

Exploring the Rhetoric of Deceit in Cyber Marketing for Education

Rabiah Rustam Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS, Abbottabad Campus, Pakistan.
Email: rabiakhan2008@gmail.com

Akbar Ali Assistant Professor, Department of English, FATA University, Kohat, KP, Pakistan

Muhammad Imran Lecturer, Department of English, FATA University, Kohat, KP, Pakistan.

Abstract

Current article aims to investigate the rhetoric used in one of the biggest scams in the history of online education known as the "AXACT scandal". The key purpose is to unfold the real situation by finding the strategies used for deception and to identify the fallacious tactics that stay hidden from the eyes of the website audiences. The research has not only attempted to recognize the rhetorical situation but also looks into the techniques of persuasion (logos, pathos and ethos) that were used in making the advertising claims. Further, the logical fallacies associated with the rhetorical appeals have been identified. The article finds that the deceptive rhetoric has been used in a number of ways in order to make the content persuasive. Moreover, there are a number of fallacious appeals that have been used to make the claims look attractive to the website visitors.

Key Words

Rhetoric of Deceit,
Persuasive Claims,
AXACT Website, AXACT
Scandal

Background of the Research

Rhetoric of deceit has spread like a virus across the world. It has affected thousands of people by robbing them off of their earnings. One of the affected areas is education with worst example of a website called AXACT that deceived thousands of people by providing fake academic degrees online. In May, 2015 an American investigative journalist called Declan Walsh exposed the fraud of selling fake degrees. It was a fraud of millions of dollars. According to media reports, the fake degrees provided by the online website ruined the professional lives of many people and also were a source of providing jobs to the people who did not deserve the jobs. In the words of Declan Walsh as quoted below, it was a fake empire of education that earned millions by the scam:

"Seen from the Internet, it is a vast education empire: hundreds of universities and high schools, with elegant names and smiling professors at sun-dappled American campuses. Their websites, glossy and assured, offer online degrees in dozens of disciplines, like nursing and civil engineering. There are glowing endorsements on the CNN iReport website, enthusiastic video testimonials, and State Department authentication certificates bearing the signature of Secretary of State John Kerry."

Need for the Research

The need for the current research stems out of the above mentioned online scam associated with website called AXACT that claimed to provide virtual education. When it comes to education, the advertisements related with it need much attention as the common people simply see the images and ideas on the surface and do not get into the details and the intentions hidden behind a message. As the language has the power to change the minds of the buyers, the sellers achieve their targets effectively by using the language in a

manipulative manner. Therefore, it is very important to find out the strategies of persuasion and the fallacies associated with the language used online.

Connection between Rhetoric, Advertising, Persuasion and Deception

Shabo (2010, p.07) stated that although, there is a variety of definitions for the term “rhetoric” but the best one was given by Plato who termed it as an act of ruling the minds of the men. Shabo (2010) also explained the rhetorical appeals of Ethos, Pathos and Logos. Logos is the most important among the three classical appeals. It focuses on the rational thinking instead of focusing on the perceptions and the emotions. According to her, appeal to Ethos is also called ethical appeal that aims to enhance the credibility of an argument by calling attention to the positive characteristics of the speaker. Ethical appeals have a considerable power of persuasion but if used carelessly, they can turn into fallacious arguments from authority which means that the source of credibility of an argument is only based on the expert’s words and nothing else.

Referring to Hastak and Mazis (2011), Maysonave and Delorme (2013, p.10) mentioned that whenever the advertisements are deceptive, the claims are intentionally designed in such a way that they mislead the customers to read beyond the literal message and to draw a wrong conclusion about a product or a service. The most important issue is whether the customers are able to detect such deceptive claims or not. Making reference to Oslon and Dover (1978), Maysonave and Delorme (2013, p.10) stated that as the customers are highly reliant on the advertisements, they are more likely to be deceived.

Victor Danciu (2014) states that the manipulation through advertising is an issue being faced by the consumers on daily basis. Referring to Grover (2011) he mentioned two classes of advertising where one is non manipulative while the other is manipulative advertising. He further classified manipulative advertising into deceitful advertising and the argumentative advertising. The deceitful advertising uses deceptive facts while the argumentative advertising uses bad arguments where emotive persuasion can be used.

Lieto and Venero (2014) conducted a research in which they analyzed the use of different fallacy based persuasion strategies in e-commerce websites. They found a number of fallacies in websites and application features. They found that the bestseller products used the fallacy of “Argumentum Ad Populum”. Improper testimonials used fallacy of “Argumentum Ad Verecundiam”. For personalization, the fallacy of audience agreement was used. Similarly, for the public visibility of purchased and browsed items “Argumentum. Ad Baculum” was used. “Arg. Ad Consequentium” was used for cause effect simulations and the fallacy of accent was used for emphasizing or hiding the information. Lieto and Venero (2014) argue that there is a scarcity of research conducted on the computer technologies and persuasion. They also found that fallacy based persuasion strategies are extensively used in mobile and web technologies and are quite effective in influencing the users’ behavior and facilitate in decision making.

Methodology

The study is descriptive and qualitative. Data were collected from AXACT Website. When a user types www.AXACT.com, a front page opens on the screen that has some introductory statements about AXACT on a slideshow. There are ten statements or claims that were selected for analysis.

Data analysis was done according to the methods provided by www.screespace.org where appropriate formats are available for the analysis of the rhetorical situation. For the analysis of logos, pathos and ethos, the guidelines given by Shea (2013) and Effinger (n.d) given in their articles on rhetorical advertising and rhetorical analysis were used. The statements about AXACT were considered as claims for analysis. According to Shea’s model, first the rhetorical situation was analyzed, and then the appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos as well as the associated techniques used in the claims were analyzed. In the last step of analysis, the logical fallacies were analyzed according to the list of fallacies

provided by Bennet (2014). The fallacies not found in Bennet's model were analyzed by using some other internet resources.

Analysis of the Rhetorical Situation

First, the rhetorical situation was analyzed in the following manner:

Purpose

In order to analyze the purpose, the following three dimensions were considered:

- i. Intents of the website
- ii. Goals and objectives
- iii. Usefulness

The purpose of the website was not only to persuade but also to inform, educate, motivate, persuade to action, to change audience opinion and to help as mentioned on the web pages.

For persuasion, the website is filled with statements presenting it as best for online education. A number of the customers were attracted to the website for the sake of online education.

The website also informed about a number of activities related with its educational plans and the sale of a number of products such as softwares. Apart from that, the website was also used as a medium of information for the launch of new projects and seminars by the organization.

Context

In order to analyze the context, the following dimensions were considered:

- i. Content or web text
- ii. Environment
- iii. Tools and technology
- iv. Culture or society

The context in which the website worked seems quite complicated as the website provided a number of services including, softwares, online education and information.

The website was an e-commerce website that worked in online environment. Texts and the images were used side by side.

The website servers operated in several countries including Pakistan and United Arab Emirates. The head office was located in Karachi (Pakistan). The customers could easily contact through email or phone.

According to the report by Declan Walsh, the customers belonged to multiple cultures and nationalities including Pakistanis, British, American and Arab nationals.

Audience

In order to analyze the audience following questions were considered:

- i. Demographics
- ii. Characteristics of users
- iii. Modes of access to the website

The audience belonged to different nationalities as stated above. The researcher relied on the reports from the different sources which indicated that the audience across Pakistan, America, UAE and some other countries were among the affected ones.

The awarded degrees data indicated that customers wanted to become engineers, doctors, teachers, economists and managers.

Their modes of access to the website were online and they could also use telephonic communication.

Analysis of Rhetorical Appeals

Appeals to logos, pathos and ethos were analyzed keeping in view the following claims:

1. AXACT is 3 Times Larger Than Any Other Private Sector Company in Pakistan
2. 7 of AXACT's 10 Business Units are No.1 in the World
3. AXACT has 2 Billion Users and a Customer Base of 40 Million Worldwide
4. AXACT has Global Presence in 6 Continents, 120 Countries & 1300 Cities
5. AXACT is First Choice Employer in Pakistan with 25,000+ Employees and Associates Worldwide
6. AXACT is the Largest Exporter of IT Services of Pakistan – Contributing 65% of Total IT Exports
7. AXACT Contributes 65% of its Revenues to Pakistan through SEDAXACT
8. AXACT Provides Free Insaaf for Matters of up to Rs. 300k in Pakistan through SEDAXACT
9. AXACT will Educate 10 Million Children Free of Cost in Pakistan by 2019
10. AXACT will Make Food & Shelter and Healthcare Affordable & Accessible to All in Pakistan by 2019

Appeal to Logos

According to the Effinger the logos are used when a writer uses logical evidence to support his claims. Techniques used by AXACT are given below:

Use of Statistics

Statistical have been used to impress the readers. In the first statement, AXACT has been compared with any private sector company in Pakistan and it has been claimed that it is three times larger. In the second statement seven of AXACT's 10 business units have been compared with the business units of all the companies and have been termed as number one.

Numbers

Numbers have been used to present the website as one of the world's biggest organizations as it has two million users and 40 million customers that makes a total of 42 million users. Similarly, in another claim, it is written that it has global presence in 6 continents, 120 countries and 1300 cities. Another technique has been used by adding a + sign with the number mentioned as 25000.

Use of Percentages

According to the claims, AXACT exports make 65% of total revenues of Pakistani exports and then contributes 65% to Pakistan through SED AXACT a sub division of its organization for social work. The use of percentages is usually selected out of 100 and it implicates that the large number of revenue through exports in Pakistan comes through AXACT exports.

Using Numbers with Alphabet k

In the claim number 8, a number 300 has been used with the addition of letter “k” and it has been written as 300k. K stands for kilo or 1000 and if seen mathematically it makes 300,000.

Using Word Million with Numbers

Word “million” can be seen that has been placed after digit 10 for making ten million. Mathematically, it makes 10 multiplied by 10, 000, 00 and it makes 10, 000, 000 or one million. The word million gives an impact of wealth and progress.

Abstract Statistics

It can be seen in the last statements written about food and shelter in which the author claims that it will be accessible to all. "All" refers to everyone living in Pakistan and the exact number is not clear.

Time

In order to give an impression of commitment and achievement, the concept of time has been used where a deadline has been provided that in 2019 or after 05 years food, shelter and education will be provided to everyone in a large population of 18 crore which will be 25 crore or more in 2019.

Scientific Facts

Scientific facts have been used to support logic. As the company can be accessed throughout the world, it can only be possible using information technology. Similarly, it also strengthens the claim of making revenues by software exports while the educational earnings have not been mentioned anywhere.

Appeal to Ethos

Appeal to ethos or the Ethical appeals are highly dependent on the credibility of the author. A number of such appeals can be found in the advertising claims made by AXACT.

Popularity

Third statement uses popularity as a technique for ethos. A company can only have 2 billion users and a customer base of 40 million when it is credible and popular among the people.

Ethical Likeability

Statements use the techniques of ethical likeability that can be further classified as under:

Duty towards the State

AXACT is showing a sense of responsibility and duty by giving employment to thousands of Pakistanis. They are also contributing a large number of revenue to the state. Then out of those 65% revenues, AXACT spends all of it through its sub organization called SED AXACT.

Fairness and Justice

AXACT is very much interested in protecting the people from injustice and helps them to get justice by providing financial assistance.

Social Needs

AXACT is much sympathetic to the needs of children and wants to provide them education that is free of cost. Similarly AXACT will provide food shelter and healthcare to all the Pakistanis by 2019

Self Confidence

AXACT is self-confident to provide all the needed facilities to the people of Pakistan by 2019.

Hard Work

Apparently, the top positions mentioned by AXACT show that they have got his positions by hard work and commitment.

Appeal to Pathos

Appeals to pathos or emotions are designed to appeal audience's feelings. A number of such appeals can be found in the claims made by AXACT.

Use of Adjectives

The words such as "larger" and "largest" have been used to give the impression that AXACT is on the best organizations. These adjectives evoke an image of something huge and valuable.

Patriotism

The statements evoke emotions of patriotism by contributing its revenues to Pakistan and to the Pakistani nation.

Vision for Pakistan

AXACT has a vision for 2019 that evokes the emotion in the minds of readers that something is likely to happen in future. The people can dream of a better future with AXACT.

Achievement

AXACT has been projected in all the statements as a successful organization with a series of achievements such as the largest private company with best business units, a majority of customers and producing highest revenue in Pakistan. Such statements invoke the thinking of positive expectations about an organization. People associate hopes of good future with a high revenue producing organization.

Endurance

The feelings of endurance have been presented by the side of AXACT for the people and the children who are unemployed. AXACT promises to provide the services that others cannot arrange for themselves.

Sympathy

Feelings of sympathy have been associated with the claims by showing a concern for the poor people and their children In Pakistan

Analysis of the Logical Fallacies

In order to analyze the logical fallacies, the taxonomy of logical fallacies given by Bennet was followed.

False Comparison

According to Bennet fallacy of false comparison is used to make one thing appear more desirable than another as in statement given below:

"AXACT is 3 times larger than any other private sector company in Pakistan"

The comparison is faulty as AXACT claims to be a software company and does not compare itself with any other software company rather with any private sector company. No specific company has been mentioned that is leading in any field. It is hard for readers to infer how AXACT can be three times larger than a company that has not been mentioned.

Same fallacy can be found the following claim:

"7 of AXACT's 10 Business Units are No.1 in the World"

Again, this claim is confusing in that it does not provide the information about the standards which determined AXACT as no.01. There is no information provided about the status of other units.

Following claim again commits the same fallacy as found in the above mentioned in the above mentioned claims:

“AXACT is the largest exporter of IT Services of Pakistan”

An organization cannot be termed as largest simply by using the term "largest". How has this conclusion been reached that AXACT is the largest exporter of IT services when there is no such company in Pakistan that exports IT products at such a huge level.

Lying with Statistics

Bennet has defined “lying with the statistics” as a fallacy that presents statistical data in a biased way where the methods used behind collecting and presenting the data are questionable. This fallacy can be found below:

- i. “AXACT has 2 billion users and a customer base of 40 million worldwide”
How can AXACT have two billion users when Facebook has 1.19 billion users and even Google do not have that much users. This is quite surprising how a software company can have 40 million customers and two billion users.
- ii. “AXACT has global presence in 6 continents, 120 countries & 1300 cities”
If the presence is in 6 continents then why only 120 countries while the actual number of countries must be 230. Again there is no proof of how AXACT has determined its global presence in all the inhabitable continents and cities. If it only has its presence in the biggest cities of the world, even then the number of cities cannot reach 1300.
- iii. “AXACT is first choice employer in Pakistan with 25,000+ employees and associates worldwide”
Here, a number of questions arise. First, if it is first choice employer then why so many people are unemployed? Second, why has actual number of employees not given? Third, how can only 25000 employees manage a customer base of 40 million and also two billion users, then the employees must be greater than those working on Facebook and Google? The rational thinking does not get a satisfactory answer to all these questions that have arisen as a result of this claim.
- iv. “AXACT is the largest exporter of it services of Pakistan – contributing 65% of total it exports”
The very first objection that arises against this claim is that Pakistan is not a great exporter of IT products, rather she is an importer. Second, if AXACT is contributing 65% of exports, then what are all other IT companies doing. The claim is based on a vague assumption instead of concrete information.
- v. AXACT contributes 65% of its revenues to Pakistan through SEDAXACT
This is quite irrational to think of an organization spending sixty percent of its revenues on a country in which it is located. Another question is that Pakistan never recognized AXACT for too much revenue production and never acknowledged that AXACT is spending its revenues on Pakistan.
- vi. “AXACT provides free insaaf (justice) for matters of up to Rs. 300k in Pakistan through SEDAXACT”

It has never been mentioned by media or any other organization in Pakistan that SED AXACT is an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization). It is of course not a court of law then how does it provide money to the people for getting justice. No other information supporting this claim could be found on AXACT website.

Appeal to Popularity

Appeal to popularity is also called “argumentum ad numeram” as mentioned by Bennet. In such kind of fallacy popularity of a premise or proposition is used as an evidence for its truthfulness.

In the following statements AXACT has tried to use the appeal to popularity.

- i. AXACT has 2 Billion Users and a Customer Base of 40 Million Worldwide

- ii. AXACT has Global Presence in 6 Continents, 120 Countries & 1300 Cities
- iii. AXACT is First Choice Employer in Pakistan with 25,000+ Employees and Associates Worldwide Giving reference to billions of users and millions of customers means that so many people know AXACT. Second, as it can be accessed worldwide that is another proof of popularity. It has been shown that as AXACT has so many employees and thousands of associates; it is again popular company.

Escape to the Future

In such kind of fallacy someone claims that their worldview will soon prevail because the victory is about to come or evidence is in process

Some examples are given below:

- i. “AXACT will Educate 10 Million Children Free of Cost in Pakistan by 2019”
The claim seems fallacious as it is a challenge to educate ten million children in Pakistan. Second, it is not clear what kind of children will be educated, those, who cannot afford educational expenses or those children who do not go to schools. It is not clear how will the money be arranged. There is no webpage or blog about this statement that could explain how AXACT would accomplish the target.
- ii. “AXACT will make food & shelter and healthcare affordable & accessible to all in Pakistan by 2019”

This is quite difficult to infer as how it is possible for a company to provide food health and shelter available to a population of 200 million people.

Appeal to Wealth

The appeal to wealth fallacy as it claims below assumes that someone or something is better because it is more expensive or wealthy.

- i. AXACT has 2 Billion Users and a Customer Base of 40 Million Worldwide
- ii. AXACT is First Choice Employer in Pakistan with 25,000+ Employees and Associates Worldwide
- iii. AXACT is the Largest Exporter of IT Services of Pakistan – Contributing 65% of Total IT Exports
- iv. AXACT Contributes 65% of its Revenues to Pakistan through SEDAXACT

Appeal to wealth has been used here. AXACT has tried to create an impression that there is a huge customer base of 40 million for which there are thousands of employees who get benefit by getting jobs. Another thing is the revenue production, being patriotic AXACT gives 65% of its revenues to the reserves of Pakistan by exporting 65% exports.

Fallacy of Appeal to Emotions

Appeal to emotions can be found in following claims where it evokes the emotions of patriotism and pity.

- i. AXACT is first choice employer in Pakistan with 25,000+ employees and associates worldwide
- ii. AXACT is the largest exporter of its services of Pakistan – contributing 65% of total IT exports
- iii. AXACT contributes 65% of its revenues to Pakistan through SEDAXACT
- iv. AXACT provides free Insaaf (they could write word justice) for matters of up to Rs. 300k in Pakistan through SEDAXACT
- v. AXACT will educate 10 million children free of cost in Pakistan by 2019
- vi. AXACT will make food & shelter and healthcare affordable & accessible to all in Pakistan by 2019

Being a first choice employer, AXACT jobs are available to a multitude of people who are jobless. More over being a patriotic organization, it contributes a lot to its nation not only by exports but also by spending a large amount for the betterment of its people. Fallacy of “Argumentum ad populum” has been misused here by appealing to the feelings of the people who are poor and jobless.

Conclusion

The article concludes that AXACT used a number of deceptive strategies in order to attract the customers towards the website. The appeals to logos, pathos and ethos have been misused as there are a number of fallacies associated with the advertising claims made by AXACT website on its front page. The article also concludes that the existing approaches to the study of rhetorical analysis are insufficient in that there are many other strategies used by the content writers on the websites that have not been analyzed but still create an impact. The article suggests the website visitors not to get impressed by the claims made in the online advertisements but cast a careful eye on the claims and analyze them in the context in which they are presented so that they can be kept secure from the frauds and scams such as AXACT.

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