AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS OF PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENTS

Bianca DABU[*]

Abstract: *In nowadays societies the interdisciplinary approach of concepts is generated by the interference of various fields of activity. Advertising is an activity that overlaps psychology and marketing as well as language and communication in the context of globalization.*

Advertising as a part of marketing mix relies on the connection between targeted consumers' needs and designed advertising campaigns becoming "an integral part of modern culture (Mathur 2007:8). In the same context, Hofstede's research on cross-cultural values in an employment context may be applicable to consumer behaviour and thus to advertising thinking.

Advertising as a cultural and linguistic approach envisages the idea that the sociocultural frame of linguistic contact, the contact proper between cultures induces the diffusion of material and spiritual elements of culture and generates lexical and cultural interferences. Advertising involves a form of semiotic communication actively using repeated verbal and visual images creating its own discourse. Bougnoux (2000:49) states that "semiology is therefore a science of culture rather than a science of nature or better said a science of transit from nature to culture".

Advertising as a communicative approach is concerned with "the ethnography of communication, the questions of what a person knows about appropriate patterns of language use in his or her community and how he or she learns about it." (Hymes, 1972:54)

Keywords*: cross-cultural values, semiotic communication, ethnography of communication, SPEAKING model*

1. Advertising as a part of marketing mix

The idea of globalization was induced by the intense economic activities that generated not only the exchange of commodities and services but also the exchange of organisational models, promotion strategies, target customers oriented policies or extra-professional cultural patterns. All these activities have a linguistic component that has to be deeply considered and analysed.

"A fundamental shift is occurring in the world economy. We are moving progressively further away from a world in which national economies were relatively isolated from each other by barriers to cross-border trade and investment; by distance, time zones and language by national differences in government regulation, culture and business systems. And we are moving toward a world in which national economies are merging into an interdependent global economic system, commonly referred to as *globalization*." (Hill, 2002:4)

Almost every business in the world deals with advertising as an integral part of marketing strategy and any strategic thinking behind advertisements focus on the same principles: identifying the group(s) of customers, targeting them efficiently, positioning the brand according to their needs, persuading them to buy the products. In order to achieve these goals, both sides involved in the process must find a common channel of communication.

[*] University of Pitesti, biancadabu@yahoo.com

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Advertising the highly visible ”tip of the iceberg of marketing” (Ferrell et al.2015:453) designing and placing advertisements in various media in order to reach a particular target audience. In order to identify the target audience the advertisers focus on location and geographic distribution of the groups, the distribution of demographic factors (age, income, etnic origin, sex and education, lifestyle, etc.), achieving as a final goal the increase of sales. But advertising is more than that.

Mathur (2007:8) is convinced that “advertising creates value systems as people buy advertised products, which establishes a particular lifestyle for the users of the products. Such products are, at time, purchased only to become a member of that particular elite. […] Product positioning and choice of media for the target market segment are all based on getting the right person to see or have the opportunity to see the advertisement.”

Leiss (2005:5) confesses that: “Advertising is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycles cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions. This venture is unified by the discourse through and about objects which bonds together images of persons, products and well-being.”

Hofstede, as an expert in cross-cultural differences and management defines culture as ”the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another…Culture, in this sense includes systems of values, and values are among the building blocks of culture.”(1984:21) Hofstede's research on cross-cultural values in an employment context may be applicable to consumer behaviour and thus to advertising thinking. The four dimensions he is setting as essential are:

1. *power distance*

Hofstede defines power distance as ‘[…] the extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally....People in Large Power Distance societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification…’(p.83). In terms of consumer behaviour, Hofstede settles a correlation between the geographical latitude and technology from the point of purchase capacity and sophistication of the technology. The conclusion is that conspicuous consumption is an indication of social class. Therefore, advertising campaigns focusing on esteem goods, for example, could consider the needs of the targeted social groups

2. uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede considers the concept as a society’s tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. A strong culture of uncertainty avoidance implies a higher interest for precision and punctuality or a higher willingness to take risks. The translation of these principles in the area of consumer’s behaviour in the countries with higher uncertainty avoidance implies a higher degree of brand loyalty, more stringent consumer protection mechanisms, after-sales guarantees. In this respect advertising campaigns could consider safety needs, for example, for the targeted customers.

3. *individualism*

According to Hofstede, individualism and wealth are very tightly connected. High Individualism Societies will place more emphasis on “autonomy, variety, pleasure, and individual financial security”(1984:171). Therefore, consumers’ behaviour

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towards financial services or cultural events, travel or pleasure will be encouraged and developed in such societies. In such a circumstance, social needs could be envisaged by the advertisements.

4. *masculinity*

Using Hofstede's conceptualization, masculinity is the only dimension that can be used outside of the work-related environment. 'Masculinity stands for a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success. Its opposite, Femininity, stands for a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and the quality of life.'(1984:84). Thus gender-positioning advertisements focus on consumers' behaviour towards various traditional products:

- women-oriented products: food, fashion, grooming, and homemaking
- men-oriented products: automobiles, grooming, home-improvement, drinking.

Nevertheless, nowadays there is a gender-usage crossover for traditional products (Milner et al.1993). in such a case the advertisements could be applicable to any types of needs considering the products advertised.

Through these elements contribute to the dynamic economic relations and to the implementation of new business practices achieved not only through financial or material costs but with organizational and human resources costs, as well. Thus, the expanding cultures get to impose value systems and norms in non-native environments together with a new type of communication which facilitates the movement of a group of people towards the achievement of their own goals.

2. Advertising as a cultural and linguistic approach

The dynamics of a society infuses cultural patterns, which although non-characteristic to its structure on the whole, are readily accepted by reference groups and then spread around to the entire society. One of the most important factors that entails the change of values and norms is the relation between the group and the individual (De Coster, 1990:125). The individual awareness of belonging to a group (Baron, Byrne, 2001:434) gives a common sense of identity and generates interaction grounded on common behavioural expectations. The transfer of cultural patterns by expansive and dominant cultures implies the ritualization of knowledge, beliefs and actions presupposed to be necessary to its own effectiveness in accomplishing its goals.

Social life in itself is carried up on the life of social groups (Chelcea, 2008:184) irrespective they are formal, informal, professional, friendship or interest groups They are of a fundamental importance because they satisfy the social needs of their members providing them with safety, status, esteem, power or self-actualization.

Interaction at a social level is strongly supported by communication through a language adequate to a group of communicators or common to the entire society. "Whenever languages and other, perilinguistic semiotic systems are used in their ubiquitous human habitats, cultures as well as people can be said to be communicating." (Silverstein, 2004:621). The sociocultural frame of linguistic contact, the contact proper between cultures induces the diffusion of material and spiritual elements of culture and generates lexical and cultural interferences.

Silverstein brilliantly applies the ideas of index and reference to speech acts to delineate the difference between culture in language and in speech. By

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applying semiotic principles to the study of culture in a way that is not classifiable strictly in the usual terms of structuralism or post-structuralism or linguistic, Silverstein creates an interesting new place for semiotics within communicative, linguistic, and cultural studies.

The process of cultural change, very complex, flexible and dynamic may be analysed from various perspectives the most recent one focusing on the idea of cultural globalization.

Barthes (1977) was hunting for the stereotype, the cultural artefact re-embodied in the minds of utilizers or changed in prefabricated discourses, applied to mythologies borrowed from the consumer society. A mass communication semiotic system as that of advertising is mystified and needs interpretation through the means of a language (Bougnoux, 2000:41). The decoding of semiotic symbols existing in advertising communication punts on an accessible penetrating language. "Accepting a natural language as sole communication instrument is nowadays an objective necessity compulsory for the contemporary social environment. This understanding means the deliberate acceptance of a language capable to work in the field of communication situation in which people must overcome the old competitional mentality of linguistic supremacy" (Călărașu, 2003:324).

As a consequence, advertising involves a form of semiotic communication actively using repeated verbal and visual images creating its own discourse. Bougnoux (2000:49) states that "semiology is therefore a science of culture rather than a science of nature or better said a science of transit from nature to culture". From this point of view advertising turns into a vehicle of ritualization of consumption habits of consumers assigned to different levels of identifiable marketing features such as interest, income or access.

"All brand communication should play a role in build a relationship with the consumer, a relationship that should be developed and sustained across other points of contact with the brand. Though analysis of brand equities in print and television advertising is the most obvious application of semiotics, the methodology makes a science out of integrating brand communication across other marketing "occasions" such as packaging, retail display, media choices, and even sponsored events." (Oswald, Semiotics and Sencory Marketing: marketingsemiotics.com)

According to Jakobson's theory of communicative functions (1960:350-377) the advertising message has to accomplish the following functions, in three successive stages: (1) attract attention (the phatic function), (2) convince (the conative function), by appealing to reason (the referential function) or emotion (the emotive function), and (3) get people to act (the conative and referential functions). The third objective is clearly the most important, and the others are subordinate. Jakobson's contribution to brand strategy research is of outmost importance (Oswald, 1996:48-62) as the very notion of brand equity is testimony to the power of symbolic representation to capture the hearts and minds of consumers by means of visual, audio and verbal communication.

Oswald (2010:107) advances a general theory of advertising response based on the dialectical implication of the psychic drives, on the side of the consumer, and semiotic codes, on the side of advertising discourse. The dynamic of this relation would look like:

Consumer > Psychic Drives <> Semiotic Codes < Advertisement

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Bell (1997:139) noted that the formality of a ritual is associated with "the use of a more limited and rigidly organized set of expressions and gestures, a restricted code of communication or behaviour in contrast to a more open or elaborate code"

Ritual performance in advertising involving emotional attachment to a certain brand is dramatized by highly visual imagery, dramatic sound, and extraordinary settings. These dramatized performances in ritual evoke intense emotions among participants by attaching specialness to the brand. Work on nostalgia in consumer behaviour research bears a similar definition, whereby a general preference toward objects from one's younger days is observed (Holbrook 1993). Affective involvement of the receiver of the message is determined by an aesthetic mechanism symbolically forged on the general sensitiveness (Ruşti:2005:193). Artistic creation transcends and generates feelings, it is founded on well-known experiences and translates them for an average social conscience.

3. Advertising as a communicative approach

Kenric Thompson (1994:43) describes the feedback relation between the language and society in terms highlighting the cultural change:"[…] There are three main sources of large-scale cultural change: alteration in the natural environment; cultural contact between groups whose norms, values and technology are different; and discovery and invention". The contact between cultures entails the diffusion of material and spiritual elements of culture in a natural way because they generate the linguistic and cultural interference.

Hymes believes that communicative competence within a speech community is the essence of the ethnography of communication. Hymes defines speech community as a community connected by common linguistic norms, that is 'a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety' (Hymes, 1972:54). The essence of the problem is not whether speakers have a common understanding of syntax and semantics, but also whether or not they share ideas about the use of silence, ideas about the meaning of irony or emphasis, speech taboos, ways of formulating requests or statements, and so on. Hymes frequently noted that ungrammatical utterances may be socially appropriate, just as grammatical utterances can be socially inappropriate

Farah (1998:125) agrees with Hymes '…that the study of language must concern itself with describing and analysing the ability of the native speakers to use language for communication in real situations (communicative competence) rather than limiting itself to describing the potential ability of the ideal speaker/listener to produce grammatically correct sentences (linguistic competence). Speakers of a language in particular communities are able to communicate with each other in a manner which is not only correct but also appropriate to the sociocultural context. This ability involves a shared knowledge of the linguistic code as well as of the socio-cultural rules, norms and values which guide the conduct and interpretation of speech and other channels of communication in a community … [T]he ethnography of communication ... is concerned with the questions of what a person knows about appropriate patterns of language use in his or her community and how he or she learns about it.'

Hymes (1972:54-60) developed the well-known SPEAKING model to promote the analysis of discourse as a series of speech events and speech acts

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within a cultural context. His model can be applied to advertising discourse observing the elements provided by Hymes according to the acronym (*setting and scene, participants, ends, acts sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, & genre*):
Setting and scene refers to the time and place of a speech act and in general to the physical circumstances. Advertisements can thus be designed according to national particular features of the customers or, if the message can be internationalised, can be delivered as an international concept. Alintaroma
Participants are those assigned to two categories: the speaker and the audience. In advertising, the speaker is the company addressing to the customer interested in a product or other hearers that might become interested.
Ends or purposes, goals, and outcomes in advertising is the purchase of the product.
Act sequence represent the form and order of the event. The advert design, the structured sequence of characters, the message, other types of reactions is intended to appeal to the customer's needs and desires.
Key establishes the tone, manner or spirit of the speech. The usage of a certain voice, playful gestures, emphasis, and other devices can be used to have a better impact on the hearer.
Instrumentalities refer to forms and styles of speech. The casual register with many dialect features or a more formal register and careful grammatical "standard" forms can be part of a certain advertisement.
Norms concern social rules governing the basic story of the advertisement event and the participants' actions and reaction. Audience interruptions in an informal style, or a serious, formal way of behaviour.
Genre deals with the kind of speech act or event of the advertisement such as anecdotical stories, gossips, jokes, etc.

Conclusion

The transfer of cultural patterns by expansive and dominant cultures implies the ritualization of knowledge, beliefs and actions presupposed to be necessary to its own effectiveness in accomplishing its goals. The promotion of goods and services becomes an imperative for the economic activity. In such a context, international business companies bring forth advertising thinking targeted at a specific group of consumers. Advertising involves a form of semiotic communication actively using repeated verbal and visual images creating its own discourse but the audience is appealed to decode the messages according to their own instruments.

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