

The Use of Weasel Words as Disclaimers in Superiority Claims

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Abstract Issues reported in the news regarding the false claims of products, particularly beauty and health products, suggest that consumers may have been misled and deceived by the claims made by the advertisements on the products. Data from a study on the print advertisements on the local complementary and alternative medicines in Malaysia show that the most frequently used technique in claiming the superiority of these products is the use of weasel words. These words are able to make the products more appealing to the consumers. However, consumers may not realize that weasel words are empty words that function as modifiers to qualify the claim. In fact, the words are cleverly used to negate the claim or as disclaimers to the claim. This paper focuses on the use of these words in advertisements in the local CAM print advertisements in Malaysia with the aim of educating consumers of the advertisers' trick of the trade. Using Mallery's framework of the types of weasel words (words of action, words of comparison, words of possibility, and words of illusion of strength), the analysis indicates the presence of 527 weasel words in the 157 advertisements examined, with the action words being the most commonly used. The analysis also reveals that the highest number of weasel words is found in the biology-based products, followed by the energy-based products, whole medical systems and body-based practices. It is hoped that by recognizing the types of weasel word and how it functions in a claim, consumers may be more discerning in evaluating the claim of the product.

Keywords Advertisements; complementary and alternative medicine; advertising claims; weasel claims.

1 Introduction

In the advertising activity, copywriters cleverly and creatively manipulate language forms and linguistic features to attract consumers' attention, with the aim of getting the readers to purchase the product. Words, phrases, slogans and rhetoric are the common techniques in claiming and creating the superiority of the products advertised. Words and phrases such as 'helps', 'the best', 'enhances' and 'a better choice' are commonly found in the advertisements in order to persuade 'the hearer or reader to part with money' (Barnhart & Barnhart, 1982, p. 32).

However, empirical studies on advertising claims have reported that most of the claims 'balance on the narrow line between truth and falsehood by a careful choice of words' (Schrank, 1988). In order to comply with the 'truth-in-advertising' laws (Weasel Words, n.d.), advertisers will usually qualify the superiority claims with 'weasel words' that contain modifiers that practically negate the claim that follows (Schrank, 1998, p. 2). Thus, modifiers such as 'helps', 'fights' and 'may' can act as disclaimers to get the copy 'through legal review' (Roman & Maas, 1976, p. 133).

Table 1: The Types of Superiority Claims Used in Advertisements

| No. | Types of Superiority Claims | Distribution | |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|---------|
| 1 | Weasel | 437 | (53.9%) |
| 2 | Unfinished | 16 | (1.9%) |
| 3 | We are different & unique | 38 | (4.7%) |
| 4 | Water is wet | 6 | (0.7%) |
| 5 | Vague | 32 | (3.9%) |
| 6 | Compliment the consumer | 12 | (1.5%) |
| 7 | Scientific or Statistical | 43 | (5.3%) |
| 8 | Endorsement or Testimonial | 208 | (25.6%) |
| 9 | Rhetorical question | 19 | (2.3%) |
| TOTAL | | 811 | |

In a study on the use of the nine types of superiority claims in advertising (refer to Schrank's (1988) framework on superiority claims) on the local Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) print advertisements in Malaysia that use Bahasa Malaysia

as the medium language, Kamisah, Azlini, Khairunisa, Norzie Diana and Rahimah (2013) found that 53.9% of the claims are the 'Weasel Claims'. Table 1 shows that this type of rhetoric tops the copywriters' choice in informing the consumers the superiority of their products.

Stevens (1971) puts forward that the use of weasel words in a copy is a strategy used by copywriters 'to evade or retreat from a direct or forthright statement or position' (p. 165). Consider the following examples:

Can be a solution to hair loss ...

May reduce weight ...

In the above examples, the use of 'can' and 'may' can avoid the claim from being challenged in terms of its truthfulness. It is not guaranteed that the product will solve the hair loss problem, nor will it reduce weight. Roman and Maas (1976), thus, called these weasel words as the 'sly little turns of phrase' (p. 133). This lays the foundation of the study – to raise the readers' awareness of the presence of these disclaimers which they are bound to miss and only hear the promises as claimed. Thus, the main focus of the paper is to identify the type of commonly used weasel words in advertising claims.

2 Literature Review

Advertising is persuasive, thus, influential in consumers' intention to buy a product (Kantzow, n.d; Preston, 1996; Abernethy, n.d; Handerson, Kitzinger & Green, 2008; Kaplan & Graff, 2008; Handfield & Bell, 1996; Xu & Wyre Jr, 2010). As it serves the purpose of selling the products, advertising becomes an incessant marketing tool that leaves little or no room for consumers to think first before buying the advertised products. Advertisement at its best is persuasive and at its worst, deceptive. The ability to persuade and deceive consumers into buying the products lies heavily on the rhetorical blend of advertising methods such as comparative advertising and puffery – through which the attributes of the proposed products are overstated, claimed to be '... of great importance but are actually inconsequential or meaningless' (Xu & Wyer Jr., 2010, p. 329).

In addition to what is being termed as comparative advertising and puffery discussed by Preston (1996), Wyckham (1987) and many others, Shrank (1998) outlines ten types of superiority claims, employed in advertising namely (1) the ‘weasel’ claim, (2) the ‘unfinished’ claim, (3) the ‘we are different and unique’ claim, (4) the ‘water is wet’ claim, (5) the ‘so what’ claim, (6) the ‘vague’ claim, (7) the ‘endorsement or testimonial’ claim, (8) the ‘scientific or statistical’ claim, (9) the ‘compliment the consumer’ claim and (10) the ‘rhetorical question’ claim. This paper will look at the first type of claim – the ‘weasel claim’ that has been found to be the most popular and commonly used in advertisements (Kamisah & Azlan, 2004; Kamisah et al., 2013).

2.1 Weasel Words – Origin and Categories

Originated from the natural egg-eating behavior of a weasel (an otter-like carnivorous animal) that leaves an unnoticeably empty egg shell after sucking its content (Schrank, 1998), weasel words are words manipulated to bring about greater power of the weasel words themselves, rather than the claims accompanying them. This, therefore, leaves the claims as meaningless, empty and insignificant, the way a weasel, the animal, empties the egg content and leaves the shell to look intact despite its unnoticeable hollowness. Words like ‘helps’, ‘like’, ‘virtual’ or ‘virtually’, ‘acts’ or ‘works’, ‘can be’, ‘up to’, ‘as much as’, ‘refreshes’ ‘comforts’, ‘tackles’, ‘fights’, ‘come on’, ‘the feel of’, ‘the look of’, ‘looks like’, ‘fortified’, ‘enriched’, and ‘strengthened’ are among the examples of commonly used weasel words, with the word ‘helps’ being “the champion weasel” (Schrank, 1998, p.2) because of its frequent use in advertisements. In his explanation of weasel words, Schrank shows how the word ‘fights’ in “Listerine fights bad breath” for instance, in reality, does not serve any meaningful purpose. The mouthwash brand is only claimed to ‘fight’ bad breath, but not to necessarily ‘stop’ it – which is a more consumer-desired result of the product.

Schrank (1988) in his discussion on the use of superiority claims in advertisements categorizes the weasel words into two types which are 1) words, mostly in a verb form, that imply little or no particular meaning such as ‘fights’, ‘helps’ etc.; and 2) words, mostly in forms of adjective and adverb, that carry vague meaning like ‘virtually’, ‘especially’, ‘exclusive’ etc.. Mallery (2006), on the other hand, details Schrank’s categories of weasel words into four types, namely, words of 1) action or doing i.e; ‘helps’, ‘acts’, ‘works’,

‘refreshes’, ‘comforts’, ‘tackles’, ‘fights’ etc.; 2) comparison i.e ‘the feel of’, ‘the look of’, ‘looks like’, ‘as much as’ etc.; 3) possibility i.e ‘can be’, ‘virtually’ etc.; and 4) illusion of strength i.e; ‘strengthened’, ‘enhanced’, ‘fortified’ etc. Table 2 below shows the categories for easy reference.

Table 2: Types of Weasel Words (Mallery, 2006)

| Weasel Words | Examples |
|--|---|
| Type 1 (words of action or doing) | <i>help, can, fight, prevent, enhance, control, work, like, promote</i> |
| Type 2 (words of comparison) | <i>the feel of, the look of, looks like, as much as</i> |
| Type 3 (words of possibility) | <i>can be, virtually, exclusively, thankfully, absolutely, special, exclusive, effectively, easier,</i> |
| Type 4 (words of illusion of strength) | <i>strengthened, enhanced, fortified</i> |

A close look at Mallery’s categories shows that her Type 1 and Type 2 of the weasel words are subtypes of Schrank’s Type 1, while her Type 3 and 4 are the subtypes of Schrank’s Type 2. Although they differ in the number of categories/types, both Mallery’s and Schrank’s divisions of the weasel words indicate that these words can make the products appear effective, better, promising, desirable and reliable despite their meaninglessness and insignificance.

2.2 Empirical Studies

In an analysis of 25 print advertisements, Kamisah and Azlan (2004) have found ‘the weasel claim’ as the most frequently employed superiority claim. The words ‘helps’, ‘prevent’, ‘can’, ‘fully’, ‘promote’, ‘accommodate’, ‘goodness’, ‘add’, ‘effectively’ etc. are weasel words that serve as “qualifiers” whose “effectiveness [and] ... ability to do whatever has been claimed, [are] not guaranteed” (ibid, p.14). In addition, weasel words like ‘specially’, ‘scientifically’, ‘gently’, ‘perfect’ etc. according to the researchers are only used to “appeal to the customers’ emotion to take the desired action” (ibid) – which is product purchasing. The use of ‘scientifically’ for instance, is persuasive in nature as “the terms science and scientific are often used for persuasive rather than descriptive purposes” in which “... the term scientific is often used as an adjective to enhance the credibility of a view or approach even though no scientific evidence is available to support that view” (Gambrill, 2013, p.128)

Stang, Hoss and Story (2010, p.20) in their analysis of advertisements for infant formulas in 16 American magazine brands, have reported the top three health statements made of the product brands, which claimed "... the ability of the product to improve, support or aid in brain development, eye and vision development, and immune system development" which, according to the researchers, "... may alter a mother's decision on how to feed her infant". Although the study focuses on the health claims of the products, it indirectly shows the powerful influence that the language of advertising can have on the mothers' perception as consumers. A combination of the claimed health benefits, rhetoric and the weasel words like 'improve', 'support' and 'aid' is found to be effective in shaping the mothers' choice of infant formulas and perception of breastfeeding – the health statements of which "... no clear benefit" (Stang, Hoss & Story, 2010, p. 21) is found but made to look good and right for the babies with the choice of meaningless but powerful words like the weasel words above.

Gilbert et al. (1993, as cited in Cowley, 2006) in their research found that consumers' future actions can be influenced by inexact data or by an overblown statement, even when they knew that the statement was not true. It showed that the misinformation using superiority claims was able to change the evaluation of a product to be highly regarded than usual. In Cowley (2006), the results provide evidence that "consumers are able to identify puffed claims as less credible, however, the claims are not judged to be not credible". This is because the puffed claims used are less concrete and more difficult to discredit.

CAM refers to the medical-based products that do not necessarily follow the standard medical requirements commonly employed by the medical and health personnel such as doctors, nurses or therapists. CAM, hence can be regarded as the non-standard medical-based products or treatments used to serve the aforementioned major purpose – to complement the conventional standard medication provided or practiced by the health bodies. The popularity of CAM products in Malaysia has led to its greater consumption hence bigger profits to the producers, but not without consequences to the consumers. The popularity gained with several unfortunate incidents reported in the mass media showing the adverse effects these non-standard products have caused on the consumers (Mohd Yusof, 2007; Sapura, 2010) therefore, has motivated the

researchers to look into the claims. Despite the absence of reports that consumers were allegedly being misled by the products' superiority claims, the ability of these claims to influence consumers' purchase intention should never be underestimated. This is because it is the claims themselves that directly provide people with the information on the alleged effectiveness, dependability and worthiness of the advertised products which might lure the consumers into buying the products.

Although studies on the use of weasel words have been abundant, none has been found on the local CAM advertisements that are written in the local language in Malaysia. Thus, the present study can be significant as it will inform the consumers of the advertisers' marketing strategy.

3 Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to examine the use of weasel words in the local CAM advertisements with the hope that the disclosure of this particular type of advertisers' persuasive technique can be of benefit to the consumers in evaluating the claims on the products advertised. Thus, the objectives of this study are:

- a. to classify the weasel words found in CAM advertisements
- b. to determine the types of weasel words most commonly and frequently used in different CAM product categories.

The study employed a text analysis method that focused on the weasel words used in the printed advertisements of the local CAM. 157 print advertisements of CAM in Bahasa Malaysia from newspapers, magazines, brochures and promotional leaflets were collected to provide a corpus of data for the identification and categorization of the weasel words. The description of The National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of America (NCCAM) was used as guidelines for sample collection as there had been no clear guideline on the types/categories of CAM produced by relevant authorities such as the pharmaceutical bureau of the Ministry of Health in Malaysia. Table 3 shows the CAM categories based on the NCCAM guidelines:

Table 3: Categories of Complementary and Alternative Medicines

| | Category | Description | Examples |
|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | whole medical systems | the complete systems involving both theory and practice | traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy, ayurveda and naturopathy |
| 2 | mind-body medicine | the holistic approach exploring the interconnection between the brain, mind, body, and behavior | meditation, yoga, acupuncture, deep-breathing and relaxation exercises, hypnotherapy, tai chi and qi gong |
| 3 | biology-based product/practices | involving the use of substances found in nature | herbs, foods, vitamins, probiotics, minerals and other natural products |
| 4 | body-based practices | practices that feature manipulation or movement of body parts , focusing on the structures and systems of the body, including the bones and joints, soft tissues, and circulatory and lymphatic systems | various types of massage and pilates |
| 5 | energy medicine | the use of various energy to improve health | biofield therapies, bioelectromagnetic, hydrotherapy |

The samples collected were non-probability and purposive as they had to fulfill the following criteria: 1) must be in any of the CAM categories described above, and 2) must contain verbal messages (words, phrases, slogans). In addition, redundant/repeated samples were eliminated.

The data were treated to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The framework used to quantify the CAM categories of the advertisements collected was the definitions suggested by the American NCCAM (refer to Table 3). As for the weasel words, Mallery's (2006) categories were used as the framework for analysis as they were more detailed, and thus, would be able to provide the consumers with a wider dimension of knowledge and understanding on the words used. The categories are: words of action or doing, words of comparison, words of possibility and words of illusion of strength (refer to Table 2).

The types of weasel words most commonly and frequently used in different product categories were determined by observing the occurrences of the four categories mentioned above. As the corpus was in Bahasa Malaysia, the words/phrases/slogans were translated into English to match the meaning of words/phrases/slogans described in Mallery's framework. The frequency counts which were later calculated into percentage were used to determine the types of weasel claims that were utilized the most/least in the local CAM advertisements. The text analysis also reported and described the words/phrases/slogans that were commonly used in the claims to create appearance of superiority of the products.

4 Findings and Discussion

Altogether, 157 CAM advertisements were collected during the period of data collection for this study (May – December 2012). The following table shows the distribution of the CAM advertisements based on the types of CAM as prescribed by the American NCCAM.

Table 4: Distribution of CAM Products in Advertisements

| | Types of CAM | No. of Advertisements | Example of Product |
|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1 | whole medical systems | 12 | <i>Examo</i> <i>Salindah</i> <i>Growell</i> <i>Rawatan Islam</i> |
| 2 | mind-body medicine | 0 | - |
| 3 | biology-based product/practices | 118 | <i>D'Elegant Secret</i> <i>Cappucino</i> <i>Fara Slimming Beauty Juice</i> <i>Minuman Herba Misai</i> <i>Kucing</i> <i>Vasia-vit c + collagen series</i> <i>Jamu Ratu Dara</i> |
| 4 | body-based practices | 1 | <i>Urutan Tradisional</i> |
| 5 | energy medicine | 26 | <i>Blue Ocean Therapy</i> <i>Happy Feet Therapy Socks</i> <i>Al Jabbar – Dr jism</i> <i>Diamond Energy Water</i> <i>Magnetic Necklace</i> |

As can be seen from Table 4, the most popular type of CAM advertised was biology-based product and practices where 118 out of

157 (75.2%) advertisements collected fell under this category. This is followed by energy medicine, whole medical systems and body-based practices with 26 (16.6%), 12 (7.6%) and 1 (0.6%) advertisements respectively. None was found on the mind-body medicine, which was not surprising as this type of medicine such as hypnotherapy and tai-chi are not commercially persuasive in nature but are rather based on individuals' interest or keenness on the practice. Figure 1 illustrates some of the samples that contain the weasel words.



Figure 1: Samples of Product Advertisement

The textual analysis indicated the presence of all types of weasel claims in the advertisements. Altogether, 527 weasel words were recorded in the 157 samples analyzed. The distribution, however,

varied among and between the product categories. As advertisements from the biology-based products/practices contributed the most to the corpus analyzed, the analysis found that it was also parallel with the number of weasel words found. Likewise, since the body-based practices were very rare in the CAM advertisements, the number of weasel words found was also scarce. The analysis revealed that the biology-based products/practices used 372 (70.6%) weasel words in claiming their superiority. This was followed by the energy-based products (103 or 19.5%), whole medical systems (49 or 9.3%) and body-based practices (3 or 0.6%). Table 5 below shows detailed distribution of weasel words in the corpus according to CAM type and weasel word categories.

Table 5: Distribution of Weasel Words

| Types of CAM | Types of Weasel Words | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| | Type 1 (action/doing) | Type 2 (comparison) | Type 3 (possibility) | Type 4 (illusion of strength) |
| 1 whole medical systems | 21 (42.9%) | 3 (6.1%) | 8 (16.3%) | 17 (34.7%) |
| 2 mind-body medicine | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 biology-based products/practices | 195 (52.4%) | 26 (7%) | 62 (16.7%) | 89 (23.9%) |
| 4 body-based practices | 2 (66.7%) | 0 | 1 (33.3%) | 0 |
| 5 energy medicine | 57 (55.3%) | 9 (8.7%) | 16 (15.5%) | 21 (20.4%) |
| TOTAL | 275 | 38 | 87 | 127 |

As clearly shown in Table 5, Type 1 of the weasel words containing action/doing words were most commonly used in the advertisements. 275 out of 527 weasel words used were words belonging to the action or doing category. In addition, all the CAM product categories also recorded the highest amount of use of this type of words. Examples of action/doing words used in the advertisements include the following:

Membantu menurunkan berat badan (energy-based product)
(Helps to reduce weight)

Melawan obesiti (biology-based product)
(Fights obesity)

Meningkatkan penggunaan tenaga (energy-based product)
(Enhances energy use)

The analysis also indicated that the most frequently used action/doing words in the advertisements were '*membantu*' (helps) and '*melawan*' (fights). The frequency counts of these words used showed that the word '*membantu*' appeared 218 times in the advertisements, while the word '*melawan*' appeared 171 times. There was also evidence that the word '*membantu*' and '*melawan*' appeared more than once in a single advertisement. For example, in one of the bio-based product advertisements scrutinized, the word '*membantu*' alone appeared as many as five times, claiming that the product was able to help do/achieve several beneficial effects if consumed.

Weasel words that create the illusion of strength of the product advertised are also a popular choice among the copywriters. It was found that 127 out of 527 words were of this type. It was quite common to find words/phrases such as 'enhanced', 'better' and 'improved formula' that commended the effectiveness of the products. Some of the examples that can be extracted are:

Kuasa yang diperbaharui (energy-based product)
(Renewed energy)
Dibuktikan secara saintifik (biology-based product)
(Scientifically proven)
Formula yang dipertingkatkan (biology-based product)
(Enhanced formula)

Type 3 of the weasel words, i.e words of possibility was also evident in the corpus. 87 out of 527 weasel words were words that gave a picture of superiority and uniqueness of the products. These included words/phrases like 'different', 'exclusively', and 'especially'. This can be seen in some of the samples analyzed:

Dinginnya lain macam ... (biology-based product)
(Its coolness is different ...)
Melekat dengan sempurna (biology-based product)
(Sticks perfectly)
Ditawarkan eksklusif untuk mereka ... (whole medical systems)
(Exclusively offered for those who ...)

Type 2 weasel words, i.e words of comparison were also evident in the corpus although not as abundant as the other three types. Only 38 out of 527 words were found in the data. Phrases like 'the feel of' and 'as much as' were found in the advertisements:

Lebih mantap, lebih menyerlah ... (biology-based product)
(better, more exquisite)
Sebanyak yang terdapat dalam ... (biology-based product)
(As much as in ...)
Seakan mendapat ... (whole medical systems)
(As if getting ...)

As can be seen from the examples, the use of the weasel words such as those from Type 1 ('help', 'promote', 'can', 'may be', 'enable') can suggest the superiority of the products. For example, by consuming bird's nest, one may think it will *help* fight stress. They might miss the hollowness of disclaimer *help* in the claim of which if we analyze it carefully, the product may not fight the stress but only help to do so. Similarly, words from other types such as 'magnificently', 'exclusively', 'specifically', 'strategically', 'premium' and 'exceptional' (Type 3), or 'strengthened' and 'fortified' (Type 4) are aimed at not only creating an impression of the effectiveness or goodness of the product, but also enhancing the consumers' goodwill towards a particular product, believing that it is created *exclusively* for them. These weasel words seem to successfully create the illusion of the products' effectiveness. As their effectiveness cannot be guaranteed, the advertisers may get away with this claim by disclaiming it. This will also ensure that they would not be doing something legally wrong (Roman & Maas, 1976) and perhaps avoid the likelihood of being sued.

Having looked at the findings, we can suggest that the use of weasel words is a popular way of advertising among the numerous superiority claims available. Although this technique may make the products more appealing and resulted in their purchase, we should not let ourselves be easily tricked into buying them at first glance. As Schrank (1998, p. 2) puts it, weasel words serve the purpose of disclaiming the claim made by advertisers. Although there are laws designed to prevent fraudulent claims, weasel words are legal. Advertisers use weasel words to appear to be making a claim for a product when in fact they are making no claim at all. Thus, these words can be very misleading. Knowing this, we, the consumers should be aware of this trick by product or service advertisers so that we can be more discerning and critical in making any decision regarding the products advertised.

5 Conclusion

Evidence from various studies has clearly shown that the ‘weasel’ claim is hugely popular among advertisers. This may be because, as mentioned by Anker, Sandøe, Kamin and Kappel (2011), it is easy for consumers to believe such functional claims. Functional claims “state or imply that there is a correlation between the consumption of a product and health.” (Anker et al., 2011). Consumers interpret these ‘weasel’ words as verifying that the products are really able to fulfill the claims. The various claims made about a particular product such as ‘*membantu*’, meaning ‘helps’ (i.e. to fight certain diseases), ‘*melawan*’ or ‘fights’ and other such words are clearly misleading as these words do not really authenticate the effectiveness of the product; they merely help advertisers create illusions of their ability to solve consumers’ problems. Some consumers, especially those experiencing health problems, might be more inclined to believe such claims, though more research needs to be done to identify which types of consumers are more susceptible to this type as well as other types of claims.

According to Parker (2003), advertisers use these weasel words to get around existing laws that do not allow them to make health claims without approval from the authorities. Indeed consumers need to be aware of such tactics so that they do not fall prey to unsubstantiated claims made by advertisers. Consumers need to exercise some caution when reading any advertisement claims. As Parker’s (2003) study reveals, the ordinary consumer might not realize ‘the subtle differences in wording’. Thus, it is important that any consumer education program includes instilling awareness among consumers of the advertisers’ choice of words and the intention behind it as well as getting consumers to scrutinize the actual message contained in advertisements.

Although there have been a large number of studies aiming towards better consumer education, more often than not, the public or community of consumers do not get direct information from the research findings. Therefore, it is suggested that the results of any studies that can contribute towards consumer education like the present study be communicated to the masses through the mainstream media or consumer communiqué such as consumer association publications. By this way, the results of the studies will have a direct impact on the target group rather than only the

academic or research community if they only appear in journal publications.

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