

A STUDY ON THE GREENWASHING STRATEGIES IN BASF'S 'WE LOVE EVS' CAMPAIGN

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Abstract

The study explores the deception communication strategies used in BASF's 'We Love EV's' digital-only advertising campaign and promotional website. Although greenwashing is not uncommon, in the past two decades, it has given rise to a newer area in marketing called 'corporate environmentalism'. The researchers for this study use descriptive content analysis to analyse various greenwashing strategies and draw similarities with the propaganda techniques used by BASF's 'We Love EV's' digital-only advertising campaign and promotional website. As identified by Underwriters Laboratories, Greenwashing techniques are used by BASF's 'We Love EV's' digital-only advertising campaign and promotional website. Further, it identified that the campaign used the Plain folk testimonial technique as a significant tool to alter perceptions. The study also reveals that the testimonies given by participants do not mention the brand name nor the use of BASF components in their self-made electric vehicles, hinting that BASF products are implicit ingredients of mobility solutions.

Keywords: *Deceptive communication strategies, Greenwashing, Corporate environmentalism, Electric Vehicles, Advertising, Descriptive content analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Marketers use different persuasion techniques to influence the public perception of their company, products and services. The capitalist societies since the mid of nineteenth century created a mass-market laboratory for marketers, advertisers, publicists, politicians and propagandists to test their persuasive powers (Soules, 2015).

The past two decades have given rise to an enormous range of symbols of corporate environmentalism. Companies worldwide have spotted the consumer's desire for environmentally safe products and are trying to meet the demand as quickly as possible (Arens et al., 2016). Firms show their environmental awareness through green buildings, eco-labels, sustainability reports, industry pledges, and green technologies. They have been labeled as 'carbon-neutral', 'eco-friendly', 'organic', 'sustainable', or 'environment-friendly'. This symbolic corporate environmentalism is prevalent across all industries and businesses. The growing need among consumers for environmentally friendly products has made corporate houses tactically design their communication messages – especially advertising messages. European Commission (2014) studies

reveal that green advertising claims have become an important component of an advertising campaign for many consumer products and services.

The concept of environmental advertising began in the late 1960s due to the concerns raised by the scientific community, consumer activism and later by public opinion regarding the unsustainable practices practised by several companies. (Easterling et al.,1996). These concerns forced firms to resort to advertising to promote an eco-friendly stance. (Kinnear and Taylor, 1973; Peattie, 1995). However, in the late 1980s, aided by public awareness, stringent government regulation and market pressures, green advertising experienced a sharp rise. (Carlson et al., 1996; Kilbourne, 2004). Environmental claims made by many firms for their products like automobiles, food and beverage, and personal care are not inherently environmentally friendly. Consumers and stakeholders have developed a justifiable scepticism about the effectiveness of green solutions promoted by large corporations (Bowen, 2015). They caught on to the fact that some of these companies were making false claims, using vague terms such as environmentally friendly and green (Arens et al., 2016). It turns out to be a worrying factor for consumers as many environmental attributes of products and services such as 'sustainability', 'net-zero emissions', and eco- friendly' cannot be verified (Lyon & Maxwell, 2006).

Though this phenomenon soon decreased owing to false, misleading, extravagant green claims and lack of clarity for the consumer, green advertising gained renewed interest in the new millennium. (Belz and Peattie, 2009; Yin and Ma, 2009). This resurgence sparked the interest of several marketing scholars, and the first practice prominently noticed was greenwashing. According to the United States Federal Trade Commission, greenwashing is the disinformation disseminated by an organisation to present an environmentally responsible public image. Typically greenwashing takes one or more forms, such as the hidden trade-off, the absence of a proof claim, the vague claim, the irrelevant claim, the lesser two evils claim, false claim and false or misleading claims (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010). These forms can draw lines with propaganda techniques such as assertion, bandwagon, card stacking, glittering generalities, false dilemma, lesser of two evils, plain folks, testimonials, and transfer (Shabo, 2013).

We Love Rothco, designed EV's digital-only campaign for BASF to show how Electric Vehicles can be even more sustainable. The campaign highlights how BASF, through its technological innovations in producing battery materials for energy vehicles (EV), contributes to a more sustainable society by reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions.

'Green technologies' cover eco-friendly solutions that impact environmental and social sustainability. The major objective of green technology is to reduce the negative impact on the environment and to produce alternate solutions that eliminate the rampant use of fossil fuels. The Allied Market Research report on Green Technology and Sustainability Market Statistics: 2030 shows that the global green technology and sustainability market size is projected to amount to \$74.64 billion by 2030.

BASF SE (Badische Anilin - und SodaFabrik) is a German multinational chemical company and the largest inorganic chemical producer in the world (C&EN's Global Top 50 chemical firms for 2021). The group operates in over eighty countries across Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and the Americas. The company has diversified its chemical operations from petrochemicals to agricultural solutions. It supplies products and services to around 100,000 customers from all

sectors and countries worldwide. (BASF Report, 2021). The company embarked on a sustainability drive in 1994, where BASF stated that it combines economic success with social responsibility and environmental protection. In 2011, the company integrated sustainability as part of its mission statement, 'We create chemistry for a sustainable future' (BASF Who We Are, 1994). BASF has set a goal to reduce CO2 emissions by twenty-five per cent by 2030 and net-zero CO2 by 2050 in compliance with the Paris Agreement.

Studies conducted on environmental advertising have increased in recent times. These studies largely do not focus on the messaging strategies used in environmental advertising that examine the underlying approaches to influence public perception (Schmuck et al., 2018). To address this gap, the researchers here analyse the message strategies used by BASF in its 'We Love EVs' digital-only campaign.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers for this study have taken the entire set of the advertising campaign, and the promotion webpage of BASF's 'We Love EVs'. To analyse the greenwashing strategies in the campaign, the researchers have used qualitative content analysis. *Content analysis* is a research tool through which the researcher seeks to examine the content of the recorded information systematically. Krippendorff (1980) defined it as a research technique for making replicable and valid references from data to their context. He calls this method primarily a symbolic method as it is used to investigate symbolic material, conducting many interpretative works, relying on a good knowledge of the texts under examination. This method of textual analysis is frequently combined with other methods in qualitative research. Through this method, researchers attempt to uncover, analyse and dissect the media content of the BASF's 'We Love Evs'. In this study, the researchers will analyse the greenwashing strategies used in the advertisements and the multimedia content of BASF's 'We Love Evs' campaign.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The researchers analyse the greenwashing techniques used such as – the hidden trade-off, the absence of a proof claim, the vague claim, the irrelevant claim, the lesser two evils claim, false claim and false or misleading claims to analyse the advertising campaign and the promotion webpage of BASF's 'We Love EVs.'

i. The hidden trade-off is a claim suggesting that a product is 'green' based on a narrow attribute without paying attention to other important environmental issues (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010). This technique also parallels the propagandist technique called 'card stacking'. Card stacking is a technique where a propagandist gives an unfair advantage to one point of view while weakening another (Shabo, 2013). BASF's 'We Love Evs' campaign carries the tagline 'EVs' are the future, suggesting that the only sustainable mobility solution is converting into electric vehicles without providing alternate options. The self-made electric vehicles by the characters in the ad films (figure 1- figure 3) suggest and establish this technique. These are misleading because they obscure important facts.



Figure 1: Lao Qian's self-made electric vehicle



Figure 2: Audrey and Steve's self-made electric pickup truck



Figure 3: Hernan Bradas's self-made electric racing car

ii. No proof and vagueness – an environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or a reliable third-party certification (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010). This technique mixes 'assertion' and 'glittering generalities' propaganda techniques. While 'assertion' states debatable ideas as facts, 'glittering generalities' is the use of vague words (Shabo, 2013). The phrase 'so we are making battery materials for EVs more sustainable' is repeated in multiple descriptions on the 'We Love EVs' digital campaign page and their ad films. In addition, other words such as 'future', 'heritage', 'love', and 'efficient' have generously alluded to the text.

The visual imageries of human relationships, particularly 'love' in 'We Love Evs', showcase how humans are connected and, more importantly, with their self-made electric vehicles (Figure 4a, 4b; Figure 5, Figure 6a, 6b). The battery technology's energy efficiency or environmental impact is not substantiated sufficiently and therefore remains ambiguous in the testimonials.



Figure 4a: Lao Qian's relationship with his son



Figure 4b: Lao Qian with his self-made electric car



Figure 5: Relationship between Audrey and Steve and their electric pickup truck



Figure 6a: Hernan Bradas with his father

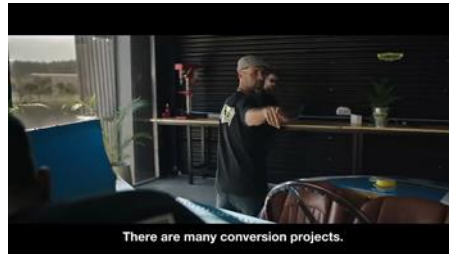


Figure 6b: Hernan Bradas with electric racing car

iii. Irrelevant Claims– an environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010). The BASF's 'We Love Ev's' digital campaign page has a banner stating, 'Cleaner, greener and more sustainable electric vehicles (EVs) are capturing hearts all over the planet. It is a true love story.' This is supported by a montage of imageries like 'Lao Qian's self-made electric car driving through the modern expressways in China', Herman Bradas's electric racing car and Audrey and Steve's electric pickup truck driving through the greeneries (Figure 7). These claims made by BASF 'We Love Ev's' turn irrelevant as the imageries do not match the products they produce.



Figure 7: Digital campaign montage

iv. Lesser of the two evils– are claims that may be true within the product category but that risk distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole (Underwriters Laboratories, 2010). EVs are a sustainable alternative to vehicles running on fossil fuels and do not cause significant emissions. However, lithium, on the other hand, which is one of the main ingredients in EV battery materials, is still not off the hook in terms of sustainability. The extraction process has several ecological implications that are too great to be neglected. However, compared to gas-guzzling vehicles, EVs are promoted as an environmentally safer option forcing

us to choose the lesser evil in the larger scope of things. BASF's campaign makes no mention of this fact, and neither do the passionate advocates of EVs in the campaign testimonials.

v. The Plain folk testimonials– the goal of this technique is to trust in "plain folks" who give the testimonial and will carry over to the product or cause at hand (Shabo, 2013). BASF's 'We Love Ev's' have predominantly used testimonials of individuals who made a difference by self-producing electric vehicles or modifying the fossil fuel vehicles into the electric vehicles under the title 'Our Stories'. These testimonies given by the participants do not even mention the name BASF, hinting that BASF products are implicit ingredients of mobility solutions.

vi. Transfer– is closely related to the testimonial technique. In this technique, the propagandist encourages transferring feelings and associations from one idea, symbol, or person to another (Shabo, 2013). Usage of transfer technique is rife in both the text and the visuals used on the

BASF's 'We Love Ev's' promotional website and advertisements. 'Love' and 'Passion' are recurring emotions throughout. Whether in the budding love affair between the Clunns, the renewed bond between father and son, or the admiration of a hero figure, love is an emotion tying human relationships, EVs, and a passion for protecting the planet. The audiovisual imageries in the digital-only campaign transfer the green images to the audience. The settings of the advertisements are moving away from the hustles and bustle of urban life to serene settings in nature. This is evident in all the digital-only advertisements as this technique transfers the idea that BASF's initiatives in developing its products are 'green' and 'clean' (figure 8).



Figure 8: Green and Clean

vii. Bandwagon—a technique or a psychological theory explaining how individuals choose an opinion or side not according to their own beliefs or values but with what the general crowd believes and values (Shabo, 2013). BASF's 'We Love EV's' promotional website and advertisements exploit the desire of most people to join the crowd for a greener planet. The use of phrases like 'our stories', 'match made in EV heaven', Herman's race against climate change, 'Lao Qian and Xiao Qian on top of the world', 'we love EV's', 'loving EV's means respecting our sources', 'Love EV's. Do not love carbon footprint', and 'Our love of e-mobility knows no bounds' suggest how the brand wants the general crowd to believe the beliefs and values of BASF for a greener and cleaner future which is also the new mantra of all companies and firms that are into exploiting nature.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, the researchers have discussed the use of greenwashing and propaganda techniques used by BASF in its 'We Love EV's' digital-only campaign and have found that the digital campaign has used Greenwashing techniques as identified by Underwriters Laboratories combined with propaganda techniques. The imageries and audio reinforce the combined use of propaganda and greenwashing strategies to create deceptive communication. The analysis further reveals that the campaign used the Plain folk testimonial technique as a significant tool to alter perceptions. The study also reveals that the testimonies given by participants do not mention the brand name nor the use of BASF components in their self-made electric vehicles, hinting that BASF products are implicit ingredients of mobility solutions.

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