

PERSUASIVE ELEMENTS ON THE WEBSITES PROMOTING FITNESS PROGRAMME

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Abstract: The trend of internet marketing has taken advertising to a whole new level which challenges the typical mode of persuasion by using the online platform as the medium of communication. As advertising is part of a persuasion means, the advertisement itself employs various persuasive strategies in order to influence its target market. Six websites which advertise various fitness programs were identified for the purpose of this research. Persuasive elements embedded in the advertising discourse were analysed based on Jamieson's (1990) Electronic Eloquence Model. The analysis reveals that visual dramatization (43%) is the most frequently used element across the six websites. This is followed by conversational style (22%), personification/imagery (13%), self-disclosure (12 %) and synoptic element (10%). The conversational style, imagery and self-disclosure elements reduce the formality of persuasion whilst visual dramatization and synoptic elements create long-term effects in the readers' minds. This paper concludes that all the persuasive elements proposed by Jamieson (1990) are still widely used in the contemporary online advertisements to persuade the potential customers.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 21st century, the internet has inevitably become a platform to acquire information regarding various fields, such as communication, shopping and even exploring the world as it is inexpensive and available to most people. Millions people shop online and this is mainly because they can have access to large amounts of information quickly and inexpensively via the internet (Rashid et. al., 2016). In addition, people are resorting to this channel as it is convenient and efficient especially for the purpose of selling and purchasing due to the absence of long queues and less time is wasted.

Similar to other industries, the fitness industry takes the opportunity to expand its business and to reach out to the potential customers through online advertisement. The websites are designed in a way that they address the client's product needs and expectations, and also assist the customers in the buying process. Websites, then, are not only the companies' products catalogues or online flyers but also an essential tool of customer service and persuasion.

Persuasion and Advertising

Tatum (2003) defines persuasive advertising as a component under advertising strategy that seeks to entice consumers into purchasing specific goods or services,

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often by appealing to their emotions and general sensibilities. Different from informative advertising, persuasive advertising assumes its consumers to have known the product's basic nature, but needs to be convinced of the desirability and the benefits that differentiate a particular product apart from its competitors. However, Bolatito (2012) notes that persuasive advertising does not mean that the effects illustrated in the advertisement are promised to be achievable. The idea behind persuasive advertising is to convey the perception that there is a good chance for the consumers to experience the effects promised though it comes with a particular disclaimer for its content.

Bolatito (2012) further explains that among the common approaches used in persuasive advertising is highlighting the uniqueness or specific benefits of a particular product that is hard to find elsewhere. Other than that, the characteristics of persuasive advertising also include conveying the perception that using a given product will help an individual be more successful with some areas of his or her life. In other words, persuasive communication is used in order to change, reinforce, and shaping responses among the potential consumers.

Jamieson's (1990) Electronic Eloquence Model (EEM)

The five characteristics of EEM include the elements of personification, self-disclosure, conversational, synecdoche, and visual dramatization. As the Internet advertising websites are mostly found in the form of one-way communication, hence, it make sense for the marketers to employ the EEM elements in their advertisements to enhance the communication process.

Personification prompts the audience to use their imagination to picture the message the persuader is conveying. The message becomes alive in the audience's minds and thus enhancing the impact of persuasion. Personification is also beneficial in building intimacy with the audience as persuaders can tell stories and use imageries to appeal to the audience feelings. On the other hand, the element of self-disclosure aims to engage buyers and sellers in a reciprocal process in order to establish trust and foster relationships that could lead to a better understanding between the two parties. This element assists the persuasion process as the persuaders reveal the story behind their personal belief and "it encourages dramatic narratives that audiences accept as proof for a persuader's claim" (Borchers, 2013, p.18).

Conversational style, according to Borchers (2013, p.18), refers to "how the words in speech are used as well as the way those words are presented to the audience". This is also an approach to build intimacy with audience by resorting

to simple vocabularies and avoiding the use of jargon or bombastic words in order not to confuse and mislead the audience which will reduce audience's attention and interest.

Synecdoche is a figure of speech used to capture a part of the meaning as a whole or vice versa. Jamieson (1990) asserts that eloquent persuaders have the ability to synopsise an issue in a clear, concise and dramatic statement. This is important as an effective advertising is about delivering a message that is simple yet has retainable impression in the audience without the use of complex language. Last but not least, the combination of words and images helps to create a memorable vignette in audiences (Jamieson, 1990). This paper aims to provide insights into how these persuasive elements are incorporated in the websites promoting fitness programmes.

Methodology

Data in this qualitative study were generated from six websites which advertise different fitness programs. The websites are 7dayabs.com, curvaliciousworkout.com, jeansdiet.com, oldschoolnewbody.com, tonedintentfitness.com and troublespotnutrition.com. These websites were chosen randomly so as to avoid bias in data generation. The data generation took place in December 2015 where the online discourses were recorded and transferred to raw data sheets to facilitate data analysis. Adopting Jamieson's (1990) Electronic Eloquence Model as the analytic lens, content analysis was carried out to identify the persuasive elements in these websites. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique and is considered as a flexible technique for examining text data (Anas et al., 2016).

Analysis and Discussion

Visual dramatization (43%) is the most frequently used element across the six websites. This is followed by conversational style (22%), personification (13%), self-disclosure (12 %) and synoptic element (10%).

Visual Dramatization

Images can facilitate digital communication by helping the audience to relate the images with the message that the author intends to express. Figure 1 below shows an example of visual dramatization used by the websites to simplify the message loaded with scientific explanation.

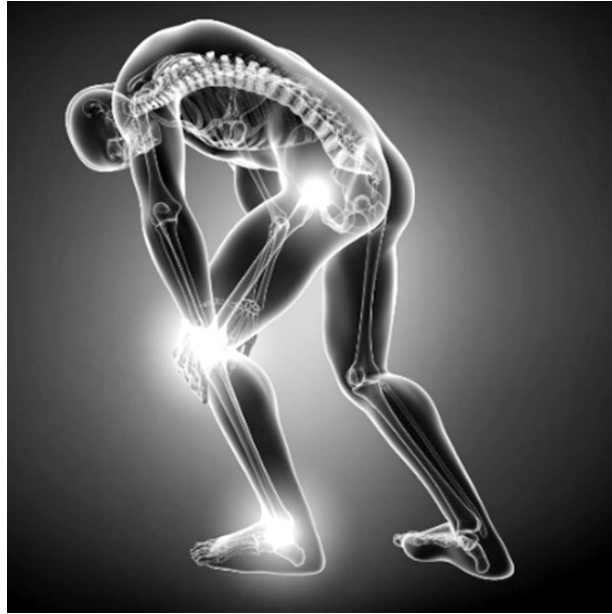


Figure 1: Visual dramatization to show joint pains

Besides using visual dramatization to aid the comprehension of an explicit message, it is also used to appeal for audience's emotions as shown in Figure 2.



Look at Becky's before and after transformation on F4X Phases 1 & 2! Ladies, F4X works for YOU!

Figure 2: Visual dramatization to appeal for audience's emotions

Figure 2 above illustrates the body transformation underwent by a female client named Becky. A caption is added to assert that if Becky can have a successful effect, the fitness program will work for other customers too. Note that the element of persuasion is indirectly conveyed to the target market that this fitness program is exactly what they need to get a good shape. A long narration without visual dramatization is not useful in showing the changes achieved by Becky. By providing testimonial pictures, people are more convinced with the claim made by the persuader. This visual aid can create a positive response from the audience and convince them to buy the products and services.

Visual dramatization is also used in presenting attractive pricing as shown in Figure 3. The persuader vividly shows two prices: the regular price and the discounted price. The image of dollar notes helps the audience to visualize that the saving is very valuable. At the regular price of \$50, one would have to pay two pieces of \$20 dollar notes plus an additional \$10 dollar note. With the discounted price as illustrated, the customers just need to pay a \$20 dollar note for the purchase.



**Click The "Buy Now" Button To
Receive Your Pre-Sale Price Of Just \$20...
PLUS All The Bonuses (Worth Over \$227!)**

**Act fast! Your discount expires
when the timer runs out...**

12:47

Figure 3: Visual dramatization for attractive pricing and bonuses

As if it is not convincing enough, the author further tops that by clicking the “buy now” button, there will be a further price reduction with bonuses worth over \$227 to be given away. In order to ensure the deal can be closed, there is a flash version of countdown timer to anticipate the audience into taking action on the opportunity before the time runs out.

Conversational Style

A persuader who uses conversational style writes in the spoken language and this typically involves the stretching or breaking a few rules of grammar (Spencer, 2011). Contractions, informal transitions and incomplete sentences are commonly found in conversational style (Rashid et. al., 2016). Simple vocabularies are used and the persuader appears to be ‘plain spoken’ rather than being too formal which can further the distance between the audience and the persuader. An example of conversational style is shown in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

I’m Steve Holman, the Editor-in-Chief of one of the oldest and most popular fitness magazines on the planet: Iron Man Magazine, and I’m lucky enough to have my wife, Becky, work with me side-by-side.

Don’t let the name “Iron Man” fool you...we have a large female readership because we are focused on the truth, not absurd gimmicks, worthless machines, or “diet patches.”

(Come on, are you SERIOUS?!? You are WAY too smart to fall for all that nonsense!)
(oldschoolnewbody.com)

The persuader introduces himself in a casual manner with the contraction ‘I’m’. He continues to keep the atmosphere light and casual by saying ‘Don’t let the name ‘Iron Man’ fool you...’ In the last sentence, the language is strategically crafted to create a close relationship between the persuader and the readers by using the phrase ‘come on’ which is normally used during the conversations between good friends. This helps to ensure that the readers do not feel estranged and they would be more accepting of what the persuader attempts to convey. Since this is a one-way communication, the persuader needs to make sure that the readers understand the message being conveyed. Since readers are geographically distributed and might not be well-versed in English, simple and casual vocabularies are used to avoid ambiguity and to retain readers’ attention and interest to keep reading.

Excerpt 2 is another example of the conversational style found on the websites. The persuader tells the audience that there is no barrier or excuse in the process of slimming down.

Excerpt 2

You think, “I’m too overweight to do this.”

Listen: you are NOT too overweight. Period!

I’ve seen women with years of body image issues and stubborn fat that won’t budge succeed with this Method.

If you have the desire to slim down, your weight won’t hold you back.

(jeansdiet.com)

The persuader begins by pointing out the notion that readers would possibly have in their mind before considering to purchase the fitness manual advertised. She uses the imperative ‘listen’, just like how a normal person would utter in a real life conversation to attract readers’ attention. The word ‘NOT’ is capitalized and this creates the emphasized tone of the sentence which reflects the persuader’s eagerness in talking to the readers. The word ‘period’ followed by the exclamation mark emphasizes the intensity of the fact that no one is too overweight for the program.

Imagery

An example of imagery is shown in Excerpt 3. The persuader asks the audience to imagine the situation where all the jeans would not fit them because of fat. She then reveals that she was once in that condition. In this sense, the use of imagery is combined with self-disclosure.

Excerpt 3

Imagine tearing through your closet ... with one pair of jeans after another ending up in a tossed heap on the floor. Some pairs not pulling up past a certain spot — right below your thighs, and far from covering your rear end. Other pairs you can manage to get up with more effort than you’d like to admit ... your tummy barely squishing into them, ending in a fit WAY too snug to maintain any sense of normal breathing.

(jeansdiet.com)

By using the imagery, the persuader attempts to appeal for readers’ emotions. Imagining her situations, the readers might feel sorry for her besides being able to relate this situation to themselves. Anyone especially women would dread the horrific image and for those who are already in the same plight, might be persuaded into purchasing the fitness program.

Another example of imagery is shown in Excerpt 4 where the persuader asks two questions in the attempts to paint a mental image in readers’ minds.

Excerpt 4

If you could have the body you want in 50 minutes per week, instead of 300 minutes per week, wouldn't you? Does this sound familiar?

(tonedintfitness.com)

This imagery focuses on the audience as the ones who will have the body of their desire and this mental image would propel their interest in the fitness program. The questions also show how the persuader cares and understands the customers' needs. Thus, the audience might agree with the persuader. The questions also indirectly challenge the readers and offer them a chance to improve their body figure in an easy way. This offer is useful in encouraging the readers to take part in the fitness programme.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is a purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person (O'Shaughnessy, & O'Shaughnessy, 2004). This element is useful to achieve intimacy with the target market and gain their trust and sympathy to reduce their wariness and uncertainty towards the products. It also encourages dramatic narratives that readers usually accept as proof for a persuader's claim (Borchers, 2013). An example of self-disclosure is shown in Excerpt 5 where the persuader reveals to the readers that his wife has an autoimmune disease which hinders her from losing weight. This is one of the attempts made by the persuader to develop intimacy and gain trust from the readers in selling his fitness book.

Excerpt 5

You wouldn't know it from looking at the picture on the left but Janet has an auto immune disease that increases inflammation and raises' her cortisol levels (cortisol is a stress hormone known to cause muscle loss and increase belly fat). In fact, Janet wasn't able to exercise at all for 6 months after our twins were born. However, because of the methods outlined in Trouble Spot Nutrition she was able to stay lean, healthy and full of energy. Best of all Janet and I are able to eat lots of tasty food every day while also enjoying our favourite treats and even alcohol on a regular basis.

(troublespotnutrition.com)

At first, the persuader creates an empathy by narrating the condition of his wife's sufferings; describing on how his wife must have felt hopeless to attract the audience attention to his narrative persuasion. The self-disclosure here is regarded as something rather personal as it involves the revelations of the author's past experience with his wife. In the third line, however, he convinces the readers that because of the fitness manual that they are attempting to sell, his wife manages to keep a fit figure, stays healthy and enjoys food without having to limit herself to

a particular diet. This personal experience helps in eliminating doubts the readers might have in mind.

Another example of self-disclosure is shown in Excerpt 6. The persuader tells her experience of adapting the method from the advertised fitness manual and this has helped her maintain a youthful look.

Excerpt 6

I'm living proof of what Toned in Ten can do for you because at age 41, I have people tell me all the time that I must still be in my twenties. This works for me and it can work for you! No more long, boring workouts – just 10 minutes a day to completely reshape your body and transform your life. My expertise in exercise comes from many areas of my life.

For one, I have been a treating **Physical Therapist** for the last 18 years creating comprehensive and customized rehabilitative and fitness exercise programs for healthy and unhealthy individuals.

(tonedintenfitness.com)

The persuader brings to the fore his credibility by disclosing that she is a physical therapist. This convinces the readers of her expertise and it would appeal especially to women as they strive to perpetuate their youth and beauty. To further persuading the readers, she highlights that the fitness manual does not require users to perform long and dull workouts.

Synoptic

Even though synoptic is the least used element on the websites, it is significant for being part of the persuasion and should not be disregarded of its importance. As noted by Jamieson (1990), an effective persuasion does not require the use of language to develop complex ideas, instead, it strongly depends on short and precise sentences to convey their ideas. In fact, readers are also less capable of appreciating long-winded contents (Rashid, 2016). This abbreviated style of communication is also known as *synecdoche*, whereby a large amount of information is represented in a short and memorable way.

The mark of eloquence is having the ability to summarize information into a brief and concise message without losing the accuracy of its original content. Jamieson (1990) claims that people is most likely to make judgements on persuaders based on their ability to create synoptic phrases. An example of synoptic element is “A big, bulky body is only attainable via one means: steroids” which is found on curvaliciousworkout.com website. The synoptic element is used to convey the idea via the extraction of the essential meaning where ‘steroids’ is used as the key word entailing the statement itself.

CONCLUSION

Visual dramatization is the most frequently used persuasive element on the websites. The use of images adds great advantages to persuasive advertising as it can convey a lot of information quickly, adds visual simulation and colour, enhances other media, as well as helps to communicate across language borders. Visuals displayed on screens can capture the audience attention better than words. Conversational style is the second frequently used persuasive element. This element is closely related to self-disclosure which brings the readers closer to the persuaders by reducing the formality of message delivery. The persuaders tone down the degree of formality by presenting themselves in a friendly manner to the readers. On the whole, this study has shown that all the persuasive elements proposed by Jamieson (1990) are still widely used in today's online advertisements.

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