

## Processing of Product Communication: A Study of the Rural Audience

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### Introduction and Literature Review:

Persuasiveness of advertisements has received a lot of attention in the literature, for the basic aim of an advertisement is to persuade. Various aspects of an advertisement have been studied for their persuasive characteristics. Effects of message quality was studied (Austin, Pinkleton, and Fujioka 1999) in the consumer evaluation of pro-social advertisements (video clips) among alcoholics. While quality of message is important, Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene and Haugen (1994) found that there need to be a functional match with the personally relevant motivations of the consumer. An effective message strategy in advertisement has been thought to be in sync with the consumers' motivations, opportunities, and abilities (MOA) to process the information. However, McCarthy and Mothersbaugh (2002) advocated typography of print advertisements as a powerful element of execution to increase consumer MOA.

This visual connectedness has been found to play a critical role in the persuasiveness of the advertisement (Young and Robinson 1992). Visual content of an advertisement has also been found to influence persuasion provided they suggest the belief that is intended to be changed (Youjae 1990).

Studies have been conducted to understand source characteristics in terms of the effect of the endorser expertise (Pornpitakpan 2004). Shavitt, Swan and Lowrey (1994) suggested that, the motives behind the evaluation of an advertisement need to be considered while evaluating the effect of the endorser characteristics.

Consumer level factors have also been studied extensively. These include other-directed vs. inner directed (Chatterjee and Hunt 2005), self relevance of the message to consumer (Chebat, Gélinas-Chebat and Dorais 2003), individual differences (erotophobia) in evaluating sexually related message (Hewleg and Howell 2000), gender difference (Brunel and Nelson 2003), age difference (Phillips and Stanton 2004), consumers' prior knowledge about the product (Beattie 1983), and susceptibility to advertising (Barr and Kellaris 2000). 'Need for cognition' (a tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking) has been found to moderate: relation between humor in advertisements and persuasion (Geuens and Pelsmacker 2002), responses to the framed messages by influencing the strength of the message, and source credibility (Zhang and Buda 1999), and effectiveness of extended symbolic messages (Brennan and Bahn 2006).

Other works include studies on influence of culture (Laroche, Toffoli, Quihong and Pons 2001; Pornpitakpan and Francis 2001), effect of external factors on the evaluation of an advertisement like: spacing of message repetitions (Malaviya and Sternthal 1997), existing market forces like brand share, number of competing brands, brand loyalty (Stanton and Herbst 2006), and consumer involvement in the program within which the advertisement is placed (Anand and Sternthal 1992).

While almost all the studies have used urban samples, the author of the present paper would like to speculate on some differences in the results in the rural context. This line of thinking is born out of the fact that, rural customers, more so in India, are surrounded by a different social and economic structure, with different value systems and traditions. The following section gives a brief description of the Indian rural context.

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**Indian Rural Context:**

A rural area is defined as one that does not fall under a municipality/corporation, cantonment board or a notified town area, with a population of less than 5000 persons, with a population density of less than 400 per.sq.Km, and where majority of the people are involved in agricultural activity (Velayudhan 2002).

According to 2001 census, rural population constitutes 72.22 per cent of India's total population (Acharyulu 2004). The literacy rate of this huge rural population is around 27 per cent, and more than 60 per cent of the population comprises of adults in the age group of 15 to 59 years (Pande 1997).

The rural economy is driven by two kinds of activities: agricultural and allied, and non-agricultural. The agricultural and allied activities comprise of farming, dairy farming, poultry, aqua-culture, tree growing, salt farming, etc., and the non-agricultural activities comprise of cottage industries, khadi, handlooms and handicrafts, other businesses like trading in general goods, agro-inputs, construction hardware materials, cement etc., and providing services like transport, communication, banking, input supply, marketing of farm and non-farm produce. The agriculture and allied activities contribute 75 per cent to the total revenue generated in the rural economy, and the contribution of the rural economy to the overall GDP of India was about 24 per cent in 2000-01 (Acharyulu 2004).

**Objective of the Study:**

The main objective of the study is to understand the antecedents to rural consumer persuasion. In order to understand this, an exploration of the internal (human) processes of persuasion is deemed necessary. In other words, one needs to understand as to how a rural customer processes a persuasive communication.

**Methodology issues:**

“It is not possible to give a set of subjects a task to perform and then observe the means by which they undertake it. Rather, it is necessary to infer what individuals have already done through a set of carefully related questions” (Trumbo 2002).

Researches in persuasion have extensively used lab experiments as their methodology, except for some work by Trumbo (2002) who used surveys. Lab experiments give a better handle for the researcher on factors that they want to control. Causal relations under controlled environment have higher validity. However, there are certain issues that need to be considered while studying persuasion for application in marketing.

Researchers like Funkhouser and Parker (1999) proposed a new perspective called the Action Theory of Persuasion (ATP). According to them, the final aim of any marketing activity is to get the potential customer to buy (act) the product or service on offer. ATP details the variables that affect persuasion based on the action decision sequence that a customer typically indulges in, where the following questions (steps) are answered (followed): Does a need for action exist?, Is there any choice of action to be taken?, Will a habitual course of action suffice?, Reduction of alternative courses of action to 'consideration set', choice of preferred course of action, and decision to take indicated course of action.

The existing research on persuasion has ignored individual's need level that is pre-requisite for all the other factors like motivation to elaborate, ability to elaborate etc. The lab

experiments conducted by persuasion researchers have manipulated various factors like source credibility, issue or response involvement. But the participants' need that drives the desire for a disposable razor (in Petty and Cacioppo's work) or a 35 mm camera (in Chaiken's work) have been ignored. Simply put, if an individual does not have the need for personal transportation, then he will not pay any attention to advertisements that give arguments for a particular Motor Bike's choice. When ELM talks of a peripheral route to be chosen when the recipient finds the message to be inconsequential, in fact it may just happen that that recipient would just ignore the whole advertisement or message if the product/service advertised is of no consequence to the recipient. Under such circumstances, where is the chance for peripheral route? Thus the handicap of a lab experiment is in its inability to manipulate need levels (expressed or latent) in the participant, which is the basic construct that drives purchase.

Persuasion is a phenomenon that needs to be studied as it unfolds in reality. It is a daily experience of customers who are exposed to innumerable product and service messages. It is a life experience every one is a part of. Persuasion cannot be quantified by scales, for; the individuals would not be able to quantify some thing which is a pure experience. It would be better if the individuals are asked to relate their experience in their own words, and the researcher discerns patterns in all the experiences shared by many such individuals. Thus, I propose the use of Phenomenology as a methodology, a technical note of which is given in Annexure-1.

### **The village – Thembarai‡**

Thembarai is a conglomerate of 5 small villages in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. These five villages are Therkku Thembarai, Vadakku Thembarai, Ulkadu Thembarai,

Melakkadu Thembarai, and Kattappalli Thembarai. Thembarai has a population of 4,600 persons, of which 2,250 are males and 2,350 are females with a literacy rate of 20% and 15% respectively. There are about 550 children below the age of 12 years. 70% of the people belong to the most backward class (MBC), 25% backward class (BC), and 5% scheduled class (SC).

There are about 1.210 households (HH), of which 400 HH are in the below poverty line (BPL) category, who work as laborers in the farms, 500 HH in the middle class category, and 300 HH are well to do. There are about 74 pacca houses, 640 tile-roofed houses, and the remaining thatched roof houses. The primary occupation of the people is farming.

Of the total land area of 773 hectares, 80% is under cultivation (primary crop being Paddy), and 10% under coconut groves. About 90 bore-wells are in use for irrigation, and 8 water tanks with a capacity of 30,000 liters for drinking and other daily purposes.

The water from these tanks is supplied through pipes with taps for every 5 to 10 houses. Individual water taps to houses is not yet given. The houses get 24 hours power supply from a power station at Pallathur, which is 20 Kms from the village. There are three schools: two of them offering education till 5<sup>th</sup> standard and another till 8<sup>th</sup> standard. For higher classes, the children have to travel about 5 Kms, and for college they have to travel to Mannargudi, which is about 15 Kms from Thembarai.

‡ Thembarai is also the village in which the first author's great grand father Sri. Thembarai Ananthachari lived. This in fact helped build rapport with the villagers.

Mannargudi is the nearest town. The village and this town are well connected by government buses. There about 3 services in the morning and 3 in the evening. It takes about 40 minutes one way. Though there are shops in the village (there are about 90 shops including small retail shops, tea shops, cycle repair shops etc.), traveling to Mannargudi for purchases has increased in the recent past due to increased bus service. Apart from the retail shops, hawkers also visit the village regularly selling sarees, dhotis, shirts, and pants. People buy from these hawkers if the prices are comparable to the ones at Mannargudi. Because of the proliferation of retail shops in the village, for the past 4 or 5 years there have been no haats other than on special occasions like Diwali and Pongal (Sankranti).

There are two cable TV operators. About 15% of the houses have cable connection. At an access charge of Rs. 130 per month, people get to watch about 50 channels. Of the channels, Sun TV is the most watched for its family soap operas and talk shows (like Visuvini Arattai arangam) and Jaya TV for its News. Apart from TV, about 50% of the houses have radio, and people listen to Karaikkal FM (broadcast from Karaikkal).

### **Preliminary analysis of the transcript:**

Interviews and group discussions were tape recorded, which were transcribed later. The following are some basic themes that evolved from the interactions based on some preliminary analysis of the transcripts.

### **Skepticism:**

Skepticism came out to be the major theme from interviews with the men of the village. This attitude toward product advertisements is born out of their belief that companies that advertise their products do so for their personal gains and not in the interest of the people. To quote one villager, *“Majority of the ads are related to business, the things that are required by the business men. So there is no ad that is focused on the general mass, all the ads are focused on business development”*. The antecedent to skepticism thus can be found to be perceived selfishness of the companies. This also came out quite clearly when another villager said, *“...so they are all advertising for their good and not for the good of the common man”*.

Another antecedent to skepticism is also the perceived discord between the communication and actual product experience. In the words of a villager, *“They say that the teeth become white, but the teeth only become yellow. Like wise, there are ads for detergents, they say that the washing soap removes stain, he shows as if dipping the cloth in water and the cloth become bright, but we actually have to struggle with the cloth of 2 hours”*. Since the people have had post purchase dissonance, they are just not ready to believe the ads.

This brings another important point: past experience of the villagers. The conversation with the villagers was filled with references to their past experiences. The fact that these people have been cheated before by small time businessmen has left an indelible mark in their minds. As the larger companies now gain entrance into villages, these past experiences make the villagers more cautious. As one villager put it, *“...if 10 persons sell a product and even if 2 persons cheat...people suspect all 10”*.

The integrated marketing communication undertaken by companies, for example conducting competitions, distributing pamphlets etc. in villages are also not viewed positively and thus very less villagers turn up for such events. However, villagers attend such events if the village president or any such high official of the village were to attend. Thus out of respect for the high official people attend and not really out of interest.

**Risk averse:**

From the discussions with the women of the village, their risk averseness came out as a distinct theme. While asked if they used personal care products, the answer was a strong no. The village women believe in natural products for personal care. It was evident that they don't believe in the benefits of using advertised personal care products. The women even had difficulties in recalling some personal care product advertisements. But, interestingly, the village women use a talcum powder that is a foreign brand.

**Demonstrations:**

The author was very interested to know what kind of ads click with the villagers. An interesting exercise was given to them. One villager was asked to create an ad for bottled water. He gave this description of an ad that he thought would work with the villagers: *“Sir...we should do like this...we will show someone drinking ordinary water...show as if he is not refreshed...show him having well water...show his thirst is not quenched...show he is drinking lake water...show he is getting disease...then show him drinking this water...show him fresh...”*.

Villagers want the benefits to be demonstrated. They don't believe in glamorous portrayal hinting at the benefits but a clear representation of actual benefits. One very good example is an information piece that the village women recalled of having got exposed to in the television. The information piece demonstrated a way of checking the quality of tea powder. It was said in the communication that if the tea powder floated on water, then it is good tea, otherwise bad tea. The women apparently tried with the tea brand they had bought, and checked for its goodness the way they were shown in the television. This need for demonstration can be seen as a way of resolving conflict arising out of skepticism.

**Concluding remarks:**

Rural consumers are very clear as to what they want: *“...we buy what we like and don't what we don't like”*. Their past has taught them to be extremely cautious with product choices. High priced products are generally bought from a single retailer, thus retailer loyalty is high with regard to this category of products.

Credibility of the organization advertising is of high importance. The village women believed any communication from the government. For the men, a good company that has been selling products in the village for many years, and thus has proved its quality, is believed.

With regard to low priced products, the villagers are high variety seekers. However, their variety seeking is restricted to variants under a single brand. When a product comes with very attractive offers, then variety seeking happens across brands. The women, due to their past experience, however, don't believe in offers. The youth of the village are very skeptical about promotional offers. According to one young villager, *“...initially they will put the product in a cover...then they will just change the cover and say 25gms free...the cover alone changes the but the item inside remains the same”*.

Rural consumers prefer clear message to celebrities in the ads. While comedy is liked by all, ads have to demonstrate the benefits in clear terms. Commenting on using celebrities, a villager pointed out, *“...when you make an ad with Hindi film actresses...you spend about 1 lakh...so you need to sell products worth that...a product with out advertisements is of good quality....advertised products will never have quality....”*.

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## ANNEXURE-1

**Phenomenology: (A technical note compiled from Moustakas 1994; Sanders 1982; Gibson and Hanes 2003)**

Phenomenology is a scientific study of phenomena as they appear to us and to our consciousness. Anything that appears to us is a phenomenon and any phenomenon is a starting point for a phenomenological investigation. Such investigation, according to the basic philosophy of phenomenology, needs to be conducted in the lifeworld (the natural world where the phenomenon takes place) with its unique intersubjectivities (our relationship with the world). Thus it takes the researcher to be with and build trusting relationship with the interviewees (or co-participants). This helps the researcher to extract the constituents and meanings of a phenomenon. Such an attempt to understand the whole essence of the experience is the core aim of phenomenology.

**Key concepts in Phenomenology:**

**Intentional experience:** Every experience, according to the phenomenology, is an intentional experience. Intentionality refers to the internal experience of being conscious of something, and intentional experience is a combination of the outward appearance of an object, and the object as contained in the consciousness based on memory, image and meaning. The interaction between these two (object and consciousness) gives rise to at least one theme or reference. Thus intentional experiences are theme based.

**Noesis and Noema:** These refer to meanings, which is the heart of any human experience. Noesis is the act of perceiving, thinking, remembering or judging (acts of consciousness). Thus through Noesis, objects appear the way they appear. Noema, on the other hand, are mental equivalents to a schema or cognitive structures that dictate the mind to see or think rationally. Noema helps in breaking down the experience into parts called “reality”.

**Epoche:** This (also called bracketing) is the essential attitude of a phenomenologist. This attitude requires temporary suspension of all existing personal biases, beliefs, assumptions to enable a researcher to get straight at the heart of the human experience as it is.

**Eidetic Reduction:** This is the process of extracting essences from the experience. This abstraction aided by intuition and reflection helps the researcher to go beyond a particular phenomenon to appreciate the universal essence of meanings that are constant.

**Procedure to conduct a phenomenological study:**

1. Discovering a topic and question with underlying autobiographical meanings.
2. Literature review.
3. Develop criteria to select co-researchers (respondents).
4. Providing the co-researchers with purpose of the study, and getting their support, and confidence.
5. Develop a set of questions to guide the interview.
6. Recording the interviews, and conducting follow-up interviews if needed.
7. Organizing and analyzing the data to develop textural and structural descriptions.

The scope of a phenomenological study guides the choice of topic and question to be researched. A phenomenological study chooses to reveal the essence and meaning of human experience. This is done by uncovering the qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of behavior and experience. Thus the role of the co-researcher is critical in terms of his/her personal and passionate involvement. One thing to be kept in mind is that, phenomenological studies do not seek to predict or determine causal relationships. They only focus on the vivid and accurate description of experiences.

**Validation of Data:**

In phenomenology, by the nature of the methodology, validation of data is done by the co-researchers themselves. The synthesized descriptions are sent back to the co-researchers and their opinion on how well the synthesized version reflects their actual experience is sought. This is done to make sure that the researcher’s biases do not influence the synthesis of the descriptions.