Chapter Four

Effects of Hidden Persuaders on Consumer Behaviour: An Experimental Study
4.1. Introduction

As mentioned in details in chapter 2, ‘hidden persuaders’ refers to the efforts made by advertising copywriters to pierce through the subconscious minds of the consumers in order to bring the intended feedback from the audience. Vance Packard (1957), the man who coined this term wrote, “Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions and our thought processes. The result is that many of us are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realize, in the patterns of our everyday lives”.

Packard observed that advertisers, including some of the largest firms of the United States often crossed the border of acceptable persuasion with their “depth approach” which was based on extensive ‘motivational research’ (MR) financed by the advertising industry. One
such MR specialist was James Vicary, who preferred the term ‘Subliminal Advertising’. Vicary announced that he had designed a subliminal projection machine, which would flash unnoticeable messages within big-screen movies. He claimed to have conducted his test for six weeks at a theatre in Fort Lee, New Jersey that brought significant sales increase. He said that through his machine, he blipped the messages ‘Eat Popcorn’ and ‘Drink Coke’ on the screen every five seconds throughout the feature film. These messages, according to Vicary, appeared too briefly to be consciously perceived by the viewers. These subliminal messages increased the sales of Coke by 18% and Popcorn by 58% according to the claim by Vicary.

Vicary’s so called experiment was not taken positively by many. Many people thought that their minds were being assaulted and they feared that they would be manipulated by invisible slogans. On the other hand, there were many who found nothing wrong in it. Whether people accepted or not, it created tremendous protests from the press and the intellectuals and later on, on being challenged, Vicary confessed that he had falsified the data. Critics even started to doubt whether this type of experiment was conducted at all. The issue was finally laid to rest as the Federal Communications Commission of America announced on 24 January 1974 that subliminal advertising, ‘whether effective or not’, were
'contrary to the public interest' and banned the broadcasting stations from using them anymore.

So, it is observed that Vance Packard, who coined the term 'hidden persuaders' himself, did not use it to denote a positive trend in advertising. Though he did not use the term 'subliminal advertising', he found the new 'motivational research' leading to persuading people to buy products they had never realized they needed. He concluded with utter discontentment that, "Marketers who could reach into the minds of American consumers soon found consumers' wallets to be within easy grasp as well".

The present study, however, is based on a different connotation of the term 'hidden persuaders'. It is a 'reincarnation' of the term with a positive approach in an attempt to make an empirical study of the implicitness in Bangladeshi advertisements. As discussed in chapter 2, the term in the present study refers to the indirect or 'hidden' persuasions made by the copywriters by using language in such a way that the consumers are not directly urged to buy the product. All the persuasive elements are there in the message, but framed implicitly so that the potential buyers have to ponder first before deciding to buy. The 'persuasions' studied in the present research in no way 'coerce' unwary buyers into making purchases they would not otherwise have considered.
In this chapter, an experiment is made on the effects of hidden persuaders in the language of advertising in Bangladesh in comparison with the advertising with explicit persuaders. It first tries to find out how effective the concept 'advertising' is before experimenting the effects of hidden persuaders as opposed to direct persuaders. The target is to see the 'audience response' and statistically analyze the findings in order to search whether the effectiveness shows any significant trend.

4.2. Earlier Works

'Audience response' in advertising has been an area of interest for researchers of diversified areas like marketing, linguistics, semiotics and other related areas. In his Ph.D. dissertation at Georgetown University, USA, Garfinkel (1978) made a sociolinguistic analysis of the language of advertising. He exposed videotaped TV commercials of breakfast cereals and fast food restaurants to some college students in order to look into the truth in advertising and to analyze the nature of the internal structure of an advertising discourse. His work was more of a sociolinguistic nature where 'attitude' rather than purchasibility was emphasized. McConnell (1970) opined that the audience response varies for different products towards different advertising media. Buchman (1964)
made a macro level study and observed lower response for print ads compared to television ads. In a more recent work, Motes, Hilton, and Fielden (1992) found that linguistic manipulation in the absence of illustration is much more acceptable than linguistic manipulation in the presence of illustration. In this paper, the authors examined 720 college students to know "how interesting, appealing, believable, clear and informative each advertisement was perceived to be". Harris et al. (1986) argued that psycholinguistic theory and methodology if applied to advertising could be a very effective tool for researching information processing.

The most contributory and relevant to the present study is the study made by Taylor and Thomson (1982). They made eight studies to see the effect of concrete versus abstract language in advertising where only one study revealed a significant effect for concrete colorful language over its opposite. But the study was confined to print advertising only and for that reason, can be accepted as a partial reflection of the real scenario. Banu and Sussex (2001), in a rare survey on Bangla language of Bangladesh (Bangla is also the mother tongue of the majority in the Indian State of West Bengal but they differ from each other to a large extent at the lexical level due to religious and cultural reasons), worked on hybridization between English and Bangla in Business names and
commercial signs. It was mostly a sociolinguistic study where the authors compared the ‘Englishness’ in similar studies in Pakistan (Meraj, 1993) with their data and found that code mixing is more prominent in Pakistan while the use of English exclusively in product names is greater in Bangladesh than in Pakistan. This study was more of an informative nature and the response of the consumers or buyers about these naming have not been taken up by the authors.

Gaining from the strengths and weaknesses of the literature reviewed the present experiment can claim to be unique and contributory, first, due to the fact that it is the first such work in Bangladesh where the effects of the language of advertising has been analyzed through statistical methods. Also, the product and the advertisements used for the experiment are hypothetical, and hence threat to validity of the experimental results because of the audiences' prejudice poses no problem. The present study aims at looking into the effects of hidden persuaders in the language of advertising in Bangladesh in comparison with the advertising where the language is explicit. But before going into the comparison, it is important to find the effect of advertising itself regardless of language.
4.3. The Experiment

Consumers now have lots of products to choose from. Almost all commodities have a considerably large number of products. So, the need arises to let the consumers know about a particular product and to tell them why they should buy it. Here, advertisements play the most effective role. It is primarily through advertising that the consumer becomes aware of a product. At this pioneering stage of a product, the manufacturer first informs the consumers about the arrival of the product. Gradually, when the product becomes known to the consumers, it begins to compete with other similar products. This is the stage when advertisers need to persuade the consumers so that they become loyal to their brand. For example, Coca-Cola and Pepsi do not need to inform the customers about their existence. But they do need to persuade them to be loyal to their respective brands. The final stage of advertising is just to remind the consumers that they are there in the market. Sometimes this notion of showing existence becomes competitive. Again, the example of Coca-Cola – Pepsi can be given. By this time both have a considerable size of brand-loyal customers. But still they advertise just because their competitor advertises. Often we observe the use of celebrities for the purposes of persuasion and reminder. So, through information, persuasion, and
reminder a consumer becomes directly involved with a product and the
tendency to purchase increases sharply.

While this can be accepted as a universal phenomenon, one
also has to remember that sometimes advertising can also generate strong
negative reactions. Aaker and Bruzzone (1981) opined that prime-time
television advertising could sometimes have adverse effect on the minds of
a consumer to the extent that it can affect the overall effectiveness of
television advertising. They questioned 500 respondents and found out
that advertisement of some types of products like liquor, cigarettes,
sanitary napkins etc. are generally not liked by the audience and
sometimes considered by them as ‘offensive’.

Actually advertisements should reflect the cultural value of the
society in which they are generated. Advertisements, if directed towards
the population in concomitance with the cultural values of that society are
received positively and favorably by the audience. Therefore, we
sometimes find in the advertisements the use of puns and proverbs of the
society in which the commercial is generated. For example in a
Bangladeshi TV commercial of a roof tin called PHP’s Arabian Horse, the
following Bangla proverb is used:

/murobbiraki Sadhei koy Sommondho korba
The elder ones unnecessarily say relationship do

guSTi  deikha  ar  baRi korba  Tin  deikha/

family  seeing  and  house build  roof tin.  seeing

‘Do our elders say unnecessarily that ‘make relationship by seeing the family and build house by seeing the tin?’

In an advertisement of a typical rural product shown in a typical rural setting, a rural proverb has been incorporated here to make the arguments in favor of the product more powerful.

This is how an advertisement penetrates deep into the minds of the target audience and influences them to buy the product. It not only informs the consumers about the product, but “its message contains the unique features of the product and compares it with other similar products”. (Korgaonkar, Moschis and Bellenger, 1984). Thus, information, persuasion, and reminder together lead to positive purchasing behavior of the consumers, and on the basis of that we can hypothesize that:

“A consumer in Bangladesh is more likely to purchase a product if he/she is exposed to an advertisement than if he/she is not”.

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If the potentiality of a customer being exposed to advertising to purchase a product is labeled as $P_1$ and the potentiality to purchase a product without any exposure to advertising is labeled as $P_0$, then the above hypothesis can be symbolically written as:

$$H_0: P_1 > P_0$$

Assuming this hypothesis to be true, the next question that arises is, what type of advertisements attract the consumers most? No empirical answer can be given to this question as the choice of the consumers vary largely according to social, cultural, educational, age, gender and many other factors. There can be advertisements where the persuasion is direct and explicit like Bangla expressions: /aji kinun/ ‘buy today’ or /joldi kinun/ ‘buy quickly’. But the persuasion can be implicit or hidden in some advertising campaigns. Here, the copywriter uses message where the consumer is indirectly persuaded to buy the product. The latter type of advertising attracts mostly those who are educated and belong to the higher class of the society. A consumer with a certain level of education considers himself/herself to be intellectually matured. He/she would prefer that the advertising message should have some linguistic element that would make him/her ponder first and then decide whether to buy the product or not. He/she won’t like to be exposed to an advertisement, which includes explicit persuasion. Considering these
characteristics of educated consumers, our second hypothesis can be as follows:

"Hidden persuaders in the language of advertising are likely to have more positive impact on consumer behavior than explicit language of advertising on the educated consumers in Bangladesh".

If the potentiality of a customer being exposed to an advertisement with hidden persuaders to purchase a product is labeled as $P_H$, and the potentiality to purchase a product after being exposed to an explicit advertisement is labeled as $P_E$, then our second hypothesis can be symbolically written as:

$$H_0 : P_H > P_E$$

### 4.4. Methodology for Testing the Hypotheses

To test the above two hypotheses a questionnaire was prepared. The obvious choice of respondents was university students. University or college is the target of most of the advertisers, as they constitute the majority of their potential buyers. Motes, Hilton & Fielden (1992) observed that this type of consumers, "are indeed perceived, and
rightfully so, by ad agencies and other businesses alike as legitimate consumers about whom added insight and an increased understanding are needed”. Reilly (1989) and Schiffman & Kanuk (1991) noted that they are the target customers and provide substantial markets for products and services like, clothes, fast food, recreational equipment, computer hardware and software, educational supplies, cosmetics, etc.

The hypothetical product used to test the above hypotheses is mostly useful for students, and as such the choice of students as respondents is deemed appropriate, given the nature of the present study.

The university chosen for the present study is a private university named Asian University of Bangladesh. The private university concept is relatively new in Bangladesh. Since the first private university started operating in 1992, almost 30 private universities have so far got the charter from the University Grants’ Commission and the Ministry of Education of the Bangladesh Government. Most of these institutions charge very high tuition fees compared to state-owned universities and, therefore, represent mostly the elite class of the society.

Asian University of Bangladesh is one of the largest private universities in Bangladesh with its tuition fees within the capacity of middle class. That is why this university has the largest number or enrolments.
They have students from middle class background as well as students coming from the higher class of the society. As they cover a wide range of educated people in Bangladesh, this university was the obvious choice.

According to the hypothesis, the respondents are required to be reasonably educated, because to understand and respond to implicit advertisements, one needs to have a certain level of education. For macro level, i.e., the uneducated class who represents the majority of Bangladesh population, vast scope remains for future studies.

Out of the list of 2669 current regular students of Asian University of Bangladesh (AUB), a sample of 336 students were selected by applying the simple random sampling technique. The error level here was .05%. Seven research assistants went to the two campuses of the university with questionnaires. Unfortunately, the cooperation from the selected students was unexpectedly low. The research assistants received considerable degree of resistance and hostility from most of the sampled members. Out of 336, only 97 members showed interest and answered to the queries. This type of non-cooperation from the respondents limited the scope of the present research. But due to time and resource constraints the available data had to be used for the study. This may be considered as one of the limitations of the whole study itself.
The questionnaire had three sections. Section 1 was related to respondents’ background and included questions regarding their current family, educational, social, marital, financial etc. situation. Section 2 included some general questions on advertising. It tried to look into the respondents’ amount of exposure to the electronic and print media as well as their general attitude towards advertisements. Section 3 was divided into three parts. This division was made to know how they respond to different types of advertising. The 336 listed members were first divided into three groups. The research assistants collected data from these three groups using the interview method.

All the three groups were asked the same set of questions. The first group was the control group who was not exposed to any advertisement. The second group was exposed to an advertisement where the language was very flat, straightforward and explicit. The last group heard an advertisement where hidden persuaders were used. Among the 97 respondents, 35 were randomly allocated to the control group and were not exposed to any advertisement. As many as 31 respondents heard explicit advertisements, while another 31 were exposed to an advertisement with hidden persuaders. These two groups were the experimental groups. The research assistants read out the separate advertising messages prepared for each group to the respondents of both
the experimental groups and then asked them relevant questions about the message they (respondents) heard. Respondents in the control group were asked only questions relating to purchasing of the product.

To avoid prejudice on the part of the consumers, a hypothetical product was chosen and two hypothetical messages were prepared. The product was a brain tonic with side effects. The brain tonic, named 'Brano' helps one's brain to be sharper and makes him/her intellectually superior. But it has some minor side effects. The respondents were exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of the product and then tested whether advertisements are strong enough to influence the consumers to overcome the fear of side effects and buy the product. For the control group, the purpose was to see whether knowing about the side effects and without any persuasion, the consumers are still interested to buy the product. The second group was exposed to an explicit advertisement where the copywriter intentionally ignored the 'side effect' matter. Questions were asked of them to see how they reacted to this situation. The third group that was exposed to advertisement with hidden persuaders was informed about the side effect and justifications were made indirectly that this product had more positives than negatives.

In the third and the most important section of the questionnaire, the control group was simply asked whether they wanted to
buy this product. The advertisement for the second group, the group that was exposed to explicit advertisement, began by asking the question, “Are you silly?” the whole message is very straight forward insisting the consumer to buy the product because it would make him/her more intelligent and sharp. After reading out the message twice to each respondent, the research assistants then asked some questions relating to the language of the advertisement before asking whether he/she wanted to buy it or not.

The advertisement for the third group contained indirect persuasion where the copywriter never asked the consumer to buy the product. The persuasion here was hidden and implicit. In this message, a story is told about how a person who had been intellectually mediocre throughout his life used the brain tonic named 'Brano' and suddenly topped the Bangladesh Civil Service Examination. Concluding that the product had some side effects, the message emphasized that the positive sides of the product hugely outnumber the negatives. Finally the respondents were asked the same set of questions as the respondents of the second group were asked of.

Out of the 31 respondents in the experimental group that were exposed to explicit advertisement, 11 wanted to buy the product. The other experimental group that heard the advertisement with hidden persuaders
had more positive response. As many as 16 out of 31 agreed to buy the product. Therefore, out of 62 respondents who were exposed to advertisements, 27 (=11+16) wanted to buy the product. But the picture is different for the control group: out of 35 respondents, only 3 agreed to buy the product.

The tests of the two hypotheses are conducted as follows:

**HYPOTHESIS 1**

Total number exposed to advertisement $n_1 + n_2 = 31 + 31 = 62$

Number of respondents who wanted to buy the product $\bar{n}_1 + \bar{n}_2 = 11 + 16 = 27$

Proportion of respondents exposed to advertisement who wanted to buy the product $\hat{p}_1 = \frac{\bar{n}_1 + \bar{n}_2}{n_1 + n_2} = \frac{27}{62} = 0.435$

Number of respondents who were not exposed to any advertisement $n_0 = 35$

Number of the above respondents who wanted to buy the product $\bar{n}_0 = 3$
Proportion of respondents not exposed to any advertisement who wanted
to buy the product: $\hat{p}_0 = \frac{n_0}{n} = \frac{3}{35} = 0.086$

The common estimate of the proportion

$$\hat{p} = \frac{n_1 + n_2 + n_0}{n_1 + n_2 + n_0} = \frac{27 + 3}{62 + 35} = \frac{30}{97} = 0.309$$

Our Hypothesis is

Null Hypothesis $H_0: p_1 > p_0$

(where $p_1$ and $p_0$ are population proportions defined as $p_i = \frac{N_i}{N}$ and $p_0 = \frac{N_0}{N_0}$)

Alternative Hypothesis $H_1: p_1 \leq p_0$

The test statistic is

$$Z = \frac{\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_0}{\sqrt{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})\left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} + \frac{1}{n_0}\right)}}$$

$$= \frac{0.435 - 0.086}{\sqrt{0.309(1-0.309)\left(\frac{1}{62} + \frac{1}{35}\right)}}$$

$$= \frac{0.349}{0.0977}$$

$$= 3.57$$
This is a left tailed test $Z_{0.05} = -1.645$, that is, the probability to the left of -1.645 in a standard normal curve is 0.05. The available data do not show any evidence against the null hypothesis. Hence, the null hypothesis that $P_1 > P_0$ cannot be rejected at 5% level of significance. In other words, a consumer is much more likely to buy a product when he/she is exposed to an advertisement (hidden or explicit) about that product than if he/she is not exposed to any advertisement.

**HYPOTHESIS 2**

**Total number of respondents exposed to explicit advertisement** $n_1 = 31$

Number of respondents exposed to advertisement with hidden persuaders $n_2 = 31$

Number of respondents exposed to explicit advertisement who wanted to buy the product $\bar{n}_1 = 11$

Proportion of respondents exposed to explicit advertisement who wanted to buy the product $\hat{p}_1 = \frac{\bar{n}_1}{n_1} = \frac{11}{31} = 0.355$

Number of respondents exposed to advertisement with hidden persuaders who wanted to buy the product $\bar{n}_2 = 16$
Proportion of respondents exposed to advertisement with hidden persuaders who wanted to buy the product $\hat{p}_H = \frac{n_2}{n_2} = \frac{16}{31} = 0.516$.

The common estimate of the proportion: $\hat{p}_c = \frac{n_1 + n_2}{n_1 + n_2} = \frac{16 + 11}{31 + 31} = 0.435$.

Our Hypothesis is

Null Hypothesis $H_0 : P_H > P_E$

(Where $P_H$ and $P_E$ are population proportions defined as $P_H = \frac{N_1}{N_2}$ and $P_E = \frac{N_1}{N_1}$).

Alternative Hypothesis $H_1 : P_H \leq P_E$

The test statistic is

$$Z = \frac{\hat{p}_H - \hat{p}_c}{\sqrt{\hat{p}_c (1 - \hat{p}_c) \left( \frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} \right)}}$$

$$= \frac{0.516 - 0.355}{0.435 \times 0.565 \left( \frac{2}{31} \right)}$$

$$= 1.28$$
This is left-tailed test and \( Z_{0.05} = -1.645 \). Hence, based on the available data, the null hypothesis that \( P_H > P_E \) cannot be rejected at 5% level of significance. In other words, the hidden persuaders have positive effect on consumer behavior, i.e., consumers are more likely to buy a product if they are exposed to hidden persuaders than if they are exposed to explicit advertisements.

4.5. Discussion

The test result of the first hypothesis clearly indicates that the hypothesis made about the effectiveness of advertising cannot be rejected. Out of 35 respondents who were not exposed to any advertisement, only 8.5% agreed to purchase the product as against 91.5% deciding not to purchase it. On the other hand, out of 62 respondents exposed to advertisement (hidden + explicit), 43.5% showed inclination to use the product. The results show that the desire to purchase rises significantly in favor of buying it due to advertising (43.5% opposed to 8.5%). It proves that the consumers' response is sharp in favor of advertising. The second hypothesis also provides evidence of significant positive impact of hidden persuaders on the desire to purchase among educated consumers: 51.6% of those who heard the advertisement with hidden persuaders opted to
purchase the brain tonic, whereas only 35.4% of those who heard explicit advertisement decided in favor.

4.6. Conclusion

This study has a number of limitations. The non-response rate was very high and as such, the present analysis is based on data on only 97 respondents that represent a small part of the total population the sample was selected from. Secondly the semiotic aspects have not been taken into consideration in the present study, which if included, could make the work much more dynamic, and finally, the experiment has been conducted on only the educated class, whereas majority of the Bangladesh population are uneducated.

As discussed before, the scope for future research in this area is vast and unlimited. There has been very little research on advertising itself in Bangladesh, let alone the language of advertising. So, the range of unexplored research areas is huge. There should be a comprehensive work on the effectiveness of advertisements on illiterate people. An analysis of comparison between the attitudes towards advertisement of demographically different subgroups is another area to
be looked into. A sociolinguistic approach to look into the differences of response with regards to age, sex, class, education etc. may yield interesting results. Finally, a comparative study between the effectiveness of linguistic manipulation, hidden persuaders and the visual effects in television and print advertising could make tremendous contribution to the fields of linguistics and advertising in Bangladesh.