

Deception and Internet Advertising: Tactics Used in Online Shopping Sites

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Introduction

In order to sustain mass production, mass consumption is essential. In order to pursue this very basic rule of capitalism, entrepreneurs try to apply plans increasing consumption and invest in advertising (Ewen, 1976). Corporations use advertising to persuade consumers to purchase (Harms & Kellner, 1991) and so as to compete and gain advantage in the highly competitive capitalist economy they frequently use deceptive tactics in advertising practices (Boush, Friestad, & Wright, 2009; Preston, 1994).

The history of deceiving consumers is as old as the history of trade but with the development of capitalist economy it has become more common and widespread. Despite of its countless harms to the consumers, such as the health losses and alike, markets and advertisers do still use deceptive tactics (Aditya, 2001; Gao, 2008; Gardner, 1975). The increasing use of Internet in daily life and trade elevated the use of deceptive tactics and deception has turned into a more complicated and omnipresent phenomena (Boush et al., 2009)

The Internet media and web interfaces provide numerous facilities and amenities to the sellers and advertisers that no other pervious medium could. Companies and marketers, not surprisingly, use these features to accomplish a variety of purposes ranging from informing to convincing the consumers while promoting their products on the Internet. Recent research showed that the misleading and deceptive advertising on these mediums are on the rise (Grazioli & Jarvenpaa, 2003; Mitra, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2008; Xiao & Benbasat, 2011). In that respect the aim of this study is to analyze and explain the deceptive tactics used in the online shopping sites by focusing on the distribution and nature of use of these tactics used by ads.

Methods

In this study deception is considered as '*the deliberate attempt, whether successful or not, to conceal, fabricate, and/or manipulate in any other way, factual and/or emotional information, by verbal and/or nonverbal means, in order to create or maintain in another or others a belief that the communicator himself or herself considers false*' (Masip, Garrido, & Herrero, 2004). By adopting this definition, the practice of deceiving becomes independent from the behavior change since it is conceived as a result of the deception attempt. Many researchers accept the definitions defending that the deception occurs when a consumer perceives and believes an advertising claim is false (Cowley, 2006; Gao & Scorpio, 2011; Gardner, 1975, 1976; Göle, 1983; İnal, 2000). According to this approach if no one distinguishes the deception, it is not considered as deception. To put this in other words, we can only detect deception after it happens and this means that we cannot avoid from the harms and negative consequences of deception. Instead of this the definition the definition employed here provides opportunity to detect the potentially deceptive contents by comparing the information and the presentation. Following this latter stance, this study designed to examine the verbal and nonverbal content of ads. Accordingly this study analyses both the presentation of the products and the information given about these products in a shopping web site. As a strategy, this study used both qualitative and quantitative content analyze methods in order to find out the deception tactics used in ads.

For this study the indicators that are developed by Grazioli & Jarvenpaa (2003) were used to define the deceptive tactics used in the shopping sites. According to this framework there are basically two categories that deceivers use to affect the purchase behaviour of consumer: 1) tactics that hinder the formation of a correct representation of the core; masking, dazzling and decoying 2) tactics that foster an incorrect representation of the core; mimicking, inventing, relabelling and double playing). Due to the limitations of the research, in this study I examined the possibilities of 3 tactics covered under the first category and accordingly I have done the following analysis:

1. Masking: The advertising contents were examined if there is any crucial characteristic of the core was omitted or eliminated (ex: material and size). In real store environment during purchase consumers can understand the material and size of a product by looking and touching. Furthermore they can examine the label of the product, which according to laws should contain the crucial information about the product like production materials, size and etc. In virtual environment like shopping sites, consumers do not have a chance to see and touch the real product but it is very easy to provide label information on the web page.

In this research, two crucial information about the product are defined as 1) the information about the material and 2) the size of the product. The absence of any of this information is considered as use of masking tactics and reported as deceptive.

Masking was measured as follows:

1. The main page of the shopping site is opened and boutique ads are coded according to the product type.
 2. Each boutique is visited by clicking on the banner ads. There were different numbers of product ads on different boutiques. From every boutique every 1st, 5th, 9th and 13th products were selected.
 3. Selected 4 products page are visited clicking on the banner ads. Each page is analysed for having information about the material and the size of the product separately. Ads having full information are coded as '0'. Ads that do not have any information is coded as '1' and reported as using masking tactics.
2. Dazzling: The advertising contents were examined by comparing the other available information on the web site so as to find out if any crucial information about the characteristics of the core was obscured or made difficult to access (ex: special offers, shipping and return terms).

Dazzling was measured as follows:

1. The ads about the campaigns are found and the special offers announced in that ads are noted.
 2. By clicking on the ads the pages explaining the conditions of the campaigns are reached. Conditions are carefully examined to figure out if there is any terms that may have a potential effect on decreasing or cancelling the appeal of the offer.
3. Decoying: The advertising contents were examined by comparing the other available information on the web site whether any crucial characteristic of the core was tried to be driven away from the attention of the consumer. (Ex: presenting images of the good that are not on sale or out of stock, invalid discount offers, possible untrue virtual product experience)

Decoying was measured as follows:

1. Each boutique was examined on the grounds that if the presented image is on sale or not. If the presented image is also found in the boutique's page the ad is coded as '0' (meaning that there is no deception) otherwise the ad is coded as '1' and reported as deceptive for using dazzling.
2. In order to find out the truthfulness of discount offers, all the discount rates are calculated to check the correctness of the ad.

With the framework described above I have analysed 48 unique online shops, which operates under a web site, which has the highest membership figures in Turkey. For some deception tactics (like invalid discount offers) all of the ads were coded and for others (like masking) the ads chosen by the random sampling method.

Results and Discussion

1.Masking:

It was found that 40.7 percent of the total ads do not provide the essential information about the products' materials. Moreover, it was also found that this type of deceptive tactic varies according to the product types. Among the seven product categories, the highest use of masking material information was detected in the category of shoes-bags (52 percent), followed by textile products and toys (50 percent each). The books category has a comparatively low rate for masking material (8 percent). Lastly the category of 'others', which covers gifts, decorative products and furniture, displayed full information for the products.

Masking the information about the size of the products is relatively lower compared to the material masking, with 18 percent in total. This practice is mostly common among toys (62 percent) and hardware products (50).

2. Dazzling:

On the day of analysis there were three banner ads announcing special offers/campaigns for online shoppers. One was about 'free shipment and three instalments', the other was about 'winning discounts as you purchase more' and last one was an announcement of a 'cross-promotion'. All three ads had hyperlinks which means that when you click on, you go to a new page explaining the details of the campaign. One out of three has a warning *_written in small fonts_* saying 'click for conditions of campaign'. The other two do not have any sign of hyperlink unless you move the cursor on them. When reached to the conditions of the campaign it was seen that the second offer is valid only purchases upper than 20TL and the cross-promotion offer is not valid for products like dippers, wet wipes and like.

3.Decoying:

Decoying was examined under three headings:

1. *Presenting images of the good that are not on sale or out of stock:* 13 boutiques out of 48 was found to use deceptive images on the main page because the product shown or represented in the main page ad was not available for purchase.
2. *Invalid discount offers:* There was six boutiques offering special prices on their main page ads. Four of them were offering discounts and two of them were offering products available for very low prices. All the discounts were

calculated and it was found that only one boutique applied the exactly promised rate. Nonetheless that boutique applied this exact rate to two products that one of them was out of stock and the other one was the cheapest product on sale. When the boutiques offering very low prices was examined, it was found that a very small number of products are available for that prices (2 out of 188 and 2 out of 157).

Conclusions

Online shopping and online advertising practices are exponentially growing. Moreover misleading and deceptive advertising and misrepresentations of information on internet are also on rise (Grazioli & Jarvenpaa, 2003). Accordingly this study verifies that the deceptive advertising practices are common among Internet shopping sites. Based on the acquired quantitative data, it can be said that while some sellers, advertisers and marketers provide valuable information for consumers, some of them omit, obscure or manipulate the crucial information about their products.

The results displayed the fact that a considerable amount of ads do not provide information on the material, and the size of the product. While the masking of the material is more common among the textile products, the masking of size is more common among toys. The dazzling practice is especially common in delivery/shipping notices. It has been found that for all special offers there are preconditions given in a linked page, which can easily be missed out by the customers. Potentially deceiving the consumers, discount rate numbers, which were written in big numbers, were followed by very tiny “up to” phrase. By this way consumers were manipulated as if there is a very big discount in all of the products. In addition to this, some discount claims are found to be not true. Finally analysis displayed that; in a number of cases the advertised commodity was not available in the shops. All these tactics were considered as deceptive since they have a potential to manipulate the rational purchase decision of the customers

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