The Effect of Persuasion in Go Army Advertisements

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Abstract

The purpose of this analysis is to investigate the methods that two “Go Army” advertisements employ to persuade potential recruits to join the armed forces. Specifically, this research analysis focuses on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and how the advertisements focus their messages at peripheral processors instead of central processors. Peripheral processing involves focusing on cues that aren’t directly related to the substance of a message, while central processing means thinking about the content of a message, reflecting on the ideas, and scrutinizing the evidence. This paper also examines the use of motivational appeals and visual persuasion that are incorporated in the advertisements. The army zeroes in on those with low motivation and attempts to ignite a drive from within by using motivational appeals. By using attractive imagery, the Go Army advertisements depend of peripheral processors to buy into their visual persuasion. Furthermore, this paper examines how the Go Army advertisements demographically pinpoint young, unprivileged men via persuasive techniques. Lastly, this analysis briefly discusses the issue of ethics in relation to these advertisements.

The Effect of Persuasion in Go Army Advertisements

In modern society, persuasion is everywhere. We live in a world that functions on the use of persuasion, whether it is a real estate agent making his pitch on a house or a basic McDonald’s commercial. It is a responsibility to prepare for the hundreds of persuasive messages that aim to influence the population on a daily basis. Persuasion is not simple, it is almost impossible to define. Those who persuade use numerous mechanisms to achieve their ultimate goal (Gass & Seiter, 2011).

This is an extremely important topic to investigate, because unlike the goals of individual, profitable business that use persuasion, our country depends on the Go Army campaign to succeed. If Burger King’s marketing campaign failed and they went bankrupt, there are numerous substitutes our country could fall back on, but there is not a substitute for the United States army. Ever since the army converted into an all-volunteer system in 1973, there has been added pressure on their recruitment campaign to succeed. Almost every year there are rumors about the draft being re-instated, but every bill that has been created in the past decade has hardly scratched the surfaces, as the House of Representatives and Congress have wanted nothing to do with them (Powers, 2011).

This paper will discuss how the Go Army campaign persuades people to join the army, and the various persuasive concepts they apply to their advertisements in order to achieve their ultimate goal—to build and maintain a strong army. Specifically, this paper will investigate how the Go Army ads use the Elaboration Likelihood Model to their benefit, and how their persuasive mechanisms relate back to the basic functionality of the ELM.

This analysis focuses on two specific advertisements from Go Army’s recruitment campaign. The first is titled, “Army Strong” (Bandit36, 2007) and the second, “U.S. Army, Army of One-Legions” (Digital Cyclone, 2010). This paper will first explain the Elaboration Likelihood Model and how its concepts are used. Next, this paper will analyze the use of motivational appeals, visual persuasion, and demographical pinpointing in both of these messages and how they are connected to the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

**The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Its Effect of Go Army Advertisements**

Developed by Richard Petty and John Cacippo in 1986, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is one of the most widely cited models in the field of persuasion (Gass & Seiter, 2011). This model proposes two routes, the central and peripheral, which consumers take when responding to a persuasive message. When engaging in central processing, consumers use cognitive elaboration, which means thinking about the content of a message, reflecting on the ideas and information contained in it, and scrutinizing the evidence and reasoning presented. While some centrally process, others use peripheral processing. This involves focusing on cues that aren’t directly related to the substance of a message, such as focusing on a source’s physical attractiveness, a catchy audio melody, or the amount of arguments presented when intrinsically breaking down a message. After watching both of the ads previously cited, it is apparent that the army directs their messages to those who use peripheral processing. Both the “Army Strong” and “U.S. Army, Army of On-Legions” advertisements hardly contain any content to think about or ideas to reflect on. They are filled with visual persuasion and motivational appeals. Just from using the basic definition of the ELM, the army’s objective is obvious; to target those who use peripheral processing from the start—they don’t want philosophers who will ponder every command, they want soldiers who will obey orders.

According to Petty, Rucker, Bizer & Cacioppo (2004) the two routes in the ELM represent the ends of an elaboration continuum (as cited in Gass & Seiter, 2011) At one end of this continuum, a person engages in little or no elaboration, while at the other end, a person engages in high elaboration. How people eventually reach these ends depend on two basic factors. The first is the individuals’ motivation to engage in central processing. Since being cognitively engaged in a message requires more mental effort, a person with greater motivation is more likely to rely on central processing, while a person with less motivation is more likely to use peripheral processing. The army does not target the highly motivated. Some people are undoubtedly motivated to become soldiers, but the army is well aware they cannot build an army solely on these soldiers. The majority of the highly motivated population has greater aspirations than to join the army and get shipped off to war. This is why the advertisements contain motivational appeals—to motivate the unmotivated.

Also, those who typically use central processing have high involvement with the topic. If a person has low involvement, they are more inclined to use peripheral processing. Thousands of people join the army that are well aware of the realities of war and simply want to help defend their country join the army. But as stated previously, you cannot build an army with only those who were born to be soldiers. The army’s ads manipulate those who have low involvement with our country’s current status. The advertisements do not encompass the reality of joining the army. There aren’t any images of the sleeping arrangements or food that you are stuck with once you are out in the bare, 120 degree deserts of Iraq or Afghanistan. Instead, they portray “cool” images of state-of-the-art technology that the average soldier will never use.

The second factor that determines whether a person will use central or peripheral processing is his or her ability to process information. Smarter people are more capable of grasping ideas, understanding concepts, and making sense of things. This relates back to the idea that the army does not aim their advertisements at intellectuals, instead they target those who are unable to cognitively break down a message. They aim their recruitment at those who are not so intellectually-inclined, those who depend on peripheral cues to make their judgment on a message.

According to Petty, Haugtevedt and Smith (1995) researchers have found that persuasion via the central route tends to be more long-lasting, whereas persuasion via the peripheral route tends to be more short-lived (as cited in Gass & Seiter, 2011). Some people join the army using central processing, those that are highly motivated to serve their country, and those who have always had intentions of joining the army for one reason or another. The army does not need to persuade these people, so they aim their recruitment at people who are at a cross-road in their life and need to make a decision. For those who do not have the means or motivation to attend a university or get a job, the army presents itself as a viable option. They don’t portray the negatives of joining in their ads—only the benefits you will receive by joining. It doesn’t matter if these decision based on peripheral cues are short-lived; Once you are on active duty, it is not easy to quit the military (Powers, 2011).

**Motivational Appeals in Go Army’s Advertisements**

Motivational appeals can be thought of as external inducements to jump start an individuals’ drive to do something. Based on the ELM, a person with greater motivation is more likely to rely on central processing, while those with lesser motivation will use peripheral processing. The army zeroes in on those with low motivation, and attempts to ignite a drive from within by using motivational appeals.

A study by Martin and Rogers revealed that although one nationalistic ad was more effective than a non-nationalistic ad, a different nationalistic ad was not (Pedic, 1990). Therefore, the type of patriotic appeal has a lot to do with its effectiveness. The army makes their ads effective by stimulating the pathos, the passion and emotion, of the receiver. The results of numerous studies imply that patriotic ploys are effective when used appropriately, and portraying patriotism in advertisements to join the U.S. army is more than appropriate. According to Seiter and Gass (2005) waiters who wrote “United we Stand” on a patrons’ check instead of “Have a Nice Day” got higher tips. This proves that the sheer sight of something patriotic, whether it is an image or a few simple words, motivates people to do, or give, more.

The events of 9/11 made America more patriotic, yet if a persuader solely depends on patriotic ploys or uses patriotism as a wedge issue, then receivers may reject the message or the source (Gass & Seiter, 2011). The Go Army advertisements by no means rely on the patriotism card. For example, in the “Army Strong” advertisement (Bandit36, 2007), they don’t say, “Show that you care about your country and join the army”. Instead,

“There’s strong, then there’s army strong. It is a strength like none other…It is a strength of purpose, the strength to do good today, and the strength to do well tomorrow…there is nothing on this green earth that is stronger than the US army, because there is nothing on this green earth that is stronger than a US army soldier.”

This ad is motivating the unmotivated. There is nothing about being a patriot, nothing about being a good American. It is filled with absurd promises that a central processor would immediately question. When the “And the strength to do well tomorrow” slide is presented, there are supporting images of a successful business man in a conference room, followed by a man fishing with his son. In short, the “Army Strong” advertisement says that not only will joining give you super strength because there is nothing in the world stronger than a US soldier, but it will also set you up for the future with a sound job and happy family. This advertisement aims to motivate peripheral processors who read these words and see these images; it aims to manipulate those who are not capable of cognitively breaking down the message. This ad targets those who are stuck at a life cross-road with seemingly no good options, and falsely guarantees that the army will not only make them a stronger, better person, but will also provide a great future.

**Visual Persuasion in Go Army’s Advertisements**

Studies have revealed a picture superiority effect for images compared to words. Based on these findings, it is understandable why Go Army’s advertisements focus on providing visuals. A product that is relevant for physical attractiveness affects attitudes more favorably than does an attractive model that advertises a product that is less relevant for attractiveness (Trampe, Stapel & Siero, 2011). While this study focuses on commercial products, it is relevant to view the army as such. Similar to persuading costumer to by a product, the army must persuade recruits to buy into the idea of joining the army. In order to so, the army must portray itself as an attractive option. By carefully choosing images that are attractive, the Go Army advertisements, “Go Army, Army for One-Legions” and “Army Strong” depend on peripheral processors to give into their visual persuasion.

According to Messaris (1997) one of the iconic functions of images is that they can violate the reality that they represent. While functioning as icons, images can also be selective (as cited in Gass & Seiter, 2011). These advertisements selectively portray images of soldiers running through fields, using high-tech satellites and powerful tanks, marching, and purposely stay away from images of blunt reality. Visuals can also accentuate certain features while minimizing others and highlight certain facets of reality. The images aren’t completely dishonest, as there are truthful images of soldiers training and saluting, but they don’t encompass the full reality what one would encounter in the army.

According to Hockley and Bancroft (2008), pictures are more easily recognized and recalled than words. This is why the ads use “sexy” images, like satellites, tanks, helicopters, etc. Those considering the army don’t want to think back to the advertisement’s images of bloody comrades or the enemy firing back at them; the goal is to persuade the receiver to forget about the possibility of battle and to focus on the positive images of teamwork and interesting technology.

**Demographics**

The conservative claim that most of the youth desires to enlist because of patriotism is misleading. The majority of young people wind up in the military for reasons ranging from economic pressure to the promise of citizenship. The army also represents a solution to those facing dead-end situations. Army recruiters may not explicitly target the poor, but there is mounting evidence that they target those whose career options are very limited. According to a 2007 Associated Press analysis, nearly three-fourths of U.S. troops killed in Iraq came from towns where the per capita income was below the national average and more than half came from towns where the percentage of people living in poverty topped the national average (Mariscal, 2007). Do Go Army advertisements aim their messages in the same direction as recruiters?

There is no doubt that the army targets men more aggressively than women. Men are scientifically more physically able, therefore they make better soldiers. In both of the advertisements, women are rarely portrayed, just enough so that the ads cannot be considered sexist. According to Gahagan and Tedeschi (1968) males often have more trustworthiness than females when promised something, and they cooperate more often than females on the trial that followed messages when the promise was of high credibility (as cited in Gass & Seiter, 2011). In the advertisement, “Army Strong”, several promises are made; Promises of strength, ability and future success. And they come from a credible source, the United States Army. It’s perfectly understandable to buy into what these ads are saying because after all, you should be able to trust what your country tells you. Based on the context of their ads, it is fair to say that the army targets young, un-privileged men who don’t have the opportunities that the privileged do.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, based on the functions of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Go Army campaign effectively incorporates motivational appeals and visual persuasion to target young men who use peripheral processing when dissecting messages. From the very start, the advertisements target those who don’t use central processing, they focus on the people who are not motivated to centrally process and those who are intellectually unable to. Peripheral processors do not cognitively breakdown messages, instead they focus on images, melodies, or the amount of arguments presented, which explains the motivating, triumphant melodies and “sexy” images used repeatedly in Go Army’s advertisements. By promising current and future success, the ads target certain demographics as they are very appealing to those who don’t have many other options.

Ethics and persuasion live vicariously, and in regard to this subject, the issue of ethics is very debatable. The Go Army advertisements focus their efforts on the vulnerable, which at first glance may seem unethical, but the reality of the matter is that they don’t have a better option. It is nearly impossible to persuade young, intelligent, privileged men that joining the army is a better option than attending a university. In the situation that army recruitment consistently fails to reach its quota, the likelihood of a draft would continuously increase. Thus, while it may be unethical to manipulate young men to join the army, it is a necessary tactic to keep our armed forces at full strength and sometimes truly is their best option.

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NOTE: I used 4 secondary sources, giving me 13 sources in total.