

# Different strokes for different folks: Influence of Advertising Semantic Noise on Consumer Behavior

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**Abstract**—The purpose of this paper is to highlight the influence of Advertising Semantic Noise on Consumer Behavior with specific reference to Sāmoa. The study used convenience sampling to collect data from a sample size of 50 respondents with the help of structured questionnaires. While it was found the advertisements containing semantic noise still provided product familiarity, consumer purchase and decision making were influenced by personal taste and preference. Result of the study shows that with chi-square testing, semantic noise has no association with consumer purchase and consumer decision making. The paper is the first of its type to research consumer behavior in Sāmoa specific to advertising semantic noise using local advertisements.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Semantic Noise, Consumer Behavior, Sāmoa

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the world's commercialization and globalization, advertisements play an important role in enlarging markets, promoting sales and building a certain segment of consumers. However, the impact of 'semantic noise' in advertising has crippled the reputation of many international brands and brought multinational companies to their knees. Semantic noise in Advertising refers to ambiguity in words, sentences or symbols present in an advertising message. These cause distortion in the effectiveness of an advertising message and interfere with the receiver's interpretation of the message. In 2006, hair care company Clairol introduced a curling iron called the Mist Stick, which did very well in U.S. markets. When the company marketed the product in Germany, however, they failed to realize that 'mist' means 'manure' in German. Mark Laswell, (2004). When General Motors introduced the Chevy nova in South America, they were oblivious to the fact that 'no va' in Spanish meant 'it won't go'. When sales didn't pick up for the car the company realized their mistake and renamed the car Caribe, for Spanish markets. Kevin Reagan (1999), Yumiko Ono (1997).

There is an emergence of advertising methods observed in t Sāmoa that contain semantic noise due to ambiguity in words and symbols present in advertising media. For instance, Vailima is a family of beers brewed in Sāmoa by Sāmoa Breweries Ltd. The Vailima brand dominates the local market in terms of beer sales. Much of its sales transactions are attributed to local consumer taste and preference. More interesting from an Advertising perspective, Vailima is amongst many local companies where company sales are not affected by the presence of 'semantic noise' in a few of its advertising campaigns. A recent example, a billboard advertisement of Vailima Beer contains the slogan 'Different strokes, for different folks. This saying originated in the United States in the 1960s to mean 'different things please different people'. This was also the meaning hoped to have been understood by consumers however, exploratory research discovered the majority of consumers in Sāmoa had a different interpretation of this saying. The slogan had been interpreted to mean: a beer for a different generation, a connection with 'having a stroke' or a brain attack while others have taken the meaning of 'stroke' to the extreme to mean 'hitting' or to 'caress' as a result from excess alcohol. Notwithstanding these advertising issues, based on consumer preference and taste, consumers continue to have high preference for the Vailima brand.

Despite many previous studies on Advertisements and Consumer behavior, studies on consumer behavior with specific reference to consumers in Sāmoa are non-existent in literature. Furthermore, many of the past studies do not use local advertisements that are familiar to the sample population. The study aims to investigate the influence of advertising semantic noise on consumer purchase and consumer decision making.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Advertising plays a significant role in stimulating sales. Advertising failures however have occurred due to the wrong

encoding of a message, in the form of words, slogans, pictures, symbols, specific colors. ‘Noise’ has also been a result of decoding errors in advertising messages: where the receiver of message interprets the meaning of the words, symbols, pictures incorrectly that he/she is unable to understand the message in the manner intended by the sender of the message. Also, the use of technical and multiple meaning words – using words/signs/symbols with technical meaning or more than one meaning creates a lot of consumer confusion. Marketing practitioners recognized that advertising semantic noise has an extensive influence on consumer perception, consumer purchase and consumer behavior.

Businesses’ spend a tremendous portion of their marketing budget on Advertising to ensure ads are effective and the message transmitted to the receiver is not cluttered with components of semantic noise. Although local companies continue to improve advertising creativity, there arises a question as to what extent semantic noise in advertising influence consumer behavior. Studies on Advertising and its influence of Consumer Behavior are ample in literature. Many of the past studies have examined the impact of Television Advertising on Consumer behavior and not on the impact of Semantic Noise in Advertising on Consumer Behavior. Furthermore, consumer behavior as a discipline of Marketing has been explored in developed countries and not in developing countries such as Sāmoa. Through this study, an attempt is made to explore the influence of semantic noise in advertising on consumer behavior among consumers’ in Sāmoa.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature refers to ‘Noise’ as interference in marketing communication that is either deliberately or accidentally introduced and which blocks or distorts transmission. (George Belch and Michael Belch (2007). Noise could originate from the message itself (internal noise) either in the form of unknown words and any other stimuli. The communication could also suffer from ‘external noise’. There are four kinds of noise, Physiological noise, Physical noise, Psychological noise, and Semantic noise which exists when words themselves are not mutually understood sometimes due to advertising jargon or unnecessarily technical language. Larry Percy and Richard Elliott. (2005).

Due to noise, the message is not received by receiver in the way or form in which it is sent by the sender. Noise may also result if the sender is unclear about what is to be communicated. The barrier can be in the form of wrong use of language, wrong encoding, wrong media, or wrong decoding by receiver of message. Language is one of the major barriers to effective communication through advertising. A company marketing tomato paste in the Middle East found that in Arabic, the phrase tomato paste translates as tomato glue. Kevin Reagan (1999). In addition, cultural factors affect one’s perception of various phenomena, or marketing messages. Much of perception is shaped by one’s cultural values, beliefs, heritage and traditions, and are hard to overcome. Once in another culture, the perceptual framework is different and the perception of the message itself differs. Yumiko Ono (1997).

General Mills when it first introduced instant cake mixes did not attract customers from the Japanese market. While customers in the United States and England perceived the product as keeping them away from genuine baking and thus started having guilt feelings, customers in Japan perceived the product’s ad on TV as an insult because making rice is perceived as a skill.

An understanding of the influence of semantic noise on consumer behavior would provide insight as to whether semantic noise impacts on intention to purchase and actual purchase. It would also highlight factors important to consumer decision making which helps companies and marketers in their marketing strategies. Previous studies in the area of Advertising and Consumer Behavior is extensive in literature. (Esther Thorson, Annie Chi and Clark Leavitt (1992), Abhilasha Mehta (2000), Chingning Wang, Ping Zhang, Risook Choi and Michael D’Eredita (2002), Lycourgos Hadjiphanis (2011). No literature exists on consumer buying behavior and the impact of semantic noise in advertising on consumers’ in Sāmoā.

The purpose of this paper aims to highlight factors that influence consumer decision making and the influence of semantic noise on consumer behavior.

### IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the degree of influence of ‘Semantic Noise’ consumer behavior
2. To understand factors other than semantic noise that influence purchase decision making.

### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### a) Data

Data collected for the study is primary data which was collected through a structured questionnaire.

#### b) Sampling

Convenience Sampling was used to select the sample size of 50 respondents for the study.

#### c) Research Procedure

Participants were selected based on the criteria that they were familiar with the selected brands, have good product knowledge of the products advertised and are also consumers of the advertised products. A Participant Information sheet that explained the goals of the study, the general procedure and the anonymity of the experiment was firstly given. The participants then signed a Consent Form, and were asked to fill in the structured questionnaire after being exposed to four (4) local advertisements.

The four (4) locally produced advertisements that contained ‘semantic noise’. The first two of these advertisements were television advertisements, the third was a newspaper advertisement and the fourth was a picture of a bill

board advertisement. The respondents were then asked to respond to a set of structured questions in the questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree were used to measure responses for all variables in the study.

d) *Framework of Analysis*

Data collected is analyzed using percentage method and hypotheses are tested using Chi-Square Test.

e) *Limitation of Study*

A limitation to be noted is on the small study sample used. The use of a sample size of only 50 respondents means that the results cannot be generalized for all Sāmoan consumers. The study also selected local advertisements and respondents that currently purchase the advertised products. Respondent responses may vary if the selected advertisements were international in nature.

Hypotheses:

H1: There is no association between semantic noise consumer purchases.

H2: There is no association between semantic noise and consumer decision making.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

While the selected advertisements used in the study contained symbols and words open to many interpretations, the results illustrate consumers' purchase decision are not influenced by message ambiguity and message transmission issues. Although the advertisements selected for this study reinforces product familiarity (56%), the information gained from the advertisement does not influence purchase (25%) nor does it influence the customer to consider select different product alternatives (50%).

Variable	Number					Total 50
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Decrease purchase of the advertised product.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	6 (12%)	27 (54%)	16 (32%)	50 (100%)
Encourage product switching	0 (%)	3 (6%)	9 (18%)	28 (56%)	10 (20%)	50 (100%)
Helps the customer select an alternative	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	8 (16%)	25 (50%)	13 (26%)	50 (100%)
Reinforces familiarity of product.	15 (30%)	28 (56%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	50 (100%)
Provides useful information to influence purchase.	2 (40%)	5 (10%)	8 (16%)	25 (50%)	10 (20%)	50 (100%)

TABLE I. INFLUENCE OF SEMNATIC NOISE ON PURCHASE

Semantic Noise does not seem to influence Consumer Behavior in terms of selecting a product, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, purchase and post purchase. While 30% (Strongly Agree), and 50% (Agree) that advertisements promote awareness and familiarity, it does not save time in decision making 60% (Disagree). 52% of respondents are not confused with the advertising message although the advertisements contained semantic noise and 70% disagree that the examined advertisements created confusion with existing product features. Interesting however that the percentage of respondents that responded 'Neutral' for 3 variables are high, variable 2=20%, variable 3=26% and variable 4=30% . This may indicate, respondents have had little time to decode and understand the advertising message to realize there are problems in the advertising message, or it may also be that due to personal preference, respondents switch off from paying attention to advertisements as understanding its contents is not considered important to their purchase decision.

TABLE III. INFLUENCE OF SEMANTIC NOISE ON CONSUMER DECISION MAKING.

Variable	Number					Total 50
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Promote awareness and familiarity.	15 (30%)	25 (50%)	6 (12%)	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	50 (100%)
Creates confusion of product features.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	35 (70%)	4 (8%)	50 (100%)
Time save in decision making.	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	13 (26%)	30 (60%)	5 (10%)	50 (100%)
Creates confusion of advertising message	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	15 (30%)	26 (52%)	7 (14%)	50 (100%)

Consumer decision making is also influenced by other factors other than 'semantic noise'. The respondents were asked about other factors that were important other than the quality and clarity of a transmitted advertising message. In their responses, 30% of respondents were influenced by their personal taste and preference. This may also explain why 'brand' is also important (24%), in that particular brands are often preferred based on personal taste. Although the selected advertisements for the study contained elements of 'semantic noise', other

respondents were more influenced by ‘Price’ (14%). The amount of humor (12%) in an advertisement influences consumer behavior more than the quality of an advertisement (4%). Another important finding is that the quality of an advertisement (4%) and making sense or understanding what the advertisement was about (4%) are least important factors. This suggests, the presence of ‘semantic noise’ in advertisements does not really influence consumer behavior. It appears that consumers are depending on personal preference to influence brand selection and behavior towards decision making. This implies, companies should focus more on building customer relationships to maintain likability, consumer preference and reinforce a positive brand and overall company image.

Association	Table Value at 5% Level of Significance	Calculated Value of Chi-Square	d.f	Results
Semantic Noise and Degree of Influence on Consumer Decision Making	11.532	4.63	13	There is no association

As the calculated value 4.63 is less than table value 11.532 at 5% of significance level and at degrees of freedom 13, the null hypothesis, i.e., ‘there is no association between semantic noise and consumer decision making’ can be accepted.

TABLE III. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PURCHASE DECISION OTHER THAN SEMANTIC NOISE

Variables	Number	Percentage
Humor in an advertisement	6	12
Quality of advertisement	2	4
Makings sense of an advertisement	2	4
Personal taste & preference	15	30
Brand	12	24
Quality	4	8
Price (select a cheaper option)	7	14
Opinion of friends/relatives	2	4

*Analysis of Hypotheses*

There is no association between semantic noise and consumer purchase.

Association	Table Value at 5% Level of Significance	Calculated Value of Chi-Square	d.f	Results
Semantic Noise and Degree of Influence on Consumer Purchase	25.396	11.99	13	There is no association

As the calculated value 11.99 is less than table value 25.396 at 5% of significance level and at degrees of freedom 13, the null hypothesis, i.e., ‘there is no association between semantic noise and consumer purchase’ can be accepted.

There is no association between semantic noise and consumer decision making.

VII. CONSLUSION

From the findings, we can arrive at a conclusion that Advertising Semantic Noise does not influence consumer purchase and consumer decision making. International companies have been brought to their knees due to semantic noise in their advertising campaigns however from the study, consumer purchase and decision making were influenced by factors such as personal taste and preference, brand, and price. Findings from the study indicate that personal taste and consumer preference influence brand choice, and humor in advertisements also help to create likeability and positive brand associations with both the company and products.

It is hoped that the present study can provide insights for further research in this area and also help local companies and marketing practitioners improve marketing and advertising strategies.

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