Truthfulness as a Factor in the Language of Advertising

Dr Ayantayo J. Kehinde
Department of Religious Studies,
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan
kehindejacob@yahoo.com

Abstract
Little or no credence is given to truthfulness – a moral virtue and its implication for good advertisement in the discourse about the language of Advertisement. This is the gap in scholarship, which this work has filled. Therefore, this work, which uses analytical method, is an exploration of truthfulness as regards its intent, context, content and its implications for good advertisement in a continuously competitive business world. It examines the evil of deceptive advertisement for consumers, sellers themselves and business enterprise itself. It recommends way of reducing deceptive advertisement through the joint efforts of the government, the press, religious bodies, and non-governmental organization among others but with the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria taking the lead.

Introduction

That there is a possible relationship between truthfulness and the language of advertisement is difficult and hard fact for most advertisers to believe in the world of communication. This has to do with freedom of expression associated with the use of figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and euphemism (Crystall 1997). To those who hold this belief, there is no relationship between ethics (from where we conceived the virtue of truthfulness) and the language of advertisement. Some do ask: what does truthfulness have to do with advertisement since it is persuasive? And, that what has truthfulness need to do with persuasion because persuasion often involves cajoling, coaxing, convincing, enticing and inducing. All these as a matter of fact involve exaggeration, falsehood, puffing, embellishment and over estimation.

These raise the question of morality in business. In the field of advertisement, we ask the question of professional ethics, and ethical codes of conduct in relation to advertisement practices. In the field of language, the society also seeks for truthfulness, because language be it of advertising or otherwise, is an instrument for action used to promote our purpose in dealings with others, and in communicating ideas that are divorced from emotion. Because of this, language and its uses is a subject of moral rule, as we shall discuss fully in the subsequent headings. In the light of this background, this work highlights the following: the possible relationship between truthfulness and the language of advertising with respect to truthfulness; what the society and advertiser stand to gain as dividends from truthful advertising and the evil of deceptive advertising.

What is truthfulness?
Truthfulness simply refers to the act of giving true information or facts (in exact manner) about something. Therefore, true statement is based on fact and not imagination or invention. In a broader sense, truthfulness in the world of Ifemesia “indicates a correspondence between one’s exterior conduct and internal convictions”; that it is agreement between a person’s words or signs and his inner persuasion (Ifemesia 1985:207). A person whose words tallies with his inner persuasion is a truthful person. Corroborating this Aristotle writes:

A man is truthful, both in speech and in the way he lives – because he is like indisposition. Such a person would seem to be a good type: For a lover of the truth, who speaks it when nothing depends upon it, will speak it all the more, when something does depend upon it, because since he is guards against falsehood as such, he will guard against it (all the more) as something dishonourable. Such a man is to be commended. (Eth Nic, 112a pp16-640).

What we can infer from the above is that truthfulness is an obligation and indeed a moral obligation. This makes truthfulness a moral virtue. We need to discuss this because it is germane to our understanding of the need for morally oriented advertising.

**Truthfulness as a Moral Virtue**

As said earlier, truthfulness is a moral obligation. An obligation is a moral duty, which is enforced by a moral conscience and law. An obligation as Dzurgba has put it is governed by a principle of compulsion (Dzurgba 2000:19). This means it is an act, which we must compulsorily and unavoidably carry out. Truthfulness is an objective societal value. It is objective because the act is good in itself and not because we have favourable disposition towards it. A truthful person stands to gain from being truthful for example, he is praised and commended and if he acts otherwise, he is blamed and condemned. The society too benefits from it because every social relation is built on trust. Trust here refers to mandate, which is shown when assignments to very important jobs (like advertising) or appointments to position of power are made. There are many situations in real life that illustrate the concept of trust: oath taking, oath-giving, statement on oath, promising oath, bond, covenant contract, marriage vow, sacred pledge, and solemn declaration.

The moral implication here is that every word or statement must be truthful, that is it must be devoid of falsehood or deceit. Whether viewed from religious or non-religious perceptive, society expects truthfulness, in every statement uttered. In Christianity for example as in Islam and traditional religion (the faithful are expected to speak truthfully to each other; because, they are members of each other (Eph. 4:25; Surah 61:2-3). In secular life likewise, the popular dictum is that honesty is the best policy; that is it is the best thing to apply to social relation. Honesty in this sense is manifested in truthfulness, trustworthiness, sincerity, integrity and fairness. It means also the absence of deceitfulness, and untruthfulness. As far as the society is concerned, honest persons are dependable and can be counted upon to honour their duties, obligations, promises, and contracts. When likened to advertising, an honest and truthful advertisement is devoid of exaggeration, manipulation and coercion. We can therefore argue that truthfulness, as a value, with its specific moral claims, admits no exception at all. What is called the necessary lie is always an anti-value at least from the point of view of truthfulness as a value. Values in the context of this paper
refer strictly to societal beliefs, principles and standards to which it attaches much importance. One of these is truthfulness. On this ground, no end can justify deliberate deception as a means (like in advertising) of making success in business. We shall expatiate more on this later.

**What are advertising and its language?**

Advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor (Kotler 1999:458). Advertising has specific objective to accomplished hence we have different types such as informative – used to inform consumers about a new product or feature and to build primary demand, persuasive – used to build selective demand for a brand by persuading consumers that it offers, the best quality for their money; comparison – the ones that compare one brand directly or indirectly to one or more other brands, and reminder – the ones used to keep consumers thinking about a product (Kotler 1999:456). Without going into many details regarding the theories and practices of advertising, because of lack of space, we limit ourselves to selected information about advertisement relevant to our study. We know that advertising activities involve posters, signs, notices, show cards, samples, circulars, catalogues, labels, wrapping papers, price tags, tickets, footballers’ shirts, and many other devices. We have several slogans, jingles, street cries, loudspeaker messages, and the range of auditory effects heard in radio and watched on television advertising. Advertising also takes place in newspaper and magazines.

The overall aim of advertising is to draw attention of the public to a product or service in order to sell it. Therefore, advertisements rely almost totally in the use of language. We notice that the language is generally laudatory, positive, unreserved and emphasizing the uniqueness of a product (Cambridge 1997:394). As a result of this, advertisers make free use of figurative expressions such as hyperbole, metaphor, simile, paradox, euphemism, oxymoron, irony hence, we are familiar with such phrases “Drink X and Win N5million” “There is nothing like X”, B Milk: the milk of the super Eagle; X; the drinks of victorious people”; eating sunshine (cereal)’ smiling colour (hair shampoo). Others include “X costs less” many people prefer X”, “Z treats aches and pain (all?). What we can infer from these phrases is that the language of advertising used here vague, unpredictable, ambiguous, confusing, evasive, unclear uncertain and inexact. This raises the question of truthfulness. For example, the members of society having listened to message of advertising pause to ask: is this claim truthful? Or does the picture displayed on the T.V. screen about a product so advertised truthful in practical sense? On this we need to examine the moral relation between truthfulness and the language of advertising.

**The Moral Basis of Truthfulness in Advertising**

We believe as David Crystal also admits that the field of advertising is a controversial one especially as people in society dispute the ethics and effects of chard’ selling tactics, fraudulent claims, commercial sponsoring in sport, the instructiveness of advertisements and their effects on the public. To this end, we need to shed light on the relation between morality and advertisement. Morality in the context of our essay refers simply to beliefs or ideas about what society considers as right or wrong and about how people should behave (Omoregbe). For example, society regards truthfulness as a right conduct and deception in advertisement as a wrong conduct (Spurrier 1962:108). Therefore, it expects advertiser to behave well by being truthful in what he advertises.
The fact is that advertising like any other social activity is a subject of moral rule. This is so because advertisers are part of society and, therefore the action of advertisers in business world as in other human endeavour can be evaluated from moral point of view. This is so because every activity presupposes a background of morality and could be impossible without it. Advertising is judged to be morally right or wrong depending on whether or not the message of advertising or its language corresponds with the product so advertised when buyer purchases it and is ready to use it. For example, those who buy a product expect it to be as advertised when they take it home and unpack it. But if the quality of good so bought is different from what is in advertised, the buyer will complain and this raises the question of falsehood, which is the opposite of truthfulness. A complaint about a product by a buyer presupposes a desired for truthfulness. It is only against this background of morality that we justify the essence of truthfulness in advertising. DeGeorge is therefore correct when he asserts that morality is the oil as well as the glue of society, and therefore of advertising (DeGeorge 1990:23). To our mind, the proposition that truthfulness is not reconcilable with advertising, today consequently cannot be convincingly maintained. We need to make this point clearer by examining the practical relation of truthfulness to advertising.

Relating Truthfulness to Advertising

Our concern here is to demonstrate what makes a truthful advertising or what truthful advertising entails. Truthful advertising involves giving exact or accurate information about commodity being advertised since advertising is concerned about supplying information, it follows that such information must be factual because as a matter of principle, the society to which advertisement is targeted or addressed has right to truthful information. Truthful information is useful to consumers because such will help them buy or use a product or service satisfactorily after spending money to purchase it. Such information will improve the consumer’s purchase or use experience. Such information will help to measure the consumer’s satisfaction with the purchase and use experience. To our mind, effective information, which of course is truthful information, might reasonably be expected to increase consumer satisfaction. The more truthful information the advertising supplies, the better market and sale it makes from the public. The fact is that truthful advertising could enhance high patronage of goods so advertised and such could enhance re-sale and repeat sale. On this note, truthful advertising can make a dynamic contribution to rising levels of economic activity, help creates more jobs for an expanding labour force, and this broadens the base of taxes, which go to the government (Onyebuagu 1979:115). In addition, truthful advertising and not otherwise has potential to stimulate people to a higher standard of living and a richer diversity in material awards. As a matter of fact, advertising everywhere will quicken the pace of social development.

It is on this account that the society bestows some responsibilities on the part of advertisers. In fact, the basic responsibility of advertising through truthful advertising is to sell goods, and services, to create wants and desires and thereby encourage people to raise their standard of living to live a fuller, richer and more convenient life. To achieve this mission among others, the value and importance of truthfulness must be placed at high esteem in advertising strategy. Corroborating this, Onyebuagu notes

…but advertisers must recognize and work within the limits of contemporary understanding and acceptance of what is
truthful, not misleading, or deceptive and what is in good taste (Onyebuagu 1979:114).

With this expectation from advertisers, we can argue that the question and concern for truthfulness raise the issue of integrity on the part of advertisers; integrity is the quality of being honest and of always having high moral principles. Here, integrity is wedded to the moral issue of social responsibility and public interest (Day 1982:134). Therefore, a truthful advertiser is commended because he is courageous to speak the truth even when this does not earn him much economic dividend. In all, the advertisers and the public, stand to gain better from truthful advertising than otherwise because deceptive advertising is an antisocial act. Let us shed more light on this assertion in order to justify and appreciate the importance truthfulness in our society.

We should know that if we say truthfulness is impossible or not important in advertising, we are saying indirectly that truthfulness, which is the nucleus of social relation, is unimportant. Whereas, as Nelson believes (the belief we equally share with him) society is founded on an unspoken mutual trust (Nelson 1988:156). Trust, which is the basis of truthfulness, makes life possible. Hence, life is impossible without trust if we disagree, with this thesis, let us examine the evil of deceptive advertising.

The Evil of Deceptive Advertising

Deception comes into advertising when advertisers lie about the quality and quantity the product being advertised. Lying is this context consist not simply in making a false statement, but it also consists of making a statement which one believes is false, to another person, whom one has reason to think will believe the statement to be true (Bok 1988:153). Therefore, deceptive advertising is found when what is advertised differs from what the product is when it is purchased (Aaker 1982:40). Deceptive advertising contains:

1. False or misleading statement or exaggerations visual or verbal
2. Testimonials, which do not reflect the real choice of a competent witness.
3. Price claims which are misleading
4. Comparison, which unfairly disparages competitive product or service.
5. Claims insufficiently supported or which distort the true meaning or practicable application of statements made by professional or scientific authority.
6. Statements, suggestions or pictures offensive to public decency.

Deceptive advertising is manifested the abuse of the use of figures of speech which is manifested in bluffing, puffing, exaggeration, humour and overstatement. Inherent in the semantic advertising are the notion: of lying, misrepresentation, deception, manipulation and other questionable immoral practices. More seriously, deceptive advertising often produces negative effect on the public to which the advertisement is targeted. For example, it leads to (in economic terms) a misallocation of resources of buyers he spends his money on invaluable things especially when what he pays for goods outweigh the quality of goods purchased). The end result is, a disappointed buyer, or worse a real economic or physical injury.

Deceptive advertising also produces negative effect on advertiser because it shows that whoever deceives others lacks integrity. But can a man throw away his integrity all in his bid to sell products and render services? Or can a man throw away his integrity all in his bid to outshine competitors in market? We think, there is no excuse for lying or justification for deceptive advertising because, the society will always ask two fundamental questions: Can there be exceptions to the well-founded distrust of deception in public life? Are there times
when the public itself might truly not care about possible lies or might even prefer to be deceived? At every point in time, every society detests lying because it is immoral. Anything immoral is destructive to society. Therefore, there is no any just course, for society to promote falsehood and kill truthfulness. Lying is an immoral act because it is tantamount to fraud. This is why every form of advertising that involves coercion, manipulation and exaggeration is immoral because it negates the concept of truthfulness. To deceive the public through advertising is a moral evil because it shows that the advertiser does not respect the public, at this juncture deceptions is tantamount to a form of contempt for others. Consequently, the public will treat advertiser with contempt. In such a situation, man’s dignity will lose its place in the society. Hence, the view of Elegido is apposite. He writes:

Each time we choose to disregard the well being of other people, we reduce at least marginally the importance of that well being for us and the strength of the boards, which unite us to them. Finally, when we treat others as if they had no intrinsic worth or dignity, we automatically relativise our own value in our eyes and lessen our respect and self esteem (Elegido 1996:17)

In addition to the above, the goods so advertised deceitfully will eventually receive low patronage because naturally every person will want to allocate or use his/her resources maximally meaningfully and beneficially. On the account of this, advertisers should note that for no reason should they deceive the public. This is because deception harms a person’s interest, his well-being and his respect or dignity.

The society, having realized the evil of deceptive advertising always advocates for honesty in the overall merchandising. For example, consumers advocate a wide range of remedies to protect them from unsafe product, distorted and false advertising and environmental pollution. They also advocate for moral oriented business. It is on this note that we need to see how we can encourage practical application of morality to advertising in order to meet the aspiration of the public. We need to consider some steps to achieve this mission.

Steps Towards Moral Oriented Advertising

In order to enhance truthful advertising, certain steps should be put in place. These among others involve apportioning more responsibility on every stakeholder in advertising such as the producer or manufacturer, the advertising agency, the media, the public and finally the government. This is important as long as we accept that advertising like any so that social activities presuppose a background of morality. Where manufacturers or producers decide what to advertise it is important for them to make truthfulness their watchword and knowing that they have social responsibility not to deceive the public. Whichever level the decision is taken regarding what is advertised the company is responsible for the advertising it does. The company therefore stands the risk of defending before the public what it does advertise. Any attempt to mislead or misinform the public could lead to social opprobrium. Likewise, advertising agencies need to know that it is important for them to be truthful regarding the content, advertising accuracy, the medium it chooses and the like. We discover that the advertising agents frequently produce ideas for advertising campaigns, which are submitted to and approved by their customers. They frequently know what is true about a product and what is not, what is misleading or deceptive. On this note, advertising agencies should abide by the code of advertising
practice. For example, the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigerian (APCON) codifies what it is called the essence of good advertising in section 2 of its codes. It reads that all advertisements in Nigeria should:

1. Be legal, decent, honest, truthful and respectful of Nigeria’s culture.
2. Be prepared with a high sense of social responsibility and should not show disregard for the interest of consumers and the wider Nigerian society.
3. Conform to the principles of fair competition generally accepted in business, and fair comment expected in human communication
4. Enhance public confidence in advertising.

It is important for the council that these codes are implemented to the letter in order to promote truth-oriented advertising in Nigeria. The APCON, therefore, need to honour such a responsibility. This is important because there is a difference between making law and implementing it. Therefore, the APCON has an obligation to investigate when it suspects falsehood in the advertisement designed or not designed by its members.

It is on this ground, that the media where the advertising programme is produced also has moral responsibility to discharge towards truthful advertising. All the medium of advertising – television stations, magazines, newspapers and others have the moral responsibility for what appears in their shows or in the pages of their publications after all they receive copy or film submitted by the manufacturer or advertising agency. The society expects that they have the right and in fact a duty to question, censor or prohibit if the need arises the content of the advertising especially when such is misleading and deceptive. Even when they are being compelled to collaborate with advertising agency or manufacture to lie, mislead, or misrepresent product by showing it or publishing it, they have the duty to refuse, such deceptive advertising. They are morally required to refuse an immoral advertising. To show or print an immoral advertising would be to take part in an immoral action. For whatever reason, we believe that the media cannot cast aside their moral responsibility so lightly for monetary gains. If they do, the public will condemn them and they will lose their public honour.

However, the public too has a duty to assess, comment, command or complaint where necessary about deceptive advertising. This is a moral duty. In fact, they have moral responsibility to take any positive action about them.

It is a pity that Nigerians consumers have cold feet regarding assessment of the content and language of advertising. They seem to be too complacent with what advertising is all out even when they do not like it, they hardly raise up their hands to complain or show any form of annoyance about deceptive advertising. At times, the public is either ignorance of its right to complain. However, there is no complaint commission in Nigerian, like Europe or America where consumers can display their discontentment about misleading and deceptive advertising. Nevertheless, we still believe that if they are concerned about truthfulness or accuracy of advertising and if they feel advertising is misleading they can perform a public service by making their feelings and perceptions known by writing the APCON, and the media where such advertising is aired or published. They can also stop purchasing such goods. It is our belief that public pressure of such intensity could enhance truthful advertising and keep advertisers responsible. If advertisers know that members of the public will not only complain about misleading or immoral advertising but can also refuse to buy such goods so advertised, they would wake up to renew and discharge their moral responsibility.
To make this work, the government has to take an active role in regulating and monitoring advertising. The role of government is to protect the public interest. Making laws is not sufficient because officers who should monitor the application of the laws could be so corrupt to make the laws redundant. As we all know that corruption is a common anti-social but also evil practice in Nigeria. We believe that the right thing the government could do to protect public interest regarding misleading advertising is to establish consumer complain action commission with powers to:

1. listen to consumers’ complaints about unethical practice of retailers already discussed.
2. provide assistance to consumers to seek redress for goods and services that are not good for them
3. summon suspected erring retailers to the commission to answer queries from consumers.
4. punish any morally erring retailers or business people. Such punishment could be in form of fines. The fines must be made higher than the profit made by retailers from their unethical practices.
5. protect consumers against the perceived injustice and to remedy consumers who suffered injustice in terms of prices on good and quality or quantity supplied after payments were made.
6. make open purchase law that enables consumers to return a product within one week and get a refund in case of non-perishable goods. This will provide additional protection against defective products.
7. provide a forum for dialogue between consumers and the government, the manufacturers and consumer, retailers and consumers in order to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation.

It is our suggestion that any advertiser or advertising agency found to be guilty should be penalized accordingly so that such would serve as deterrent to others. We believe that if the public, the media, the government and the manufacturer recognize moral duty of making truthfulness the watchword for advertising, the whole society will gain from it (Aaker 1982:40).

Concluding Remarks
From the foregoing, we have proved without sentiment and beyond reasonable doubt that truthfulness is indispensable to advertising because the public will gain from it but lose from deceptive advertising. Since every social relation is built on truth, therefore, truthfulness in advertising makes good background for effective communication (Thayer 1973:5). To the best of our knowledge, language is an instrument for action and such language should be devoid of deception because deception is always detrimental to public interest. No wonder why Ifemesia warns that:

For it has been said that one gains a much sinister effect if, instead of calling spade a spade one calls it an instrument of a certain nature. This attitude can lead to heinous misunderstanding between groups in a society (Ifemesia 1985:205).

Therefore, effective communication in human society involves truthfulness. This is why we emphasize the need for truthful advertising. Truthfulness in social relation enhance
peaceable fellowship while deception produces misunderstanding which can lead to opposition, disagreement, controversy, discordant, separation, splinter-group and faction. To avoid these, the advertisers should endeavour to tell the truth at all time. This is a good way to create integrity in the discharging of their duty. This is also the best way to establish high sense of confidence and mutual trust both at interpersonal and international levels. We hope to see a day when advertisers and even the public would find that there is nothing more important than truthfulness. For example, religious people say truthfulness or righteousness exalts a nation and non-religious people equally affirm that honesty (which is manifested in truthfulness among others) is the best policy. The whole public has the task of making truthfulness the guiding principle and the watchword at every level of social relation (advertising inclusive).

REFERENCES


