

The Use of Bad Language in Advertising: the Building of a Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

The inclusion of swear words in advertising is becoming more popular and yet very little has been written on the use of this creative tool. This paper attempts to stimulate this area of research by exploring reasons why an advertiser might use swear words. Drawing on various streams of research a conceptual model is created which identifies six reasons why swear words may be employed in advertising. A number of moderating variables are also recognised which influence the perception of the end consumer to the advertisement. Examples of advertisements containing swear words are then examined to strengthen the validity of the proposed framework.

Background

Very little has been written in the advertising or marketing literature on the reasons why an advertiser may choose to use swear words in an advertisement or the impact they have on consumers perception of the advertisement. Indeed, the numerous lists of executional tools available to the advertiser contain no mention of this approach (e.g. Belch and Belch, 2004; Laskey *et al*, 1995; Stewart and Koslow, 1989) despite evidence of its use across different types of media and product classes. One explanation for this may be that a swear word is an antecedent which can lead to a number of different executional approaches. The use of a swear word in an advertisement may be considered as a form of norm violation or incongruity, the latter being defined as “the extent to which ad content differs from generally expected beliefs, attitudes and/or behaviours” (Alden, Mukherjee and JHoyer, 2000, p.2). This incongruity can then lead to surprise i.e. a feeling of uncertainty. Surprise is considered to have a neutral valence i.e. it can have either a positive or negative outcome. If surprise is accompanied by other moderating variables, namely warmth, playfulness and ease of resolution, the incongruity may lead to perceived humour (Alden, Mukherjee and JHoyer, 2000), an executional tool that has a strong effect on ad attitudes leading to direct effects on attitude towards the brand (Brown and Stayman, 1992).

Alternatively, the feeling of surprise created by the swear word may lead to shock. Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchandra (2003) describe shock advertising as that which intentionally challenges the values and norms of society. There is evidence to suggest that such a violation can break through advertising clutter and have a positive effect on information processing in terms of elaboration (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984) by enhancing the motivation to process the information (MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski, 1991). The study by Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchandra (2003) examined the impact of advertisements using three different executional tools; shock, fear and informational, using an advertisement containing bad language to represent shock. They found that the shock appeal produced higher levels of attention, recall and recognition than the other advertising approaches. However, it is worth noting that the advertisement was communicating the impact of aids prevention i.e. a public policy advertisement, where shock is a more acceptable executional tool than in other more commercial areas (Thacker, 1993). Therefore, the type of product being advertised may play

a part in the how the swear word is perceived. A need to examine the impact of sector in offensive advertising generally has already been identified (Brown, 2001).

If the level of shock created by the swear word is perceived to be high this can lead to the advertisement being perceived as offensive. An offensive advertisement can be a result of the product being promoted, for example, condoms, and/or the way in which an advertisement is executed (Barnes and Dotson, 1990). Brown (2001) states that advertisers use offensive advertising because it is effective in gaining attention, efficient in stimulating a second look, cheap due to extra media coverage and easily copied. He argues that offensive campaigns appeal to the Generation X who have grown up in a “dumbed down” society and are trying not to grow up. But not all advertisements containing swear words are considered offensive. It has been suggested that the perceived level of offensiveness is influenced by the medium utilised and the audience demography (Christy, 2006). In two studies, one based in Hong Kong (Prendergast, Ho and Phau, 2002) and another in Australia (Waller, 1999), indecent language was identified as one of the top five reasons why an advertisement might be considered offensive. And, interestingly, this was identified more strongly by women than men in both studies, providing evidence of the importance of audience demography. Another variable that has been identified by Mortimer (2006) in her study of the regulation of bad language in advertisements is the severity of the word in use. The Advertising Standards Authority in New Zealand refer to a league table of swear words that is produced by the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority every six years. This research indicates that some swear words are considered by the general public as more acceptable as others.

But is bad language always used to create a surprise? There may be other reasons why an advertiser uses swear words in its advertisements. As no research has been done in this area it was considered helpful to examine why people swear because some of the objectives of an individual may be similar to an advertiser. An interesting study from the linguistics literature examined a group of young people who were long-term drinking companions in an Irish bar (Stapleton, 2003). When they were asked why they swore in this particular environment a number of reasons were given as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Why people swear (adapted from Stapleton, 2003)

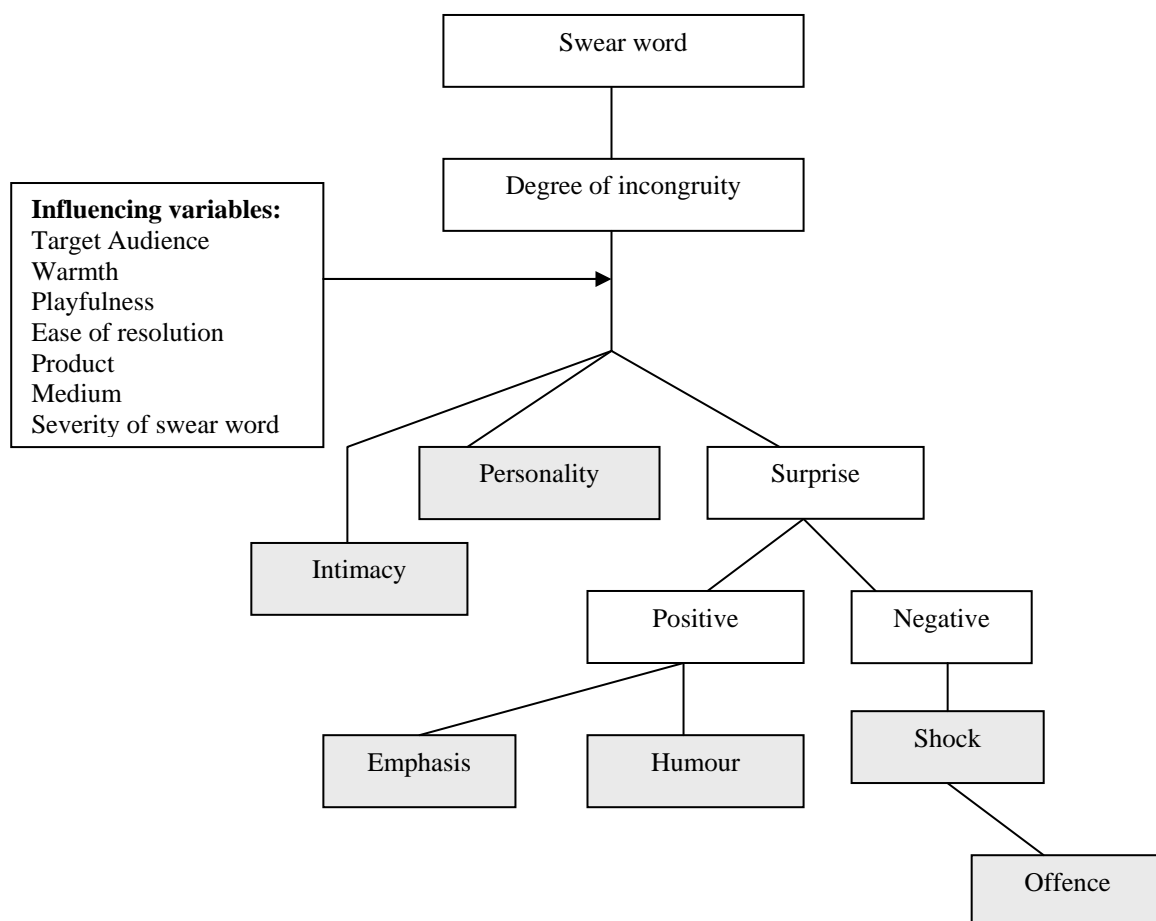
	No of women	No of men	Total
Humour/story telling*	15	13	28
To create emphasis*	13	11	24
Anger/tension-release	10	10	20
Habit	4	14	18
It's normal/expected	2	16	18
To show intimacy/trust*	12	0	12
To cover fear/vulnerability	6	5	11
Part of personality*	6	0	6
To shock*	2	1	3

The reasons identified with a star are those that may be considered applicable to the advertising industry. The main reason given was to assist when telling a story or making people laugh, that is, humour, which provides some endorsement for the proposed link between swearing and humour. To create an emphasis can also be seen as a reason in advertising, for example, it is a bloody good price!! This emphasis would be an outcome of some level of surprise. To show intimacy or trust is an interesting area to consider. It is possible that advertisers are trying to communicate with their target audience at the same

personal level as a friend or family member might. Such a communication can obviously be fruitful as it may lead to a closer relationship between the brand and the consumer resulting in the message being more convincing and acceptable. Swearing may also be used to reinforce an irrelevant brand personality. An example of that would be the FCUK brand. Although not a swear word per se the connotation here is rebellion and many young people are happy to be associated with this brand as displayed by the large number of T shirts that are worn. Lastly swearing is used in conversation to shock, although in this piece of research it was considered ninth of the list of reasons.

The literature would therefore suggest that there may be a number of reasons why advertisers may consider the use of swear words in their communications and that the impact of the inclusion of this bad language in terms of consumer perception can vary considerably, depending on a variety of moderating variables. These findings have been brought together to create a conceptual framework showing these relationships.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of effects of swear words in advertising



Examples to support the framework

It was felt useful to examine a small number of advertisements which have used swear words to establish whether they would fit into the proposed framework. These have been chosen selectively and in no way are designed to represent the total population of advertisements using this creative approach. They were taken from the websites representing the advertising

self-regulatory systems that exist in New Zealand and Australia. One could argue that the use of this source immediately introduces a bias as they must have been considered offensive by at least one person for a complaint to have been made. However, the fact that the vast majority of these advertisements have been deemed acceptable by the boards would suggest that the people complaining are considered to be out of step with the views of the population as a whole.

Example No 1: Toyota Bugger Advertisement

This advertisement was run by Toyota in 1999. It showed a farmer undertaking a number of farm jobs with his Toyota which result in various levels of disaster, because the vehicle is so strong. At every point, when disaster strikes, the farmer, followed by his wife and the dog at the end of the advertisement, say the word “Bugger”. This advertisement caused a great deal of controversy at the time, and was a topic of conversation in the home and in the media. It received 120 complaints in New Zealand (Case 99/23 ASA). Interestingly the advertisement was also shown in Australia where it received 1 complaint. This would suggest that there is some discrepancy in levels of tolerance between the two countries (Mortimer, 2006). The advertisement received 17 international awards and it has been referred to as a New Zealand icon. It is also considered responsible for the word becoming an accepted part of the New Zealand vocabulary.

If the advertisement is examined in the light of the conceptual framework the impact of the swear word for the majority of people is the element of surprise which is then leading to humour. Alden, Mukherjee and JHoyer, (2000) state that warmth, playfulness and ease of resolution have to be present for humour to result. Warmth is seen to be a sense of well-being or tenderness. Playfulness is linked to a nonserious or mischievous feeling. Lastly ease of resolution is defined as the effort needed to deal with or resolve the incongruence caused by the surprise. It could certainly be said that the advertisement contains an element of warmth. One feels some affection for the characters in the plot and the day to day issues that they are facing. The playfulness is perhaps less easy to identify although the way in which the characters respond to the incidents, that is, the use of the word bugger is light-hearted. Lastly the incongruence can be resolved fairly easily due to way in which the words are spoken. It would seem that the variables necessary for humour to be the outcome are present. However the advertisement was perceived by some as offensive. Indeed, in the case documents provided by the ASA, TVCAB state that “viewer response appears to be polarised into those who thoroughly enjoy it because of its humour and those who are offended by the use of the word “bugger”. The reasons for these different outcomes may well be because of the audience demography.

Example No 2: Australian tourism advertisement

This advertisement contained a number of examples of Australians getting ready for tourists to arrive, for example, buying a beer and having the camels shampooed. It ends with a young woman wearing a bikini on a deserted beach asking “So where the bloody hell are you?” The advertisement has resulted in numerous complaints in Australia and abroad. The advertisers, in their response to complaints received by the Advertising Standard Bureau (Case No 91/06 ASB) stated that the word “bloody” was delivered “with genuine Australian warmth To make overseas visitors feel welcome”. They also state that the campaign captures “the essence of the Australia personality and the charm of the Australian people”.

This advertisement is not using swearing to create humour. The comments from the advertiser reflect other reasons for using bad language identified in the conceptual framework. The swearing is being used to link in with the already existing image of Australians in terms of being relaxed and informal i.e. part of personality. The comments from the advertisers would also suggest that the term “bloody hell” creates a level of intimacy or “warmth” between the advertiser and the consumer. Lastly, the term provides some emphasis on the last line of the advertisement. One could therefore argue that there are elements of all three objectives in the advertisement. The people complaining about the advertisement obviously were not happy with this justification. The comments from the complainants would suggest that their distress was a result of Christian beliefs, the effect of swearing on their children and concern with the way the advertisement portrayed the image of Australians. The characteristics of the audience and how they see themselves and their country are obviously playing a part here.

Example 3: MARTINFUCKINEMOND advertisement

The New Zealand advertising campaign in question was for an art exhibition for a deceased artist whose name was Martin Fuckin Emond (Case no, 05/158 ASA). The exhibition was promoted through the use of posters which could be seen throughout the Auckland city centre. The poster contained the following copy: MARTINFUCKINEMOND, with “YESTERDAY TODAY TOMORROW, Retrospective, 1969-2004” displayed below. The word “fuckin” was printed in red for emphasis. The argument put forward by the advertiser was that the swear word was used because it was part of the artist’s name. However it was noted that the artist had been referred to as Martin Emond elsewhere. The ASA decided that the advertisement was offensive and the complaint was upheld. Reasons put forward for this decision were that the swear word was the second most offensive word on the Broadcasting Standards Authority list which they use as a guide. They were also concerned that the medium being used was posters which could be seen by a large percentage of the population.

With reference to the conceptual framework, the influencing variables of medium and severity of swear word seem to be having an influence on the perception of this advertisement. The use of the word has been to create some surprise and perhaps some emphasis. However the element of surprise has not been accompanied by any of the variables that are necessary for the use of the swear word to lead to humour. The surprise element has led to shock and then to offensiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

Very little has been written on the use of swearing in advertising, despite the fact that it is becoming an increasingly popular way of gaining attention. It has therefore been necessary to bring together different avenues of study with the purpose of understanding why advertisers use swear words and what impact they can have. The conceptual framework proposes that swear words may be utilised to create five different outcomes; Emphasis, Intimacy, Personality, Humour, Shock and Offence. However, a number of contextual moderators, that is, audience demography, warmth, playfulness, ease of resolution, product, medium, and severity of swear word, may influence the final perception of the advertisement. This work is obviously very exploratory at this time. For the framework to be of use to managers it is necessary to operationalise it and future research plans include undertaking some structural equation modelling with manipulation of the advertisement and participants

so that the impact of the swear word can be predicted. Research into the other influencing variables is also necessary. In its present form the framework highlights a number of interesting areas for future research and hopefully may stimulate an insightful discussion on the topic.

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