The Effect of Targeted Advertisement in the Media and on the Internet on High school Students' Lifestyle Choices (I)

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Résumé: Cet article propose une étude sur l'influence du discours médiatique sur les apprenants roumains et étrangers, tout en analysant les relations qui s'établissent entre les stratégies de marketing et la communication médiatique, des réalités discursives fondées sur la psychologie, vue de la perspective de la culture populaire critique.

Mots-clés: discours médiatique, publicité médiatique, approche communicationnelle, stéréotypes, influences.

1. Introduction

This study is an attempt to introduce one of the important aspects of our daily lives in the curriculum of our high school students – advertisement and its complex strategic techniques. We consider that this industry has become very important, and the books that we came across and studied enforced this idea. It is important for all of us to see how much advertising is part of our lives, and how much it influences us, not only as consumers of goods, but also as consumers of ideologies and cultural stereotypes.

Our attempt to introduce such themes in our TEFL classes started from the idea that such a subject should not be only a part of the economic sciences classes, as advertising is a manifestation of various 'sciences and arts'. Then, as it is a message carrier, the ad can be read and interpreted as any sign, and therefore, it is a good pretext for our conversations,

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our vocabulary and grammar study, as well as for our teaching of foreign cultures.

We will speak about the relationship between marketing strategies and mass communications, which is based on psychology, but, we do not profess to be specialists in either of these domains. We will approach such matters from the angle of a popular culture critique, and will base our discussions with our students on the concept of cultural stereotype (during such discussions we will also speak about imagology, the study of how a people sees itself, as well as other people; as well as issues related to racism, sexism, ageism, and xenophobia). There are few instances in their curriculum that they speak about such issues, and we think that our educational aims should not be only teaching vocabulary and grammar, but also teaching culture: the culture of the English-speaking countries, of course, but also culture generally. Opening our students' eyes as to important issues of their lives should be one of our permanent goals in school.

2. Types of Mass-Media Advertisement Targeted Towards Teenagers

Before WWI, as it is generally acknowledged, the category of the teenager, the adolescent, did not exist from the point of view the marketing of products, thus there were no ads targeted towards this social category. Teenagers were considered to be just "grown-ups to be", and thus no special attention was given to them when it came to clothes, cosmetic products, lifestyle choices, etc. After the war, though, things changed dramatically, especially due to the increased wealth of the parents, who could afford spending more money on their teenage sons and daughters. Then, the new music – rock and roll, and the other new sounds – as well as the new cinema, with such desperadoes like James Dean, provided teenagers with a new type of image that they could identify with, with an entirely new set of idols, very different from the ones they had had before that – parents and teachers, historical figures, or fictional characters.

Since that time, there were many things that changed, especially when it comes to this social class, teenagers have become a very important target group for marketing, as they are considered one of the most important social groups: always interested in pressuring their parents to buy new things for them, which might add to the way they are perceived by their peers, or might help them get the self-esteem they are so much in need of, or, last but not least, which might help them become part of the group they would like to be accepted by.

To approach teenagers by the mass-media professionals is one of the most important aims, as it is well-known how much this social group is influenced by image, in their effort to create an „original" personality

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for themselves. There are a few directions that all kinds of mass-media follow when it comes to teenagers and to selling specialized products:

a) the teenagers' sensitivity when it comes to their self-image, their body and how they are perceived by their social group from the point of view of physical appearance;

b) the position they have in the social group, that is, if they are perceived as leaders, if they are popular and considered to be "cool" by the others, or, on the contrary, their fright of being considered "geeks", "un-cool", unpopular, "nerds", "losers";

c) their tastes and lifestyle choices, especially in terms of the music they listen to, their movies, their clothes, and their behaviour.

Thus, commercials dedicated to teenagers will mainly focus on these issues, and this type of ad will be met with in magazines, during their favourite serial movies or other movies, on their music channels, and, of course, on the Internet. Some such ads are more damaging than others, and here we are mainly referring to ads that induce a body image that is so unnatural and demanding, that it leads millions of teenagers around the world to extreme diets and strenuous efforts to get the "perfect body", as well as to depressions, bulimia, anorexia, and other mental disorders.

In a study, *The Influence of Media Marketing on Adolescent Girls*, http://www.kon.org/urc/v8/sanders.html, dedicated to the effect of mass-media marketing on teenagers, Erica Laurén Sanders considered that "the ability of media marketing to affect adolescents today has evolved through many different means. Digital editing has created a false world that is impossible to achieve. Celebrities, good or bad, have been made "role-models" and are presented as people that should be emulated. Media marketing has taken a negative toll on many aspects of adolescent lives. It is entwined with entertainment, fashion, and music, making it almost impossible to differentiate reality from fantasy. Teenage girls who viewed commercials depicting women who modelled the unrealistically thin-ideal type of beauty caused adolescent girls to feel less confident, angrier, and more dissatisfied with their weight and appearance. According to the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, sociocultural norms for ideal appearance lead women to base their self-worth more strongly on appearance than on character".

There are a few main effects of the media on how teenagers see themselves, on how they view their relations with their group, their family, and their teachers, and most of these effects are, unfortunately, negative, that is, they influence them in such a way as to always be unhappy with who they are, with how they look like, with their lives and families. Another very important issue is that they are forced into doing things that

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they are not prepared to do, only because of the social pressure they feel, and only because their mentality is so much influenced by the mass-media. Let us consider a few such effects that are mostly damaging, according to all the studies conducted by psychologists and educators.

2.1. The Effect that Media Has on Teenagers' Body Image

The notion of *body-image* is very complex, as it is not something that can be quantified in any way, it is something created by our minds, it refers to emotions, to how people 'see themselves' in their minds, even if they are looking at their image as reflected in a mirror. They do not see what they see there, or as they see people around them, but what they think they look like. It is absolutely critical that this image be satisfactory for the self-esteem people have. Unfortunately, as Elizabeth Ehorn shows, in a scholarly study on body image (Ehorn, Elizabeth, 2008: 7), most people have a negative image of themselves, which is affected by more factors: "there are many factors that affect a person's perception of himself/ herself. For example, parental, peer, and media all tend to have different effects on development of how people in today's society view themselves. Due to the simple fact society treats men and women differently; there is usually a presumed difference in how men and women view themselves" (*ibidem*, p.7).

Among the three main influences – parents, peers, and media – it is the media that has the most notable influence, as it influences teenagers both directly, and indirectly. The media is the one that "gives ideas" to parents, as well, so they will also be influenced on what they see on the screen or in magazines regarding the way their teenage sons and daughters should look like and behave. They will also be influenced by images of teenagers in fashion magazines, when they go to stores to buy clothes for them, etc. Such stereotyping of the girls' and boys' appearance begins even since childhood, in fact, and the body suggested for princesses in most Disney movies, do nothing but impose an image of a woman's body that is impossible to obtain, but which has become the ideal for millions of people. The Barbie doll shape is also much blamed for the "ideal" it creates, giving girls the impression that this is how they are expected to look like if they want to be happy. The shows on television for baby models, force both mothers and daughters to consider that if they look any less "beautiful" than the girls on the screen, they might be less accepted, they would not be "good enough".

Before the era of marketing and commercialism, issues related to the girls' bodies, their health and habits were mainly discussed by mothers

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or grandmothers with the daughters, with no "third party", with no intermediary.

As the industry became an ever-present "third party" in mother-daughter, doctor-patient, and teacher-student discussions, personal experience and testimony from older women became even less authoritative or important. Although there was more information available, it was increasingly abstracted from real-life experience, and it was also made less (rather than more) personal in the hope of reducing embarrassment (Brumberg, Joan Jacobs, 1997: 54).

Thus, instead of talking to their daughters, many women prefer to let them find models in magazines and movies, in ads and celebrities' lives, a solution that is simpler, and which is more suitable for the busy life mothers have. Moreover, grandmothers, and even mothers feel that their own experiences are not relevant, they feel outdated, they feel they have too little to share with the adolescent females in their families, especially as many of them feel that they cannot compete with the technology around them. The same happens to male teenagers as well. Most of them consider their fathers outdated, not fashionable enough, and many fathers react negatively to their sons' need for self-esteem, acting even in the detriment of the consolidation of a good opinion on themselves that such teenagers need. Lack of communication in the families is prolonged by lack of communication in school, as teachers are no longer role-models for their teenage students, who look for success stories elsewhere, as they have access to their idols' lives through magazines and TV shows.

Another problem with lack of time is that families do not have as much time to cook healthy meals, and many teenagers rely on fast food (very much advertised for, as well). Fast food and health are known to be antagonistic, but so are fast food and a slender figure. This is one of the battles the teenager has to fight, that is, the attraction of fast food and the need to keep thin, at the same time.

Lack of time on the part of the parents, is matched by their need that their children become as competitive as possible, in a world that they recently discovered as being competitive and demanding. Feeling sorry for not having been more aware of the importance of education, some parents tend to ask too much of their teenagers and force them to spend more and more hours in school and after-school programmes, in learning and doing many other extra-curricular activities. This also influences teenagers very much into considering the models they see on the screen (fictional characters, movie and music idols, magazine images of youth) as being the alternative, the free and happy version that they would like to identify with more. The first thing they notice with these idols is their ap-

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pearance, and the dissatisfaction with their own bodies increases dramatically.

It is not only female adolescents that are less than happy with how they look like, but, it is a fact that they are much more likely to have such feelings, which may also lead to all kinds of mental and physical disorders.

We now know women experience more body dissatisfaction than men, and it is of growing concern at what age this dissatisfaction begins to affect women. Over the past 30 years there has been increasing pressure on young women and girls to keep with the cultural norm of accepting thinness as a key to happiness (Ehorn, Elizabeth, 2008: 10).

Thinness is in the minds of all teenage females, or almost all, it is one of the main issues in conversations; it is cause for bullying in schools, for social exclusion, it is a main issue for educators, and it is the main focus of targeted commercials and ads.

It is hypothesized that the core of body dissatisfactions stems from discrepancy between the perceived self and the ideal self, the ideal self being portrayed by various media influences (*ibidem,* p.11).

Sizes of the body are also important to teenage males as well, they compare their muscles with each other, they try to show their manliness by getting the "beefy" bodies they see on the silver screen. Much of the comparisons they draw between each other depend on body shapes and images, and they spend hours at the gym. Those who cannot afford going to the gym, or lack the inclination for sports and exercise, try to evade in the fantasy world of the video games, where their heroes look like how they, themselves, would like to look like and be perceived by others. The video games characters they choose reflect the body image and capabilities they would like to have in real life.

The pressure from the media is so high that most girls and boys feel they need to change the way they look, and see themselves so lacking in this respect when they compare themselves with the female and male models.

The female model is an institution.

She is tall and thin, weighing much less than the average female. Most models weigh approximately 23 percent less than women of healthy weight. Twenty-five years ago successful models weighted only 8 percent less than most women. According to the Girl Scouts of America Research Institute, nine out of ten girls say they feel a lot of pressure from the media to be thin. And 31 percent of the girls interviewed admitted to starving themselves as a way to lose weight (Conway, Celeste, 2013: 14).

The male model has become more and more perceived like the norm of how a body should look like, as well.

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The media present ideas about how males should look too. Handsome men shown in the media are tall and have slim waists and hips. They are muscular, especially on their chests, arms, and shoulders. Some boys who are underweight are ashamed of their bodies. The may start exercising excessively in hopes of bulking up muscle (*ibidem*, p.15).

Unfortunately, both female and male adolescents do not stop at exercising and dieting, they will also appeal to medication, diet pills and steroids being very popular among them. Girls will not go to their mothers, their doctors, or any other mature person for advice regarding their wish to become thinner, or look better; on the contrary, most girls seem to be more attentive to what their peers have to say, and they start using certain products because their best friends or the popular figures in school recommended them. The products recommended by Internet sites and TV shows are also very much trusted, and they could spend a lot of their parents' money on buying such products that can ruin their health permanently. It is even easier for them to even convince their own mothers to buy them such pills, as the mothers use them, as well. Going to the gym means getting acquainted with all kinds of products dedicated to muscle development, some of them healthier (like vitamins and natural energizers), but some chemicals that are not tolerated by the liver in the long run.

With the need to be perfect, to have perfect bodies, as stereotyped by the media, the youth also started to be interested in the way their preferred celebrities are able to have and maintain their bodies, thus creating more demand for tabloids and TV shows, as well as becoming more interested in buying the products suggested by these celebrities (who are paid to recommend them, of course). Another side effect is that teenagers want more and more money, and they identify happiness with having enough money for paying for their preferred products, but also, for the ideal of having personal trainers, stylists, as well as for aesthetic surgery, sometimes. They do not understand the pressure and the stress these celebrities are under, just as a consequence of having the money and the obligation to comply to all these demands.

Sure, these models and celebrities are more attractive than most people. But they work hard to maintain it, too. They hire private chefs, personal trainers, hair stylists, makeup artists, and wardrobe experts to keep them trim, toned, and looking great at all times. It's a stressful situation that leads many celebrities to be extremely self-conscious about their looks (Palad, Thea, 2009: 11).

A vast gallery of screen fictional characters, of cheer-leaders and pop-artists, of sports and dance young talents and future models, of popular teenage girls and boys come to consolidate all these issues, come to

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make most teenagers feel uncomfortable, unacceptable, and in need of more and more self-assurance. This is where school can intervene, not only by offering professional counselling, but also by offering special courses to all teachers and helping them understand the complex needs of their students, as well as do something in order to help them cope with such issues better.

Special interest and concern should be shown in eating-related disorders, both for teens who are bulimic and overweight to understand what is happening to their bodies when subjected to unhealthy food, and for anorexic ones, who diet all the time, and are also very exposed to serious health issues. Possibilities of dealing with such issues during classes will be dealt with later on in this study.

2.2. Media Effects on Teens' View on Sexuality and Being Sexy

One of the main reasons why teenagers want to have a 'perfect body' is so that they become sexually attractive, that they become 'sexy'. This is one imperative, entertained by most screen and music idols, who very soon jump from the image of sexual purity, to that of sexual desirability and hotness. This was the case with Britney Spears in the 90's, with Miley Cyrus nowadays, who jumped from the most innocent and wise school girl to being a sex symbol before even being 20 years of age.

Such powerful images are very effective on the teens' psychic, as they take most of their 'knowledge' in the domain of sexuality from magazines, from television, and from discussions with peers. Being sexy has become absolutely crucial for them, and they would do whatever necessary just to conform to what is considered by most such media as being sexually attractive.

Research indicates that adolescents may obtain sexual scripts and norms from media examples (Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990), with as many as one in five teenagers reporting that television is their most important source of sexual information (Brown &Steele, 1995). "...On of the most significant sources of sexual messages that may influence America's youth [is] the prime-time television programs most frequently viewed by teenagers" (Cope-Farrar, Kirstie M. & Dale Kunkel, 2008: 59).

Cope-Farrar and Kunkel looked at an impressive number of serial prime-time movies that teenagers love to watch on TV, and concluded that the sexual content presented in these movies is much higher than expected, and that it is from such programs that they learn behaviours, language, and it is to such images that they try to conform and mimic in their own lives. The authors show in convincing ratios and numbers, how much sex makes way in such programs, harmless as they may seem: "Talk

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about sex was observed in 67% of the programs analyzed, as compared to 62% sexual behavior. Almost half (47%) of all programs included both talk and behavior; 20% contained only talk about sex, and 16% contained only sexual behaviors. [In the] 37 programs containing sexual messages, portrayals featuring talk about sex or sexual behavior were numerous, averaging 4.5 scenes per program, or 7.0 scenes per hour with sexual content" (*ibidem*, p. 66).

If apparently there is no problem with such scenes, as they are rather "nice" and "harmless", the authors identified as very harmful and deceitful the fact that sex talk and behaviour have absolutely no consequences, in the majority of cases. If any consequences at all, these are positive. Thus, the report underlines the fact that there is no talk about "risks and responsibilities" when speaking about sex, or showing sexual behaviours in such movies.

More importantly, there were even fewer scenes containing a risk or responsibility theme when sexual behavior was portrayed as compared to scenes involving talk interaction only. Only 3 out of 99 scenes (3%) involving sexual behavior contained some theme related to sexual responsibility (*ibidem*, p.72).

Such issues are mostly discussed in health classes (biology, educational), and this happens on special occasions, maybe once or twice a year. Somehow, we still live under the impression that such matters should not be part of our daily activity as teachers, and that some subjects have absolutely nothing to do with them (especially in Romanian schools). Teachers do not know what their students watch on TV, or read (compulsory reading lists are very safe and outdated, not very many teachers of literature have actually heard about the Twilight series, for instance), they are not aware of the way such shows and magazines influence them to the point where they react in certain unbecoming ways. When they do, the discussion is most of the times a moralizing one, which does not exactly help them understand the importance of education in this matter, as well. They "know it all", and they are embarrassed to talk to adults about such matters. The same happens at home, with their parents, who think that such issues are dealt with in school, and this is all that it takes.

Today's world, though, is much more complex than that, and many things that our teenagers hear and see in such shows and magazines (as well as in other videos, advertising, cartoons, etc.) may influence them in such a way as have them make life decisions based on what they profess and show. Much is said about cartoons and violence, and how children are not aware of the fact that violence is not acceptable, even if their cartoon characters are violent and seem to be all right all the time. Never-

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theless, the same situation repeats itself when we speak about teenagers and the ideas they can get from their movies, especially regarding the lack of consequences of their behaviour.

Being sexy is compulsory. Being sexy depends on how they look, how they dress, on their accessories, on a certain code of behaviour, as well as on how much time and money they spend in order to get the exact "look". This kind of look and behaviour seem outrageous for many older teachers, who have no idea what triggers such choices, and blame the parents, western influence, even "democracy" as they understand it. Such behaviour is totally inadequate, and to see 12 year old girls acting like *femme fatal(s)* is always a sad. Nevertheless, getting to understand how important it is for them to fit in, to be accepted by the group, to feel important and "grown-up", can help teachers have a less morally accusative attitude, and correct such attitudes in a such a way as to not confuse and offend students. Examples of how such attitudes can be corrected will be given in the following chapters.

First, it is very important to see where the image of "being sexy" comes from, and identify those popular culture sources that teenagers get inspired by. The very policy of the media comes with a lot of undesired behaviours, that influence teenagers: smoking, drinking alcohol, partying, having fun (to the limit where work is seen as nothing but boring and bringing nothing but tiredness and gloom), looking good, being provocative, taking risks and living "on the edge". All the above are usual themes in advertising, which presents even aggressive and violent scenes.

An important step towards the reducing of the "side-effects" of ads, is to work towards media literacy.

"The idea that we might be able to raise generations of critical media consumers who, by knowing how the media work, will be less seduced by their images [...]. It will require significant resources to ensure that all who need it, get it. And in the United States, we will need to train teachers, develop curricula, convince school systems that this is another important topic they must add to already overloaded school curricula. The most important piece may be educating parents to take the media seriously, to pay attention to what their children are seeing" (Brown, Jane D. & Elizabeth M. Witherspoon, 2001: 92).

The same holds true for Romanian students, and it is very important to take action as soon as possible, as the situation becomes more dramatic every day. In our contemporary Romania, even 8-9 year old girls wear make-up when they go to weddings, they hold "homecoming" parties for kindergarten graduates, where little girls wear provocative clothes, and are told that they look 'sexy'. Having the "right body", and "looking

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hot" are not the only things that our teenagers take from the media, there are other effects, which can be even more damaging in the long run, as we shall see from the following examples, as well. This obsession with image is not damaging only at the level of their parents' pockets, but mostly from the point of view of their obsession with fashion, with clothes, with malls and shopping, in the idea that objects can create for them the persons they want to become.

Another danger is for our students to think that everything that comes from abroad is good, and that everything that their parents and grand-parents consider to be value is not important.

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