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Ethos, Pathos, and Logos in Television Commercials


Production masterminds create television commercials to show consumers the variety of options available to them and to convince those same people that the products and services they see can improve their lives. Most Americans passively view commercials as an accepted part of television and might believe they are immune to the effects of these tricky advertisements.

However, these advertisements may influence a television viewer later when that viewer is in, say, the grocery store without him or her realizing it. What mop is the viewer going to purchase without having done a lot of independent research? Perhaps, it will be one like Swiffer that has gotten a lot of air time and has an appealing message. Viewers can mitigate the impact of


cunning advertising by actively engaging the messages and understanding the way commercials utilize the modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—to push certain products.

According to the Excelsior College Online Writing Lab (OWL), the modes of persuasion are “ways of convincing your audience of something or at least getting your audience to listen to what you have to say,” and these modes can be used for many purposes, good or bad (or somewhere in between). All three modes appear in television commercials. The first category of

commercial contains *ethos*, an appeal to the credibility of the author, speaker, or another party who has information on the topic (Excelsior College). Celebrity endorsements are one type of advertisement that frequently appeal to *ethos* by highlighting a person the public recognizes and, perhaps, likes. For example, L’Oreal showcases different actresses in their segments on hair

products. In a recent clip, Lea Michele of *Glee* fame gives the viewer five reasons to “change shampoo” (876fashion). **Lea Michele is a wealthy woman with access to all the best beauty products; she has great hair—long, silky, and full—and her character on Glee is pretty cool. A consumer might think all of these things and decide Lea Michele knows a thing or two about shampoo.** The next time the consumer is at the store, L’Oreal Total Repair ends up in the cart. 

Professional-opinion ads are another class of *ethos* appeals. In these, the creators highlight a professional, or an actor playing a professional, talking about the product or service. One current Sensodyne toothpaste commercial begins with a dentist extrapolating the benefits of this brand: it is recommended by dentists, and it is “new, fresh, and exciting” (BowserHasSpikes). Consumers are bombarded with different products every day, so one recommendation from a person who appears to be an authority may be just enough to sway their decisions. The danger in *ethos* appeals on television, as in other mediums, is exploitation. A company might conjure up the façade of objective authority by monetary means or by obscuring the fine print that reads “theatrical rendition.”

The second category is *pathos* advertisements, or appeals that utilize emotion. The  Excelsior College OWL explains, “We are more often moved by our emotions than by logic or common sense, so pathos is a powerful mode of persuasion.” Companies that advertise know this and will often extort these emotional reactions. Cruelty commercials are one class of *pathos* appeals and include ads for the ASPCA, religious groups, and humanitarian missions. In one commercial for the ASPCA, singer Sarah McLachlan pleads with viewers to financially support the group while her ballad “Angel” plays and pictures of abused animals slowly fade in and out (Bofeld86). For any soft-hearted animal lover, this combination is excruciating, and many do not resist her plea. The *pathos* is effective.

Another type of *pathos* ad goes for sensation and shock, such as the string of “bad drug” commercials. In one of these, an intense male voice breaks the silence and demands, “Attention parents of boys who took Risperdal” (Pulaski Middleman). Any parent whose child has taken Risperdal or a similar medication is going to immediately be engaged. The voice then relays that some male patients have grown “female breasts” as a result of the drug, and their families have successfully sued the drug manufacturer. The announcement is forceful, fast (only thirty seconds), and meant to raise strong emotions of panic or distaste.

Logos commercials are the final category of persuasive ads. The Excelsior College OWL defines *logos* as “the facts we present in our writing and the logical manner in which we present our ideas.” *Logos* is logic, and logic is usually respected, which gives *logos* in advertising the potential to be the most effective and the most insidious. One type of *logos* argument seeks to convince viewers of a product’s ability to improve life. In the most recent line of Swiffer ads, the company presents a real family who has a cleaning conundrum. For example, Lee and Morty Kaufman are both ninety years old, and traditional cleaning has become dangerous for them. Swiffer then sends them a gift box. Suddenly, “the everyday effect” of the Swiffer extendable duster and WetJet mop have solved the only problem of this adorable couple (Swiffer). The ad ends with statistics on how much cleaner Swiffer products make the home. These products solve a logical problem, and it is, therefore, logical to use them instead of the old products. *Logos* is at work.

The Kaufman ad is also an example of another type of *logos* argument in television: one-upping ads. In these commercials, the company seeks to convince the viewer that their product is better than one the viewer is already using, even if the original product is not necessarily ineffective. Many technology ads use this approach. The Kindle Fire HDX ad demonstrates the

superiority of the Kindle in terms of screen display, weight, and price when compared with the iPad (Kindle). With the exception of price, these are features the average consumer may not notice, but the ad points out the technological inferiority of the iPad point by point. *Logos* now seems to say the Kindle is the better buy, even if there is nothing really problematic about the iPad.

Whether or not viewers pay much attention to television commercials, the messages have an impact, subliminal or overt, on choices about products and service. Companies set out to persuade with these short clips, and they use the classic modes of persuasion—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—to get their audience's attention. The modes of persuasion can take on different forms, as *pathos* does in cruelty commercials and sensation ads, but each is designed to convince the viewer of a certain position, whether honestly or dishonestly.

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