Puffery Advertising in Media Industry of Pakistan: A Study of Professionals’ Perception

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Puffery advertising is defined as advertising or promotional material that makes broad exaggerated or boastful statements which may mislead the consumers in developing their opinion or making purchase decisions. This study was conducted to explore the practice of puffery advertising in media industry of Pakistan and analyze the professionals’ perceptions about how it may influence the advertising industry.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study was conducted by getting the empirical data from major Pakistani advertising agencies. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this study. Amalgamation of different qualitative and quantitative techniques was ensured. Maximum quality of data was ensured by using both techniques.

Findings: The study has been successful in digging out the possible issues and solutions related to puffery advertisements in the Pakistani advertising industry.

Implications/Originality/Value: The results implicate that professionals are aware of this phenomenon, however, novice firms are involved in puffery advertisements. More awareness and responsible behaviors related to puffery in advertisements needs to be acculturated among professionals in advertising industry in Pakistan. The study has discussed the role of media regulating agency to take necessary measures to overcome such practice.

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Introduction

Advertising is a vital part of socio-economic system and has been evolved as an integral communication system of business organizations to project themselves and their products or services. After watching
Advertisements consumer purchase products and use the services. Advertising is important as it helps the consumers to maintain the cycle of production and services (Alalwan, 2018). As a result, the whole economic system moves forward. If the demand of products and services is being declined, the whole nation will face the economic crisis. Consumers watch the ads and they demand the goods which they need (Goh & Balaji, 2016). Advertising is important for the publicity and marketing of products. It creates awareness among the users and also informs the users about the uses and benefits of any product or service (Trabucchi et al., 2017). According to Cohen, in the activity of advertising the advertising professionals use different techniques like persuasive communication, and interactive media for communicating and promoting the ideas, services and goods. Advertising Agencies perform their role for achieving the advertisers’ objectives (Fung & Carstensen, 2003) and speak only briefly about the dignity of the human beings (Weiber, 1997).

Advertising puffery is a legal advertising technique that uses 'puffed up' or exaggerated claims about a product or service that are a matter of opinion, or subjective, in nature. Such boastful or exaggerated claims about product or services in the advertisements are “made for the purpose of attracting buyers”. This is not just a theoretical perspective of present advertising industry, but now it is a common advertising practice of this era. Advertising can affect the human beings in multiple ways i.e. the advertised content, the presentation style and its impact on the viewers. We have already discussed the emotions like greed, lust, envy and prejudice which provoke the human weaknesses. Advertising also influences the patterns of individual life, family life and even whole society. In this way advertising may compromise the human freedom and dignity (Weiber, 1997).

A research conducted by the scholar Khan in 2016 in University of Sargodha mentioned about hyperbolic statements which divert the attention of viewers as well as buyers and affect the purchasing behavior. Results of that study support current research statement that advertising mostly consists of hyperbolic statements presented in advertisements. All forms of communications have their own codes of expression and these must be considered when someone discusses about the truthfulness of any message. The messages of advertising are usually misleading and rhetorical in nature. Such content is aggressive in nature and based on exaggeration and subjective opinions, however, the viewers digest or accept the content as it is communicated.

The message of advertising doesn’t just mislead the consumers but the stylization of advertising and its message provides exaggerated information. The law of right of information makes sure that the advertising must convey the truth and fair content to the viewers. Moral standards prohibit the professionals for spreading the misinformation and it is basic responsibility to protect the truth at any cost. It is mandatory for advertising that it must provide true information to viewers for making right decisions (Khan, 2016).

The ultimate objective of puffery-based advertising is to persuade the customer to do something often or to buy a product by making exaggerated claims about the product. In order to achieve this objective, the advertisers first understand their target audience. They usually know about the customers’ ways of thinking, the factors which may motivate them and the environment in which they live. The viewers have many internal and external influences. The internal factors that influence them refer to the factors within themselves and external factors refer to the those influencing elements pertaining to outside of themselves. Internal factors include psychological affects that may lead to change of attitude and behavior. Whereas the external factors include social circle, family and friends. Effect of advertising on viewers’ behavior describes how individuals who watch TV or other advertising media are influenced to purchase, use, or dispose of the products as well as may motivate them to further watching ads and purchasing. Puffery based advertisements firstly get attention of the various viewers groups based on psychographic and demographic factors. These advertisements then present the product as package of grossly exaggerated features and thus influence customers’ perception, change their attitudes and create
behavior, which is called purchase of advertised goods or services. Difference between viewers and consumers is that viewers watch the ads through TV or other media and when they decide to purchase or use product to satisfy needs and wants they are called consumers (Baldwin, 1984).

The objectives of this paper is to study the advertising industry in Pakistan and know about the professionals’ perceptions and practicing views about puffery in advertising. The subsequent objective of the research is to add up academic knowledge in the field of advertising by analyzing the current managerial trends of Pakistani media industry based on knowledge and perception of professionals working therein.

The major intent of this research study is both descriptive and predictive i.e. to present the challenges faced by the advertising industry in Pakistan and to focus on how the practices of puffery in advertising is influencing media industry of Pakistan. The paper highlights the ways professionals perceive about puffery and their understanding of how the consumers perceive their message in such advertisements.

**Literature Review**

Preston (1975) described about the puffery that it is such kind of persuasive message in which advertiser or his representative use to praise the product and develop the vague opinion for selling a product or service. It is based on exaggeration and false claims. Strutton, Hamilton & Lumpkin (1997) stated that marketing personnel use all the tactics when they are planning to achieve the marketing targets and there is seldom any ethical consideration. Along with other marketing communication techniques, puffery is also very common among the marketers and advertisers.

More often advertising is used not simply to inform but to persuade, motivate and convince people to act in certain ways; buy certain products or services; patronize certain institutions, and the like. This is where particular abuses can occur. The practice of brand related advertising can further raise serious problems. Often there are only negligible differences among similar category of products of different brands. However, advertising may attempt to move people to act on the basis of irrational exaggerated claims made in the advertising instead of presenting actual differences in product quality and price as bases for rational choice.

Visual elements of advertisements, such as pictures or symbols are also an important component of many advertisements. The role of imagery in shaping consumer response and behavior has only recently begun to receive the same degree and sophistication of research attention as the verbal elements in advertising (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Fetscherin and Toncar, 2009). Since 1970s visual imaginary was recognized as an important element. It assures that visual imagery is capable to alter the attitude and behavior of consumers (Rossiter and Percy, 1980). Since then it has become clear that visual elements can be effective tactics to achieve a range of advertising objectives, including belief acceptance and change (Miniard et al., 1991; Mitchell and Olson, 1981; Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 1994) and memory (Childers and Houston, 1984). Messaris (1997) in his book discusses that ads in the media and other types of advertising express difficult and prohibited content which otherwise is banned and difficult to express. As the book title suggests, “Visual persuasion” is an exploration of these unique aspects of advertising that advertisers use to persuade the audience about the advertised products using false imagery in the advertisements. Puffery is not a new practice in sales promotion and marketing. In fact, advertising agencies and the marketing staff want to create differentiation about their product against the competing products by highlighting some different characteristics of the product. The advertisers and marketers use fascinating word, images and videos to attract the viewers and such efforts end up in puffery (Preston, 1998). Puffery is known as exaggerated claims by advertisers like ‘new & improved’, ‘fresh & great’ for promotion of their services and products (Radford 2004). Media practitioners and professionals declare puffery as a big issue particularly in advertising and generally in media. The baseless claims in puffery advertising create a nuisance situation for consumers and compel
them towards a confusing visual and mental situation (p. 21). Different ethical questions have been raised on use of puffery as a sales promotion technique. Puffery is a collection of claims by the marketers to distinguish their company and product from the others. In puffery big statements are used for products and services but not based on reality and truth (Preston, 1996, 1998). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) of USA permits to use puffery for earning the profit as they consider that it is not an exaggeration. (FTC) considers that reasonable and well aware consumers are in a position to differentiate the truth and puffery (Preston, 1996).

Anderson and Renault (2009) have mentioned that comparative information in advertising must be accurate. Barigozzi et al. (2009) have analyzed comparative information in advertising that a competitor can challenge or not in court. Emons and Fluet (2012) have analyzed comparative information for both the verifiable case and the case where exaggerations are costly in that they might be penalized. The insights from these studies can often be extended to the case where information is not verifiable. In particular, Anderson and Renault (2009) show that small companies have a margin against their competitors that they can disclose the truth easily and same results were found in our setting.

The development and evolution of advertising have been extraordinary in Pakistan. Started as less than $1000 industry it has inflated to several billion dollars’ industry in just seventy-four years. Over the period of time the advertising industry in Pakistan has undergone different phases of evolution. These phases can be categorized on the basis of major socio-political conditions prevailing in the country. First era (1947-1964) is characterized by small number of players in the newly formed advertising industry; very few businesses taking advantage of advertising techniques; advertising reach limited to mainly urban geographic regions; advertising medium limited to print ads; Radio emerged as new promising advertising media. Second era (1964-1978) features arrival of television stations which made a revolutionary change in the existing advertising practices. The new visual advertising seemed more attractive and effective source of communication. Third era (1978-1988) brought new advertising ideologies taking over the old ones. The color TV broadcast and classical jingles made it a vintage era. Fourth era (1988-1998) features new graphic technologies which were used to facilitate the limited time frame concepts. Fifth era (1998-2008) is known as golden age of advertising in Pakistan which witnessed modern advertising and visual effects. Industry growth increased 500 times with strong accumulation and growth of talents and man power. Sixth era (2008-2010) brought animations and computer-backed simulation in advertising and therefore many refer to it as the glamorous era. Later, despite global recession and recent pandemic, the advertising industry has reached to new heights and has uncovered new avenues such as cyber advertising, web advertising and social media advertising.

With all growth and developments taking place in the advertising industry in Pakistan, the practice of puffery advertisements has also been seen prevalent by advertising academics and professionals. The ads have been frequently making use of exaggerated and false claims about the products in the guise of creativity, imagery, fantasy and visual attraction. There are rising concerns expressed by academics and industry professionals about the legal, ethical and moral standing of the puffery advertisements aired on various media in Pakistan. This study seeks to fill in this gap by looking into prevalence of puffery in advertising in Pakistan and summarize the advertising professionals’ views about how this practice may influence the future dynamics of advertising industry.

Methodology
In research studies, methodology is the collection of methods and approaches employed to enquire into the research problem. It is also referred to as the logical sequence through which research plan is executed, while indicating the association between research method and the nature of study. Mixed methods research design combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods was used in this study. Different qualitative and quantitative techniques were incorporated. This characteristic has made
it possible to achieve improvement of the quality of data. Merger of qualitative and quantitative research methods has also made the research more comprehensive by using interviews, interpretations and observations along with statistical data and it analysis.

In the study, quantitative method was used to collect the data from media users comprising of university student studying advertising as a major subject. Sampling process was completed from two different areas of population. Initially sample of this study included 300 respondents in total from different universities of Pakistan which offer advertising as a major or specialized subject in their study programs. Secondly, as per requirement of the study, next sampling was conducted from population of advertising agencies. Such advertising agencies are selected which are accredited and having an active status of business. Three professionals from each agency were selected: one from creative department; second one from media buying department and the third one from finance department. All the three departments were interconnected with each other and well aware about the prevailing situation of puffery in advertising industry in Pakistan. The data was collected from 27 professionals belonging to 9 accredited advertising agencies based in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi. Researcher conducted face to face interviews from advertising professionals, however, some respondents were unwilling for face to face interview due to the covid-19 pandemic. Hence, online interview technique was also used. Questions were sent through an online questionnaire to fill it out and send it back to the researcher. The advertising professionals were asked to complete the questionnaire consisting of open ended questions online to give their responses regarding the present research topic. SPSS was used to analyze the desired data.

Findings
The results of the study are mentioned below presenting the summary of respondents’ views about puffery in advertising in Pakistani media industry.

Q. I think that puffery (false or exaggeration) lack of relevancy and logic in Pakistani ads leads to irrelevancy regarding Pakistani brands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid STRONGLY DISAGREE</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISAGREE</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO OPINION</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGREE</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRONGLY AGREE</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation

Professionals’ response to the question showed that there was a little difference between the agreement of participants showing 27.3 % and 28.7 % respectively. While the response as no opinion was 31.7 % but strongly disagree response was only 2.3 %. The highest frequency was recorded 95 and the lowest was reported 7. Overall percentage shows that professionals perceive that there is element of puffery in advertising and it may negatively affect the media industry in Pakistan.

Q. I think that advertising in Pakistan is misleading and vague.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid DISAGREE</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO OPINION</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGREE</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRONGLY AGREE</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation
Majority of the participants with 16.7% respondents expressed their agreement as strongly agree while none of them were as strongly disagree with question. On the other hand, 27.7% were as agree and 35% with no opinion. Collectively, no opinion choice was among the highest of any other options but after it most of the participants were agreed that Pakistani ads mislead the audience or viewers.

Conclusion
Advertising is a paid marketing communication about products and services in which an advertiser presents the message to inform and persuade the potential buyers about available products and services in the market. Puffery is an aspect of advertising in which advertising agencies create a message which contains undue praise for attracting the viewers and for creating desired space in the market. According to this study Pakistani advertising professional accept that element of puffery is heavily prevalent in ads. This is a legal but unethical practice as this practice misleads the buyers. The study also finds that professionals perceive the practice of puffery harmful to the media industry in Pakistan as it may erode its ethical standing, credibility and trustworthiness to inform the audience about products and services.

References


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