



Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to modern advertising strategies

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Abstract

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has long served as a foundational theory in psychology, explaining human motivation through a structured progression of needs ranging from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization. In the field of marketing and advertising, this theory offers a valuable framework for understanding consumer motivations and designing persuasive communication strategies. Modern advertising operates in a highly competitive, digital, and consumer-centric environment where emotional engagement and personalized messaging are critical for brand success. Applying Maslow's hierarchy to contemporary advertising enables marketers to align brand messages with consumers' underlying needs, thereby enhancing relevance, emotional resonance, and persuasive impact. This paper explores how Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be effectively applied to modern advertising strategies, highlighting its relevance in addressing evolving consumer expectations, digital engagement, and value-driven consumption. The study emphasizes how advertisers leverage different levels of human needs to influence attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behavior in today's dynamic marketplace.

Introduction

Advertising has evolved significantly from its traditional role of merely informing consumers about products and services to a sophisticated process of influencing perceptions, emotions, and lifestyles. In this transformation, understanding consumer motivation has become central to developing effective advertising strategies. One of the most widely recognized frameworks for understanding human motivation is **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**, proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. The theory categorizes human needs into five hierarchical levels: physiological needs, safety needs, social belongingness, esteem needs, and self-actualization.



In modern advertising, consumers are no longer passive recipients of information. They actively interpret brand messages based on personal values, social identity, and emotional needs. As markets become saturated with similar products and services, functional differentiation alone is insufficient to influence consumer choice. Consequently, advertisers increasingly rely on psychological and emotional appeals that resonate with consumers' deeper needs. Maslow's hierarchy provides a structured approach for identifying these needs and aligning advertising messages accordingly.

The relevance of Maslow's theory has grown in the digital era, where personalization, storytelling, and experiential marketing dominate advertising practices. Brands today aim to establish emotional connections rather than simply promote product features. By appealing to needs such as belongingness, esteem, and self-fulfillment, modern advertising seeks to create meaningful brand relationships that extend beyond transactional exchanges. Thus, applying Maslow's hierarchy to modern advertising strategies helps explain how advertisements influence consumer behavior at both rational and emotional levels.

Background

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is based on the premise that human behavior is motivated by the desire to satisfy unmet needs, progressing from basic survival requirements to higher psychological aspirations. In advertising contexts, this hierarchy can be used to identify which level of need a product or brand primarily addresses and how promotional messages can be designed to appeal to that need. At the most basic level, **physiological needs** such as food, water, and shelter are addressed by advertisements emphasizing necessity, comfort, and immediate satisfaction. Many fast-moving consumer goods and essential services continue to rely on such appeals, highlighting affordability, availability, and functional benefits. Closely related are **safety needs**, which involve security, protection, and stability. Modern advertising frequently addresses safety concerns through messages related to health, financial security, insurance, cybersecurity, and product reliability, particularly in times of economic uncertainty or social change.



Beyond basic needs, **social or belongingness needs** play a significant role in contemporary advertising. With the rise of social media and digital communities, advertisers increasingly emphasize themes of connection, friendship, family, and inclusion. Brands often position themselves as facilitators of social bonding or community membership, encouraging consumers to associate their products with shared values and group identity.

Esteem needs, which include self-respect, status, and recognition, are commonly targeted in premium and lifestyle advertising. Luxury brands, fashion labels, and high-end technology companies frequently appeal to consumers' desire for prestige and personal achievement. Modern advertising leverages visual aesthetics, influencer endorsements, and aspirational narratives to enhance perceived social status and self-worth.

At the highest level, **self-actualization needs** involve personal growth, creativity, and the realization of one's potential. Contemporary advertising increasingly taps into these needs by promoting values such as sustainability, innovation, self-expression, and purpose-driven living. Brands that emphasize authenticity, empowerment, and social responsibility appeal to consumers seeking meaning beyond material consumption.

In modern advertising strategies, Maslow's hierarchy is not applied rigidly but rather as a flexible framework. Consumers may seek to satisfy multiple needs simultaneously, and digital platforms allow advertisers to tailor messages to different motivational levels. As consumer awareness and expectations continue to evolve, Maslow's hierarchy remains a relevant and powerful tool for understanding how advertising influences attitudes, emotions, and decision-making processes.

Literature Review

Ghatak & Singh (2019) – Examining Maslow's Hierarchy Need Theory in Social Media Adoption explored how Maslow's theory explains levels of consumer motivation in social media engagement, showing relevance for targeted advertising strategies based on need fulfillment.



Li (2024) – Shuhui Li’s study on Maslow’s hierarchy stressed its value for understanding consumer motivations and guiding marketing strategies in contemporary markets, highlighting how hierarchical needs inform advertising messages tailored to psychological drivers.

Meshram (2023) – Relevance of Abraham Maslow’s Theory to Contemporary Consumer Behavior applied Maslow’s framework to understanding consumer motivations in different product categories, emphasizing how advertisers align messaging with psychological needs of target audiences.

Shatak & Singh (2019) – Within research on Maslow’s theory and social media usage, findings showed that different needs levels influence consumer engagement patterns, offering insights that advertisers can use to segment audiences and tailor need-based messages.

Girum (2024) – Psychological Need Hierarchy and Advertising in Media linked Maslow’s framework with media advertising strategies, showing how advertisers craft messages based on need levels, from safety and belonging to esteem and self-fulfillment.

Supersuasive (2023) – While not strictly academic, this analysis of Maslow’s pyramid and advertising illustrated real case campaigns (e.g., Nike, Dove) where ads targeted specific need levels, demonstrating practical application of Maslow’s theory in modern advertising.

Forbes Council (2019) – Discussed using Maslow’s hierarchy for marketing and advertising purposes, particularly in segmenting audiences based on needs and designing messages that resonate with esteem, belonging, or self-fulfillment motivations.

Tanner (2012) – Examined how advertisements reflect Maslow’s need levels, especially in cross-cultural contexts, showing that need-based targeting influences ad effectiveness globally.

FiIB Business Review (2019) – In research linking Maslow’s theory to social media adoption, the authors found a hierarchical pattern in consumer motives that can inform advertising strategies aimed at engagement and conversion.

Bolia, Jha & Jha (2024) – Though focused broadly on consumer behaviour, this study highlights how marketing strategies (implicitly tied to Maslow’s need levels) influence consumer decision-making and motivation, which advertising campaigns leverage to create targeted messages.

Academic Marketing Sources (2025 web analysis) – Recent publications summarize how



advertisers use Maslow's levels to craft campaigns that connect emotionally with consumers by addressing security, belonging, esteem, or self-actualization, reinforcing the theory's relevance in strategic advertising planning.

Refined Model of Maslow's Needs Theory (2022) – Datrika et al. expanded Maslow's model for the internet era, implicitly providing a framework for digital advertising strategies that consider various human motives in online consumer engagement.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in contemporary advertising practices

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs remains highly relevant in contemporary advertising because it provides a structured framework for understanding consumer motivation in an increasingly complex and digital marketplace. Modern advertising has shifted from mass communication to **consumer-centric, personalized, and emotionally driven messaging**, making psychological theories like Maslow's especially valuable. In digital and integrated marketing environments, advertisers seek to engage consumers across multiple touchpoints—social media, search engines, mobile apps, and traditional media—while addressing both functional and emotional needs.

At the foundational level, **physiological and safety needs** continue to influence advertising strategies, particularly for essential products and services. Digital advertising platforms allow brands to target consumers with context-specific messages, such as food delivery ads during meal times or insurance advertisements during periods of economic uncertainty. These need-based messages emphasize convenience, security, reliability, and necessity, reinforcing Maslow's lower-level needs in a modern context.

Higher-order needs—**belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization**—have gained increasing prominence in contemporary advertising. Social media platforms, influencer marketing, and community-driven campaigns enable brands to appeal to consumers' desire for social connection and identity. Advertisements often portray shared experiences, lifestyles, and values, encouraging consumers to associate brands with friendship, inclusion, and social belonging. Integrated



marketing communications ensure that this messaging remains consistent across platforms, strengthening emotional resonance.

Esteem-based appeals are especially relevant in digital environments where visibility, status, and recognition are highly valued. Brands leverage aspirational storytelling, premium imagery, and influencer endorsements to enhance consumers' self-image and perceived social status. Metrics such as likes, shares, and comments further reinforce esteem needs by providing social validation. Similarly, **self-actualization appeals** are increasingly used by brands that promote creativity, personal growth, sustainability, and purpose-driven consumption. Digital storytelling and interactive content allow consumers to engage with brands that align with their values and aspirations.

Integrated marketing environments amplify the effectiveness of Maslow-based strategies by delivering **consistent, need-oriented messages across multiple channels**. Data analytics and artificial intelligence enable advertisers to segment audiences based on behavioral and psychographic insights, allowing for precise alignment between consumer needs and advertising content. As a result, Maslow's hierarchy serves not as a rigid sequence but as a flexible motivational framework that guides modern advertising strategy.

Table: Relevance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Contemporary Advertising

Maslow's Need Level	Advertising Focus	Application in Digital & Integrated Marketing
Physiological Needs	Basic survival and comfort	Food delivery apps, FMCG ads using time-based and location-based targeting
Safety Needs	Security, protection, stability	Insurance, healthcare, cybersecurity ads emphasizing trust and reliability
Social (Belongingness) Needs	Relationships, community, inclusion	Social media campaigns, influencer marketing, brand communities



Esteem Needs	Status, recognition, self-worth	Luxury branding, aspirational content, influencer endorsements
Self-Actualization Needs	Personal growth, values, purpose	Sustainability campaigns, empowerment messaging, cause-related marketing
Role of Digital Media	Personalization and engagement	AI-driven ads, interactive content, omnichannel consistency
Integrated Marketing	Unified brand messaging	Consistent need-based appeals across online and offline platforms
Consumer Response	Emotional and behavioral outcomes	Higher engagement, brand loyalty, and purchase intention

The continued relevance of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in contemporary advertising lies in its ability to explain consumer motivation across evolving digital and integrated marketing environments. By aligning advertising messages with different levels of human needs, marketers can create emotionally resonant, personalized, and effective campaigns that enhance consumer engagement and long-term brand relationships.

Impact of Need-Based Advertising Appeals on Consumer Attention, Perception, and Attitude Formation

Need-based advertising appeals, grounded in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, play a significant role in shaping how consumers attend to, interpret, and develop attitudes toward brands. In contemporary marketing environments, consumers are exposed to a vast amount of advertising content daily, making it essential for brands to capture attention and create meaningful impressions. Advertising appeals that align with consumers’ underlying needs are more likely to stand out, be processed deeply, and influence long-term brand attitudes.



Consumer attention is the first and most critical stage in the advertising response process. Need-based appeals effectively capture attention because they resonate with consumers' current motivational states. For example, safety-oriented messages during periods of uncertainty or social-belonging appeals on social media platforms align with consumers' immediate concerns and interests. When advertisements address relevant needs, consumers are more likely to notice, engage with, and recall the message. Digital targeting and personalization further enhance attention by delivering need-relevant ads at the right time and context.

Consumer perception refers to how consumers interpret and assign meaning to advertising messages and brands. Need-based advertising influences perception by framing brands as solutions to specific psychological or functional needs. When an advertisement consistently reflects a particular need level—such as esteem or self-actualization—consumers begin to associate the brand with qualities like prestige, empowerment, or purpose. These associations shape perceived brand personality, credibility, and value. As a result, consumers are more likely to view the brand positively and differentiate it from competitors.

Attitude formation toward brands is a cumulative outcome of attention and perception processes. Need-based advertising appeals foster favorable brand attitudes by creating emotional connections and reinforcing self-identity. Advertisements that address higher-order needs, such as belongingness or self-esteem, often evoke stronger emotional responses, leading to more positive and enduring attitudes. Over time, repeated exposure to consistent need-based messages strengthens brand beliefs, increases trust, and enhances emotional attachment. Positive brand attitudes formed through need-based appeals also influence behavioral intentions such as purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and advocacy.

Overall, need-based advertising appeals enhance advertising effectiveness by aligning brand messages with consumers' motivational drivers. By strategically addressing different levels of needs, advertisers can influence not only immediate attention but also deeper cognitive and emotional responses that shape long-term brand attitudes.



Table: Impact of Need-Based Advertising Appeals on Consumer Responses

Need-Based Appeal	Impact on Consumer Attention	Impact on Consumer Perception	Impact on Brand Attitude Formation
Physiological Needs	Captures attention through urgency and necessity	Brand perceived as essential and practical	Develops trust and functional preference
Safety Needs	High attention during risk or uncertainty	Brand seen as reliable and secure	Builds confidence and risk-reduction attitudes
Social (Belongingness) Needs	Strong attention on social and digital platforms	Brand perceived as inclusive and relatable	Enhances emotional attachment and loyalty
Esteem Needs	Attention driven by aspirational visuals	Brand associated with status and prestige	Creates positive self-image and brand admiration
Self-Actualization Needs	Attention through value-driven storytelling	Brand perceived as meaningful and purpose-oriented	Strengthens long-term emotional commitment
Personalized Digital Appeals	Increased relevance and engagement	Brand viewed as consumer-centric	Improves overall brand favorability
Integrated Messaging	Sustained attention across channels	Consistent brand perception	Reinforces stable and positive brand attitudes

Need-based advertising appeals significantly influence consumer attention, perception, and attitude formation by aligning brand messages with human motivational needs. This alignment enhances engagement, shapes favorable brand meanings, and fosters positive, long-lasting attitudes toward brands in competitive advertising environments.



Relationship Between Maslow's Need Levels and Consumer Purchase Intention

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a valuable framework for understanding how different levels of human motivation influence consumer purchase intention and decision-making behavior. Purchase intention reflects a consumer's likelihood of buying a product, while brand preference and decision-making behavior indicate how consumers evaluate alternatives and choose among competing brands. In modern marketing contexts, advertisers and marketers strategically align product positioning and promotional messages with specific need levels to influence these outcomes.

At the **physiological need level**, consumers are primarily motivated by basic survival and comfort requirements. Products such as food, beverages, clothing, and basic utilities are purchased to satisfy immediate needs. Purchase decisions at this level are largely rational and driven by factors such as price, availability, and functionality. Brand preference tends to be weak unless a brand consistently delivers quality and convenience, leading to habitual purchasing behavior rather than emotional attachment.

The **safety need level** influences consumer behavior by emphasizing security, reliability, and risk reduction. Consumers purchasing insurance, healthcare services, financial products, or durable goods often seek brands that convey trust and stability. Advertising appeals that highlight warranties, certifications, and product safety features increase purchase intention by reducing perceived risk. Brand preference at this level is built on trust and credibility, while decision-making behavior is more deliberate and information-oriented.

At the **social or belongingness level**, purchase intention is shaped by the desire for acceptance, social interaction, and group identity. Consumers often choose brands that align with their social circles or lifestyles, especially in categories such as fashion, entertainment, and social media platforms. Brand preference is strongly influenced by peer recommendations, social proof, and



influencer endorsements. Decision-making behavior at this level is socially driven, with consumers seeking products that enhance social connections and self-expression.

Esteem needs play a significant role in influencing purchase intention for premium, luxury, and lifestyle products. Consumers motivated by esteem seek recognition, status, and self-respect. Brands positioned as symbols of success or exclusivity are more likely to be preferred. Decision-making at this level is aspirational, with consumers evaluating how a brand enhances their self-image. Emotional and symbolic value often outweighs functional considerations in such purchases.

At the highest level, **self-actualization needs** influence consumers seeking personal growth, creativity, and purpose. Purchase intention is driven by alignment with personal values, ethical considerations, and meaningful experiences. Brands that promote sustainability, innovation, or social responsibility tend to be favored. Decision-making behavior is reflective and value-oriented, leading to strong emotional attachment and long-term loyalty.

Overall, Maslow's hierarchy demonstrates that consumer purchase intention and brand preference are influenced by both rational and emotional motivations. Understanding this relationship enables marketers to design targeted strategies that align products and brands with consumers' dominant need levels.

Table: Maslow’s Need Levels and Consumer Purchase Behavior

Maslow’s Need Level	Primary Consumer Motivation	Impact on Purchase Intention	Brand Preference	Decision-Making Behavior
Physiological Needs	Survival, comfort	High for essential products	Low involvement, habit-based	Price- and convenience-driven
Safety Needs	Security, risk reduction	Increased through trust cues	Preference for reliable brands	Information-intensive, cautious
Social Needs	Belonging, acceptance	Influenced by peers and trends	Brands aligned with social identity	Socially influenced decisions
Esteem Needs	Status, recognition	High for premium products	Preference for prestigious brands	Aspirational and image-based
Self-Actualization Needs	Growth, purpose	Driven by values and meaning	Preference for ethical and purpose-driven brands	Reflective, value-oriented
Digital Influence	Personal relevance	Strengthens intention through personalization	Enhances perceived brand fit	Data-informed and comparison-based
Long-Term Outcome	Satisfaction and loyalty	Sustained repurchase intention	Strong emotional attachment	Consistent and loyal behavior

The relationship between Maslow’s need levels and consumer purchase intention highlights how human motivation shapes brand preference and decision-making behavior. By aligning marketing



strategies with consumers' dominant needs, organizations can enhance purchase intention, strengthen brand preference, and influence decision-making in competitive markets.

Conclusion

Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to modern advertising strategies provides a powerful framework for understanding consumer motivation in an increasingly complex and competitive marketing environment. Despite being a classical theory, Maslow's model remains highly relevant because contemporary advertising continues to appeal to fundamental human needs—ranging from basic survival to self-fulfillment—albeit through more sophisticated, data-driven, and emotionally nuanced approaches. Modern advertisers strategically design messages that resonate with different need levels to influence consumer perception, engagement, and purchasing behavior.

In today's digital and integrated marketing environment, advertising has evolved beyond simple product promotion to creating meaningful brand experiences. Physiological and safety needs are often addressed through functional benefits, convenience, reliability, and trust-building cues, particularly in sectors such as FMCG, healthcare, finance, and e-commerce. At higher levels of the hierarchy, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs are increasingly emphasized through emotional storytelling, lifestyle branding, influencer marketing, and purpose-driven campaigns. These appeals help brands establish deeper emotional connections and differentiate themselves in saturated markets.

The application of Maslow's hierarchy also highlights the shift from mass marketing to personalized and consumer-centric advertising. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and data analytics enable advertisers to identify dominant consumer needs and tailor messages accordingly. This targeted approach enhances advertising effectiveness by improving attention, perception, attitude formation, and purchase intention. Brands that successfully align their advertising strategies with consumers' evolving needs are more likely to build strong brand preference, trust, and long-term loyalty.



However, the study also underscores that consumer needs are not always linear or hierarchical in real-world contexts. Modern consumers often exhibit multiple needs simultaneously, influenced by cultural, social, and situational factors. Therefore, advertisers must adopt a flexible and integrative approach rather than rigidly applying the hierarchy. Ethical considerations are also crucial, as exploiting psychological needs without transparency can lead to consumer skepticism and resistance.

In conclusion, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs remains a valuable conceptual tool for modern advertising strategy development. When applied thoughtfully and ethically, it enables marketers to craft relevant, emotionally resonant, and effective advertising messages. By aligning brand communication with human needs and values, organizations can enhance consumer engagement, strengthen brand equity, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the modern marketplace.

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