

Abstract: Billboards are a form of outdoor communication medium that is still relevant and effective due to their ability to target a wide audience. The properties of billboards are compared with prominent features of speech and writing to better understand and appreciate how the language of billboard can be used to effectively communicate messages to target audiences. Given the current technological advances, traditional billboards have indeed enabled new and sophisticated means of communication. Language effects on these new mediums are similarly experienced while societal impacts are partly a result of the nature of billboards as a medium.

In 2011, Apple's expenditure on billboard and outdoor ads was the ninth-largest in the United States. Yet, its digital expenditure was less than 10% of its total budget, illustrating Apple's lack of reliance on the web as a branding medium ("Why Billboards?," 2012). As the world gets fragmented between online, print and broadcast as communicative mediums, the outdoor advertising market is often overlooked but continues to grow steadily. An effective medium of communication would be one that would provide the most meaningful and efficient exchange of information between participants and recipients. Given that an outdoor advertising mode like a billboard has the unprecedented ability to appeal to an extensive group of target audiences; it is an efficient communicative medium. Billboards are outdoor advertising structure frequently found in areas with high-traffic such as along busy roads ("Billboard Advertising," 2013). Used for advertising purposes or for providing information, these are printed on large poster sheets and mounted on the structure. Due to their huge size and height these billboards are placed at, they are attention-grabbing and are effective in reaching out to audiences such as passing pedestrians and drivers ("Billboard Advertising," 2013). Furthermore, besides relying on creative slogans and unique visual to convey information to target audiences or the public, they can come equipped with special lighting and display effects thus making billboards a distinct medium that is able to communicate to audiences actively. With these elements being associated with billboard, the language a billboard uses to convey its meaning is dependent on the nature of the medium and expectations of the target audience. Hence, there is a need to compare billboards with the features of spoken and written language in order to understand and gain knowledge on how the use of language in billboards will influence communication with target audience. To achieve this, properties of billboards will be compared with seven features each of speech and writing, introduced by Crystal (2006). Given that billboards are the conventional form of the outdoor medium, current technological developments have led to the evolution of more innovative and unique developed form of communication. Their consequent societal impacts are also similar to conventional billboards.

Statistically, in United States alone, billboard advertising accounts for approximately two-thirds of the total out-of-home (OOH) advertising expenditures, where the total OOH advertising expenditures amounted to

\$6.83 billion in 2011 (Shimp & Andrews, 2007). Additionally, according to Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA), there are currently over 158, 868 bulletin billboard displays in the country. ("Facts & Figures," 2014). Both statistics illustrates the prominence of billboards as a marketing communication. Furthermore, a survey done in America noted that 71% of travelers in vehicles often look at the messages on roadside billboards, suggesting that people do take note of billboard advertising (Williams, 2009). Even though billboards would pale in comparison to other mediums such as the Internet, it is still a significant outdoor medium. In addition, increasingly, billboards are more commonly seen in urban areas of developing countries too due to the booming of the retail market in these countries (). With a variety billboards used around the world, the focus will specifically be on static billboards – traditional largest standard-sized signboards located on major highways, expressways and primary arteries. They are more frequent and necessary especially in urban areas due to the presence of heavier vehicular traffic, ensuring maximum exposure of the billboards.

Billboards require visual messages and graphic appeal in order for an effective and unique form of communication as this incorporates written expression with other forms of expression. Due to the type of communication medium a billboard is, it consists of several time-bound properties that create a much closer type of interaction more typical of speech (Crystal, 2006). Firstly, the placement of billboards along major roads is meant to target traveling drivers, passengers and passers-by. As such, billboards, similar to speech, have a particular group of addressee or target consumers in mind. Therefore, there is great importance to capture them by conveying significant message be it for advertisement, political or personal functions. Secondly, billboards aim to get a message across as quickly as possible, especially to commuters driving by quickly along major roads. On average, reading a billboard would take six seconds which is why the message should be conveyed with around six words ("The 6 Basic Rules of Effective Billboard Advertising," 2012). When a car drives by very quickly, there is a display of the property of time-bound as the recipient only has that few seconds to notice and understand the message on the billboard. Thus, the speed at which a billboard should be read, understood, and/or create a response, is similar to speech where typically the speaker would expect or demand an immediate response from the addressee. Furthermore, billboards are transient in the sense that the message can immediately be ignored, or that viewers will indeed engage with the message. A survey done on U.S residents who noticed billboard advertising message and engaged with it recorded for instance, 56% of them talking about something funny they saw on billboards or that 58% actually learned about a restaurant that they later patronized (Williams, 2009). This survey illustrates that messages on billboard advertisement have the ability to remain or be removed from viewers mind in that short moment, which is similar to a core property of speech. Hence, billboards and speech share many similarities of the time-bound property.

Like most advertisement means, a response to a advertisement stimulus may take anything from seconds to months (Rosendal, 2009). It is very much dependent on how persuasive the message is to the target audience. Likewise, be it used to provide information or for advertising purposes, there is an uncertainty between the moment the billboard message is read or understood by the viewers and their subsequent response. This contrived feature of billboards is similar to the property of texts in which there is a period of delay in time between production and reception (Crystal, 2006). This time-lag creates unpredictability as there is this anticipated effect on whether the message will have a directly appeal on viewers, or simply be ignored. It is made worse especially for billboards that relies more on it texts than visuals to get the message conveyed because the language of the billboard message is read and interpreted by various viewers in different settings. Hence there is an uncertainty on whether the message will be effectively communicated. Another property of text that can be observed occurs when the drivers or passers-by goes past the same billboards on a frequent basis, especially when billboards can be posted from a period of thirty days to one year (Rosendal, 2009). Repeated exposure of the message or brand name over an extensive time period ensures it is subliminally imprinted on their mind. With continuous delivery of this message or brand name, repeated imprint will translate to more effective consumer retention. This is similar to how texts can be read repeatedly and analyzed more closely. Hence, there is an uncertainty on how quickly and directly billboards communicate to viewers but rely on repeated exposure, drawing some similarities to texts.

Billboards are relied on as an outdoor broadcast medium to communicate with the intended audience. As billboards are meant to appeal to time-starved commuters with less internal processing time and close proximity to the point-of-purchase (Maskulka, 1999), they cannot depend on any context to make the meaning of the billboard message clear. As a result, increasingly, billboards are relying on using their own personalized language code to help these consumers utilize as little personal time as possible to obtain information. For instance, the highly successful Nike's "Just Do It" campaign effectively shows how the brevity of the message delivered could in turn appeal universally and remain in the lexicon of many consumers (Maskulka, 1999). The tagline further highlights the choice for time-sensitive media preferences as the message was communicated was short but effective. This feature is somewhat similar to writing since the absence of visuals results in it not directly relying on context to get their meaning across. Hence, visually decontextualized properties are found in both billboards and writings. However, billboards also utilized some properties of speech especially when they contain images that are subject to interpretations with regards to certain contextual factors. For example, a close up shot of a face could suggest intimacy, while a full body shot of an individual could imply a social relationship (Momani, 2008). Moreover, the use of metaphor, hyperbole, symbols or pun are billboard expressions that have powerful influence over target audiences who read them (Kayode, O & S, 2012). This

illustrates how these are expressed with an emphasis that creates significance for the message communicated. Hence, billboards also consist of some extralinguistic properties similar to speech.

One important factor associated with the effectiveness of billboard as a communicative medium is its format (Taylor, Franke & Bang, 2006). The verbal message must be readable, presented in a concise and simple manner and supported with effective visuals (Taylor et al., 2006). As mentioned earlier, the message needs to have no more than six words for optimal delivery of communicative information. As such, unlike writing, billboards cannot contain long sentences or complicated balanced syntactic patterns. It is much more likely that some characteristics of speech such as contracted forms and slang are utilized.

Billboards can be both factually communicative and socially interactive. Like writing, billboards aim to communicate some ideas, and can also be used as a medium to express some facts about a product service, or simply to convey public information. Their main objectives are using visual impact and innovative message that is easy to be read and understood by target audience, and to also communicate details effectively and affordably. For instance, a study on billboards in Ghanaian society reveal that billboards with properly communicated information were regarded to be an effective medium of message transmission, and in communicating their beliefs and values in a far-reaching manner (Baffoe & Asimeng-Boahene, 2011). Conversely, billboards can be socially interactive whereby similar to speech, the billboard message can express the advertiser's attitudes and opinions. For instance, billboards that addressed essential health and social issues in Kigali were mostly monolingual in Rwanda. Despite having English and French as official languages too, this illustrates how Rwanda, the official and national language, is considered to be the best medium to convey and instill a sense of nation unity regarding such socio-political aspects (Rosendal, 2009). This example demonstrates that the choice of language used on billboards behaves like speech in that both functions can reveal inherent views. The advertiser may have personal feelings about the preference of the public and the choice of language used achieved intended effects on the audience. In addition, some billboards make use of non-verbal features to stand out and innovate themselves from their competitors. For instance, one billboard by The Economist features a giant light bulb stuck in the middle of the signboard which uses motion sensor to detect when an individual passes under it, causing it to switch on (Kusinitz, 2014). This implies that reading The Economist will expose that individual to great ideas. Even though this billboard conveyed its message utilizing a property of speech rather than the more commonly used texts, it is often regarded one of the most innovative and memorable billboard in the world. Hence, overall, billboards are versatile as a medium of communication.

Given that placement of billboards are expensive, multiple checks have to be done to ensure that is published without any errors. In this sense, billboards would follow the property of writing where revision of texts can be made immediately. However, once the billboards are posted out, any errors discovered would already have been made public. The billboard can be withdrawn but there would already be a negative effect. For example, advertisement fails are sometimes unavoidable or unimaginable in the case of sliding the van door of Starbucks and turning their brand name into a word “sucks” just beside their logo (“20 Worst Advertising Placement Fails,” 2012). Similar to speech, the error could be revisable however the consequences of a failed communication would already culminate.

Lastly, the medium of billboard encompasses properties of being graphically rich. Advertising messages tend to have visual elements like colored images, typography, with emphasis on the size of the font, underline, asterisks or repeated expression to further consolidate the intended message. These are ways to effectively communicate using a billboard medium as it draws attention, preoccupy the mind and appeal emotionally and mentally. As a result of utilizing some graphic conventions for emphasis purposes, billboards do share some unique features of writing too.

Being a broadcast and outdoor medium, there will still be a demand for billboards advertising despite strong competition from other advertising sources because they are able to reach a vast number of audiences. However, in this technologically advanced world, increasingly, billboard advertising is becoming sophisticated. Digital billboards represent the biggest development in the billboard industry (Shimp & Andrews, 2007). Instead of traditional billboards that are limited to displaying a static single advertising message throughout their contract period, advertisements displayed on electronic billboards are frequently alternated (Shimp & Andrews, 2007). As such, electronic billboards are more susceptible to repeated revisions of the advertising message due to its non-static form. This is one property of writing that electronic billboards also share. Furthermore, electronic billboards exercise great flexibility as unlike the contract commitment of traditional billboards, the advertiser can choose to arrange for the advertisement to be broadcasted for even a short period of time or even in multiple locations (Towle, 2014). The transient property of writing is more apparent in electronic billboards than traditional billboards as more advertising messages are read and understood by consumers. With the content evolving and changing often, it is also more visually appealing as well as informative, hence providing the consumers with more means to likely be appealed to what the billboards communicate.

Furthermore, instead of the traditional, one-sided or two-sided billboards commonly seen, three-sided billboards are an evolved communication medium. These three-message signs allow for three individual

advertising messages to be displayed and rotated, or changed every few seconds. This is an improvement from the traditional billboards and an even more effective medium of captivating attention and maximizes brand impact. However, these three-sided billboards still retains similar language properties as the traditional ones discussed earlier. Additionally, the creative possibilities of conventional billboard have led to the sophisticated and creative three-dimensional billboards as an emerging new medium. Especially with current technological advances, three-dimensional billboards are able to present creative and artistic expressions that will leave a lasting impact without obscuring the intended message (Azzaro & Binder, 2008). Effects on language would include three-dimensional billboards being far more graphically rich since visual elements would be the highlight of the medium in order to effectively communicate the meaning of the message. Hence, properties of writing are expressed. Moreover, the extreme innovation of three-dimensional billboards tend to create a message that is ambiguous and not easy to interpret given the short time a driver has to read and understand it. Hence, like speech properties, there is a need for contextual factors so that the main objective to be communicated will be absorbed. Another new innovation that the billboard has enabled is in the form of advertising artwork. It consists of a multi-faceted prismatic facing such that as the viewer approaches the billboard, an image is seen, but as they pass by it, the viewer's angle of view is changed hence revealing a different image ("How Products Are Made," 2014). By being able to deliver two different advertising messages with a single mean, this unique innovation has made billboards continue to be effective and economically practical mediums.

Regarding aforementioned new sophisticated mediums billboards have enable, societal impacts like environmental and safety concerns are most predominant. For instance, three-dimensional billboards are criticized to be distracting to drivers due to their high visibility and flashy visuals. Similarly, electronic billboards are deemed too distracting that there can be safety issues hence they are now regulated. Restrictions such as limiting the brightness of displays, removal of elaborate transitional effects as the messages rotate are enforced to reduce any safety risks billboards as a broadcast medium will cause ("Digital Billboards,"2012). All forms of billboards are also often criticized for being placed along major roads at the expense of cutting down trees and endangering wildlife.

In conclusion, billboards usually utilize both short text and eye-catching visual to convey an effective message. Knowing the properties of both speech and writing to compare with the language properties billboards uses is extremely useful to enable advertisers to better engage billboards as an enhanced communicative medium. With the advances of today's technology, this knowledge is very relevant and significant especially when it facilitates new communication mediums. A more global context should be studied so to better understand how language can be used to communicate elsewhere.

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