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## **EFFECTIVENESS OF HIDDEN MESSAGES IN ADVERTISEMENTS TOWARDS VIEWERS' BUYING INTENTION**

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### **Abstract**

*Advertisements are generally used to deliver messages to inform, remind or persuade; in hopes that it could influence viewers' future actions. It is common for the style of the message delivered in advertisement contains double-meaning or multi-layered statement in which it compromises hidden messages for viewers to gauge. This article discusses the effectiveness of hidden messages in advertisement towards viewers' buying intention. It is based on the case study of well-known TV commercial by the Malaysian telecommunication service provider that uses competitive hidden messages style of advertising. This study uses content analysis and surveys questionnaires for the data collection procedures. Results from the findings discuss the depth of hidden messages that occurs in the advertisement together with viewers' insight on the effect the advertisement has towards their buying intention. The outcome of this paper is beneficial to*

*enhance the application of effective advertising language that can be practiced in current advertising and media industry.*

## **Keywords**

Hidden Messages, Competitive Advertisement, Buying Intention

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## **1. Background and Research Overview**

Hidden messages are one of the advertising tools used by companies to enhance the brand reputation and image perceived by the viewers. Dontigney (2015) discusses how it is able to deliver not just informational contents, but also emotional and persuasive content in a more subtle approach. The quality of content portrayed in an advertisement is able to affect the viewers' buying intention (Siddiqui, 2014). Thus, it is beneficial to study how hidden messages in advertisement and affect viewers' buying intention.

Campbell (2014) describes the usage of "halo" effect on TV advertisement where the meaning of the message is achieved indirectly without an explicit display. Some of the meaning could mean towards shifting viewers' buying intention to a specific brand over another competitor's brand. In AIDA model theory, audience buying intention is the result of their attention, interest, desire and action. Explicitly, the objectives of the study were as follows:

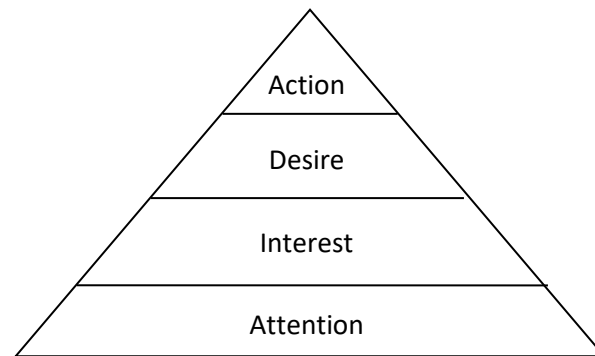
- To study the scenes in the TV advertisement that uses competitive hidden messages
- To investigate the relationship between the advertising messages with viewers' buying intention

One very good example of TV advertisement that showcases competitive hidden messages would be Maxis One Plan, Malaysia campaign. This telecommunication service campaign was launched in September 2014 where it promotes product offering of purchasing post-paid internet plan with zero call charges. In Malaysia, the telecommunication industry is the biggest advertising spenders with a highly competitive environment. Therefore, Maxis telecommunication TV advertising campaign is a good platform to use in studying the effect of advertising hidden messages towards viewers' buying intention.

### **1.1 AIDA Model**

For the reason upon studying viewers' buying intention, AIDA model was found to be suitable in guiding the research direction. Lewis in the year 1898 developed a model suited for advertisements and its relationship with potential customers. It derives from the concept of

getting attention, develop interest, create desire and encourage action. This model will be used as a structure in discussing the research findings.



**Figure 1:** *AIDA Model*

Yadav (2013) describes attention as the ability to attract viewers, interest as the ability to raise curiosity, desire as the ability to influence viewers' needs and action as the ability to convince viewers to do something about what they need. This model was adopted to assess the viewers' buying intention as a form of action in correlation to their understanding TV advertising message.

### **1.2 Hidden messages in advertisement**

Puto and Wells (1984) discuss how emotional advertising messages usually involve personal experience where viewers would not typically associated with the brand experience, however it is somewhat still relatable in other types of experience in their life. Hidden messages in advertising, utilize the same concept as emotional advertising messages. Bisht (2014) explains that hidden messages in advertisements are usually used to build a good image for the brand which indirectly trying to persuade viewers in choosing a specific brand over the other. Thus, it is most often used for competitive purposes where a brand attempted to overshadow competitors' brand by displaying which is the best option for viewers to pick from. In regards to information dissemination, it starts by empowering the development of communication (Pani, 2016). Therefore in hidden messages, the information presented should reflect the real meaning of what advertisers want to communicate to the audience. Advertisers often use media platform such as TV to attract viewers with a more stereotypes presentation of messages rather than presenting the

real situation (Al-Abbas, 2016). This however is to make viewers feel more relatable to the message which is important for viewers' social engagement (Aziz & Arabia, 2016). From viewers' engagement, it will contribute to their participation and word of mouth in spreading information about the advertisements. If viewers are not naturally engaged with whatever hidden content that they were exposed to, the results of the advertising effectiveness might be misleading (Romainuk, 2012).

## **2. Methods**

This study utilizes mix methodology of both qualitative content analysis and quantitative survey questionnaires. Content analysis was used to address the first research objective; to identify the scenes in Maxis One Plan TV advertisement that showcases hidden advertising messages. This research focuses on the following unit of analysis of the TV advertisement:

- Visuals
- Scenes
- Messages (hidden and unhidden)

From the content analysis, the author identifies what and how does hidden messages were inserted in the various scenes of the TV advertisement. Survey questionnaires employed in this study were used to address the second research objective; to investigate the effectiveness of hidden messages in advertising towards viewers' buying intention. 120 respondents consist of working adults from the age 23 to 29 participate in answering the survey that consists of questions addressing their responses towards the advertisements and their feedback in regards to Maxis One Plan product purchase. Working adults were chosen as the study sample due to them being the specific targeted users of Maxis One Plan. This study utilizes a convenient sampling method by passing out survey questions in the urban area where working adults most likely to be seen, such as bus stop, LRT station and office foyers.



## **3. Findings and Discussion**



This section discusses the findings from the data analysis towards the scenes in Maxis One Plan TV advertisement that showcases hidden messages and how does it affect viewers' buying intention. The findings were covered based upon both qualitative and quantitative data analyses.


### 3.1 Findings on hidden messages in the TV advertisement

By starting with a comparative storyline, the Maxis One Plan TV commercial successfully attracted the attention of the audience by using two children to do a comparative activity. Activity such as screaming in front of a fan is one of the popular childhood memories; thus indirectly it manage to create curiosity unlike any other common TV commercial.

**Table 1:** Analysis of hidden messages in Maxis One Plan TV advertisement

Visuals Description of the Scenes	Scene description	Messages	
		Unhidden	Hidden
	<p>Showing two children in a superhero mask and cape; wearing green and blue coloured clothing. Screaming in front of an electric fan.</p>	<p>Typical kids behaviour to see who can scream longer.</p>	<p>Boy in green, represent Maxis. Boy in blue, represent Celcom. (based upon corporate colour)</p>
	<p>Showing one of the boy (in green) continue screaming while the other boy (in blue) has stopped.</p>	<p>The boy in green can scream better than the boy in blue.</p>	<p>Represented by the boy in green, showing that Maxis is better than Celcom.</p>

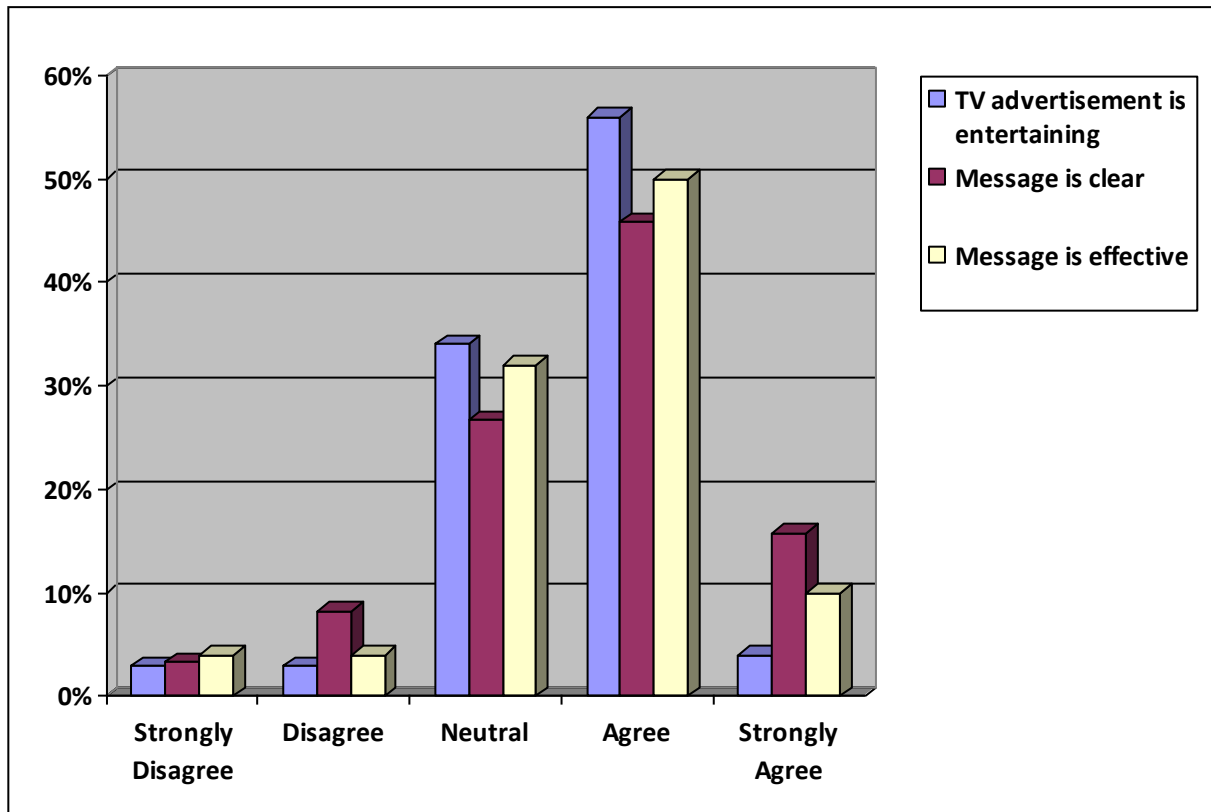
Visuals Description of the Scenes	Scene description	Messages	
		Unhidden	Hidden
	<p>Showing both boys at the end of the 'competition'; the boy in green says 1 – 0; while the boy in blue looking defeated.</p>	<p>The boy in green won the first round of the screaming competition .</p>	<p>Maxis won the best service competition against Celcom.</p>
	<p>Showing two children in a vocal class; wearing green and blue coloured clothing. Trying to sing in a high pitch.</p>	<p>Typical kids behaviour in vocal class to see who can reach the higher note.</p>	<p>Girl in green, represent Maxis. Girl in blue, represent Celcom. (based upon corporate colour)</p>
	<p>Showing one of the girl (in green) continue singing and manage to hit the high note while the other girl (in blue) has stopped.</p>	<p>The girl in green has more powerful vocal than the girl in blue.</p>	<p>Represented by the girl in green, showing that Maxis is better than Celcom.</p>

Visuals Description of the Scenes	Scene description	Messages	
		Unhidden	Hidden
	<p>Showing both girls at the end of the 'competition'; the girl in green says 1 – 0; while the girl in blue looking defeated.</p>	<p>The girl in green won the first round of the 'singing' competition.</p>	<p>Maxis won the best service competition against Celcom.</p>

As presented in Table 1, there were two identified characters; children wearing green coloured clothing and blue coloured clothing. Both are identified by the telecommunication service provider where the children in green were representing Maxis and the one in blue representing one of Maxis famous competitor; Celcom. Children who were wearing green always represent the winning side in comparison to the one in blue. From this scenario alone, Maxis was trying to do a comparison by implying that they have better service, better connection or better plan. Additionally, both TV advertisements ended with a voice over saying “Go One with the Maxis One Plan”.

### 3.2 Findings on viewers’ buying intention

Questionnaires were collected from 120 respondents of the age 23 to 29; who are familiar with the advertisement, to analyze their responses towards the advertisements and their feedback in regards to their buying intention towards the product. The questionnaires include their likability towards the advertisement, their comprehension towards the message in the advertisement, and whether or not the advertisement influences their subscription decision.



**Figure 2:** Respondents' feedback on the likability of the TV advertisement

As presented in Figure 2, respondents' likability towards the advertisement is relatively high. The majority of the respondents agrees that the TV advertisement is entertaining. This provides evidence that audiences are attracted to it; possibly because of the competitive elements, relatable storyline or the simplicity of the message. When asked to rate the clarity of the advertising message, the majority of the respondents agree that the TV advertisement conveys a clear and effective message. Table 2 presents the findings of three most mentioned feedbacks in regards to their comprehension towards the message of the TV advertisement.

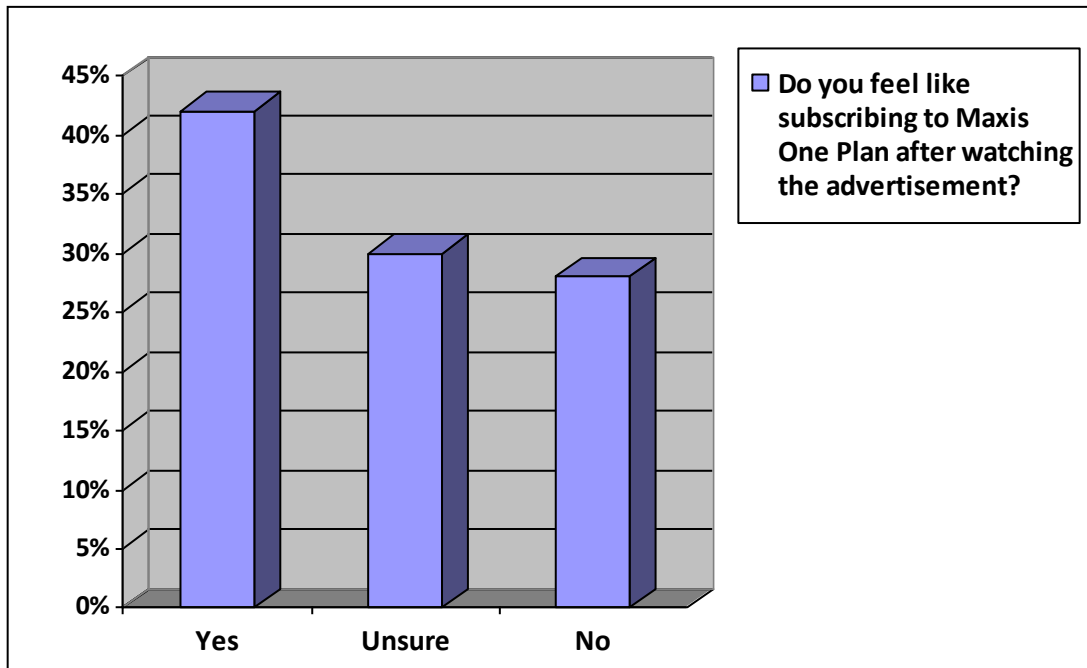
**Table 2:** Respondents' comprehension towards the message of the TV advertisement

What do you understand from what the advertisement is trying to convey?
Maxis is trying to beat their competitors (Celcom)



What do you understand from what the advertisement is trying to convey?
Maxis is selling a better mobile plan
Maxis wants to influence the buying intention of non-Maxis users

Explicitly, respondents believe that the message of the advertisement clearly leading towards the competitiveness of Maxis against other competitor; specifically Celcom. Respondents describe that through the advertisement, Maxis is trying to beat their competitor by showcasing that they are a better plan, and hopefully to influence the non-Maxis users to switch their mobile subscription to Maxis.



**Figure 3:** Respondents' feedback on the likability of the TV advertisement

Figure 3 presents findings towards respondents' feedback on their buying intention of Maxis One Plan product. When asked whether they have the intention to subscribe to Maxis One Plan after watching the TV advertisement, 42% of respondents say yes, 30% are unsure and 28% say no. Although, the TV advertisement did not manage to influence all respondents buying intention despite their enjoyment watching it, it still manage to influence quite a number of respondents to want to change their current mobile plan to Maxis One Plan. Table 3 showcases

some of the most common reasons given by respondents in regards to their buying intention of the product.

**Table 3:** *Respondents' reason towards their buying intention*

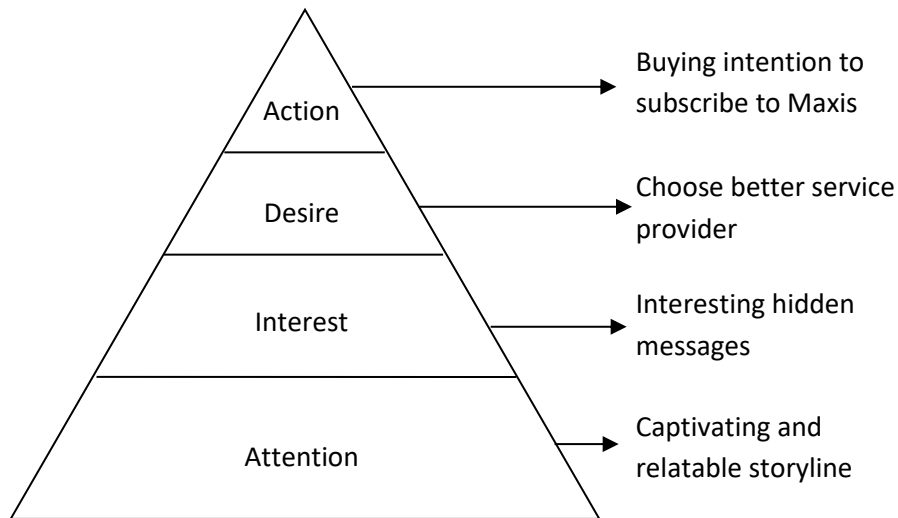
Do you feel like subscribing to Maxis One Plan after watching the advertisement?	What is the reason behind your decision?
YES (42%)	"Maxis showcase a stronger brand reputation" "It seems that Maxis are better in terms of services" "The advertisement makes me want to be a Maxis user"
UNSURE (30%)	"It is a fun advertisement but will need to do more research before buying anything"
NO (28%)	"It is just a fun advertisement, it does not guarantee that Maxis provide better service"

Respondents who agree that Maxis One Plan TV advertisement did influence their buying intention say it happen so because the advertisement showcase that Maxis has better reputation and a better service. Due to this, they also mention that they are intrigued to become a Maxis user after watching the advertisement. Respondents who are unsure of their buying intention after watching the TV advertisement say it is because they will need to do more research before deciding on subscribing to the service. Respondents who are not influenced by the TV advertisement mention that good commercial does not guarantee a good product.

#### **4. Summary and conclusion**

Based on the findings, it is certain that hidden messages in the advertisement are able to affect the viewers' buying intention towards a product. Following the AIDA model application as presented in Figure 4, viewers first give full attention to the TV advertisement due to the captivating and relatable storyline. Next, it generates interest due to the hidden messages in some scenes of the advertisement. From the hidden messages, it creates a desire for viewers to select a

better service provider. From there, the viewers' buying intention is affected as their action was influenced to subscribe to Maxis One Plan. As described by Bisht (2014), hidden messages in advertisements are usually aim to influence viewers in choosing specific brand.



**Figure 4:** Discussion of findings based on AIDA model

As presented in the findings, several aspects of the competitive hidden messages did influence viewers' perception towards the likability of the TV advertisement storyline thus it affect viewers' perception towards the product and the brand itself. The scenes from the advertisement showcase competitiveness between two strong telecommunication providers in Malaysia and the hidden messages were used in several scenes by having the corporate color of the brands reflecting on the color of the clothes. Due to the simplicity and the clarity of the message, viewers do not just find it interesting and captivating, it also manages to influence their thought in subscribing the plan.

This study is deemed beneficial to enable the advertisers on understanding towards the effectiveness of hidden messages in TV advertisements. Hidden messages in advertisements are found to appear in a competitive aspect where a brand indirectly compares products with another competitor's brand; however, the representation of the competitive aspect is very subtle.

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