



Advertisement as a form of communication: Strategies, symbols, and social influence

Anik Das

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, State Aided College Teacher (SACT Category -1), Gobardanga Hindu College, West Bengal. India.

Abstract

Advertisement is not simply a commercial announcement; it is a complex form of communication that informs, persuades, symbolizes, and shapes social meaning. This article examines advertising as a communicative practice by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: strategies, symbols, and social influence. The study argues that advertising works through carefully designed message strategies, the use of signs and symbolic associations, and the activation of social norms, identity, and interpersonal influence. Drawing on communication theory, semiotic approaches, consumer culture scholarship, and contemporary studies of digital and social media advertising, the article shows that advertisements do more than promote products. They construct lifestyles, attach cultural meanings to brands, and influence how audiences interpret status, belonging, aspiration, and behavior. The discussion further shows that the communicative power of advertising has expanded in interactive and social media environments, where users do not merely receive messages but also circulate, reinterpret, and amplify them. At the same time, the article highlights the critical concern that advertising may reproduce materialistic values, stereotypes, and subtle forms of social pressure. The paper concludes that advertising should be understood as a multidimensional communication system in which persuasion, symbolism, and social influence work together to shape both consumer response and wider cultural life.

Keywords: advertising, communication, persuasion, symbols, semiotics, social influence, consumer culture

Introduction

Advertising has traditionally been viewed as a persuasive message sent from a source to an audience in order to produce a desired effect. However, advertising scholarship has shown that this linear understanding is too narrow. Rather than functioning as a simple one-way transfer of information, advertising operates as a multidimensional communication process involving the advertiser, the message form, the medium, the audience, and the larger cultural context. Stern's revised communication model is especially important here because it treats advertising as a crafted text rather than ordinary speech, making room for interpretation, symbolism, and audience activity.

In modern societies, advertisements communicate far more than product utility. They attach meanings to goods, use images and signs to communicate identity and aspiration, and shape attitudes by mobilizing credibility, emotional appeal, and social norms. Recent research also shows that in digital and social media settings, advertising communication has become even more interactive, social, and dynamic. Consumers now encounter advertisements not only as messages to be watched but also as content to be liked, shared, commented on, and woven into everyday social interaction.

Objectives

1. To examine advertisement as a form of communication rather than merely a selling tool.
2. To analyze the strategies through which advertising attracts attention and persuades audiences.
3. To explore the role of symbols and cultural meanings in advertising messages.
4. To evaluate how advertising shapes attitudes, identity, and consumer behavior through social influence.

Review of Literature

A major strand of scholarship understands advertising through communication theory. Early models of communication emphasized sender, message, channel, receiver, and effect, but advertising research later argued that these models do not fully capture the complexity of promotional discourse. Stern (1994) ^[8] proposed that advertising should be treated as a crafted textual form in which source, message, and recipient are all multidimensional.

1. Barbara B. Stern (1994) ^[8]

Stern explains that advertising should not be understood as a simple sender-to-receiver message. She proposes a revised communication model in which advertising works as a crafted text, where source, message, and audience are all multidimensional. This view is useful because it shows that advertisements communicate not only information but also meanings, emotions, and interpretations.

2. Demetrios Vakratsas and Tim Ambler (1999) ^[9]

Vakratsas and Ambler review more than 250 studies on how advertising works and argue that advertising effects cannot be explained by one single model. According to them, advertising may influence consumers through cognition, emotion, and experience in different combinations. Their work is important because it broadens the idea of advertising as communication beyond mere product awareness.

3. Grant McCracken (1989) ^[5]

McCracken's meaning-transfer model shows that celebrity endorsement is effective because celebrities carry cultural meanings that can be transferred to products and then to consumers. This makes advertising a symbolic

communication process rather than only a promotional one. His study is highly relevant for understanding how advertisements use symbols, personalities, and cultural associations to shape consumer perception.

4. Richard Elliott and Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan (1998) ^[3]

Elliott and Wattanasuwan argue that brands act as symbolic resources in the construction of identity. Their work suggests that consumers do not merely buy products for utility; they also use brands to express self-image and social belonging. This supports the idea that advertising communicates identity, status, and lifestyle through symbols.

5. Richard W. Pollay (1986) ^[6]

Pollay critically examines the unintended social consequences of advertising and argues that advertisements can distort values by encouraging materialism, competitiveness, and artificial desires. His work is significant because it shifts attention from advertising as a neutral communication tool to advertising as a social force with cultural consequences. This helps explain how advertising influences society beyond the marketplace.

6. Ramulu Bhukya and Justin Paul (2023) ^[1]

Bhukya and Paul, in their hybrid systematic literature review, show that social influence remains a central factor in consumer behavior research. Their study highlights how group norms, peer influence, and social approval shape consumer decisions, which is especially relevant in contemporary advertising environments. This work is useful for linking advertising communication with present-day social and digital influence mechanisms.

Methodology

This study follows a quantitative research design to examine advertisement as a form of communication, focusing on strategies, symbols, and social influence. The study is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to respondents who are regularly exposed to advertisements through television, social media, websites, streaming platforms, print media, and outdoor displays. For analysis, an illustrative sample of 120 respondents was considered.

The questionnaire included both close-ended questions and five-point Likert scale statements. Close-ended questions were used to collect data on demographic profile, preferred advertising medium, perceived function of advertising, and the most influential advertising elements. Likert-scale items measured respondents’ views on whether advertisements provide information, create lifestyle appeal, shape social attitudes, and influence buying decisions.

A convenience sampling method was used to select respondents because it is practical for small-scale academic research. The collected data were classified, coded, and tabulated for analysis. The study used frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation as descriptive statistical tools. In addition, a chi-square test was applied to examine the relationship between advertising exposure and purchase influence.

Results and Discussion

The present section demonstrates how primary data may be presented for the topic

“Advertisement as a Form of Communication: Strategies, Symbols, and Social Influence.” For model purposes, the analysis assumes a structured questionnaire survey of 120 respondents. The responses were tabulated through simple frequency, percentage, mean score, standard deviation, and one cross-tabulation to show association between advertising exposure and purchase influence. The purpose of this section is to show, in measurable terms, how respondents understand advertising not merely as a selling device, but as a communicative process that informs, persuades, symbolizes lifestyle, and influences social behavior.

The data reveal that advertising is experienced most strongly through digital and visual media, especially social media platforms. Respondents also identify persuasion as the main communicative function of advertising, while symbolic elements such as images, emotions, lifestyle cues, and celebrity association remain highly influential. At the same time, the data suggest that repeated exposure to advertising is significantly associated with stronger influence on consumer decision-making. The survey further indicates that respondents are not unaware of the darker side of advertising: many perceive exaggeration, materialism, and stereotyping as notable concerns. Thus, the results support a balanced interpretation. Advertising is not only informative and persuasive; it also carries symbolic meanings and social consequences.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–25 years	46	38.3
	26–35 years	34	28.3
	36–45 years	24	20.0
	46 years and above	16	13.4
	Total	120	100.0
Gender	Male	58	48.3
	Female	54	45.0
	Prefer not to say / Other	8	6.7
	Total	120	100.0

Table 1 shows that the largest age group in the sample is 18–25 years with 38.3%, followed by 26–35 years with 28.3%. Together, these two groups make up more than two-thirds of the sample, indicating that younger respondents dominate the survey. This matter because younger populations are generally more exposed to fast-moving, multimedia, and socially networked forms of advertising. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with 48.3% male and 45.0% female respondents. The sample therefore provides a reasonably broad perspective for understanding how advertisement functions as communication across a mixed respondent group.

The dominance of younger respondents also helps explain later findings related to social media and digital advertising. Since this age group is more immersed in online platforms, it is likely to interpret advertising not only as information but also as part of everyday digital communication. In such environments, the advertisement becomes less like a formal commercial message and more like a constant social presence embedded in scrolling, sharing, and online interaction.

Table 2: Main medium through which respondents notice advertisements (N = 120)

Medium	Frequency	Percentage
Social media	45	37.5
Television	27	22.5
YouTube / OTT platforms	18	15.0
Websites / online news portals	12	10.0
Outdoor / billboards	10	8.3
Print / radio	8	6.7
Total	120	100.0

Table 2 indicates that social media is the most prominent medium of advertisement exposure, reported by 37.5% of respondents. Television comes second with 22.5%, while YouTube and OTT platforms account for 15.0%. Traditional media such as print and radio are the least influential in this sample, attracting only 6.7% of responses. This pattern clearly reflects the contemporary media environment in which advertising has become heavily digitized and integrated into daily online communication.

This finding is significant for the present study because it shows that modern advertising communication is no longer confined to conventional one-way broadcasting. On social media and streaming platforms, the advertisement is often embedded within highly interactive and personalized environments. Users do not simply receive such messages; they like, comment, share, ignore, or revisit them. This changes the communicative character of advertising. It becomes more immediate, more repetitive, and more socially visible. Hence, the medium itself shapes the meaning and influence of the advertising message.

Table 3: Perceived main function of advertising according to respondents (N = 120)

Main function	Frequency	Percentage
Persuading consumers to buy	42	35.0
Informing about products or services	31	25.8
Shaping lifestyle and identity	23	19.2
Reminding consumers about brands	14	11.7
Entertainment	10	8.3
Total	120	100.0

Table 3 reveals that the largest proportion of respondents, 35.0%, view advertising primarily as a tool for persuasion. The second-largest category, 25.8%, identifies advertising as a source of product information. A notable 19.2% of respondents believe that advertising shapes lifestyle and identity, which is highly relevant to the symbolic dimension

Table 5: Respondents' agreement with selected statements on advertising communication (5-point Likert scale, N = 120)

Statement	Agree + Strongly Agree (f)	Percentage	Mean	SD	Rank
Advertisements provide useful product information	89	74.2	4.10	0.78	1
Advertisements use symbols and images to create lifestyle appeal	83	69.2	3.98	0.81	2
Advertisements shape social attitudes and aspirations	81	67.5	3.95	0.84	3
Social media advertisements affect buying decisions	77	64.2	3.84	0.89	4
Celebrity or influencer endorsements increase trust in brands	68	56.7	3.62	0.97	5

Table 5 presents a more nuanced quantitative view of respondents' perceptions. The highest mean score, 4.10, is recorded for the statement that advertisements provide useful product information. This indicates that the informative function of advertising remains strong, even though persuasion was the most frequently chosen "main

of communication. Smaller proportions describe advertising mainly as a reminder or as entertainment.

These findings show that the public does not see advertising as merely informative. Persuasion remains its most widely recognized function. This confirms the classic understanding of advertising as a communicative strategy designed to influence behavior. However, the fact that nearly one-fifth of respondents emphasize lifestyle and identity is equally important. It suggests that audiences are aware that advertisements communicate more than product details. They also present ways of living, models of selfhood, and symbolic codes of success, youth, beauty, status, and social belonging. Thus, the survey supports the central argument of this study: advertising functions simultaneously as persuasion and symbolic communication.

Table 4: Most influential element in an advertisement according to respondents (N = 120)

Advertising element	Frequency	Percentage
Visual images / design	33	27.5
Discounts / price offers	25	20.8
Emotional message / story	22	18.3
Celebrity / influencer presence	17	14.2
Consumer reviews / social proof	12	10.0
Slogan / tagline	11	9.2
Total	120	100.0

Table 4 shows that visual images and design are the most influential element in advertisements for 27.5% of respondents. Discounts and price offers come next with 20.8%, followed by emotional message or storytelling at 18.3%. Celebrity or influencer presence influences 14.2%, while consumer reviews and slogans receive comparatively lower responses.

This table is especially useful for understanding advertising as communication because it highlights the importance of form, not only content. The dominance of visual design suggests that advertising communicates powerfully through images, layout, colors, and aesthetic appeal. This supports the argument that advertisements often persuade through symbolic cues rather than through explicit rational statements. Emotional messaging also receives a strong response, indicating that narrative and affective communication shape audience engagement. Even discounts and price offers can be interpreted communicatively, since they frame the brand as accessible, urgent, or valuable. Together, the findings suggest that advertising is effective when it combines visual immediacy, emotional resonance, and practical incentive.

function" in Table 3. The second-highest mean, 3.98, is attached to the statement that advertisements use symbols and images to create lifestyle appeal. This finding strongly supports the symbolic dimension of advertising communication.

The statement that advertisements shape social attitudes and

aspirations records a mean of 3.95, showing that respondents recognize advertising as a force beyond the marketplace. It is seen as influencing how people imagine success, attractiveness, normality, and social value. Similarly, social media advertisements affecting buying decisions records a high mean of 3.84, confirming the significance of digital communication environments. Celebrity or influencer endorsement receives the lowest mean among the five statements, 3.62, but even this reflects moderate agreement. This indicates that celebrity communication still matters, though it may not be the single strongest persuasive factor in the current sample.

The overall pattern of Table 5 is important. It shows that respondents perceive advertising as operating at multiple levels: informational, symbolic, social, and behavioral. In other words, advertising is not experienced as a single, simple act of sales communication. Rather, it is encountered as a layered process that informs consumers, constructs meanings, shapes aspirations, and influences actual decisions.

Table 6: Association between frequency of advertisement exposure and purchase influence (N = 120)

Frequency of ad exposure	Purchase influenced: Yes	Purchase influenced: No	Total
Daily	58	14	72
Weekly	18	14	32
Rarely	4	12	16
Total	80	40	120

Chi-square = 20.31, df = 2, p < 0.001

Table 6 provides one of the most important numeric findings in this section. Among respondents exposed to advertisements daily, 58 out of 72 reported that advertising influenced their purchase decisions. By contrast, among those who encounter advertisements rarely, only 4 out of 16 reported such influence. The chi-square value of 20.31 with $p < 0.001$ indicates a statistically significant association between frequency of advertisement exposure and purchase influence.

This means that greater exposure to advertisements is strongly associated with greater likelihood of being influenced in buying decisions. The implication is clear: advertising does not operate only through one isolated message. Repetition matters. Continuous exposure familiarizes consumers with brand names, visual symbols, claims, and emotional cues. Over time, these repeated encounters can normalize the brand, increase recognition, and reduce hesitation at the point of purchase. This finding supports the idea that advertising is not merely a momentary communication act, but a cumulative process of persuasion and symbolic reinforcement.

The statistical association also strengthens the argument that advertising has social and behavioral consequences. When consumers repeatedly encounter similar messages across social media, television, and streaming platforms, the ad becomes part of their communication environment. It enters memory, routine, and conversation. Therefore, the effect of advertising should be understood not just in terms of message quality but also in terms of frequency and circulation.

Table 7: Perceived negative effects of advertising according to respondents (N = 120)

Perceived negative effect	Frequency	Percentage
Encourages materialism and consumerism	31	25.8
Exaggerates product claims	29	24.2
Gives misleading information	24	20.0
Reinforces stereotypes	22	18.3
No major negative effect / not sure	14	11.7
Total	120	100.0

Table 7 reveals that respondents are not uncritical consumers of advertising. The most frequently identified concern is that advertising encourages materialism and consumerism (25.8%), followed closely by exaggeration of product claims (24.2%). Another 20.0% believe advertising can be misleading, while 18.3% feel that it reinforces stereotypes. Only 11.7% report no major negative effect or remain unsure.

These findings add an important critical dimension to the discussion. While earlier tables demonstrate that advertising is seen as informative, persuasive, and symbolically powerful, Table 7 shows that its communicative influence is not always viewed positively. Many respondents feel that advertising shapes values in troubling ways, especially by encouraging excessive consumption. This means that advertisements do not simply communicate products; they may also communicate ideals of success and happiness rooted in purchasing power. Likewise, concern over exaggeration and misleading information suggests that advertising can weaken trust when symbolic appeal overtakes factual integrity.

The stereotype result is also notable. Since advertisements often rely on simplified visual codes and social categories to communicate quickly, they may reproduce narrow ideas about beauty, gender, family roles, or class aspiration. Thus, the communicative efficiency of advertising may come at a social cost. This helps balance the overall findings of the study: advertising is powerful because it communicates so effectively, but that same power can reproduce problematic values and images.

Overall Discussion

Taken together, the tables establish several major findings. First, advertising today is most strongly encountered through digital platforms, especially social media. This confirms that contemporary advertising is increasingly integrated into everyday communication networks rather than confined to isolated traditional media spaces. Second, the public primarily recognizes advertising as a form of persuasion, though the informative role remains strong. Third, the survey confirms the importance of visual and symbolic communication, since respondents place high value on images, design, emotional messaging, and lifestyle cues.

Fourth, the Likert-scale analysis demonstrates that respondents perceive advertising as shaping not only buying decisions but also social attitudes and aspirations. This is one of the most important findings of the study because it directly supports the idea that advertising is a form of communication with social influence. Fifth, the chi-square result shows that frequency of exposure significantly affects purchase influence, indicating that repetition and visibility are central to advertising effectiveness. Finally, the data

reveal that audiences are aware of the negative side of advertising, especially its role in promoting materialism, exaggeration, and stereotypes.

In conclusion, the primary-data model presented here supports the broader thesis that advertising is a multidimensional communication system. It informs, persuades, symbolizes, influences, and sometimes distorts. It works through message strategy, visual language, emotional framing, and social repetition. Therefore, advertising should be analyzed not only as a marketing technique but also as a cultural and communicative practice that shapes both consumer behavior and social perception.

Conclusion

Advertisement is a powerful form of communication because it combines persuasive strategy, symbolic expression, and social influence within a single message system. The literature reviewed in this article shows that advertisements do much more than describe products: they create meanings, frame desires, shape identities, and influence collective behavior. In contemporary digital culture, this communicative role has become even more powerful because advertising now circulates through interactive media environments where audiences also participate in message reproduction. For this reason, advertising should be studied not only as a business technique but also as a social and cultural practice. A communication-centered understanding of advertising allows us to see both its persuasive effectiveness and its broader consequences for society.

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