

# การใช้คำที่มีความหมายเชิงลบในโฆษณา

## The Use of Negatively Associated Words in Advertising

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บทความนี้ศึกษาเรื่องการใช้คำที่มีความหมายเชิงลบในโฆษณาออนไลน์ โฆษณาจำนวน 80 ชิ้น จากสินค้าหลายประเภท เช่น ผลิตภัณฑ์เพื่อความงาม อาหารและเครื่องดื่ม และผลิตภัณฑ์ทำความสะอาด ซึ่งใช้คำศัพท์ที่มีความหมายเชิงลบ รวมทั้งรูปภาพ เพื่อใช้ในการนำเสนอสินค้า โฆษณาเหล่านี้ถูกนำมาศึกษาเพื่อหารูปแบบของการใช้คำที่มีความหมายเชิงลบ ผลการศึกษาพบว่ามีรูปแบบหลัก 6 แบบที่พบในโฆษณาออนไลน์ คือ (1) สินค้าเป็นตัวช่วยแก้ปัญหา (2) โจมตีคู่แข่งโดยตรง (3) โจมตีคู่แข่งโดยอ้อม (4) สินค้าเป็นตัวป้องกันปัญหา (5) การใช้คำที่มีความหมายกำกวม และ (6) การทำตามใจตัวเอง ซึ่งมีคำถามเกิดขึ้นว่าทำไมนักโฆษณาจึงใช้คำที่มีความหมายเชิงลบรวมทั้งรูปภาพ แทนที่จะใช้ข้อความที่มีความหมายเชิงบวกในการนำเสนอสินค้า ผลการศึกษานี้จะเป็นเรื่องที่น่าสนใจสำหรับทั้งวงการภาษาและธุรกิจ

**คำสำคัญ :** คำที่มีความหมายเชิงลบ โฆษณา

### Abstract

This study considers the use of negative associations in on - line advertising. Eighty advertisements of various product types such as beauty products, food and beverage, and cleaning products, all of which used negatively associated words and/or images to promote their products, were examined with the aim of discerning recurring patterns in terms of thematic organization and format. The findings show that there are six recurring themes commonly

used by on-line advertisers, including (1) product as solution, (2) direct competition bashing, (3) indirect competition bashing, (4) product as prevention,(5) ambiguously framed product messages and (6) indulging yourself.

The question then addressed is why on-line advertisers would choose to use such images and text in the first place when common sense would tend to support the use of positively associated messages in advertising. The findings from this study will be of potential interest to both language and business majors

**Keywords :** Negatively associated words, Advertising

## Introduction

We are constantly inundated with advertised images of happy-looking, attractive young people enjoying life to the fullest, even when engaged in the mundane chores of everyday life such as washing dishes, doing laundry or attending to personal grooming. Such images and the text used to support the images are ubiquitous: television, radio, billboards and, increasingly so, the Internet. As the goal of commercial advertising is to convince target markets to buy products or services, we expect advertisers to craft their messages to create positive feelings and associations towards the products they promote. Furthermore, we expect them to do this by carefully choosing images and expressions that help to create positive associations. Yet, as advertisers become increasingly sophisticated in the manipulation of images and text, we find an ever increasing number of advertisements that eschew the smiles and vibrancy of *life at its best* for messages that actually communicate negatively associated ideas. The questions posed by this research are how and why advertisers do this.

According to Niccum (2009), negatively associated messages are used to make recipients develop a dislike towards certain things, whether this be a commonly recurring situation or condition or a rival product. The overall effect, however, is for the recipient to unconsciously juxtapose the negative associations represented by the situation, condition or rival product alongside the stated or inferred positive

associations accrued to the product being promoted. To get a better understanding of how advertisers are able to do this effectively we first need to consider some of the insights provided within the field of semantics.

Semantically, words have both denotative and connotative meanings (Hinderer, 2005). Denotation refers to the literal definitions commonly ascribed to all words, such as you would find in a dictionary. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the underlying emotional values associated with different words (Kalkstein, Regan, and Wise, 2000). The denotative meaning of the word "home", for example, could be defined as "a building or dwelling where one lives" but the connotative meaning of this word evokes, for many, a range of emotions from comfort and safety to family and love.

Connotations can be positive, neutral or negative (Hinderer, 2005). A classic example is the denotative and connotative meanings of the words "slim" and "skinny". Both words mean "thin" but consider the widely different connotations for each: "slim" refers to "attractively thin," and connotes "good health" while "skinny" refers to "unattractively thin" and connotes "poor health".

Additionally, both denotative and connotative meanings vary depending on the context in which a word is used (During, 1999; Verderber and Sellnow, 2008). Most words in English have several denotative meanings depending on the other words they collocate with. The word "right", for example, takes up nearly two pages in the Oxford Dictionary. But as During (1999) and Verderber and Sellnow (2008) point out the denotative meanings of words are nearly universally understood. Connotations, on the other hand, are more variable, malleable and idiosyncratic and are to a large degree experientially and culturally determined. A child growing up in an abusive home, for example, would probably bring a range of emotionally charged connotations to the word "home" that would be markedly different from a person growing up in a loving, caring home.

Connotative variability leads to what Hayakawa, a professor of English and general semantics, calls "purr" and "snarl" words. "Purr words" are words that generally evoke positive emotions and responses from listeners; "snarl words"

produce the opposite effect. The words "cull" and "slaughter", for example, are both used with reference to killing animals but the word "cull" is a purr word, owing to its positive associations, whereas "slaughter" is a "snarl" word for the exact opposite reasons. Advertisers, for one, are extremely sensitive to the emotionally charged connotations associated with "purr" and "snarl" words and can be extremely adept at using them in their marketing campaigns.

When considering the discourse of advertisements, it is important to heed both the denotative and connotative meanings of the words used, particularly the latter, as a viewer's emotional response is a crucial aspect of the advertiser's intended message. One would expect, for instance, that advertisers would exclusively choose positively connoted "purr" words to describe their promoted products and, if negatively connoted "snarl" words were to be used, they would be limited to descriptions of their competitor's products. While the juxtaposition of a "we" versus "they" dichotomy in advertising may have been a popular model in bygone years, advertisers have become increasingly sophisticated in terms of manipulating their message and often use words and phrases with exclusively negative associations.

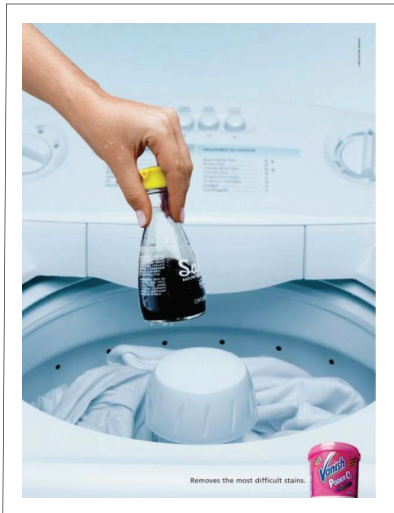
For the purposes of this study only product and service based advertisements found on the Internet were considered. Using purposive sampling, 80 advertisements were selected, regardless of product types, countries, or the year of posting. Products included food and beverage, personal care and hygiene, pet and cleaning products, and services included banking and investment. The selected advertisements were analyzed and then categorized according to discernable patterns of organization and message type. This involved scrutinizing both the graphics and the text. Representative examples of each pattern type were selected for further elaboration and illustration.

### **Recurring Themes that Rely on Negatively Charged Associations**

Six major themes were discerned, all of which repeatedly used negatively denoted and connoted words and phrases to promote their products and services. These include: (1) product as solution, (2) direct competition bashing, (3) indirect

competition bashing, (4) product as prevention, (5) ambiguously framed product messages and (6) indulging yourself.

First, **the product as solution** is the most frequently found theme from the samples considered. Compared with other themes, this theme is perhaps the easiest to understand in terms of denotative and connotative meanings. Consumers can readily understand why they need to use the product: it solves a problem for them. Advertisements of this type clearly associate negative images, snarl words, as explained above, with the problems that the various products will solve. Examples of commonly recurring words, and the images they connote, include *dirty, funky, smelly, bad, hard, tough, difficult, discomfort, boredom, stain, damage, hurt, and offend*, some of which are illustrated in the samples below.



**Figure 1:** From <http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/vanish-washing-powder-soy-sauce-7058155/>

This advertisement for laundry detergent said “Removes difficult stains.” The Longman Dictionary defines the word “difficult” as “hard to deal with” which expresses a negatively connoted emotion. The denotative meaning of the word “stains” refers to “marks on something” but the connotative reference is to dirt, which in turn has a wide range of negative associations, ranging from “disease-carrying” to “low class; impoverished”. In this case, the advertiser’s message is clearly elucidated: the product provides a cure, a remedy for all the negative associations attached to the term “difficult stains.”



**Figure 2:** From <http://www.webdesignfact.com/2011/01/really-creative-advertisements.html>

This advertisement for breath freshener states, "Eliminates bad breath." The choice of negative associations is deliberate. First, the word "eliminates" conjures up a wide set of powerful emotions associated with annihilation. It does not just control or reduce bad breath but instead totally destroys and annihilates it. The adjective "bad" placed right next to "eliminates" has deep connotations ranging from "unpleasant" right through to "evil incarnate." Again, the message is straight-forward and clear: this product stands between you and the evils of the world, which the image of a fish - like tongue serves to reinforce and amplify.

As these examples illustrate, negative associations are heaped squarely onto the problems that the two products are purported to solve. Although left unstated there is an easily inferred juxtaposition between the problems' negative associations and the positive associations accrued to the products that solve them. In other words, a rather culturally universal elemental dichotomy is thus created with problem = bad, on the one side, and product = good, on the other.

Second, **direct competition bashing** is found whenever an advertised product is juxtaposed against the negative qualities of other products. Instead of negative associations being placed at the doorstep of specific problems, as discussed in the previous section, such words as *ruin*, *hurt*, *envy*, *loss*, *devil*, *scary*, *harsh*, *boring*, *wrong*, *bad*, *sick*, *embarrassed* and *fake* are applied to competing products.



**Figure 3:** From <http://www.behance.net/gallery/Pringles-Stix-Cracker-Envy/649244relief-ads/11873355/>

The noun phrase “cracker envy”, used in the advertisement for Pringles makes them anthropomorphically jealous of this product. The word “envy” denotes “the feeling of wanting something that someone else has”, which in turn connotes desire and fulfillment or the lack thereof.



**Figure 4:** From <http://www.designswan.com/archives/creative-ads-design-about-food-and-drink.html>

This advertisement for a Dunkin Donuts drink states “Makes other snacks look scary”. The word “scary” denotes “frightening” which in turn calls up a range of images associated with fear and phobias, all of which have an underlying basis in danger, real or imagined. While making no explicit claim, the implied message is clear: other snack foods are dangerous for your health ; this product is safe, perhaps even health - promoting.

As these examples illustrate, words with negative associations can be used effectively to demonize competitor's brands and by so doing create brand recognition through the implied but often unstated superiority of the advertised product. Interestingly, the advertisers do not target their attacks on any one specific competing brand but instead lump all the competing brands together.

The next theme, **indirect competition bashing**, is in effect a melding of the previous two themes. In this case, a negatively charged message presents a problem with the onus of blame being indirectly cast on the competitor's inferior products. That is, the responsibility for the problem is implied rather than directly stated. Here, the attack is more subtle but the juxtaposition remains clear: the promoted product will solve the problem. Negative associations are fostered through the use of such words as *bad*, *cry*, *monster*, *rough*, and *suck*. Two representative examples are offered below.



**Figure 5:** From <http://tnmg4u.wordpress.com/category/fmcg/page/2/>

This advertisement for Dove Haircare products states, "Treat it rough, it cries." The words "rough" and "cries" are both associated with violence, which in turn is linked to pain and suffering, all of which require protection. The image, a strand of hair forming the shape of a tear drop, reinforces the text's message. A by - line at the bottom under the product's logo, "Hair, it's just like you and me," serves to reiterate and strengthen the message of protection. Notice that protection from whom or what is left unstated. The agent for violence remains amorphaously defined but it takes no great leap of imagination to understand that the competitor's inferior products would be included herein.





**Figure 6:** From [https://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/nutri\\_balance\\_husband?size=original](https://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/nutri_balance_husband?size=original)

This advertisement for Nutribalance Dogfood states "Bad Food, Bad Dog". The repetition of the word "bad" through parallelism seeks to causally link pet nutrition and poor behaviour, but it does this without specifying what actually constitutes "bad food". Here again, the negative association remains amorously defined and could include table scraps, litter bin raiding and, of course, the competition's inferior products.

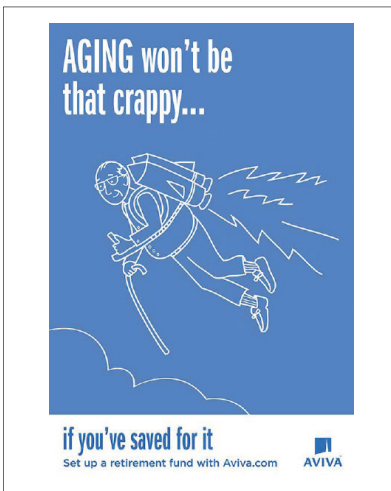
As both advertisements illustrate, negatively denoted and connoted words can be used to indirectly attack the competition by linking their products to the constellation of problems that the advertised product claims to solve. Notice that in both cases the products do not overtly claim to solve anything but instead use previously attained brand recognition to implicitly promote the connection.

The fourth theme, product as prevention, posits the idea that a given product will stop a particular problem from occurring. Unlike the product as solution theme previously discussed, product as prevention does not target competing brands. Instead, it suggests that the endorsed product is the sole, or at least the best and most effective, way to keep a vexing problem from occurring. Negatively associated words here include dull, fake, crappy, insecure, and stress as illustrated in the two examples below.



**Figure 7:** From <http://www.celebrityendorsementads.com/celebrity-endorsements/celebrities/evangeline-lilly/>

This advertisement for L'Oreal Hair Care products states, "Natural never looked so beautiful. Always glossy color. Never dull or fake." The snarl words "dull" and "fake" are juxtaposed alongside the purr words "natural", "glossy" and "healthy" with deliberate effect: the product stands in a class of its own; it is better than anything else, including nature. The repetition of the word "never" must also be considered deliberate. The use of L'Oreal products insures that all the negatively connoted problems associated with hair will never occur.



**Figure 8:** From <http://saraheno.com/?portfolio=aviva-print-ad-series>

This advertisement for the UK insurer Aviva states, "Aging won't be that crappy... if you've saved for it. Set up a retirement fund with Aviva.com." The slang expression "crappy" refers to "very bad" which serves to reinforce the negatively denoted feelings associated with growing old. The choice of slang over other colloquial expressions shows that the advertisers are specifically targeting a specific demographic, presumably the 20 to 30 years old market, that would likely respond positively to its inclusion here.

In both examples, the advertisers use negative syntactic constructions in arguably clever ways to promote their products. In the L'Oreal advertisement, the use of the word "never" permits the advertisers to make a fairly brazen claim (i.e., their products improve upon nature) while the "won't be that" construction of the Aviva advertisement acknowledges that the aging process is not an enjoyable experience but can be improved upon by financially preparing for it. In both cases, the advertisers are offering their products or services as a means of avoiding problems according to the old adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

The fifth theme, **ambiguously framed product messages**, is when an advertiser highlights a feature of the product that makes it unique but does so through the use of negatively associated images and text. In this case, the images deployed or the text or both create some initial ambiguity and confusion for the reader, which serves to draw the reader into a closer viewing of the advertisement. Some of the negatively associated words found here include *inferiority*, *hardcore*, *rebellion toxic*, *violence*, *obstacle*, *confused*, and *dangerously*.



**Figure 9:** <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nalexanderdesign/7028123789/galleries/>

The Burt's Bee Lip Balm advertisement states, "It's so natural even the bees get confused." The word "confused" denotes "unable to understand clearly," which would in normal circumstances impart negative associations, but as used here creates a positive means of highlighting how natural the product is. This advertisement is a good example of how advertisers can use initial ambiguity to draw a reader's attention into an advertisement. Images of bees, which many associate with danger and pain, along with the negatively associated "confused" do indeed create confusion, which spurs the reader on to look more closely at the product.



**Figure 10:** <http://www.cruzine.com/2010/10/21/food-advertising/>

This advertisement for McIlhenny Tobasco Sauce states, “Dangerously Hot”. The image of an uneaten pizza in the shape of the international symbol for radioactivity further reinforces the message of danger. Obviously the denotative meaning of both invokes associations linked to injurious and life-threatening hazards. Using such associations is an extremely effective way of drawing and focusing a viewer's attention as it plays on the deep rooted instincts of “fight or flight”. When these negative associations are finally reconciled through an understanding that there is no immediate threat, the overall feeling created is that of cleverness and enhanced brand recognition.

These two advertisements attest to the effectiveness of creating a degree of content ambiguity within a message and accentuating the ambiguity through negatively associated images and/or text. In both cases the reader is drawn into the advertisement seeking to reconcile the uncertainty created and once understanding has been fostered through a closer inspection of the advertisement, the lasting impression will, as intended, be favourably disposed towards the endorsed product.

The sixth theme, **indulging yourself**, implies that consumers deserve to be rewarded by breaking the rules and thinking of only themselves once in awhile. The reward, of course, is the product being promoted, and this type of advertisement plays to our hedonistic impulses. Understandably, negatively associated words in this category include *spoil*, *sin*, *demon*, *greed*, *lust*, *anarchy*, and *chaos*, some of which are seen in the examples below.



**Figure 11:** <http://www.dailyinspiration.nl/creative-ads-magnum-ice-cream/>

This advertisement for Magnum Ice Cream states “It’s a sin”. The denotative meaning of the word “sin” is “something that is very wrong”. Clearly, “sin” has a negative connotation but in this context it implies that this ice cream is so delicious that consumers cannot, and should not, avoid eating it. Like the forbidden apple in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, breaking the rules does at times confer its own rewards.



**Figure 12:** <http://grahamedavidson.com/2012/09/13/166/>

This advertisement for Axe Body Spray states, “New AXE Anarchy For Him + For Her -- Unleash the Chaos.” The words “anarchy” and “chaos” denote “a situation in which there is no control” and “a state of confusion with no order,” conditions that are typically feared by mainstream society, appear below an image of a man holding a lit blow torch and a woman holding a bag of fireworks. While not down-playing the risks involved in giving into one’s desires, the advertisement endorses the occasional abandonment of reason for hedonistic enjoyment, a particularly apt message considering the demographic this advertisement would be targeted towards.

Both these advertisements play on people's desire to occasionally rebel, break society's norms, and throw caution to the wind. This makes particular sense given that post-adolescents in the 20 to 30 year range would in all probability be the intended market for these ads. The use of negatively associated words and phrases supports the theme of 'it's sometimes good to be bad'.

## Discussion and Conclusion

To comprehend the real value of any product, it is necessary to consider both reason and emotion for the usage of a given product (Chaudhuri, 2006). Expressed another way, there are both concrete and abstract benefits accrued to a product. Concrete or functional benefits are results that a customer can perceive readily in terms of performance; laundry detergent removing stains from a fabric, for example. In contrast, the feeling(s) derived from the experience, which cannot be quantified so easily, is the abstract benefit. The sense of satisfaction a person derives from having a soiled garment, to use the previous example, clean and ready to wear again constitutes the abstract or emotional benefit of laundry detergent.

Considering functional and emotional benefits, the relative degree between these benefits are different from one product to another. The marketing of some products focus more on function than emotion. Dish washing liquid, mechanical equipment and stationery, for example, tend to be marketed with an emphasis on the functional/concrete benefits attributed to different products. Other products are marketed with a focus on the emotional benefits; accessories, make-up, grooming products and clothes all fall into this category. Others, such as luxury cars, condominiums, and five-star hotels, emphasize both function and emotion.

The approaches advertisers take are different depending on whether they are marketing the functional or emotional benefits of their endorsed products.

When an advertiser emphasizes how a product can solve a particular problem, s/he is appealing to reason and to the concrete/functional benefits of the product. When, on the other hand, an advertiser focuses on the sense of satisfaction, happiness and contentment that will be derived from a product, s/he is appealing to emotion and to the abstract benefits of the product. As Kirkpatrick (2007) notes, when advertisers value emotion over reason, abstract over concrete, they pay particular attention to the connotative meaning of words and exploit this understanding with great care. According to Kirkpatrick (2007), emotional appeal in advertising refers to the abstract benefits of the product, which can be either positive, feelings of pleasure, satisfaction and achievement, or negative, avoidance of discomfort, pain and the ridicule of failure. As the examples cited in this study show, advertisers can target both ends of the emotional spectrum simultaneously and often do so through the use of negatively associated images and words. Yet, as we have seen, the final 'take home' message achieved in all ads finds their respective products cast in the most favourable of terms possible. How is this possible?

As Saussure (1983) points out in his seminal work in semiotics, all signs, which all forms of communications including advertising are, refer simultaneously both to a socially agreed upon referent, the thing represented, and its binary opposite, what it is not. A red light at an intersection, for example, refers to the command, "Stop!" but at the same time evokes a recollection of what it is not: a green light and the command, "Go." By exploiting this basic human tendency, advertisers can use negatively associated images and text and let the viewer infer their opposite, positive association(s). Advertisers do not, of course, leave things to chance, so they create a dichotomy between external agents or conditions such as present and future problems, rival products, and rules of conduct, heaping the negatively connoted associations on these, and leaving their endorsed products to

bathe in the warm glow of implied and inferred positive associations. Table 1 below shows how this process of dichotomization and juxtapositioning works, according to each of the six themes considered in this study.

**Table 1 :** Negative & Positive Associations in On - line Advertising

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Negative Associations Applied to</b>	<b>Implied Positive Associations Referred to</b>
Product as Solution	Problem	Advertised product
Direct Product Bashing	Competition's products	Advertised product
Indirect Product Bashing	Problem & Competition's products	Advertised product
Product as Prevention	Future problem(s)	Advertised product
Ambiguously Framed Message	Uncertainty	Advertised product
Indulging Yourself	Societal norms/Rules of conduct	Advertised product

It would be a grievous mistake, however, to view the advertisements considered here just in terms of the dichotomies created. While the use of negative associations does, according to Bergh and Behrer (2013), facilitate brand recall, it is not the only tool in the advertiser's toolkit. Advertiser's also use humour to great



effect. Interestingly and perhaps not coincidentally, humour also involves a juxtapositioning between an implied anticipated outcome, what we expect to happen, and the actual delivered outcome, the punch line. The McIlhenny Tobasco Sauce ad is a good case in point. The image of the pizza in the shape of the international icon for radioactivity along with the headline "Dangerously Hot" all form the expectation of a dangerous situation, which the uneaten pizza mitigates to some degree and informs us that something out of the ordinary is about to occur. The punch line is delivered by the company's logo when we suddenly realize that the word "hot" does not refer to physical temperature but to spicy. It is the sudden shifting of levels between the two meanings of "hot" that creates the humour and leaves the viewer favourably disposed towards the product.

Another technique that advertisers exploit to great effect is the targeting of images, words and phrases to specific niche or demographic markers. The choice of lexicon and the creation and arrangement of images are all carefully planned to appeal to a certain audience. The Aviva investment ad is a good example of this. The word "crappy" would certainly be a part of the socially acceptable vernacular of young adults in the 20 to 30 year demographic, far more so than it would be for older adults. The phrase "won't be that crappy" (*my emphasis*) acknowledges what many young adults think and fear, "Being old is not an enjoyable experience." The message communicated by the advertiser is that the endorsed service is in tune and understands the concerns of people in this age group. The overall effect is to enhance the service's credibility within this specific market.

The use of negatively connoted associations and the juxtapositioning of negative and positive feelings through the use of humour and the careful selection and placement of text and images all attest to the sophistication of on-line advertising. In today's world where people all too often experience information overload, advertisers must use increasingly clever and sophisticated methods to

grab and hold an audience's attention, and by so doing instill and reinforce brand recognition. By operating on multiple levels simultaneously, using techniques gleaned from semantics, semiotics and psychology, and doing so in ways that are both imaginative and entertaining shows that the decoding of advertisements offers a rich field of enquiry for scholarly research.

### Glossary

denotation = ความหมายโดยตรงตามตัวอักษร

connotation = ความหมายโดยนัย

purr = คำที่มีความหมายโดยนัยเชิงบวก

snarl = คำที่มีความหมายโดยนัยเชิงลบ

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