

Advertising and Its Subtle Role of Conflict Resolution

A Semiotic Analysis of Two Ads (1914 Sainsbury's Ad & Axe Peace/Call to Arms)

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ABSTRACT: Till this present day, the role of advertising has remained a promotional tool for business brands with big business plans. Undoubtedly, its promotional role is of extreme importance in the society. This is due to its contribution on the increased consumption of goods and services, and wide arrange of awareness which has left consumers with numerous choices. Nevertheless, advertising has never stopped at shifting its frontiers to perform certain roles. It “goes beyond borders” to perform other roles that are deemed socially responsible in its nature. One of such social responsibilities is the resolution of conflict. A subtle role which has not being placed on the frontiers of academic scrutiny. It is on this ground the work moves to examine the subtle roles of advertising in resolving conflict. Employing the semiotic analytical approach, two ads will aid the work to further unmask certain actions that buttresses the subtle role of advertising in conflict resolution.

KEYWORDS: Advertising, Conflict Resolution

Background

Over the years the role of advertising has to great extent being limited to the promotional role of marketing. Even though its existence in the 4ps in the marketing strategy is absolutely pertinent, its role of conflict resolution which can be attributed as its social responsibility is absolutely worth academic torchlight.

In the literature, there exist litany of definitions of advertising. However the ultimate purpose of advertising is to create wide range of awareness and subtly persuade the consumers to take actions on the biddings of the sellers, While this is being achieved, important information of the products get conveyed along to the target audience. These conveyed products are products of brands which are responsible for not only the well-being of its employees but also of the society which receives information about the brand. Subsequently, this responsibility places a social call on the brand to ensure that certain level of serenity is achieved in the society they operate and exist in. Hence advertising plays a communication role to reach its audience.

Brands are encouraged at all level to display certain aspect of social responsibility and one of these social responsibilities is conflict resolution. The role of conflict resolution (CR) is far from the mundane role of advertising which is promotionally inclined. As a result of this, one could be tempted to ask the question: Does advertising play a role of conflict resolution? With a constructive analysis of 1914 Sainsbury's advert and Axe peace/Call to Arms, this work will move to unravel the subtle role of advertising in resolving conflicts.

Objective

The objective of this work is to examine the subtle role of advertising to resolving conflict in the society which is a gray area. This subtle role will be examined through the eyes of a semiotic analysis of two adverts namely;

- a) *1914 Sainsbury's*
- b) *AXE Peace/Call to Arms*

Through the lenses of both ads, an extensive semiotic analysis is carried out to examine the subtleness of advertising in resolving conflict.

Advertising

According to the definition by the well-known UK Advertising Association, Advertising is a means of communication with the users of a product or service. Advertisements are messages paid for by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence people who receive the messages. Here, advertising and its messages are aimed at educating, enlightening and persuade the users of products of important messages which are of utmost benefit to their society. At this point, advertising can be seen as information. A “well-composed” piece of information dished out with the intention to improve or reverse a cause, knowledge or awareness. Advertising, which has existed for hundreds if not thousands of years (Some observers claim that even the Egyptian hieroglyphics contained advertising) has constantly adopted and adapted new formats in its roles. (Eder 1993). One of these new formats is information. To Nancy (1999), Advertising also educates. It informs us about candidates running for office. It tells us about important issues such as the benefits of seatbelt use, the dangers of drugs and the problem of drunk driving-which are all conflicting and affecting the daily human lives.

Conflict Resolution (CR)

Conflict resolution is the intervention aimed at alleviating or eliminating discord through conciliation. The issue being intervened on is called conflict. Thus conflict is simply discord, disagreement, friction, hostility, quarrel etc. To Njoku (2006), one can identify from the above synonymous that conflict entails the presence of an object of contention that has brought about a divide.

According to Njoku (2006), conflict can be classified in different types namely,

1. **Gender conflict** which is gender-inclined. A conflict that evokes a sex divide between male and female. It cuts across socio-cultural differences between both sexes.
2. **Ethic conflict**- this involves tribal and communal clashes.
3. **Power conflict** - this conflict is attributed to power struggle between various classes of individuals in the society, the bourgeois and proletariat.
4. **International conflict** - this conflict dives into the discords and outright rancor between two or more sovereign nations. Sometimes, this rancor often musters into an outright war. Other types of conflict include: Civil, Industrial and Labour Conflict

However, this study is obsessively focused on the power and international conflicts with an intention of “semiotically” unmasking how certain advertisements help to ignite and initiate peace in a conflicting atmosphere.

From the media research conducted over certain period of time, it has been noted in the literature that even though conflict is an inevitable part of human life, it can be prevented, avoided, managed and brought under considerably space of control. These can be achieved through the media’s contribution to societal reconciliation, reconstruction of misconceptions and extensively understanding the causes and consequences of conflict. If the media embodies these ultimate contributions, advertising which is “element” of the media arguably embodies the same roles and contributions.

Advertising and Conflict Resolution

It’s well known that advertising informs about the product, the brand and its promotional offers. It goes further to outline the availability of different range of products. The information function of advertising helps to influence the price of the product to increase sales.

However, few scholars see the advertising role from a different academic purview. The assertions of Angeline (2014) aligns with the view of these few scholars. “Without doubt, marketing and advertising can overstep its bounds. Some bad apples can ruin the bunch; however, the majority of marketing communications do add value to peoples’ lives...Hence, by reaching consumers – and perhaps in the process educating or entertaining them ...”

More so, ads are not only about selling, for they operate in a social context and have social effects. Thus, we must try to sift out the aspects of advertising practice that have potentially negative social effects and seek to address them as precisely as possible (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally 1990, 387).

The aforementioned negative social effects are effects which outcomes are conflict driven. Conflict does not occur in a vacuum, hence conflict resolving around gender, ethnic and power issues are born out from such social effects. It's on this ground, advertising in its social responsibility moves to mitigate and resolve gender, ethnic and power conflicts etc.

Theoretical background

From the theoretical argument in the literature, the nexus between advertising and society is clearly without doubts extensively discussed. There exist two major arguments in terms of the inseparable relationship of the advertising and society.

The mirror school of thought argues that advertising reflects the norms, values and beliefs existing in the society. In relations to our study, it represents the notion that advertising reflects conflict which has been one of the realities of our present human existence (Njoku, 2006). That's through misinformation or disinformation, and representations which are basically established with certain contents geared towards instigating conflicts (either gender conflict, power, or international conflict). Contrary to this view, the molding school of thought sees advertising as an element with a role of constructing socio-cultural realities. That's the media (adverts) produces and constitutes understanding, subjectivities, and versions of the world (Williamson 2011).

Hence, the advertisement construct "anti-conflict related" contents in realities. Here, advertising simply serve as an agent of change. This means that advertising can change our views about a particular product or situation and eventually contribute significantly to what we purchase or receive (Pardin 2014). Pardin went further to decide on the path of argument to align to when it comes to the role of advertising to society. To him, "advertising must be both a mirror of the society and agent of change". However, he claimed that the most interesting and instructive aspect of this academically debated argument is to stick to one side or the other. To this ground, this academic work aligns itself to the side of advertising being an agent of drastic change. This change which wholly incorporates itself towards the precepts of social responsibility is a change that entails peace in its entirety.

Advertising carries out this social responsibility of conflict resolution as a corporate and creative strategy to sincerely and honestly engage and contribute to certain issues that affects society. Merskin (2004) gave three seasons to buttress this point when she articulated why SR is a smart, ethical and effective creative strategy for advertisers to use. She argued that SR is smart and ethical if the below three reasons are met,

1. The advertiser is truthfully and actively engaged in the cause or concern represented,
2. There is a clear and associative relationship between said cause and the advertised products, and
3. The ads educate and inform customer citizens about social issues, concerns and needs.

Following Merskin's views, this work brings to the fore the concerns of advertising in its truthful stance and engagement on conflict related issues, its clear articulations of peace-oriented discourse and its stance in educating and informing the consumer on these conflict-related issues in the course of performing its classic promotional role.

From the ultimate question raised by Merskin (2004) concerning SR which says: Does the "do good" or at least "do no harm" approach work when combined with advertising?

One could subtle infer that the phrase "do good" can be placed side by side with "peace" while "do no harm" aligns itself with "avoiding conflict". Based on this foregoing, advertising campaign objectives extends its boundaries beyond its classic role of increase sales, awareness and image to performing function that are responsible for the well-being of the society. This role which advertising performs can be easily encapsulated in its social responsibilities at the peripheral level but if dive further has other broad concepts. One of such concepts is its role of conflict resolution.

Following the definition of Social responsibility (SR) by Berman and La farge (1993, 7) as the alignment of business operations with social values," it's obvious that businesses will barely strive on societies which social values are devoid of peace. And it falls on the domain of advertising to construct a conflict-devoid atmosphere in the course of certain ads to incorporate peace into the

system. Tinin (1997, 4) posits that advertising can be regarded as a “significant site of cultural production” and thereby become a location for public discourse around meaning, social values...”As mentioned earlier on this work, advertising plays a role beyond mere increment of sales, creation of awareness and building image. Stadler (2004, 592) concurs to this position in his words asserting that “advertising which typically aims to sell a product by associating it with a resonant image, identity, lifestyle or ethos, is a form of persuasive communication that can be effectively harnessed for explicitly pro-social purposes”. These pro-social purposes puts the brand in an active position of a change agent in the process.

Lori and Arlene (1990) concurs to the above assertions in their words that as an accomplished technique of persuasive communication, advertising has played a leading part in shaping how consumers think about their needs and what will satisfy them. But advertising’s most important social impact is not to be found here, rather, it lies in the diffusion of the advertising model of persuasive communication to other social processes”. From a subtle view of the advertising role, one of such social process is to resolve issues of conflict in the social settings.

Methodology

Semiotics

The first major proponents of the semiotic analytical method were as Swiss linguist and an American philosopher, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Pearce (1839-14). These move was followed by other remarkable scholars, like the French theorist Roland Barthes, Erving Goffman and the recent scholar Rosalind Gill.

Beyond the superficial definition of semiotic as the “study of signs”, a well-known semiotician, Umberto Eco, (1976, 7) gave one of the broadest definitions of the term as “a field concerned with that can be taken as a sign” (Chandler 2007).

Semiotics goes beyond the focus on only of what we refer to as “signs” in our everyday life interaction. It “stands for” or represents something else. In the realm of semiotic, signs are in different “shapes” in the forms of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects.

In the realm of semiotics, every sign has meaning and there are great chances of multiple meaning in every signs. Furthermore, these multiple meanings are to a large extent socially and culturally influenced thus caving a space for denotative and connotative meanings to be constructed. There are bunch of means deeply embedded into advertisements (products) and they intend not to manipulate us in exploitative form but rather create structures of meanings.

The intention of semiotic on this study is to decipher the underlying codes in ads that has conflict-resolution inclinations with the utmost purpose of acknowledging the contribution of advertisements in resolving conflicts on the frontiers of gender, ethnicity and power.

This study examines two ads that concretely buttresses the role of advertising in conflict resolution. These selected ads are *1914 Sainsbury’s* and *AXE Peace/Call to Arms*.

Sainsbury

Sainsbury is one of the largest chain of supermarkets in the United Kingdom. It was founded in 1869, by John James Sainsbury with a shop in Drury Lane, London. The company became the largest retailer of groceries in 1922 and was an early adopter of self-service retailing in the United Kingdom (Sainsbury 2018).

1914 Sainsbury’s Ad

Denotation

The *1914 Sainsbury’s Christmas ad* was created in 2014 made in partnership with the Royal British Legion to commemorate the extra-ordinary events of Christmas (Sainsbury’s 2014). The ad begins with the display of soldiers on the battle field in a cold and snowy night weather taking a break and awaiting further instructions from their military regions. As they patiently await in the freezing weather, some of the English soldiers received postal packages from loved ones. One of the soldier named Jim, a knight in the force, gets a package from his lovely girlfriend. In it were her picture, a letter and a little blue box

of chocolate. As he stares at the packages with smile on his face, he could hear voices from a distance. Apparently, these voices were from their Russian rivals. The song titled “*Silent Night*” was sang in the calm battle field. Subsequently soldiers in both warring factions sang to this beautiful Christmas song in harmony and with smile, joy and peace on their faces.

In the break of dawn, Jim steps out from the trench built in the battle field to meet with the enemies. As he moves out, their rivals immediately initiates readiness to attack which was halted by a young soldier just like Jim. He shouts “Halt” to abort the attack. He didn’t stop at that but extended the friendly move by stepping out of his trench.

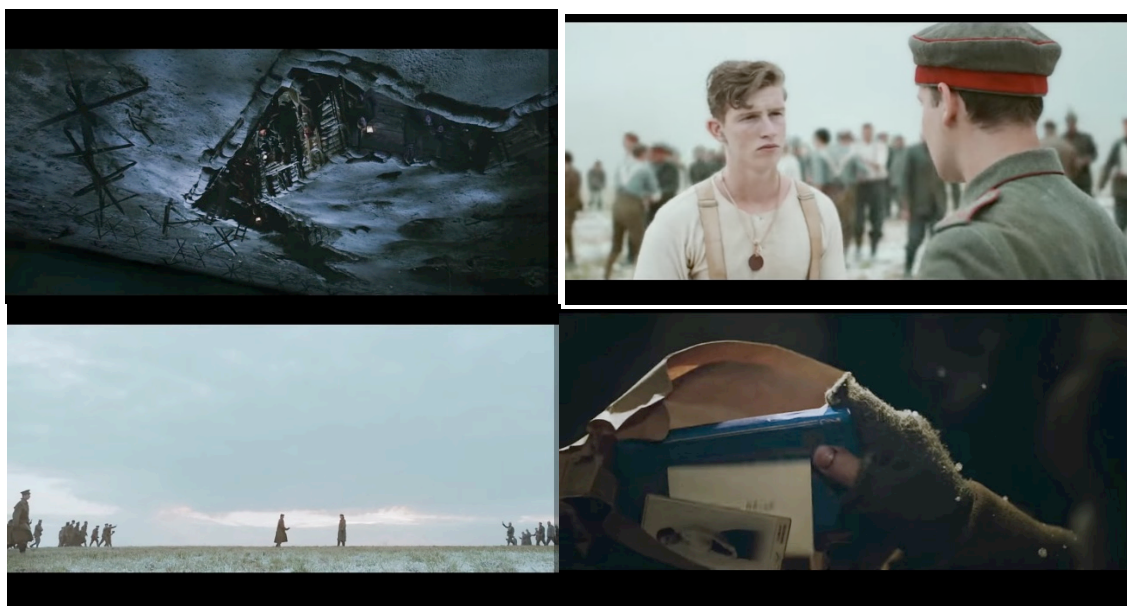
They met, shocked hands and shared other pleasantries with the introduction of names. These moves were further followed by the two armies coming together in no-man’s land, sharing gifts and even playing football together. The ad ends with a sudden disruption by bomb sounds from the fight jets. A caption: “*Christmas is for sharing*” was boldly displayed on the screen.

Connotation

The ad employing the night visuals of a cold and snowy weather was never done in a vacuum. Snow and winter are often used to represent sadness, bleakness or death. This signification was equally represented on the faces of the soldiers as they bleakly sit in the trench awaiting further instructions from their military units. While they await instructions that decides their fate, they are presented with gift packages. These packages signifies love, affection and remembrance. It evokes an extra-ordinary feeling. In Jim’s package lies a picture, letter and chocolate which were visual, textual and objective symbolism respectively. As they all got entangled in the portrayed emotional web, a beautiful song with subtle emotional undertone was employed to align to the present situation. The choice of this beautiful Christmas song titled “*silent night*” was perfectly placed to evoke that conflict resolving spirit at that situation. The soldiers sang in harmony and it signifies “Agreement, Truce, and One Voice”. A voice of peace and understanding. The atmosphere was totally engulfed in a complete state of joy and peace with a broad smiles in the faces of the soldier.

The signification of peace was further represented in the visual display of “the break of dawn” and the melted snow a sign of new beginning/a new start. This scene was buttressed with Jim stepping out of the trench and a reciprocated move from the other soldier. These actions signifies “Friendship” and “Partnership”. This friendly signification was further elaborated with pleasantries, sharing gifts and playing football etc.

Figure 1: Christmas is for sharing



Source: Images extract from BBH London. 2014. AXE Peace | Call to Arms

The scene which displays a sudden cut in joy and happiness by bomb sounds is a signification that even though there exist a bold strive to resolve conflict, conflict remains an inevitable part human which deserves a steady negotiation. However the caption “*Christmas is for sharing*” at the end of the ad preaches Peace, Love and Friendliness.

Table 1: Signification for Sainsbury’s Ad

Signifier	Signified
Snow and Winter	Sadness/Bleakness/Death
Gift Packages	Love/Affection/Remembrance
Voices	Agreement/Truce
Break of Dawn	New beginning/New Start
Soldiers Meeting	Friendship/Partnership

Source: Personally designed by the author

AXE

The AXE brand was first launched in France back in 1983. After success in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the world, AXE was introduced in the U.S. in 2002. The AXE brand is obsessively focused on Fragrances and Deodorants (Unilever 2018).

Axe Peace/Call to Arms/Official Extended Cut *Denotation*

The *Axe Peace ad* (BBHLondon 2014) starts with military convoys gradually stopping in front of a portrayed presidential villa with the top military officer being escorted by other military officers. As he walks through the hall, he’s being shown with his hands cuffed with a grey-colored briefcase. Other scenes are shown intermittently. Soldiers who profusely sweating are shown in a helicopter heading for a mission. In another cut, an armored vehicle roaming around in a destroyed city with individual in a shambles is displayed. Subsequently, Asian troops are shown embarking on a military drill in preparation for a battle is bought to the scene.

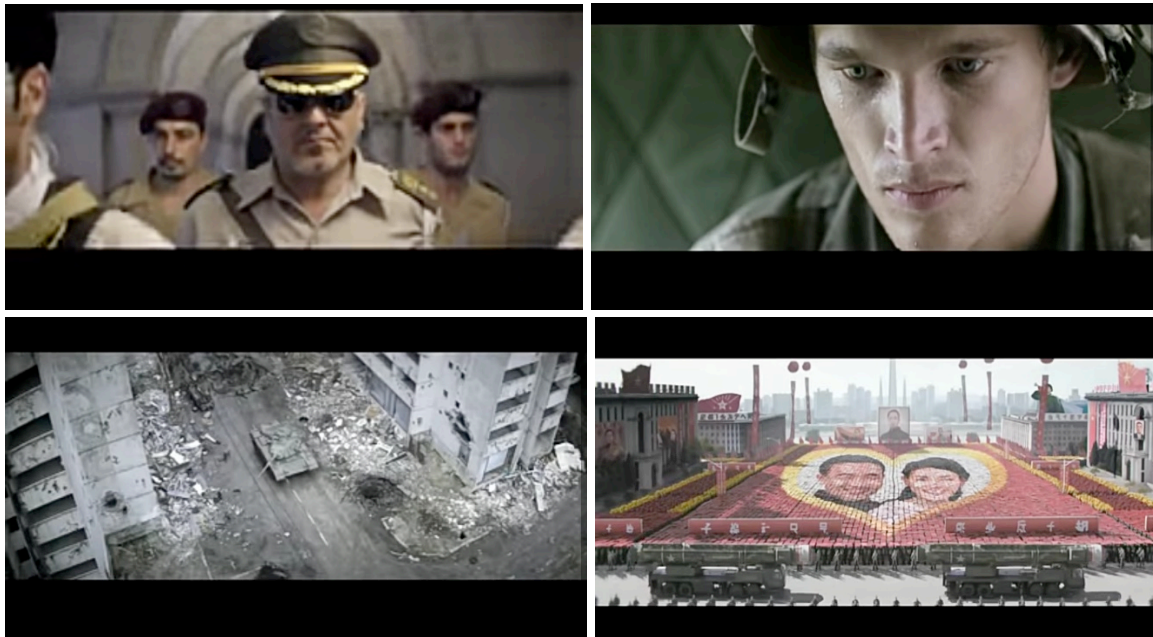
The top military officer gets the briefcase into the room while the president and his wife were discussing with the dignitaries. Immediately he gets into the room, he hands over the briefcase to the president. The president opens the briefcase which has a customized and configured detonator. While these actions were on going, another scene shows a pretty looking standing in front of the armored vehicle and a helicopter lands with soldiers alighting to begin their combat.

Suddenly her boyfriend steps out of the war machine and held each other. The same action is also reflected in the scene of the soldiers stepping out of the helicopter. The soldier throws his weapon on the muddy ground followed up with kisses and hugs to his pretty-looking lady.

As this lovely and peaceful atmosphere strives on, the leader of the Asian troop gives order by nodding his head and it was followed by the soldiers’ creative display which formed a photo of the leader and his lovely wife. This action got his wife smiling. Lastly, the president which was presented with detonator at the opening scene initiates the detonator but rather than a huge destruction or explosion as the outcome, fireworks lighted all over the sky. This received huge applauds from the dignitaries sitting with the president.

The ad ends with the caption “*Make love no war*” and the president was shown using the product “*New Axe Peace*”.

Figure 2: Make love not war



Source: Image extract from Sainsbury's. 2014. 1914 Sainsbury's Ad | Christmas 2014

Connotation

Just like the Sainsbury's ad which is subtly geared towards resolving conflict, the AXE displays the same trait in its *AXE peace/call to arms ad*. At the beginning of the ad, the top military officer and his team were shown walking towards the presidential villa with his hands cuffed to a grey-coloured briefcase which clearly signified "intending discords" or "a ticking time bomb". A quite disturbing scene with visuals of tensions and diplomatic chaos. This scene is buttressed with soldiers in a helicopter profusely sweating on their way to an intending mission. The scene unveils a sign of despair, total tension and unknown fate of the soldiers.

Subsequently, a destroyed city is displayed showing armored vehicle roaming around. A full picture of a destroyed city is displayed with indicators of chaos/pandemonium as people are shown running from pillar to post looking for headway.

Suddenly, a pretty looking girl encroaches to stop the further movement of the armored machine. That action of boldness signifies "conflict confrontation." Hence the confrontation was successful as love was unwrapped at the end of that scene.

The scene takes us back to the president receiving and opening the briefcase. In it lies a customized and configured detonator which clearly signifies weapon of total mass-destruction. The ad goes further to display its subtle role on conflict resolution as it displays a scene of the soldier throwing his weapon in the muddy ground which was later followed by kisses and hugs. A call for peace and end of a war feud was the underlying significations.

It further moves over to the actions displayed by the leader of the military drill. Giving orders by mere nodding his head was a total indication of peace and understanding. A conflict-intended order was expected as he stood but the tension was melted with a positive call for an amazing creative display by the troops.

Lastly, the display of the beautiful fireworks through the activation of the detonator by the president was a clear visual symbolism of peace and happiness. These scenes were firmly supported at the end of the ad with the caption "*Make love not war.*"

Table 2: Signification for Axe Peace (Call to Arms)

Signifier	Signified
Hand-cuff & briefcase	Problems /Discords/Tensions
Destroyed city	Chaos/Pandemonium
Pretty-looking girl	Boldness/Conflict Confrontation
Fireworks	Peace and Happiness

Source: Personally designed by the author

Summary

From the above semiotic analysis, the sign similarities in both ads on revolving conflict is subtly glaring for a symptomatic reader to easily decode. The “indicators” of conflict resolution were numerous portrayed leaving no signs behind. Both ads displayed the conflicts from the power-international scope. They further beamed the discourse torchlights on the power-related rancor and discords.

The signification were subtly derived from the interactions between different military actors. These significations cut across various positive and negative meaning for instance, in the ad SAINSBURY, the meeting between both armies was a sign of friendship/partnership. Likewise the fireworks that were displayed in the AXE ads, and signifies Peace and Happiness.

Although, the intentions of the above mentioned positive signification moves to obliterate and reconstruct the narratives placed by the negative significations in the ad. These negative signs such as the symbolism of snow and winter in the Sainsbury ads and that of the handcuff connected to briefcase linked to the wrist of the military officer were duly placed to show the advertising codes which are culturally embedded in the system. Other negative significations include the tensed entry by the military office at the beginning of the ad and a destroyed city which signifies chaos and pandemonium.

From these analyses, one could see how advertising “goes beyond borders” to perform other roles as its social responsibility. One of such is conflict resolution. On this ground, the advertising intentions is geared towards resolving conflict on the domain of gender, ethnic and power.

Conclusion

The role of advertising on conflict resolution as one of its social responsibilities is given less attention. This is due to the fact that advertising has always been viewed from its promotional contributions to business. However, advertising is more than a mechanism for communicating product information for individuals. It’s a cultural system, a social discourse whose unifying theme is the meaning of consumption.

To this work, the unifying theme which serves as a meaning of consumption to users is the subtle role of advertising in the resolution of conflicts ranging from ethical, power-related dimension to gender-related issues (Leiss, Kline & Jhally 1990). On this note, the assertion that advertising wields great social power and influence and as such communicates on norms about matters, issues affecting lives other than selling products is indeed worthy of acknowledgement.

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