SOME FRONTLINE ADVERTISING THEORIES AND THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY

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ABSTRACT

In scholarship, it is not unusual to expect theories, especially the frontline ones to exhibit a good degree of universality of applicability. This, it seems, may be tantamount to expecting too much. It becomes needful, therefore for such theories to be tested for applicability from time to time in different local environments around the world.

This paper subjects some of the frontline advertising theories of Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement, Active Learning or Information Processing and Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance to the all-important applicability test, within the Nigerian environment; utilizing the Nigerian advertisement audience. The study adopted the quantitative methodology, and it is realized as a descriptive survey. A purposive sample made up of city dwellers formed the body of respondents. Results have been presented in tables and percentages.

When the data from Three Thousand and Two respondents across Nigeria was collected and analysed, a few insights emerged. While the advertising theories of Active Learning, which is also known as the Information Processing Theory of Advertising, has found applicability with the local audience, the same could not be said for the theories of Behavioural Learning as well as Dissonance Reduction. The study, thus, establishes the levels to which these frontline advertising theories are applicable or not applicable to the Nigerian advertisement audience, as the case may be. It affirms that some of these theories, in truth, lack universality of applicability. That is to say, for example, that if a particular theory is found to be applicable in Europe, it must not be assumed that the same is also applicable in Africa.

1.0: Introduction

Although Advertising Studies are usually domiciled in the disciplines of Mass Communication, Communication Studies, Media Studies and Marketing, most advertising theories have emerged from Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences. We need not wonder much, because while all the other areas tend to focus on concept and practice, Psychology and the Behavioural Sciences have the primary task of studying and following human behaviour. Advertising, undoubtedly, has a lot to do with human behaviour. For example, advertisements are created to influence human behaviour through persuasion. This aspect certainly falls under the purview of Psychology and the Behavioural Sciences; which explains why we, find most frontline theories of advertising emanating from these areas of study and research.

A good number of advertising theories are available for study and scholarly activity. However, for the purpose of this particular study, only three have been utilized. These are the
Active Learning or Information Processing Theories the Behaviour Learning or Low Involvement Theories, and of course the Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance Theories.

We shall now discuss these theories, and then comment appropriately. Thereafter, the questions posed to the respondents, each springing directly from tenets of the theories, as well as their responses shall be presented in tabular formats. Following these shall be findings and discussions, after which comes, a conclusion.

2.0 The Active Learning Theories:

Also known as the Information Processing Theories, this group of theories operate upon the premise that any piece of advertising presents a message which the consumer finds to be meaningful. The active learning theories generally postulate that learning comes before attitudinal response and finally a change in behaviour. Therefore, if a piece of advertising was exposed to consumers, the said consumers first receive the message or stimuli, this is then internalised and thought through. After the processing and decision-making, the customer then responds through action which becomes the purchase of the advertised product. Active learning theories sharply contrast with the behavioural learning theories by insisting that the consumer to whom the advertising is exposed plays an active role by being involved in the processing of data acquired and by, subsequently, taking action. No wonder then, that the active learning theories are interchangeably referred to as the information processing theories.

Nord and Peter (1980) have tried to study how consumers acquire and process information, and how that information leads to behaviour change in the final analysis. This has found relevance in advertising practice as well as in social studies.

The whole question of meaning has also found importance in the active learning theories. This is so because in the processing of the advertising message, the consumer has to make some meaning out of the exposure before it can affect his behaviour.

An attempt to simplify meaning by Collinge (1990) has produced three classifications. These are descriptive meaning, expressive meaning, and evocative meaning. The descriptive meaning of a sentence for example refers to that aspect of its meaning which determines whether the sentence will be a truth or a falsehood. Descriptive meaning has often been freely and conveniently interchanged with cognitive, prepositional, denotative and ideating meanings. Expressive meaning, on the other hand, has to do with that which can only be expressed rather than described. This includes feelings, emotions, sentiments and attitudes. Expressive meaning has validity only at the time and place where it is uttered. Furthermore, it does not have to be exclusive at all times, as it can have a mutual occurrence with the descriptive meaning, even in a word such as “smile”.

Wan and Young (1983) have come up with the contribution that consumers tend to show a favourable change of attitude where the expressive meaning is at work. Their work tends to suggest that a piece of advertising which offers a preponderance of expressive meanings stands the chance of registering more efficacies with the consumer.

Evocative meaning concerns itself with the degree to which words can evoke feelings and images in the hearer or reader over and above what the expressive or descriptive meanings might be. The evocative meaning has been effectively employed in propaganda, poetry and advertising from time to time. Wenburg and Wilmot (1973) will strongly disagree that meanings are found in words. They assert that, far from what most people assume, meanings are in people. According to them, when people talk or write they merely transmit words whose meanings are left to those who receive them. Words, they argue can stimulate meanings, but are not meanings in themselves. They further aver that words can be connotative or denotative. While the
connotative meaning is determined by the word user, the denotative meaning is comparatively
dynamic and cultural; both of which have implications for advertising. Defleur and Lowery
(1988) have come into the issue, and have added that language and meanings collaborate in media
advertising to create perceptions and attitudes through effective presentation and packaging.

Although the active learning group of theories have attempted more that other advertising
theories to explain the complex decision-making process such as is involved in exposing the
consumer to an advertising material, the information processing theories have failed to fully
explain the consumer/advertising interaction and interface. These theories seem to operate on a
number of disturbing assumptions, chief among which is that learning always precedes a change
in attitude. However, in actual practice of advertising, the active learning theories offer a
tremendous contribution, especially with the emphasis on the making of meaning and sense.

3.0 The Behavioural Learning Theories:

Also known as the Low Involvement Theories, this group of advertising theories appear to
directly counter the postulations of the active learning theories. These theories have developed
from the pioneering works of the Edward Thorndike (1911) which was essentially hinged upon
instrumental conditioning. The principle of reinforcement was much later introduced into the
whole equation by Skinner (1953). These earlier works were advanced upon by Kassajian (1978),
where he argues that consumer decisions do not spring from any “grand theory of behaviour”, as
such responses were insignificant and uninvolving. As far as he is concerned, the matter is so
simple and easy because if a product satisfies a consumer, he is most likely to repeat the purchase
behaviour.

The issue of positive reinforcement initiated by Skinner was revisited and elaborated upon
by Rothschild and Gaidis (1981). They noted that initial and repeat purchase is central to
advertising and marketing. Therefore, they continue, the provision of positive reinforcement
should be a most critical objective of practitioners in the said fields. In their observation,
intermittent reinforcement will create enough room for behavioural change, which might mean a
shift in purchase loyalty to a competing brand whose reinforcement is unbroken. The Low
Involvement Theories seem ultimately to indicate that learning comes before behaviour change,
which predisposes to a change in attitude.

Behavioural change theories appear to have two distinct features. The first is that they are
interestingly relevant to the television medium. As a matter of fact, Krugman (1972) formulated
his theories based absolutely on television. The next is that the Low Involvement Theories also
suit non-television advertising with lower information content, rather perfectly. According to
Weilbacher (1984), the concept of involvement leaves us with two significant implications. The
question as to whether it is the value of the product that solely determines variations in consumer
involvement is the first. The second implication is that it might not be totally right and safe to
place a consumer on “low” only, as there could be a graduation from “low” to “high”
involvement.

It is also not improper to add that the Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement Theories
appear best suited to a laboratory situation, where the experimenter has considerable degree of
control over the variables. Reality is, however, what matters most; in the competitive market, the
marketer will have little or not control over market-related variables like the availability of
competing products and going prices.

Also, the behavioural learning theories appear to have left complex luxury products such
as houses and choice cars out of consideration. Where products such as the above are involved
the consumer will tend to show not low but high involvement, owing to the complex nature of the product and the high price which it must command.

These criticisms are not enough to make the Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement Theories irrelevant. Whereas some of the notions may be untransferrable from theory to practice, this group of theories nonetheless presents a paradigm for better and more effective marketing, advertising and promotion.

4.0 The Dissonance Reduction Theories:

Otherwise called the Cognitive Dissonance Theories, this group was pioneered by Leon Festinger (1962). The dissonance reduction theories operate upon the premise that human beings are in an unending search for consonance or harmony in a world full of dissonance or disharmony. The differential or margin between thought/ cognitive environment and actuality or reality is dissonance while consonance stands for the measure of similarity or conformity between thoughts or cognitive elements and what really obtains.

Weilbacher (1984) continued the flow of thought when he further explained that there is cognitive consonance when we find what we expect. Festinger (1962), finally submits that reality exerts a certain degree of pressure on the individual, thereby bringing in line with reality the individual’s personal thoughts and cognitive elements.

There are implications for advertising and marketing, as the producer or marketer can choose to offer a product advert which meets the expectations of the consumer and so record a “consonance”. Alternatively, the advertising produced and aired may fail to agree with the cognitive elements of the consumer, thereby creating a state of “dissonance”. The earlier development might encourage the consumer to carry out initial and repeat purchases. In the latter situation, however, the consumer could transfer loyalty to a competing product, or simply stop buying, where practicable.

Festinger (1962), also offers two ways of reducing the dissonance phenomenon. By changing one of the known cognitive elements and by adding a completely new element, he believes, the degree of disharmony could be reduced. Since advertising presents information which affects behaviour and determines attitude, the same can be managed in such a way as to achieve a degree of dissonance reduction. The Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance Theories advocate a pattern which puts behaviour change before attitude change, and then learning as the ultimate stage.

There is no doubt that all the above sets of theories offer one form of relevance and application or the other to advertising. All that is required would be for marketing and advertising operatives to deduce the comparative strengths of the theory groups and then proceed to utilise these as brands, media campaigns and target audience may determine.

5.0 Findings and Discussions

It is only apt to zero in on the core of each of the three theories groups. When this has been done, the quintessence of each of the advertising theories can be discerned. This will, in turn, inform the questions to be put across to the respondents:

Active Learning or Information Processing

These theories insist that the consumer to whom an advertisement is exposed pays good attention and gets involved in the information being relayed to him. That way, he can internalize and process the information with a view to learning something which will subsequently affect purchase decision.

Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement
Ultimately, these theories posit that advertisements do not lead to purchase of products because the audience is uninvolved. This means that he pays no attention to advertisements and therefore, does not bother to capture and process the information contained therein.

**Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance**

The submission of these theories is that humans by nature seek harmony and detest disharmony. Therefore, any advertisement which does not fit into the consumer’s frame of reality or cognitive environment, would create dissonance. This would as a result, compel the consumer to reject the advertisement as strange and unfamiliar.

**Questionnaire**

1. When you watch a television commercial, do you try to find out if it makes sense or not?
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

   The question directly tries to find out if the Active Learning or Information Processing Theories are applicable to the Nigerian audience.

2. When you are watching a television programme and a commercial is aired, do you:
   (a) Stop Watching [ ], or
   (b) Continue to Watch [ ], or
   (c) Become indifferent [ ]?

   This question was drawn up to determine the attitude of the Nigerian television audience towards advertisements. In doing this, the local applicability of the Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement Advertising Theories is being tested.

3. If a television commercial is good, but has a content which does not agree with your culture, beliefs and concept of life, would you go ahead and receive it well?
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

   The objective of posing this particular question is to determine if the Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance Advertising Theories are applicable to the Nigerian audience.

**Question One: Table 1.1**

**The FREQ Procedure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Row Pct</th>
<th>Col Pct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>1801</td>
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<td></td>
<td>26.78</td>
<td>33.21</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>55.26</td>
<td>64.45</td>
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<td>1201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.69</td>
<td>18.32</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54.20</td>
<td>45.80</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
The data made available on Table 1.1, shows the respondents’ answers to Question One. According to this table, 1,201 persons, who represent 40.01% of sample, do not attempt to make meaning and sense out of any television commercial that they are exposed to. However, 59.99% of respondents or 1,801 persons will pay attention to any television commercial in an attempt to make some sense and meaning of it. If almost 60% of the sample will pay attention of any television commercial because they want to know what it is all about, as well as how it concerns them, then one can state unequivocally that, in essence, the Active Learning or Information Processing Advertising Theories have registered applicability as far as this particular audience within the Nigerian environment is concerned.

Question Two: Table 1.2

The FREQ Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Row Pct</th>
<th>Col Pct</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stop watching</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td>20.15</td>
<td>10.49</td>
<td>52.07</td>
<td>21.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continue to watch</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>29.91</td>
<td>53.56</td>
<td>23.65</td>
<td>44.15</td>
<td>48.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>11.96</td>
<td>26.28</td>
<td>14.32</td>
<td>54.50</td>
<td>29.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>1547</td>
<td>3002</td>
<td>48.47</td>
<td>51.53</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On table 1.2 above, we see that 20.15% or 605 respondents would stop watching television when a television commercial is placed within their programme. Another section of the
sample made up of 1,608 persons, who constitute 53.56%, would continue to watch with the same interest and zeal, when a television commercial is aired. Those who would be indifferent to the airing of a television commercial number 789, which comes to 26.28% of total sample.

This means that a greater majority of the Nigerian audience do watch television advertisements. In doing this, they capture, process, assimilate and store the information they consider necessary. High Involvement rather an Low Involvement is affirmed here. It further means that, to a large extent, the Behaviourial Learning or Low Involvement Advertising Theories have found no applicability with the Nigerian audience.

**Question Three: Table 1.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Row Pct</th>
<th>Col Pct</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>48.47</td>
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<td>23.15</td>
<td>48.47</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>51.53</td>
<td>51.84</td>
<td>26.62</td>
<td>24.92</td>
<td>51.53</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>748</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51.65</td>
<td>48.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1547</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>51.25</td>
<td>51.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1559</td>
<td>51.93</td>
<td>48.07</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at Table 1.3, it is evident that if a television commercial is good, but its contents present ideas, sequences and information which disagree with the viewers’ culture, beliefs and concept of life, as much as 1,559 respondents would still receive it well. This figure represents 51.93% of total sample.

On the other hand, 1,443 respondents who make up a close 48.07% of sample, will not receive it well under the circumstances. Contrary to the postulations of adherents of the Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance Advertising Theories that “dissonance” or disharmony in a piece of advertisement would engender poor reception, the Nigerian audience has reacted differently. This development certainly means that in Nigeria, the Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Learning Advertising Theories have failed to show local applicability.
6.0 Conclusion

This field work has succeeded in drawing attention to the all-important question; “Are all the theories accepted and upheld globally truly universal in their applicability”? According to this study, the answer is certainly, “No”. This is especially so in respect of some frontline advertising theories, selected for the purpose of this investigation.

Going by the findings of this study, the Behavioural Learning or Low Involvement Advertising Theories are not applicable to the Nigerian audience. This, also, happens to be the case with regards to the Dissonance Reduction or Cognitive Dissonance Advertising Theories. Only the Active Learning or Information Processing Advertising Theories have found a good degree of applicability with the Nigerian audience.

The import of this is that all theories are not universally applicable, in every instance, and in every environment. Therefore, scholars as well as teachers and academics should handle every theory with basic skepticism, especially in instances where the universality of applicability applicable is not seen to be immediately beyond doubt.

REFERENCES:


