
A study on the consumer buying behavior as an effect due to brand puffery

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ABSTRACT

Consumer buying behaviour is significantly influenced by brand puffery, which involves the use of exaggerated or misleading claims about a product's features, benefits, or performance. Brand puffery can create inflated perceptions of a product's value, leading consumers to make purchasing decisions based on unrealistic expectations. When consumers encounter brand puffery, they may develop overly optimistic beliefs about a product's capabilities, leading them to expect miraculous results or unparalleled benefits. As a result, they may be more likely to choose products with exaggerated claims over alternatives, believing that they offer superior quality or performance. To mitigate the negative effects of brand puffery, businesses must prioritize transparency, authenticity, and ethical marketing practices. By accurately representing their products and setting realistic expectations, brands can foster trust and credibility with consumers. Transparent communication, honest advertising, and genuine engagement with customers can help build stronger relationships and enhance brand loyalty. Additionally, businesses should invest in delivering high-quality products and exceptional customer experiences to reinforce their brand's value proposition and differentiate themselves from competitors. Through inferential statistics its indicated that advertisements with a plain motive of generating interest may mislead the viewer because of the exaggerated claims made by way of puffery. Thus, marketers can make controlled use of puffery in their advertisements to influence consumer behaviour.

KEYWORDS: Marketing, Advertisement, Puffery, Consumer perception

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century, psychologists Walter D. Scott and John B. Watson contributed applied psychological theory to the field of advertising. Scott said, "Man has been called the reasoning animal, but he could with greater truthfulness be called the creature of suggestion. He is reasonable, but he is to a greater extent suggestible". There have been increasing efforts to protect the public interest by regulating the content and the influence of advertising. Some

examples are the ban on television tobacco advertising imposed in many countries, and the total ban of advertising to children under 12 imposed by the Swedish government in 1991. Consciously or unconsciously, we are exposed to innumerable advertisements throughout the day. Most of them are exaggerated and often misleading. This continuous exposure creates an illusion of truth in our minds. Harvard Business School Professor Gerald Zaltman says that 95 percent of our purchase decision making takes place in the subconscious mind. This emphasizes the need to understand how exaggerated claims in advertisements affect the consumer attitude and social psyche. In a country like India, where emotional appeal and societal conformation is high it becomes even more important. The messages communicated by advertisements for fairness products, that being fair increases opportunities and opens new avenues, has made the entire country, (one which was already biased towards fair skin) obsessed with becoming fair. They claim of fairness in four weeks. Is it clinically possible? Drinking a certain brand of soft drink immediately makes you smarter than your peers or helps you fit into the 'cool' crowd. Such advertisements create an impact on impressionable minds of the youth. Health and nutritional supplements claim to make you stronger, healthier, taller etc. Various shampoos claim various benefits like 5X stronger hair, hair fall control, no dandruff while using the said products. These strong and exaggerated claims affect the mental, physical, and financial well-being of a person and a society at large.

Does a consumer understand that the claims are puffed? Does he buy the product with knowledge of the product or is it only the advertisements which push him to buy a certain product? Hence, there is a need to understand the impact of brand puffery (exaggerated claims) in advertisements on consumer attitude. This research surveys 120 buyers of cosmetic products and tries to assess the impact of puffery used in the advertisement.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Xu and Wyer (2010) have written that advertisements often contain inflated product descriptions that appear important but actually provide little, if any, meaningful information. Consumers' response to these descriptions depends on whether they feel more or less informed about the product than others to whom the advertisement is specifically directed. When an ad appears in a trade magazine read primarily by experts in a given product area, bloat generally increases the effectiveness of the ad. This is also true when an ad appears in a popular magazine, but readers feel they know less about the product than consumers in general. However, if readers believe they know as much or more than the average consumer, the hype reduces the effectiveness of the ad. In addition, the media context in which the advertisement occurs has a direct effect on the judgment of consumers who believe they have little knowledge about the type of product being advertised.

Punjani et al. (2019) in their paper quantitatively assess the basic trends of existing research on "puffery advertising" through bibliometric analysis. This study uses citation data collected through Scopus and Google Scholar for the research area "puffery in advertising" to examine the most productive journals, the countries with the best affiliations, and the prominent volumes with the maximum number of citations. The study analyses 87 articles related to "puffery in advertising", published between 1840 and 2018. In addition, this study also presents a graphical analysis through network maps. "Puffery in advertising" remains an under-researched area. However, records from the last ten years indicate a slight increase in the number of publications. The USA dominates this area of research with the majority of articles published so far. By grouping the topic areas, it was found that the majority of articles were published under the topic "Business, Management and Accounting". Interestingly, the network map results are slightly different from the citation table results. This article is useful for any reader or researcher who wants to understand the trends of "advertising puffery" in terms of citation analysis, authors and associated countries, and prominent years with maximum citations, which would further enable them to explore new research areas, potential research collaborations and publication.

Stern and Callister (2019) investigated whether hyperbolic and puffed advertisements at two intensity levels elicit differential effects as opposed to non-exaggerated advertisements.

In an experiment, 597 subjects rated 1 of 20 ads based on ad likeability, product quality, deception, product name recall, and purchase intent. Hyperbolic ads yielded the highest ad liking, perceived general product quality, and purchase intention, along with the highest ratings of perceived deception, in contrast to puffed and control ads. Puffery did not differ from control ads in that it had little or no functional effect on common measures of ad results. Exaggeration can therefore offer better advertising results compared to puffery.

Halim et al. (2020) have stated that puffery is usually used in advertisements for beauty products, because it is a major expense for many women. Authors conducted a content analysis of two beauty magazines in Malaysia, which are Female and Cleo. The objective was to identify the elements of hype in advertising slogans used by a cosmetics company when advertising their products in magazines. The result shows that Female magazines have 74.5% of inflated slogans, while Cleo employs 25.5% of inflated slogans advertising slogans. In addition, the results also show that beauty products that use puffiness in advertising slogans are on the decline from 2015 to 2018. Based on the results, authors conclude that the use of puffery in advertisements has decreased over the years because it is considered less effective and exaggerated.

Nawaz and Khan (2021) have written that puffery advertising is defined as advertising or promotional material that contains broad exaggerated or boastful statements that may mislead consumers in forming an opinion or making a purchase decision. This study was conducted to investigate the practice of bloated advertising in the media industry of Pakistan and to analyse the perception of professionals on how it can affect the advertising industry. This study was conducted based on empirical data from major Pakistani advertising agencies. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this study.

A combination of various qualitative and quantitative techniques was ensured. By using both techniques, maximum data quality was ensured. The study was successful in finding possible problems and solutions related to puffery advertisements in Pakistan's advertising industry. The results suggest that professionals are aware of this phenomenon, but start-ups are involved in puffed advertising. Awareness and responsible behaviour related to advertising puffery needs to be increased among advertising industry professionals in Pakistan. The study looked at the role of the media regulatory agency in taking necessary measures to overcome such practice.

Yang et al. (2019) have stated that previous empirical studies have produced conflicting results about how consumers respond to puffed claims in advertisements. This study addresses this issue by considering how consumer thinking style and competitor puffery interact to influence consumers' brand attitude in terms of product puffery. Based on experiments using fictitious and real brand names, three studies provide converging evidence that holistic thinkers form more positive brand attitudes when exposed to the target brand's low-puffery (vs. no-puffery) claims.

Analytical thinkers, on the other hand, are less sensitive to hype and their attitude towards the brand will not change. Holistic thinkers are also more sensitive to the presence of a competitor's arrogance. Holistic thinkers exposed to competitors' puffed claims create a more positive brand attitude toward the target brand. For analytical thinkers, the degree of puffery of a competitor will not significantly affect their attitude towards the target brand. The findings shed new light on the inconclusive results of previous studies and offer practical implications for marketing hype.

Similar studies on puffery are found by Huang (2021), Olaleye et al. (2019), Ingersoll et al. (2021), and Oparinde and Agbede (2019). Studies in Indian context is very limited and hence this research endeavours to fill this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

To draw meaningful inferences and conclusions, a minimum sample size of 100 is recommended (Alreck and Settle, 2003). In line with this guidance a sample size of 120 was chosen. Convenience sampling method was followed. E-questionnaire was kept on a laptop at select cosmetic shops from Pune. Customers were requested to fill-up the questionnaire. First

120 responses were chosen as the sample size for conducting the study. Neither the name of the respondent nor that of the shop was recorded for ensuring confidentiality. In fact, it was only when the consumers and shopkeepers were assured of their confidentiality, they agreed to cooperate. A questionnaire was designed in MS Excel. It was divided into following parts:

Demographic Profile

Influence of puffery on buying behaviour

The questionnaire had following features: Responses were sought by way of a selection from a drop-down list. In seeking agreement or disagreement on a particular issue, the sequence of responses was designed as under –

- 0 – No option
- 1 – Somewhat agree
- 2 – Completely agree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 4 – Completely disagree

“No option” choice was deliberately kept as the 1st response in order to provide an early exit option to those who either didn't know the answer or didn't want to answer. The purpose of doing this was to ensure that respondents give answers about which they feel that they are confident instead of jumbling around with all the 3 options (no option, agree or disagree) for a while and then ending up in a confused answer. Researcher is hopeful that only genuine and confident responses have been extracted. The questionnaire was tested for reliability, and it returned a Cronbach Alpha score of 0.784 and hence was considered reliable. The questionnaire is given at the end of the article.

The hypothesis set was:

- H_0 : Puffery in advertisement does not have a positive effect on the buying behaviour
- H_a : Puffery in advertisement has a positive effect on the buying behaviour

The hypothesis was tested based on the average agreement/disagreement responses to the ten statements of the questionnaire. The average agreement/disagreement response of the 120 respondents for all the related statements was taken as the sample mean and it was compared with a hypothesized population mean of 50% agreement/disagreement connoting an event by chance and not due to any statistical significance. A t-test was applied at 95% confidence level and based on the p-value the null hypothesis was tested for rejection or non-rejection.

4. DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

109 respondents were female whereas 11 were male. 29 were from the Northern region of Pune, 24 were from the Eastern region, 36 were from the Western region, and 31 were from the Southern region. 44 respondents were from the age-group of <30 years, 46 were from the age-group 30-40 years, and 30 were from the age-group of >40 years. Influence of puffery on buying behaviour:

- **Grouping of questions:** Questions 1, 3 & 4 were grouped together in view of their affirmative pattern of expected response. Similarly questions 2, 5 & 7 were grouped together in view of their negative pattern of expected response. Questions 6 & 8 were not grouped.
- **Weights assigned to responses:** While aggregating the responses weights of 1.5 each were assigned to options 2 & 4 – completely agree and completely disagree.
- **Summations:** For agreement responses for somewhat agree and completely agree (with a weight of 1.5) were summed-up. Similarly, for disagreement responses for somewhat disagree and completely disagree (with a weight of 1.5) were summed-up.
- **Summarized responses**

Table 1: Analysis of affirmative answers

Q. No.	Agree	Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
1	104	48	68%	32%
3	90	47	66%	34%
4	106	45	70%	30%
Total	300	140	68%	

Table 2: Statistical testing of significance (positive answers)

Step	Parameter	Measure
1	X Bar (μ)	68%
2	N	120
3	STDEV(n)	1.00762
4	Ho	50%
5	H1	68%
6	To	1.98
7	p value	0.024939
8	α (5% SL)	0.05
9	Is p-value < α	Yes
10	Accept / Reject Ho	Reject Ho

Table 3: Analysis of negative answers

Q. No.	Agree	Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
2	39	141	27%	73%
5	48	91	35%	65%
7	43	89	33%	67%
Total	130	321		71%
Q.No.	Agree	Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
2	39	141	27%	73%
5	48	91	35%	65%
7	43	89	33%	67%
Total	130	321		71%

Interpretation: Since the null hypotheses stand rejected, it is interpreted that puffery in advertisements has a positive impact on buying behaviour.

5. CONCLUSION

Using puffery in advertisement is a common strategy. Findings suggest that puffery in advertisements has a positive impact on buying behaviour. However, it must be remembered that its effect and impact is governed by certain factors. Specifically, it depends on how the participants perceive their personal knowledge about the category of products in relation to the category of other individuals that advertising is supposed to influence. This perception again may depend on the type of media in which the ad appears and also the type of product being advertised. Advertisements with a plain motive of generating interest may mislead the viewer because of the exaggerated claims made by way of puffery. Thus, marketers can make controlled use of puffery in their advertisements to influence consumer behaviour.

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QUESTIONNAIRE		
A study of influence of puffery used in advertisements on buying behavior		
PROFILE INFORMATION		
1	Name of the Respondent (optional)	
2	Gender (Male, Female)	
3	Zone (North, East, West, South)	
4	Age (<30 years, 30-40 years, >40 years)	
I. Influence of puffery		
Rate the following statements on a scale of Cannot Say, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree		
No.	Statement	Response
1	Do you agree that the puffery claims in advertisements will influence you to buy the product?	
2	Do you think that a plain advertisement is a better option than the puffed advertisement?	
3	Do you think a very plain advertisement will fail to effectively endorse the cosmetic effect of a toothpaste?	
4	Do you think that a comparative picture will not influence you much to buy the soap?	
5	Do you think that the phrase "Dramatically reduces lines" in a facial cream advertisement is well understood as a puffed claim?	
6	Does the lines in the advertisement "Even angels will fall" and "Turns nice girls naughty" have a negative impact?	
7	"The only cream that gives complete fairness" - Claims an ad. Do you think that you understand the puffery effect?	
8	Under influence of which of the two advertisements – puffed or plan - which one are you more likely to buy?	