



ADVERTISING AS ŚABDA-PRAMĀṆĀBHĀSA: A NAVYA-NYĀYA ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONY AND EPISTEMIC RELIABILITY

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Abstract:

Advertising is often studied from the perspectives of ethics, psychology, marketing, and consumer behaviour. These approaches explain how advertisements persuade people and influence their choices. However, they pay much less attention to a more basic philosophical question. Can advertising produce genuine knowledge? Every day, advertisements present claims such as "*clinically proven*," "*doctor recommended*," "*100% natural*," or "*eco-friendly*." These statements ask consumers to believe something about a product without independently examining the evidence. In this way, advertising functions not only as a tool of persuasion but also as a source of testimony.

This article examines advertising through the framework of classical Indian epistemology. It argues that many advertisements do not function as genuine śabda-pramāṇa (valid verbal testimony). Instead, they operate as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa, the appearance of trustworthy testimony without its essential epistemic foundation. The analysis combines three major philosophical traditions. Nyāya provides the theory of āptatva, which explains when testimony deserves trust. Mīmāṃsā contributes the concepts of svataḥ-prāmāṇya and bādha, showing how apparently reliable cognition may later be defeated by stronger evidence. Navya-Nyāya adds a formal analysis of cognition through the concepts of viśeṣaṇa, viśeṣya, and avacchedaka, making it possible to identify structural weaknesses in advertising claims with great precision.

The article argues that contemporary advertising often depends on borrowed authority, vague qualifiers, selective disclosure, and unspecified conditions. These strategies encourage consumers to form confident beliefs while leaving the evidential basis of those beliefs incomplete. Through a series of philosophical case studies, the paper demonstrates that classical Indian theories of testimony remain highly relevant for analysing modern commercial communication. It concludes that Indian epistemology offers a constructive framework for evaluating advertising, not by asking only whether a claim is true or false, but by examining whether it satisfies the conditions required for reliable testimony.

Keywords: Śabda-pramāṇa, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Navya-Nyāya, advertising, testimony, epistemology, consumer knowledge

1. Introduction

Advertising has become one of the most influential forms of communication in modern society. Every day people encounter hundreds of commercial messages through television, newspapers, social media, websites, and digital platforms. These advertisements do more than introduce products. They shape opinions, influence preferences, and encourage people to make decisions. In many situations, consumers know very little about a product before seeing an advertisement. As a result, they often rely on advertising as an important source of information.

Most studies of advertising focus on its economic value or its psychological effects. Researchers examine how advertisements create desire, influence purchasing behaviour, or build brand identity. Ethical discussions usually ask whether advertisements are misleading or manipulative. These approaches have produced valuable insights, but they rarely address a more fundamental philosophical issue. Can advertising serve as a reliable source of knowledge? In other words, when consumers accept the claims made in advertisements, are they acquiring genuine knowledge or merely forming beliefs that appear justified?

This question becomes increasingly important in today's information-rich society. Advertisements frequently use scientific language, expert opinions, celebrity endorsements, environmental claims, and statistical data. Phrases



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such as "*clinically proven*," "*expert approved*," "*India's most trusted brand*," or "*100% natural*" are designed to create confidence. Most consumers do not verify these claims independently. Instead, they accept them because the language itself appears reliable. Advertising therefore performs an epistemic function. It does not merely persuade people to buy products. It also encourages them to believe that certain claims are true.

Classical Indian philosophy provides a powerful framework for examining this problem. Among the Indian schools of thought, Nyāya developed one of the most sophisticated theories of testimony. It recognises śabda, or verbal testimony, as an independent source of valid knowledge. However, testimony becomes a valid pramāṇa only under specific conditions. The speaker must possess genuine knowledge of the subject. The statement must be free from error. Most importantly, the speaker must communicate with the intention of benefiting the listener rather than serving personal interests. Trust, therefore, is not automatic. It must be earned through epistemic competence and ethical responsibility.

This classical theory raises an important challenge for contemporary advertising. Commercial advertisements certainly communicate information, but their primary goal is rarely the disinterested transmission of truth. Their central purpose is to persuade consumers and increase sales. This commercial objective creates a tension between persuasion and knowledge. Even when advertisements contain factually correct statements, they often present only selected evidence, omit important qualifications, or use language that appears more precise than it actually is. Consequently, consumers may develop confidence in claims whose evidential basis remains incomplete.

The present article argues that many advertisements should not be understood as genuine instances of śabda-pramāṇa. Instead, they are better described as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa, that is, the appearance of valid testimony. They resemble trustworthy communication in their external form, yet they often fail to satisfy the epistemic conditions required for genuine knowledge. Their persuasive power comes not from complete justification but from carefully constructed impressions of reliability.

To develop this argument, the article combines three complementary traditions within classical Indian epistemology. The first is Nyāya, which provides the ethical and epistemic criteria for trustworthy testimony through the concept of āptatva. The second is Mīmāṃsā, whose theory of svataḥ-prāmāṇya explains why people naturally trust linguistic communication until stronger evidence defeats that trust through bādha. The third is Navya-Nyāya, whose highly refined logical language makes it possible to analyse the internal structure of cognition. Concepts such as viśeṣaṇa, viśeṣya, and avacchedaka reveal why many advertising claims appear complete while remaining epistemically underdetermined.

The purpose of this study is not to argue that all advertisements are false or intentionally deceptive. Many advertisements communicate genuine information, and many products perform exactly as described. The concern of this paper is structural rather than moral. It asks whether the cognitive process generated by advertising satisfies the conditions necessary for reliable testimony. Even a factually correct statement may fail as testimony if the evidence supporting it remains hidden or if essential qualifications are omitted.

The discussion also extends beyond commercial advertising. The same epistemic mechanisms operate in influencer culture, political campaigns, public relations, and AI-generated recommendations. Modern societies increasingly depend on testimony from sources that appear credible but whose authority is often difficult to evaluate. Classical Indian epistemology therefore offers more than historical interest. It provides conceptual tools for understanding how trust is created, transferred, manipulated, and sometimes misplaced in contemporary public life.

The following sections examine this problem in detail. First, the paper analyses Nyāya's theory of trustworthy testimony. It then turns to Mīmāṃsā's account of epistemic validity and defeat. Finally, it employs the formal analytical framework of Navya-Nyāya to explain why many advertising claims generate the appearance of knowledge while lacking the epistemic conditions required for genuine śabda-pramāṇa.



2. Śabda-Pramāṇa in Nyāya: Āpta, Authority, and the Ethics of Testimony

Nyāya offers one of the most systematic accounts of verbal testimony. It recognises śabda as an independent means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). Since we cannot personally verify everything we know, much of our knowledge comes through others. We learn from teachers, doctors, researchers, news reports, and other sources. Testimony is therefore an essential part of everyday life.

Yet Nyāya does not regard every statement as reliable. Valid testimony must come from an āpta, or trustworthy speaker. Gautama states in the *Nyāya Sūtra* (1.1.7), *āptopadeśaḥ śabdaḥ*—authoritative testimony is the instruction of an āpta.

The idea of *āptatva* involves more than simply being a credible speaker. The speaker must possess genuine knowledge, be free from error, and communicate with the welfare of the listener in mind. The last condition, *hitaiṣitā*, is especially important. Testimony is not merely the transfer of information; it is also an ethical relation between speaker and hearer.

Thus, Nyāya closely connects epistemology with ethics. The truth of a statement matters, but so does the intention and reliability of the person communicate it. Greed, deception, bias, and self-interest can weaken the epistemic value of testimony. Vātsyāyana similarly emphasises that defects in the speaker can affect the reliability of what is communicated.

This framework is particularly useful for analysing modern advertising. Advertisements provide information about products, services, quality, effectiveness, and performance. In this sense, they resemble ordinary testimony. However, their primary purpose is usually persuasion and commercial gain, not the disinterested communication of knowledge.

An advertisement may contain factually correct information and still raise an epistemic concern. Commercial messages often select information that makes a product attractive while giving less attention to limitations, risks, or competing evidence. Expressions such as “doctor recommended,” “scientifically tested,” or “expert approved” can create an impression of authority without clearly identifying the experts, methods, evidence, or conditions behind the claim.

From a Nyāya perspective, therefore, the issue is not simply whether an advertising claim is true. The deeper question is whether the source satisfies the conditions of *āptatva*. Strategic omission is especially significant because it may weaken *hitaiṣitā*. When consumers are encouraged to believe without receiving sufficient information for independent judgment, communication becomes persuasive rather than genuinely informative.

Nyāya does not require us to reject every advertisement. Rather, it provides a standard for evaluating testimony. Competence, truthfulness, transparency, and concern for the hearer's welfare are essential to trustworthy communication. Advertising may imitate the external form of *śabda-pramāṇa*, but many commercial claims fail to meet these deeper conditions of *āptatva*.

This provides the first stage of the present argument. The next section turns to the Mīmāṃsā theory of svataḥ-pramāṇya and bādha to examine how apparently reliable advertising claims may lose their credibility when confronted with wider contextual evidence.

3. Mīmāṃsā on Testimony: Svataḥ-Prāmāṇya and Bādha

While Nyāya explains the validity of testimony through the reliability of the speaker, Mīmāṃsā approaches the issue differently. It focuses on the validity of the cognition produced by language. This shift from the speaker to cognition provides an important way to understand why advertising may initially appear trustworthy but later lose its credibility.



A central Mīmāṃsā principle is svataḥ-prāmāṇya, or the intrinsic validity of cognition. According to Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, cognition is accepted as valid when it first arises, unless there is a reason to doubt it. This reflects ordinary human experience. We normally trust what we hear or understand from teachers, doctors, institutions, and other sources. Constantly demanding independent verification would make ordinary communication impossible.

Cognition, however, remains valid only until it is defeated by stronger evidence. This process of epistemic defeat is known as bādha. A cognition that initially appears correct may later be rejected when new and more reliable evidence contradicts it. Thus, invalidity is not necessarily present at the beginning; it may emerge through subsequent experience or evidence.

This framework is particularly useful for analysing advertising. Commercial messages often create immediate confidence through attractive presentation, scientific language, expert endorsements, and claims such as “clinically proven” or “scientifically tested.” Consumers may accept such claims because they resemble the language of genuine scientific authority.

The initial cognition therefore appears valid. However, its status may change when further evidence becomes available. A consumer may discover that a study involved very few participants, was funded by the manufacturer, lacked independent verification, or ignored important limitations. The original belief then becomes doubtful or is rejected. In Mīmāṃsā terms, the earlier cognition has been bādha, or defeated, by stronger evidence.

Importantly, the advertisement need not be completely false for this to happen. A product may genuinely have undergone clinical testing, and the statement “clinically proven” may be technically defensible. Yet the broader belief created in the consumer may go beyond what the evidence supports. The problem, therefore, lies not only in falsehood but also in partial disclosure and misleading implication.

The same problem appears in expressions such as “100% natural,” “premium,” “eco-friendly,” and “expert approved.” Such terms often create strong impressions without clearly defining what they mean. Consumers may interpret them more broadly than the evidence warrants. Later information can then defeat the original interpretation.

Mīmāṃsā thus offers an important insight into advertising; literal truth does not always guarantee epistemic reliability. A statement may be technically true while still producing a belief that cannot withstand fuller evidence. What is omitted can therefore be as important as what is explicitly stated.

This complements the Nyāya analysis. Nyāya asks whether the speaker deserves trust, while Mīmāṃsā asks whether the resulting cognition survives stronger evidence. Together, they show how advertising can fail both at the level of communicative authority and at the level of epistemic stability.

The next section turns to Navya-Nyāya, whose concepts of *viśeṣaṇa*, *viśeṣya*, and *avacchedaka* provide a more precise account of how advertising creates an appearance of certainty even when its epistemic foundation remains incomplete.

4. Navya-Nyāya and the Structure of Advertising Cognition

Nyāya explains why testimony depends on a trustworthy speaker, while Mīmāṃsā shows how an initially accepted cognition may later be defeated by stronger evidence. Yet one question remains; why do advertisements appear so convincing even when their epistemic foundation is incomplete?

Navya-Nyāya provides a useful answer. Developed by thinkers such as Gaṅgeśa, Raghunātha Śiromaṇi, Mathurānātha Tarkavāgiśa, and Gadādhara Bhaṭṭācārya, it developed a precise language for analysing the structure of cognition. This framework is particularly useful for examining how advertising creates an appearance of certainty.



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4.1 Qualified Cognition and Advertising

Navya-Nyāya holds that ordinary cognition is generally *viśiṣṭa-jñāna*, or qualified cognition. We usually know an object together with some qualifying property. In the cognition “blue lotus,” for example, the lotus is the *viśeṣya* (the qualified object), while blueness is the *viśeṣaṇa* (the qualifier).

Advertising works in much the same way. In the claim, “This medicine is clinically proven,” the medicine is the *viśeṣya*, while “clinically proven” functions as the *viśeṣaṇa*. The qualifier gives the product an appearance of scientific credibility.

Advertising relies heavily on such qualifiers; “natural,” “safe,” “premium,” “organic,” “eco-friendly,” “expert approved,” and “scientifically tested.” These words do more than describe a product. They shape how consumers understand it and encourage them to associate it with desirable qualities.

However, a qualifier must have a properly established basis. This is where the Navya-Nyāya concept of *avacchedaka*, or delimiting condition, becomes important. An *avacchedaka* determines the precise conditions under which a property can legitimately be attributed to an object.

Consider the claim “clinically proven.” A meaningful evaluation requires information about the clinical trial, participants, methods, controls, researchers, and independent verification. These conditions help determine what exactly “clinically proven” means. Without them, the qualifier remains vague and its epistemic scope is unclear.

The same problem occurs with expressions such as “100% natural” or “eco-friendly.” What counts as “natural”? Does it concern ingredients, production, or processing? What makes a product “eco-friendly”? Without clearly defined conditions, consumers may interpret these qualifiers more broadly than the evidence permits.

4.2 The Illusion of Certainty

This helps explain the persuasive power of advertising. Advertisements often present a statement that looks epistemically complete, even when important supporting conditions remain unstated. Consumers then fill these gaps with their own assumptions.

For example, “expert recommended” may lead consumers to assume that qualified experts have independently evaluated the product. “Scientifically tested” may suggest rigorous and objective research. Yet the advertisement may provide little information about the relevant experts, methods, or evidence.

Thus, advertising does not always persuade through direct falsehood. It often works by allowing consumers to complete an incomplete epistemic picture. The resulting cognition appears determinate, although the conditions supporting the qualifier have not been adequately established. In Navya-Nyāya terms, it resembles an *avacchedaka-rahita-viśeṣaṇa-janya-jñāna*—a cognition produced by a qualifier whose delimiting condition has not been properly established.

4.3 From Śabda-Pramāṇa to Śabda-Pramāṇābhāsa

This analysis leads to the central claim of the present study. Advertising certainly produces *śabda-janya-jñāna*, or cognition generated through language. It also produces *viśiṣṭa-jñāna*, since products are presented together with desirable qualities. What is often missing is a properly established *avacchedaka* that justifies those qualifications.

The resulting cognition therefore resembles valid testimony without fully satisfying the conditions of *śabda-pramāṇa*. This is why many advertising claims can be understood as *śabda-pramāṇābhāsa*—an appearance of valid testimony rather than genuine valid testimony.



This does not mean that every advertisement is false. The point is more precise. When advertising relies on vague qualifiers, borrowed authority, selective disclosure, or undefined standards, the cognition it produces becomes epistemically underdetermined.

Navya-Nyāya therefore offers a powerful way to understand persuasive communication. The strength of advertising often lies not simply in the evidence it presents, but in the evidence it encourages consumers to assume.

The following case studies apply this framework to common forms of contemporary advertising and show how Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Navya-Nyāya together explain why persuasive claims can resemble knowledge while falling short of genuine śabda-pramāṇa.

5. Case Studies: Advertising as Śabda-Pramāṇabhāsa

The theoretical discussion developed in the previous sections becomes clearer when applied to familiar advertising practices. Modern advertisements regularly employ expressions that appear informative and trustworthy. Consumers often accept these claims without examining the evidence behind them. The purpose of the following case studies is not to argue that every advertisement is deceptive. Rather, they demonstrate how classical Indian epistemology helps us distinguish between genuine verbal testimony and the appearance of trustworthy testimony.

Each example is examined through the complementary perspectives of Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Navya-Nyāya. Together, these traditions reveal different dimensions of the same epistemic problem.

5.1 Case Study I: "Clinically Proven"

Health supplements, herbal medicines, cosmetic products, and nutritional drinks frequently advertise themselves as "clinically proven." The expression immediately creates confidence because it invokes the authority of modern medical science. Consumers naturally associate the phrase with rigorous research, expert evaluation, and objective evidence.

From the standpoint of Nyāya, however, the crucial issue is not the attractiveness of the language but the trustworthiness of the testimony. A statement deserves acceptance only when it comes from an āpta, a person who possesses relevant knowledge and communicates it with the sincere intention of benefiting others.

In commercial advertising, this condition becomes difficult to establish. Companies usually possess information about their own products, but they also have a financial interest in presenting those products in the most favourable way. This commercial motive does not automatically make the testimony false. It does, however, raise important questions about impartiality and completeness.

Suppose a company advertises that its supplement is clinically proven to improve memory. The claim may be based on an actual clinical study. Yet the advertisement may omit several important facts. The study may have involved only a small number of participants. It may have lasted only a few weeks. It may have been funded by the manufacturer, or its conclusions may not have been confirmed by independent researchers.

Such omissions are epistemically significant. They prevent consumers from evaluating the strength of the evidence for themselves. According to Nyāya, this weakens the speaker's hitaiṣitā, the genuine concern for the listener's welfare. The advertisement therefore resembles trustworthy testimony without fully satisfying the ethical conditions required for śabda-pramāṇa.

Mīmāṃsā explains the same phenomenon from a different perspective. When consumers first encounter the phrase "clinically proven," they usually accept it without hesitation. The statement appears reasonable and enjoys svataḥ-prāmāṇya, or prima facie validity. There is no immediate reason to doubt the claim.



This confidence may disappear when additional information becomes available. Independent medical reviews may question the quality of the research. Larger clinical trials may produce different results. Regulatory agencies may require changes to the advertising claim. Consumers who learn these facts revise their earlier beliefs.

This revision is an example of *bādha*, the defeat of an earlier cognition by stronger evidence. The original belief appeared reliable when it was first formed, but it failed to withstand closer examination. The problem is therefore not simply that the advertisement might be false. Rather, its apparent authority cannot survive the wider evidential context.

Navya-Nyāya offers the most detailed explanation of this epistemic weakness.

The advertisement produces a qualified cognition.

The *viśeṣya* is the health supplement and the *viśeṣaṇa* is the property of being *clinically proven*. The consumer therefore understands the product as scientifically verified.

The crucial question concerns the *avacchedaka* of this qualifier. What precisely justifies calling the product clinically proven? Is the claim based on double-blind clinical trials? Were the results statistically significant? Were the studies independently replicated? Which scientific standards were applied?

Most advertisements never answer these questions. Instead, they simply present the qualifier as though its meaning were already obvious. The consumer receives the appearance of complete scientific knowledge while the evidential foundation remains only partially disclosed.

The resulting cognition is therefore *avacchedaka-rahita-viśeṣaṇa-janya-jñāna*, a cognition produced by a qualifier whose delimiting condition has not been properly established.

This analysis demonstrates an important point. The weakness of the advertisement does not necessarily lie in factual falsehood. It lies in epistemic incompleteness. The language resembles scientific testimony, but the conditions that justify scientific authority remain hidden.

For this reason, the claim functions more accurately as *śabda-pramāṇābhāsa* than as genuine *śabda-pramāṇa*.

5.2 Case Study II: "100% Natural"

The expression "100% natural" has become one of the most popular claims in contemporary advertising. It appears on food products, cosmetics, herbal medicines, beverages, and nutritional supplements. The phrase immediately evokes ideas of purity, safety, health, and environmental responsibility.

Unlike *clinically proven*, however, the word *natural* has no universally accepted definition. Its persuasive power often depends precisely on this flexibility.

Nyāya begins by asking whether the advertiser deserves the status of an *āpta*. Consumers usually assume that the company accurately describes the product. This assumption is understandable because ordinary language normally functions as a reliable means of communication.

The difficulty arises when important qualifications remain undisclosed.

A product may indeed contain ingredients derived from natural sources. At the same time, those ingredients may undergo extensive industrial processing. Synthetic preservatives, flavour enhancers, stabilisers, colouring agents, or chemical treatments may also be present. None of these details necessarily makes the advertisement false. Yet their omission creates an incomplete picture of the product.



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Nyāya therefore shifts attention from literal accuracy to epistemic responsibility. Reliable testimony requires openness as well as truthfulness. When commercially significant information is selectively presented, the ethical conditions of āptatva become uncertain.

Mīmāṃsā highlights another difficulty.

The meaning of natural varies from one context to another. Some consumers interpret it as *chemical-free*. Others understand it to mean *plant-derived*, *organically grown*, or *minimally processed*. The advertiser may have an entirely different definition in mind.

Initially, this ambiguity remains unnoticed. The cognition appears perfectly acceptable because no contrary evidence is available.

Later, consumers may discover that the product contains artificial additives or that regulatory agencies define *natural* very differently from popular understanding. At this stage, the original cognition is defeated through bādha.

Again, the issue is not simply factual falsity. The problem is semantic instability. The advertisement depends upon a word whose meaning changes according to context.

Navya-Nyāya explains this instability with greater precision.

The advertisement generates the cognition of a product qualified by the property of naturalness.

Here, Viśeṣya is the product and Viśeṣaṇa is natural.

For this cognition to become genuine knowledge, the qualifier must possess a clearly established avacchedaka. The advertisement should specify what standard of naturalness it employs. Does the claim concern the origin of the ingredients? The manufacturing process? The absence of synthetic chemicals? Independent certification? Organic farming? Each possibility establishes a different delimiting condition.

In practice, advertisements rarely provide such clarification.

Consumers therefore supply their own interpretations. The same expression acquires different meanings for different audiences. The qualifier appears definite while remaining epistemically indeterminate.

Navya-Nyāya describes this as avacchedaka-vyabhicāra. The delimiting condition shifts from one interpretation to another without remaining fixed by objective epistemic standards.

The result is an appearance of certainty without genuine determination. Consumers believe they have acquired precise knowledge, but the conceptual basis of that knowledge remains unstable.

The phrase "100% natural" therefore illustrates one of the central claims of this article. Advertising often persuades not by presenting false information but by employing attractive qualifiers whose epistemic conditions remain unspecified. Such language creates confidence while leaving essential questions unanswered.

Consequently, the claim is better understood as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa. It imitates the form of reliable testimony without fully satisfying the conditions required for valid verbal knowledge.

5.3 Case Study III: Celebrity Endorsements and Borrowed Āptatva

Celebrity endorsements have become one of the most effective advertising strategies in contemporary marketing. Film actors, athletes, musicians, and social media influencers regularly promote financial products, medicines, nutritional supplements, beauty products, and health services. Their public image often creates an immediate sense of trust. Consumers tend to believe that if a respected public figure recommends a product, the recommendation must be reliable.



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Classical Indian epistemology encourages us to examine this assumption more carefully.

According to Nyāya, testimony becomes valid only when it comes from an āpta. An āpta is not simply a famous or respected person. Rather, an āpta possesses genuine knowledge of the relevant subject and communicates that knowledge with the intention of benefiting the listener.

Celebrity endorsements rarely satisfy these conditions.

A successful actor may possess extraordinary skill in acting but have no professional knowledge of medicine. A famous athlete may understand sports training but lack expertise in financial investment. Likewise, a popular singer may know little about nutritional science or environmental policy. Their public reputation belongs to one field, while the advertisement asks consumers to trust them in an entirely different one.

The problem, therefore, is not the celebrity's popularity. The problem is the transfer of authority from one domain to another.

Consumers often confuse social admiration with epistemic competence. They assume that success in one profession automatically guarantees reliability in another. Nyāya identifies this as an error in recognising āptatva. Public prestige is mistaken for genuine testimonial authority.

This confusion may be described as āpta-bhrānti, a mistaken attribution of trustworthiness. The audience believes that the speaker deserves confidence even though the relevant expertise has never been established.

The celebrity may honestly believe in the product. They may even use it personally. However, sincerity alone cannot replace specialised knowledge. Personal preference does not create epistemic authority.

Mīmāṃsā explains why such endorsements appear convincing when consumers first encounter them.

Most people already trust familiar public figures. Years of exposure through films, sports, or television create a sense of personal familiarity. When these individuals recommend a product, consumers naturally extend their existing confidence to the advertised item. The resulting cognition enjoys svataḥ-prāmānya because no immediate reason exists to question the recommendation.

This confidence often changes once additional information becomes available.

Consumers may learn that the celebrity received substantial financial compensation for the endorsement. They may discover that the individual never participated in product testing or lacked any professional knowledge of the claims being made. Independent investigations may reveal that the recommendation was based entirely on advertising contracts rather than personal expertise.

Such information functions as bādha. The original cognition loses its apparent certainty because its basis has changed. The endorsement no longer appears to be expert testimony. Instead, it is recognised as commercial promotion.

Navya-Nyāya provides an even more precise diagnosis.

Suppose the advertisement states; "This investment plan is completely secure." The product claim becomes the viśeṣya, while the celebrity's credibility functions as the viśeṣaṇa. The consumer accepts the investment because it is presented through a trusted public figure.

For this cognition to become valid, however, the celebrity's authority must itself possess an appropriate avacchedaka. The relevant delimiting condition would be professional expertise in finance, economics, or investment management.



Instead, the advertisement substitutes popularity for competence.

The celebrity's fame certainly exists, but fame is not the epistemic condition that justifies financial advice. The qualifier therefore rests upon an inappropriate foundation.

Navya-Nyāya describes this structural defect as *avacchedaka-vyabhicāra*. The delimiting condition deviates from what is actually required for valid cognition. An epistemically irrelevant property is treated as though it were epistemically decisive.

The resulting cognition appears fully justified because consumers already admire the celebrity. In reality, the justification has been borrowed from another domain where it does not properly belong.

Celebrity endorsements therefore illustrate an important feature of modern advertising. They do not usually depend upon ambiguous language. Instead, they rely upon the transfer of trust. Authority is shifted from one sphere of life to another without establishing the competence required for genuine testimony.

Consequently, these endorsements function more appropriately as *śabda-pramāṇābhāsa* than as genuine *śabda-pramāṇa*.

5.4 Case Study IV: Greenwashing and "Eco-Friendly" Claims

Environmental concerns have become an important part of public life nowadays. Consumers increasingly prefer products that appear environmentally responsible. Companies have responded by incorporating expressions such as "eco-friendly," "green," "sustainable," and "carbon neutral" into their advertising campaigns.

Some organisations genuinely invest in sustainable production. Others use environmental language primarily as a marketing strategy. This practice, commonly known as greenwashing, provides another useful example for epistemic analysis.

From the perspective of Nyāya, environmental advertising again raises the question of *āptatva*.

When companies describe their products as environmentally friendly, they implicitly present themselves as trustworthy authorities on environmental responsibility. Consumers are encouraged to believe that purchasing the product contributes to ecological well-being.

However, advertisements often highlight only selected aspects of environmental performance.

A company may emphasise recyclable packaging while remaining silent about manufacturing emissions. Another may promote reduced plastic use while ignoring unsustainable resource extraction or excessive transportation costs. Some advertisements mention carbon offsets without explaining how these programmes operate.

Such selective disclosure weakens the reliability of testimony.

Nyāya does not require advertisers to describe every detail of production. Nevertheless, trustworthy communication demands sufficient openness for consumers to make informed judgments. When essential information is omitted, the ethical foundation of testimony becomes uncertain.

Mīmāṃsā approaches the issue through language itself.

Expressions such as eco-friendly and sustainable possess strong emotional appeal. At the same time, their meanings often remain remarkably flexible.

One company uses eco-friendly to refer to recyclable packaging.

Another uses it for plant-based ingredients.



A third applies the same expression because the manufacturing process produces fewer carbon emissions.

Each claim may be partially correct. Yet none of these meanings is identical.

Initially, consumers accept the advertisement because the language sounds familiar and morally attractive. The cognition therefore enjoys svataḥ-prāmāṇya.

Later, broader environmental investigations may reveal extensive pollution elsewhere in the product's life cycle. Independent reports may identify harmful supply-chain practices or unsustainable sourcing methods. Once this information becomes available, the original cognition is defeated through bādha.

The difficulty again lies not only in factual accuracy but also in incomplete contextual understanding.

Navya-Nyāya explains this structural weakness with particular clarity.

The product becomes the viśeṣya.

The expression eco-friendly functions as the viśeṣaṇa.

For this qualifier to generate valid knowledge, its application must be fixed by a clear avacchedaka. Such conditions might include recognised environmental certification, independently verified life-cycle assessments, transparent sustainability reporting, or internationally accepted ecological standards.

Most advertisements provide none of these details. Instead, consumers are left to interpret the qualifier according to their own expectations.

Different audiences therefore attach different meanings to the same expression. The company may later defend its claim using one criterion, while consumers originally understood it according to another.

This shifting interpretation represents another instance of avacchedaka-vyabhicāra.

The qualifier appears stable, but its epistemic basis changes from one context to another.

As a result, consumers acquire confidence without receiving a fully determined cognition. The advertisement creates the appearance of environmental knowledge while leaving its evidential foundation unspecified.

Greenwashing therefore demonstrates that advertising can borrow moral authority in much the same way that celebrity endorsements borrow social authority. In both cases, the persuasive force of the message exceeds the epistemic support actually provided.

The claim is best understood as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa. It resembles trustworthy testimony but fails to establish the conditions required for genuine verbal knowledge.

5.5 Philosophical Significance of the Case Studies

Taken together, these four examples reveal a common pattern. Advertising rarely persuades through outright falsehood alone. More often, it succeeds by presenting incomplete evidence, vague qualifiers, transferred authority, or unspecified standards.

Nyāya exposes the ethical weaknesses of such testimony through the concept of āptatva. Mīmāṃsā explains why these claims initially appear reliable yet later lose credibility through bādha. Navya-Nyāya identifies the deeper structural problem by showing that the qualifiers used in advertising frequently lack properly established avacchedakas.



The result is not necessarily false knowledge but epistemically incomplete cognition. Consumers experience the confidence associated with reliable testimony without receiving the conditions necessary to justify that confidence. This is precisely why much contemporary advertising is better understood as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa rather than genuine śabda-pramāṇa.

6. Social and Regulatory Implications: Towards an Epistemic Framework for Advertising

The philosophical analysis of advertising has implications beyond commercial communication. It raises broader questions about public trust, consumer protection, and the ethics of communication. If advertising functions as a form of testimony, it should be evaluated not only by legal and commercial standards but also by epistemic standards.

Most advertising regulations focus on factual accuracy. This is necessary, but it is not always sufficient. An advertisement may avoid making a clearly false statement while still encouraging consumers to draw conclusions that go beyond the available evidence.

Nyāya helps clarify this problem. Reliable testimony depends on the competence, honesty, and intention of the speaker. A statement does not become trustworthy simply because it sounds scientific or is presented confidently. Yet commercial advertising often encourages selective disclosure. Positive evidence is emphasised, while limitations and uncertainties receive less attention. The result may be persuasive communication without sufficient epistemic completeness.

Mīmāṃsā adds another dimension. Consumers normally accept information when they first encounter it. This is a natural feature of cognition. We cannot independently verify every claim before acting on it. The problem arises when such beliefs repeatedly collapse under later investigation. When consumers discover that attractive claims cannot withstand stronger evidence, trust in communication gradually declines.

Navya-Nyāya further shows how advertising creates this appearance of certainty. Terms such as “clinically proven,” “natural,” “expert recommended,” and “eco-friendly” function as qualifiers, but the conditions that justify them are often unclear. The central regulatory question, therefore, should not be only whether a claim is literally true. It should also ask whether the epistemic basis of the claim is transparent.

An epistemically responsible advertisement should make important supporting conditions visible. A claim such as “clinically proven” should indicate the nature of the evidence behind it. Similarly, environmental claims such as “eco-friendly” or “carbon neutral” should identify the relevant standards, measurements, or certifications. Such transparency does not unnecessarily restrict commercial communication. Rather, it enables consumers to make more informed choices.

This approach also protects consumer autonomy. Freedom of choice has little meaning when important evidence is hidden behind persuasive language. Genuine choice requires access to sufficient information for rational judgment.

Classical Indian epistemology therefore offers a constructive model for advertising regulation. Nyāya does not reject testimony; it recognises it as an essential source of knowledge while demanding appropriate epistemic and ethical conditions. Advertising need not abandon persuasion, but it should avoid creating an appearance of certainty where adequate justification is absent. Greater transparency can strengthen both consumer autonomy and public trust.

The relevance of this framework extends beyond advertising. Political communication, social media influencers, artificial intelligence systems, and public institutions also present information that people often cannot independently verify. In each case, the problem of epistemic trust remains central.



The distinction between śabda-pramāṇa and śabda-pramāṇābhāsa is therefore increasingly relevant in the digital age. It provides a broader philosophical framework for understanding when communication genuinely produces knowledge and when it merely creates the appearance of knowledge.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined advertising through the combined perspectives of Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Navya-Nyāya. Rather than treating advertising merely as a marketing technique or a psychological influence, it has approached advertising as a form of verbal testimony. This shift in perspective allows us to ask a more fundamental philosophical question; Does advertising generate genuine knowledge?

The analysis suggests that many advertisements fail to satisfy the conditions required for valid śabda-pramāṇa.

Nyāya demonstrates that trustworthy testimony depends upon āptatva. Reliable communication requires both knowledge and ethical responsibility. Commercial advertising often weakens these conditions because persuasion and commercial interest become its primary objectives.

Mīmāṃsā explains why advertising nevertheless succeeds. Consumers naturally accept linguistic communication unless stronger evidence defeats it. Many advertising claims therefore enjoy immediate credibility, even though later investigation may reveal important omissions or limitations. The resulting cognition is initially accepted but subsequently defeated through bādha.

Navya-Nyāya provides the most detailed explanation of this process. Its analysis of viśeṣaṇa, viśeṣya, and avacchedaka reveals that many advertising claims depend upon qualifiers whose delimiting conditions remain unspecified. Consumers experience determinate cognition, but the epistemic structure necessary to justify that cognition is incomplete.

The four case studies illustrate this argument in practical contexts.

Claims such as clinically proven, 100% natural, celebrity endorsements, and eco-friendly products all demonstrate different forms of epistemic incompleteness. Although these advertisements differ in content, they share a common structure. They encourage consumers to accept qualified claims while leaving the supporting conditions only partially disclosed.

For this reason, the article argues that many contemporary advertisements function not as genuine śabda-pramāṇa but as śabda-pramāṇābhāsa. They imitate the appearance of trustworthy testimony while withholding the epistemic conditions necessary for fully justified belief.

This conclusion should not be interpreted as a rejection of advertising itself. Many advertisements communicate valuable and accurate information. The present study makes a more limited claim. Whenever communication relies on borrowed authority, vague qualifiers, selective disclosure, or undefined standards, the resulting cognition becomes epistemically vulnerable, even if no explicit falsehood is involved.

The broader contribution of this article lies in demonstrating the continuing relevance of classical Indian epistemology. The theories of Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Navya-Nyāya are not confined to historical debates about scriptural interpretation or traditional logic. Their analyses of testimony, cognition, and justification remain powerful tools for understanding contemporary forms of communication.

In an age shaped by digital media, influencer culture, artificial intelligence, and global advertising, questions of trust have become more important than ever. Classical Indian philosophy reminds us that trustworthy communication is not created by persuasive language alone. It requires clearly established authority, transparent evidence, and genuine concern for the epistemic welfare of others.



The distinction between śabda-pramāṇa and śabda-pramāṇābhāsa therefore remains more than a historical philosophical concept. It offers a living framework for evaluating how knowledge is communicated, how trust is constructed, and how public understanding can be protected in the twenty-first century.

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