THE ADVERTISING SOPHISM

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Abstract:
The complex advertising projects consist of a range of argumentative strategies which sometimes manipulatively turn into tricky sophisms. These are nothing but deliberated errors in argumentative reasoning. Unfortunately, it is hard to recognize and separate **argumentation** *from* **manipulation**. *The first is a logical interpretation which brings proofs in favor of certain transactional „objects" (or counter-proofs against the opponent), while the* **sophism** *corrupts the message through questionable arguments, incomplete reasoning, unsound wording, inaccurate terms, implicit assumptions, exaggerated/amiss argumentative accents, strained generalizations, circularity, false dilemmas, fake experts etc. This paper exposes such practices imposed by the artful advertisers under the informational pretences.*

Key Words: advertising, argumentation , sophism, manipulation, corrupt message

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The complex and artful advertising projects consist of a large range of promotional strategies jived to induce certain ideas, values, attitudes and behaviors on the targeted audience. The ads' weapons – *image, sound* and **language** – are meant to overwhelm the customer and, eventually, manipulate him so that he should purchase as much as possible.

Advertisements include argumentative reasoning, which sometimes professionally explain, motivate and induce well-set targets, while other times manipulatively turn argumentation into tricky sophisms. The open and honest exposure of correct proofs opposes the use of the „subtle arguments" (sometimes imperceptible arguments) which are still very mobilizing on the target level. **Real motivations** are consistent, accessible, sufficient, recent enough and relevant for the conclusion. On the other side, *sophisms* are nothing but deliberated errors hidden in argumentative reasoning. They secretively corrupt the advertising message, showing up as perfectly reasonable parts of promotional discourses. Yet, *the language misses* some connective chain loops.

There are **seven groups of arguments** set by James A. Herrick (1991: 80-261): 1) argumentation by analogies, 2) generalizing arguments, 3) causal arguments, 4) category arguments, 5) division arguments, 6) arguments from essential nature, 7) nonpropositional arguments. This paper tries to delimitate cases of argumentation from cases of manipulation in the advertising language.

Analogies (1) may be: literal, contrasting, judicial or figurative. The first one, *literal analogies* compare by focusing on similarities of things from the same field. TWIX comes with a memorable example in their so-called „Ideologies" campaign, almost doubling the value of its product by repetition (a simple re-ordering of qualities and use of synonyms). Even more value is added through the humoristic comparative approach (http://www.twix.com/). The brand compares LEFT TWIX („unmistakably *cookie, caramel* and *chocolate*") with the RIGHT TWIX („distinctively *caramel, chocolate* and *cookie*"), which is just a reason to display the great combination twice. One is *entirely dedicated* and the other is *wholly committed* to customers. The

manufacturing process is *one of a kind* and that makes the brand *different* from other similar brands, but it is also *unique* and makes the brand *stand out*. LEFT and RIGHT TWIX use „a complex fusion of time-tested methodologies" and „an elaborated synthesis of time-honored processes". The customer is urged to try both and pick a side, so, eventually to buy and consume a double quantity of TWIX. They both are so good that they plagiarize each other. So, what better way of valuing their own product than a by humoristic literal analogy…?

   Contrasting analogies focus on the differences between two products/services. It is probably the most used style of argumentation in advertising. The customer hears so often about *brands* of soap or detergent compared with similar *common products*: *DOVE* „does not dry the skin like other common soaps" (http://www.dove.ro/ro/); FAIRY washes up to 50% more dishes than the dish detergent with the highest sales on the market (http://web13.net/2012/reclame-detergent-familia-petrecscu-face-reclama-la-fairy/). Yet, nobody says anything about the price-quality rate, for example, which also counts as an argument in the customer's reasoning and choice while shopping. Therefore, „incomplete „comparisons", by „ignoring" essential aspects from the discourse, turn the so-called argumentation into a sophism and that is audience manipulation.

   Judicial analogies represent the argument of the precedent: if a precedent was created, all the similar cases that follow will be treated in the same way. Strong brands like NIKE, ADIDAS, PUMA or COCA-COLA, PEPSI or certain CAR BRANDS often build their commercials based on their well-known name, logo and shape. Sometimes words are not even required, which abruptly lowers the cost of advertising (by reducing the exposure time) or leaves time for a simple nice story. The precedent has already been created. Customers already know how qualitative they are. The brands have become easily recognizable. Therefore, at times, they can afford to speak only by image (and that is another way of standing out from the competitors' approach). Yet, the precedent becomes a dangerous issue when lower-quality products of the same brand are introduced under the well-known name. In this case, customers are deluded with hard-to-recognize sophisms.

   Figurative analogies tend to be rather sophisms, as the speaker forces some kind of equivalences, by comparing the relation between things from different realms of experience. They mostly function only as metaphors, enriching the artistry of speech. They are good enough to clarify or illustrate a point, but do not really earn the right to be strong proofs. Still, in advertising, where creativity, originality and motivation (together) set up a message, figurative analogies are quite used. That turns a lot of ads into examples of sophisms, because they are supposed to tell the truth, the whole truth, and not just the convenient truth. Thus, a lot of ads create a utopian paradise: using them is as if the customer touched perfection. Easiness and cleanliness is gained with CILLIT BANG as the housewife doesn't have to brush anything anymore; with a bite of MULLER yoghurt everybody evades into a fantasy (as if it were possible): a yoghurt river, sweet waterfalls, flying fruits and strawberry balloons (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_19661/muller_fantasy.html). „The BARILLA sauce and pastas" become „an Italian love story" as they meet in the pot and „kiss". NESCAFE DOLCE GUSTO pretends that coffee can be science, fun, art, classic or discovery: just insert the capsule and it becomes so much more – „Coffee is not just *black*" (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_19668/Nescafe_Dolce_Gusto_Coffee_can_be.html). All these metaphors are nice to dream about, but eventually nothing comes true. Figurative analogies remain just intermediary tools in an argumentative approach.

   Generalizing arguments (2) may be descriptive, predictive or by exemplification. ***Inductive generalizations*** start from particular observations and extend

them to general conclusions. One mum treats her child with NUROFEN and the cold disappears instantly (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijY18TWLoFU). That doesn't mean that NUROFEN is good enough for every child and any kind of cold as the ad suggests. Moreover, encouraging people to take medicines according to commercials is wrong. On the other side, *deductive generalizations* begin from general principles which are then applied to particular cases. TRANSILVANIA BANK pretends to be THE Bank (everybody's bank), capable of satisfying any needs. Its slogan is then directed personally to each member of the audience: „We are *your* bank!" However, both NUROFEN and TRANSILVANIA BANK develop sophisms in their promotional language, one because of the insufficient number of particular cases taken into consideration before generalizing and the other one because of missing the fact that there are always exceptions who don't submit to the general rule. Inductive and deductive generalizations are not to be made without a correct selection of representatives and a thorough analysis of the proofs.

Predictive generalizations transfer an initial description of a population/group from the past into the present, or from the present into the future (the group will supposedly have the same characteristics as they had at the beginning). Sophisms appear in this case because circumstances of life change in time and such a declaration is rather a manipulative venturing than a strong undefeatable argumentation. ING predicts a pink future… if some orange (ING color) is added (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_19524/ing_asigurari_viata_roz.html). Nevertheless, it would be far too easy to follow the recipe prescribed by the „Pink Life" campaign in order to ensure happiness. Even so, at a closer look the advertisement is not really predictive, but rather politically promising, as everything ING can do is only to provide some money… if they still exist and are able to make profit in ten or twenty years from now. The real message hidden behind the lines refers to investing in ING right now. The rest is just a colorful sophism.

Generalizations by exemplification set off from one example or from a low number of examples identified inside the group and apply the same treatment to the whole group. FAIRY shows Petrescu family as an example of saving money; NESTLE presents the testimony of the winners in their contest; CREDIT BANK comes up with the family that cannot afford to pay the rent and gets a credit in such an easy way. All these are examples to be effortlessly followed by the whole audience. Generalizations by exemplification turn into sophisms when the examples taken into consideration are incorrect, inadequate or atypical. ENERGY HOLDING advices the customer to enter the magic world, where miracles happen every day (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_26952/Energy_Holding_Magicianul.html). Unfortunately, for those who are not magicians by profession, magic is not really possible and the customer cannot follow the example in the commercial (which is disappointing). A wrong clause sends to a wrong/impossible conclusion.

Causal arguments (3) are meant to establish cause-effect relationships between events. *Conditional arguments* are a progressive series of „If…, then…" constructions as in: „COKE adds life." - meaning „If you drink COKE, then you will have a great life."; or in "Life takes Visa." – meaning "If there is life, then it takes Visa". Usually, slogans use just one line (not a whole if-then reasoning) as they are supposed to be short and easy to memorize. Therefore, argumentation is most likely incomplete and acts more like a sophism, based on the fact that, by repetition, slogans tend to become a kind of general truths.

Hypothesis arguments set a hypothesis, bring arguments and then draw the conclusion. NESTLE FITNESS CEREALS, for example, hypothetically talks about the decision of losing weigh by taking a diet; then it presents some tasty food the customer

is supposed to give up (which is unpleasant); some healthy ingredients are displayed; and eventually the delicious cereals are introduced and the conclusion/slogan is: „You can maintain your good shape without giving up the delicious tastes.” (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_25494/Nestle_Fitness_Mentine_ti_silueta.html). This is a complete hypothesis argumentation. Similar approaches, but with inconsistent arguments, which connect the hypothesis with the conclusion, make the whole reasoning a manipulative tentative. The procedure is very common in advertising.

The arguments from direction set a „first step” from a series of causally related events which should inevitably lead to the desired effect. The OREO ad is a set of instructions about how the product must be consumed in a delicious way. Step by step, the children explain the procedures generating curiosity, fun, information and, of course, desire; even lust for the creamy biscuit, when the father doesn't get it, as he is considered still under-prepared to consume it. A sophism in this case would include, like above, inconsistent arguments connecting the first step with the conclusion.

Category arguments (4) are introduced by argumentative definitions, pragmatic approaches, appeals to principles, quantitative and qualitative comparisons. Thus, *definitions* strengthen or support an argument through the proofs-definition-conclusion structure. Thus, ARCTIC defines TET technology as a tool for saving money, time and energy. After visually having been given proofs of savings, customers are convinced to buy the product that in conclusion saves a lot of energy (http://www.iqads.ro/ad_24667/Arctic_Economiseste_cu_TET_de_la_Arctic.html). Manipulation may appear as a consequence of using *ambiguities* (more than one meaning in a given context) and *equivocal terms* (meaning changes which secretively annihilate the reasoning validity).

Pragmatic arguments recommend or discourage the course of an action based on its consequences. The *correct* or *wrong* logics of the source are easy to detect, but *apparently correct* logics might be hard to see, in which case the receiver is manipulated by sophisms. BARNI cakes are presented as good for children, containing no colorings or preservatives. The reasoning sounds right at first sight, but BARNI contains a lot of artificial flavorings which makes it an unnatural and unhealthy snack. Although it is recommended for no wrong consequences on children's health, the argument itself is manipulative.

Arguments from principle promote actions positively valued, according to certain principles, or recommend the avoidance of the actions which violate these principles. The company advices the use of FAIRY in order for the customer to consume less detergent and save nature, and recommends the avoidance of common detergents - which might be cheaper, but in the end, because of the high rate of their usage, they cost even more.

Arguments from quantity praise things which are *numerous* (such as products appreciated and bought by lots of customers such as for beer, cell phone networks or toothpaste), *abundant* (extra quantity for example: „15% more DELMA MARGARINE at the same price”) or *long-termed* (products „for life”: knives, frying-pans etc.), and *reject* the others, while *arguments from quality emphasize good characteristics* of things (*light* for NUTRIDAY JOGHURT, *healthy* for SAVORIA BREAD, *safe* for MERCEDES, *delicate* for ZEWA PAPER etc.) and *condemn* the opposites. The only problem is that quantity and quality are subjective concepts and it is easy to fall into sophisms with them without noticing.

Division arguments (5) select alternatives according to current circumstances. *Enumeration arguments and disjunctions* make up a list of all possible alternatives and then eliminate them, one by one, until the best one stands out. The structure of this type of argument is: proof/situation/accusation presentation - consecutive

affirmation/negation – conclusion. Manipulation interferes when essential issues are catalogued as disjunctions or if false aspects are invoked to make room to false conclusions.

Dilemmas and trilemmas, on the other hand, are clear cases of manipulation because argumentation is made by presenting only two/three disjunctive options, all of then undesirable, as if there were no other variants. The strategy focuses on deviating attention from those variants that exist, but are not acceptable for the speaker. Television manipulates by promoting NUROFEN and PANADOL on a large scale, while other similar products contain the same basic ingredients and are a lot cheaper, (still they do not appear on TV, as if they did not exist on the market). They remain unknown for a lot of customers and unsold (or very slowly sold).

Arguments from inconsistency are used to discredit the opponent in spite of its rudeness. Its use is unadvisable. The focus goes on levelling away the opponent, emphasizing his duplicity, dishonesty, instability, irrelevance, inexact information (coming from vague memories, incomplete data and or deformed infos). The opponents unveil negative facets and may condemn each other, enlarging on favourable aspects and diminishing unfavourable ones. Mass-media is often blamed for manipulating in this way. In the USA, direct comparisons of products are permitted and during history there have been some open battles on the market, one of them being Coca-Cola versus Pepsi. They have splashed each other with countless critical tools.

Arguments from essential nature (6) invoke the fundamental character of a product/service. *Genetic arguments* set the origin of a thing as more important than its present use or associations, and thus motivate the „initial" interpretations, judgement and usage. Nobody can deny the origins, but still the ulterior evolution and influences cannot be ignored. Forcing one or the other sides may push the reasoning onto the sophism slope. Coca-Cola Company is a vivid example of a brand that marches on tradition and therefore on its very old origin (especially in its battle with Pepsi). For so many years, it has preserved its name, shape of the bottle, secret recipe and the colours on the logo.

Arguments of intent pretend the evidence of the fundamental character of things in the speaker's intention („He definitely intended to do so…"). Unfortunately, the verbally-pretended evidences remain simple declarations, with no practical implementation, turning the whole demonstration into a sophism.

The person/act arguments may certify the character, general attitude, knowledge, good intentions, ability to succeed etc. and prove sufficiently (or insufficiently, in case of manipulation) the degree of credibility for the person's future actions. Favourable aspects may be emphasized to picture a better individual, or on the contrary, worst things can be brought into light in order to block credibility. Sophisms are easy to handle in this case. In their advertisements, companies definitely favour the characteristics of their own products and unfavour the competitors (as much as the law permits it). They thoroughly work on their image and on their credibility as a brand.

The last category includes the **nonpropositional arguments** (7). *Emotional appeals* are very common tools of advertising. A lot of ads are affective in structure to reach the target-public, others are both cognitive and affective (and a third category is just cognitive, for technical devices for example). MILKA with its slogan „out of love", DON CAFÉ with „coffee with soul", COVALACT DE ȚARĂ with „too much like in the country" – are examples of emotional appeals through the use of affective language. This type of message stays at the border between argumentation and manipulation.

Ridicule is an unrecommended way of arguing or manipulating, although it is sometimes encountered in advertising (to expose others' flaws or even to humor an own ad in order to get memorable).

Arguments by suggestion include rhetorical questions („Who doesn't know that…?"), insinuations (by subtle comparisons between competing brands), suggestion of rewarding (or punishment) for the customer if he/she purchases the product/service and so on.

Manipulation opposes argumentation from the point of view of discourse ethics, in spite of the fact that it appeals to arguments. „Minor, subtle", but deliberate errors modify the communicational registry and induce luring, cheating and seducing elements. All these terms with negative connotations encompass manipulation. The sophism of the advertising language takes countless forms within the message, in an attempt of inducing certain values, attitudes and behaviors on the targeted client.

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