, touch on ego – involved issues and attempts to change dysfunctional behaviours that are difficult to extinguish".

Fear appeal posits the risks of using or not using a specific product, service or idea. Fear appeals relies on a threat to an individual's well-being that motivates him/her towards taking an action. However, as recapitulated by Griffin & Bone (2014) if you use fear appeals, temper them so your audience feels there is a solution to the problem that will actually work. For example, if your speech is about the risk of violent crime in your community, speak honestly about it, do not exaggerate it and then offer practical steps that audience members can take to reduce their risk so they feel hopeful and empowered rather than defeated.

Fear appeals may be classified as high, low or moderate. High fear appeals include vivid visualizations, references to pain and emotionally charged words like kill, maim and torture. Low fear appeals are based on logical analysis of a problem, utilises neutral words and play down threats. Moderate fear appeals falls somewhere between these extremes.

METHODOLOGY

In examining persuasion in communication with considerations to the role of pictures, source credibility and fear appeal in communication, the secondary data analysis method was used.

This is because, study aims at ascertaining the potency and limitation of each of the elements as it bothers on the efficacy of pictures, source credibility and fear appeals in persuasive communication. As such, a copious analysis of relevant literatures sufficed as it is more potent in deducing the impact and shortcomings of each of the elements, timely and cost effective.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Persuasion is evident in all cultural, religious and social contexts of life. From the home front to business spheres and across national borders. Nevertheless, for persuasion to be effective, certain elements are used foster changes in behaviour such as pictures, source credibility and fear appeals.

Pictures are essential in creating a mental impression of the scenario and driving home points by providing evidence for a convincing argument.

The credibility of the source of a message or information is principal in persuasion. Essentially, as it bothers on his/her expertise and/or trustworthiness because, is it fundamental in urging the target audience.

Fear appeals are also used in inducing change a behaviour as it propose a risk or danger if behaviour is not change, altered or modified. Fear, is naturally a persuasive strategy and often considered the wheel of persuasion because, “fear based appeals appear to be effective at influencing attitudes and behaviour especially in women”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From literatures studied, the researcher deduced that, whilst pictures are very effective in creating a convincing effect, Duffy & Thorson(2015),highlighted that, not all messages are meant to intentionally persuade, hence it is crucial to understand the rhetorical properties that distinguishes pictures from words.

With respect to the source of credibility, for the persuasive message to resonate, the bearer of the of the persuasive message most either be a person an expert in the chosen field, example in the case of public health communication, a doctor will suffice or be a trustworthy person within the society.

Fear appeals are pivotal in persuasive communication because, fear evokes different reactions from people and could have a boomerang effect on its audience if not careful thus, Whilst using fear appeal as a persuasive element, it is significant to note that a moderate fear appeal is more effective in persuading people than weak or strong appeals.

CONCLUSION

Communication plays a fundamental role in today’s society and such, it is expedient for a communication specialist to have a good grasp of the ability to appropriately harness and deploy communication tools and strategies.

Through the years, persuasion has become a necessity in the field of communication as it has become fundamental in achieving individual and organizational aims and objectives as a result, it is of utmost necessity for a communication specialist to understand the importance and uses of pictures, source credibility and fear appeals in achieving strategic objectives and deploy them accordingly.

However, these persuasive elements are most effective in persuasive communication when it is suitably deployed at the right time and measure so as to avert a boomerang effect.

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