

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## MANIPULATION AS A MARKETING STRATEGY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BILLBOARDS IN GHANA

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## ABSTRACT

The discourse of advertising has provided a fertile ground for scholars with keen interest in the effects persuasive rhetoric has on both the emotional and the psychological dispositions of people. This study focused on one particular type of advertisement, the *billboard advertisement*. The aim of the study is two-fold: first, to explore the linguistic and nonlinguistic devices used as persuasive artifacts in billboard advertisements; and second, to find out how ideology was projected by the billboard advertisements. The study is qualitative research. Data collection was done in the Cape Coast metropolis. A total of fifteen billboards were collected. Of these, five were sampled for analysis. The sample was a mixture of billboards that advertised institutions, services, products, or people. The analysis reveals that linguistic devices such as nominals, participles, etc., images, and multiple colours are employed in billboard advertisements to persuade consumers to patronize some product or service. Secondly, billboard advertisements make use of the technique of positive self-representation and negative other-representation in an attempt to manipulate the perceptions of their target consumers. Significantly, the study contributes to existing scholarship on the discourse of manipulation.

## KEYWORDS

Marketing Strategy, Billboard, Discourse, Advertisement

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising is derived from the Latin verb *advertere*, which means *to direct one's attention to* (Cook, 2001). Contemporary readers are more interested in advertisements than ever, perhaps due to the fact that there has been a consumer recognition that product advertisers manipulate their target groups into falling for their adverts and products (Saputra et al., 2020). Many scholars believe that the true nature of advertising discourse is not revealed for readers to see. Especially for example, opines that despite the fact that advertising is everywhere, we do not often take time to ponder its real nature as a form of discourse (Goddard, 1998). Based on the target consumers, advertising could be looked at from different perspectives (Meghdari and Sobhani, 2017). One way of seeing this is through consumer advertising, which is directed towards the promotion of some product or service to a defined category of the public, and public relations advertising, which is directed towards the entire society in order to promote some issue of socio-political nature (El-Daly, 2011). A number of studies have focused on advertisements, in general, and billboard advertisements, in particular (Cook, 2001; El-Daly, 2011). These studies pay special attention to the persuasive or manipulative strategies used in billboard advertisements. The multi-modal nature of such advertisements appeals strongly to such scholars because of the complexity it presents in terms of the metaphorical meanings of the various linguistic and other semiotic devices that are an indispensable aspect of it (Azadinejad et al., 2020). To the observes, there is hardly ever a possibility that one would come up with a definite answer to the problem a particular advertisement presents (As Cook, 2001). Though the discourse of billboard advertising has garnered the interest of scholars, in Ghana, this area remains unexplored. There is therefore a need to examine

the discourse of billboard advertisements in the context of Ghana with the aim of finding out how linguistic choices and visual strategies are used as manipulative tools by commercial advertisers, in general, and billboard advertisers, in particular. The study contributes to the literature on billboard advertisements as well as the theoretical application of triangulated approach to the discourse of manipulation (van Dijk's, 2008). Specially, the research addressees the following questions:

- How is language used in billboard advertisements to perpetuate a particular ideology?
- How are visuals employed in the billboard advertisements to manipulate consumers?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Manipulation as a Theory

Manipulation is a communicative or interactional practice in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests (Van Dijk, 2008). Van Dijk describes manipulation in three different ways: social, cognitive, and discursive practices. He explains that social manipulation is an illegitimate dominance, confirming social inequality. In cognitive terms, manipulation is viewed as a form of mind control that interferes with the process of understanding as well as the formation of biased mental models and social representation. Discursively, he considers manipulation as the usual form and format of ideological discourse. Contemporary studies like have affirmed the usefulness of Dijk's viewpoint in the approaching manipulation. From the viewpoint of van Dijk, manipulation goes beyond the mere desire of individuals or groups to persuade others to accept their

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point of view or do their bidding (Turhan and Okan, 2017; Sultan and AlKhafaji, 2022; Abdu and Khafaga, 2019; Wu and Sun, 2019). It moves on drastically to take an individual away from his or her current state of thinking to another, and that is illegitimate and an abuse of a person's position. It is therefore a wonderful enterprise to explore this kind of abuse in billboard advertisements. As it mentions that power exists in various modalities, including the concrete and unmistakable modality of physical force (Fairclough, 1992). This assertion goes to reveal that power is not only displayed by word of mouth but also by multi-modal (non-linguistic) texts. Persuasion, a form of manipulation, has seemingly become the dominant rhetorical force in advertisements. Various forms of manipulation are exhibited in the billboards that surround us. But this form of manipulation is so subtle that people scarcely recognise that they are indeed being persuaded to patronise one product or service or the other. This has led to a mix-up of what the truthfulness of a presentation is and how it has been presented.

It must be noted that there is a synergy between persuasion and manipulation on the one hand, and power and ideology on the other hand. This kind of confluence is highlighted by their definitions. As it mentions that manipulation is a social phenomenon as it is a way of exercising control over someone (Van Dijk, 2008). Exercising control over another is clearly an exhibition of power. Looked at this way, manipulation could clearly be conceptualised as a manifestation of abuse of power. However, van Dijk maintains that it could be legitimised through persuasion. Thus, persuasion is a legal or legitimate use of power. In fact, underlying all of these is ideology, in that whichever manipulative or persuasive device is employed projects a specific ideology. It is this ideology, or more specifically, this ideological position, that manipulators want the manipulated to adopt. It is therefore only natural that they employ the technique of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk, 2008; Edu-Buando and Mwinlaaru, 2013).

## 2.2 Advertising and Billboard Advertisement

To the opines that advertising could be described as a form of discourse not only because it influences how language is structured but also what makes up daily habitual acts of interaction (El-Daly, 2011). This assertion is true because billboard advertisements, a popular form of advertisement, flood the streets of most places, and they wield enormous influence on the psychological processes of people, especially with regard to their reception of information on products being advertised. This echoes observation that, Brand names, logos, trademarks, jingles, and slogans (which are semiotics employed in advertisements, in general, and billboard adverts, in particular) have become part and parcel of the 'mental encyclopaedia' (Beasley and Danesi's, 2002). These semiotic devices are used in such a catchy and compelling manner that people can hardly ignore them. The intuition underlying this is that in a world where manufacturing companies, as well as all manner of tradesmen and other commercial firms, are engaged in a constant competitive struggle for economic hegemony, the greater the influence of advertisements, the better the public patronage of a particular product, institution, or service. Commenting on the use of persuasion in advertisements, states that there could absolutely be no endpoint for such practice (Dixon, 2014). The syllogism is that persuasion and advertising are inextricably interwoven such that none can be divorced from the other. Advertising is a dialogic enterprise between advertisers and consumers. In this dialogic process, the advertiser plays the role of the persuader, and the consumer acts as the persuaded. Presently, researchers, particularly those in the field of psychology, have shown keen interest in the discourse of advertising with the aim of questioning the effects advertisements have on consumer behavior. The thrust of this is aptly expressed by, There is a new hunger to understand what advertising does, (Seglin, 1989). To conclude, advertisements, or more specifically billboard advertisements, have the primary aim of influencing people's perceptions or behaviour so that they patronise a particular product or service. To do this, they employ persuasion in a subtle manner to conceal their ideological orientations.

## 2.3 Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Devices Used in Billboard Advertisements

Advertisements use language in a special way. To observe that the language of advertising is marked by the minimal, if not complete absence of, use of function words such as articles and pronouns (Leech, 1966). He further observes that there is generally a preference for nominals over verbals. According to advertising has progressed beyond the use of simple techniques for announcing the availability of products or services (El-Daly, 2011). It has ventured into the domain of persuasion, and its rhetorical categories have become omnipresent in contemporary social discourse.

El-Daly's position is that a variety of linguistic devices are employed as manipulative strategies in advertisements. These are used concurrently in

conjunction with visuals. Advertisers have long been aware of the complementary roles of both linguistic and nonlinguistic devices, such as images in advertisements, in manipulating consumers. These two devices are placed side-by-side to enforce their emotional appeal to the consumer. An image contains what, cited by, calls an "eye-catcher (El-Daly, 2011; Ericson, 1978). An 'eye-catcher' is a pictorial or graphical element that occupies quite a large space in the image. Functionally, it may communicate either factual information about a product or symbolic information. The symbolic information refers generally to the connotations of the 'eye-catcher'.

It mentions that colours play an important manipulative role in advertisements in that they have meanings and emotions tied to them just as images and words are (Mayoyo et al., 2010). Brown states further that metaphorically, "warm" colours like red, orange, and yellow represent happiness, passion, and energy, while "cool" colours like blue, green, and violet create a sense of serenity, health, peace, and security. Brown concludes that colours are highly manipulated in adverts due to their strong emotional appeals. The positioning of visuals is not haphazard but strategic to exert some telling influence on observers or consumers. In a billboard advertisement with multiple visuals, the framing highlights may establish a connection between the different components of the billboard and draw attention to the element being given more prominence; thus, in the analysis of visuals in advertisements, the size and positioning of images are to be taken into consideration. However, it appears that the use of visuals in advertisements has been abused recently in such a manner that they distort reality, thereby giving consumers false impressions of products or services advertised. It is precisely this situation that bemoans (Dixon, 2014). He states that the manipulation of images that are to be seen in commercials or on billboards has reached the point where it becomes unethical and gives people a distorted view of reality. From this brief discussion, we can conclude that both linguistic and non-linguistic devices are equally employed as strategic manipulative devices in advertisements.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodological framework for analysing discourse. CDA is basically concerned with 'analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 2001). All these are perpetuated through the ideological workings of language (Fairclough, 1992). Thus, in CDA, analysts take an explicit position, generally identifying with the dominated or abused and finding out how they resist such domination. The aim is to help them free themselves from such ideological hegemony. This way, CDA is seen as playing an advocacy role in society. CDA analysts are themselves aware of this bias and therefore do not strive to shy away from it. It must be noted that CDA is based on the assumption that "discourses are historical and can therefore only be understood with reference to their context" (Meyer, 2001). This assertion corroborates view that text and context complement each other; thus, in critical discourse analysis, special attention is paid to the socio-historical context of the discourse as it exerts enormous influence on it. Simply, intertextuality and interdiscursivity are crucial in CDA (Gee's., 1999). CDA analysts also stress that though texts or language perpetuate ideology, it is done in a subtle manner. There is therefore a need to move from just the manifest level of analysis of linguistic items to the latent level of analysis, as it is at this level of analysis that the ideological underpinnings of texts or language can be unearthed. Finally, CDA is not a unitary analytical framework but rather an interdisciplinary approach that draws on varying perspectives for its analysis. The study specifically adopts triangulated approach (van Dijk's., 2008). This approach is made up of social forces (dominion and abuse of power), cognitive coaching, and discursive practices. This is complemented by approach to discursive practices, which also focuses on manipulation in terms of processes that *inter alia* deal with persuasion (El-Daly's., 2011).

### 3.2 Data Description

The study is qualitative research. Data collection was done in the Cape Coast metropolis. A total of fifteen billboards were collected. Of these, five were sampled for analysis. The sample was a mixture of billboards that advertised institutions, services, products, or people. Each of them was coded for easy referencing. They were coded as billboards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

### 3.3 Analysis and Discussion of Data

As we mentioned earlier, linguistic and non-linguistic devices play complementary roles in advertising. Because of this, the two will be discussed simultaneously. Below is billboard 1:



This billboard advertises an upcoming seminar. The organizing group appears to be pressuring itself to provide an ideal description of itself; thus, "your passport to financial freedom!" This expression, which has been closely associated with "Cash Planet," carries a strong message of total economic security or redemption, especially from poverty. This is emphasized by the adjectival "financial" and the nominal "cash". The ideology being projected is that one can only free him or herself from financial handicap if he or she attends the seminar. Another linguistic device used in this billboard that catches the readers' attention is the enlistment of several persuasive expressions. It is obvious that all, except one, are imperative sentences. These imperative sentences make the message direct and give the impression, like the phrases discussed, that the seminar offers financial security. The social force inherent in billboards stems from the position that the discourse addresses a particular section of society, though there is an indication that 'anyone can do it'. "Anyone can do it", an expression that ends the list, could be said to manipulate viewers into thinking that all are welcome, but upon a deeper observation, it is specifically addressed to the poor, desperate, or those with financial problems. An image of a family is positioned to the left, horizontally, of the linguistic devices. Significantly, all the members of the family are laughing or smiling. This gives the impression that all is well with the family. The aim of this image is to make consumers accept the credibility of the seminar as a life-changing one. There are images at the bottom. They include fiscal assets like a car, house, airplane, and money. The inclusion of these as physical attractions enhances the linguistic elements.

It is obvious that, upon first glance, the reader's attention is captured by the personalities forming the family and the positioning of the caption 'Life Changing Seminar' just after the visual and at the top. The advertiser is abusing the readers' economic situation, making them form the opinion that the seminar promises a better life. The supposed comfort expected at the end of the seminar is again enhanced by the colors used in the advertisement. Symbolically, blue, which according to symbolises modesty and calmness, is displayed, coupled with the use of red, emphasising the \$7000 (Utami and Harianto, 2021). The bulleted items have also been highlighted to direct viewers' attention to the beneficial expectations of the whole seminar being advertised. The next billboard to discuss is named billboard 2:



In billboard two, the discourse focuses on one particular gender: the feminine gender. The situation presented in the advertisement is an example of the assistance given to pregnant women by transport unions. An ideal situation is presented to get women to accept and believe that drivers are at the service of all pregnant women. This is boldly captured in the heading, "Transport Union At The Service Of Pregnant Women In The Central Region. To reinforce the caption, a subtitle is provided: "No Money?" and "Don't Worry". A critical look at these linguistic structures reveals the ideological stance of the advertisers, who, in this case, are the drivers. First of all, the union is at the service of pregnant women in the

central region. Presumably, the union was formed by drivers in the same region. The impression we get is that only central regional drivers care about the plight of women. The caption therefore projects a good image of drivers in the central region against drivers in other regions. This resonates with the assertion that persuaders often employ the technique of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk, 2008; Edu-Buando and Mwinlaaru, 2013). Also, at the bottom of the billboard is another expression that reads, "No Money? Don't Worry." It is a question-and-answer technique. This strategy pushes the reader into thinking that the sort of service rendered to the defined group is absolutely free and that these women need not worry about any financial headaches pertaining to it. However, the reality is that vehicle operators do not render free services as intended by the union. What they mean specifically is that their charges are so minimal or insignificant that they could be literally labeled as "free."

For this reason, it could be said that the readers are being deceived about the truthfulness of the message. Whatever the ideological underpinning, the linguistic devices have been so crafted to hide the reality from readers because, had this been known, readers might not patronize their services. Therefore, this way of exercising control over pregnant women, in particular, and readers, in general, is an abuse of power (van Dijk, 2008). The pictorial enhancement of the advertisement is phenomenal. The message communicated by the rhetorical devices is heightened by the semiotics. The image of a pregnant woman being assisted by a driver is wonderfully displaced at the centre of the billboard. In fact, the framing is magnificent. The type of visual present is the "offer image" because it doesn't look at the viewer and therefore presents the scene as a piece of information to be scrutinized by the viewer (Abousnougou and Machin, 2008). The information given is ideal, but in reality, such assistance as portrayed in the picture does not exist; hence, it projects an illusion of reality. Second, the heading is given in two colours: red and blue. Finally, because red is brighter, it has been associated with the expression "pregnant woman". The aim is to foreground the group for which the service is intended. Billboard three is shown below:



Billboard three advertises a new food product. One major linguistic device used in the billboard is the product name and slogan, "Jago... So Creamy, So Nourishing." This expression appeals directly to the psychology of an observer and lures him or her into accepting the product without question. Here, any doubts or misconceptions about the product can only be answered after having purchased and tried the milk to ascertain whether it is creamy and nourishing or not. The only option is to purchase it. Arguably, notion of persuasive power is at play here. Under the slogan and brand name is another linguistic device: "Evaporated Full Cream Milk (Fairclough's, 1989). This expression adds another persuasive feel to the one just discussed. Then, there is the expression, "Now in Ghana." The assumption underlying this construction is that the product in question is a foreign product but whose good quality has necessitated its importation into the country. Exploiting the inclination Ghanaians have for foreign products, the advertisers aim at making Ghanaians fall in love with the product as it is of supposed superior quality. One obviously appreciates social force here (van Dijk's, 2008). This is because society itself has come to believe that everything abroad is good, whereas all local products are inferior. Finally, the product's nutritional value is brought to the fore by the inscription "Contains 35 Vitamins and Minerals," captured at the top of the advert. This is to reinforce the information presented about the product and to get the readers to be convinced of its worth.

The billboard has an image of the smiling sun, an unusual image. The bright colours support the supposed soothing and nourishing nature of the product. The consumer is persuaded by the visuals and their positions, which instantly capture attention even before thinking of the other linguistic features. The product itself is positioned on the left hand side of the billboard, a strategic position that catches the attention of the entire audience. The smiling sun heightens the general mood of happiness as well as the energizing nature of the product. It is as if the consumer of the

product will be as energized as the sun. Generally, this billboard creates the impression that *Jago* is better than other similar products. Implicitly, the "us versus them" distinction is made. The opine that this strategy is an implementation of polarization prevalent in ideological discourse (Edu-Buandoh and Mwinlaaru, 2013). The fourth billboard below is equally fascinating, ideologically:



The billboard is a banking advertisement. The discourse depicts an ideal scenario of a promising future for consumers who wish to invest with HFC bank. Basically, the billboard advertises the investment policy of HFC bank. The choice of the expressions "GH 15,000 in savings... and counting" and "I am glad I started. HFC Investments makes it easy." is ideologically motivated. In 'GH 15,000 in savings... and counting', the agent is absent, so the construction appears like an agentless passive; thus, agency is backgrounded while the goal is foreground. In such sentences, the aim, according to, is to direct readers' attention to the goal affected by the action (Simpson, 1993). More significantly, the investor expects an increase in the savings. Ideationally, the advertiser is trying to direct readers' attention to the whopping sum of money with the implication of forming the impression that HFC investments have the best returns. The other two sentences, 'I am glad I started.' and 'HFC Investments makes it easy.', add to the ideology. In the former, there is the impression that one will regret not investing in HFC because of the beneficial nature of its policies. The latter seems more polarized than the first, ideologically. It connotes that, apart from HFC, no other financial 'makes it easy'.

The visual communication is superb. It is observed that images perform some of the functions Halliday identifies for languages, especially making an offer and a demand (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The use of a nurse could stem from the notion that it takes a government worker to participate in the investment. The viewer is attracted by the use of the colour blue. It gives a promising achievement to the investor. The positioning of the last slogan is meant to crown the message as true and workable. Again, the reader's mindset is being influenced. The reader is made to think only of the positive outcome of the investment, while neglecting the possibility of failure. When an image looks at the viewer, it recognizes the presence of the viewer in the interaction and thus requires some response. For example, when it smiles, it demands a reciprocal reaction from the viewer. In billboard 4, the nurse smiles at the viewer. Her facial expression demands that we feel happy and appreciate her offer. This "demand image" conveys the impression that when the viewer invests in HFC, he or she will be as happy as she is. Thus, with HFC, there are no worries. This gives the viewer some assurance. The last billboard to analyse advertises a culinary product.



The idea behind this advertisement is to get the consumer to believe that the product is the best. By so doing, several linguistic devices have been exploited. The slogan of the product "Gino", which is "Good Happens with Gino," is a declarative sentence. This has been so effectively employed that it leaves the consumer with no chance of either contesting or saying anything in contrast to what has been presented. The advertiser attempts

to ideologically dominate the consumer. One would easily realize that the substance itself is mentioned at the bottom, so what comes before the substance is only a cognitive persuasion of the advertising company to get the consumer to have a good perception of what the product is about. The billboard shows a blend of several colors, among which red dominates. It must be emphasized that the color red, as used here, may metaphorically suggest good taste or a wonderful meal. Like in billboard four, the woman in this advertisement dominates the entire advertisement and has her full dominion entrenched in such a powerful manner that the discourse is more or less directed at women. The choice of a woman is significant in that women are generally known to be responsible for the kitchen. It could be argued that attention is focused on women. The over-riding idea is that women who want to have a wonderful meal should use "Gino tomato paste".

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to conduct a critical discourse analysis of billboard advertisements in order to determine how linguistic choices and images are persuasively used not only to manipulate consumers or viewers but also to project some ideology. The data was drawn from a variety of billboards in the Cape Coast municipality, and the analysis was adapted from triangulated approach (van Dijk's, 2008). The analysis reveals that linguistic devices such as nominals, participles, etc., images, and multiple colours are employed in billboard advertisements to persuade consumers to patronize some product or service. Secondly, billboard advertisements make use of the technique of positive self-representation and negative other-representation in an attempt to manipulate the perceptions of their target consumers. Significantly, the study contributes to existing scholarship on the discourse of manipulation.

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