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## ADVERTISING AS A SPACE OF ICONOTEXTUAL PLURICODIFICATION: (MIS)LEADING MESSAGES

### Abstract

In this article, we intend to decipher the most important codes that contribute to the creation of an efficient advertising message. Methodologically, the print advertising message is approached through the semio-rhetoric-discursive and psycho-communicational perspectives that can reveal its complex significations beyond the immediate perception of the receiver. Though having a distinct role and a specific manifestation, each code contributes to the creation of a homogenous and persuasive message together with all the other codes. Besides this multi-layering of codes, the advertising communication stakes on the transmitter, the channel, the referent and the receiver in order to create a persuasive-rhetorical, unique and seductive message. All these instances that sustain the process of communication operate in a strategic-discursive dynamic relation to generate a unique icono-textual message that attracts the potential consumer to a perfect world, in which his/her needs are fulfilled.

**Key-words:** advertising, codes, communication, semiotics, iconotext

### The Premises of the Research

Advertising discourse acts as a complex, dynamic, seductive complex which searches to surprise and to persuade at any costs. It has a mixed, heterogeneous structure, as it is formed by complementary elements that have precise roles, that are different and semantically convergent at the same time, which are found in dynamic relations of interdependence in order to create a rhetoric-persuasive message with seductive-euphoric valences. At the same time, it is always anchored into a psycho-socio-cultural context and has a given purpose, which depends on the status of the involved actants. The *icono-textual advertising discourse* (Corjan, 2004: 213) appears at the crossroads between the representations of reality and the very the structuring of it, as a unitary manifestation of the binomial text-image. Thus, the latter operates with two types of language, linguistic and iconic, with the intention of transmitting an idea and an emotion (or several ideas and emotions) that would strike the receiver's deep chord, a receiver who awaits a solution to a problem which is, most of the time, induced.

Along the iconotextual advertising discourse we find several codes that impose – all in the same key – the configuration of the significance: the iconic, linguistic, chromatic, typographic, psycho-affective and socio-cultural codes. This range offers a general view of the possibilities and the enormous creative capacity of the advertising message to manifest itself as a multidimensional result of several vectors of expression. Thus, we argue that the advertising phenomenon exploits to the full

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all the tools and resources to create spectacular messages through which they both catch the public's attention and succeed into influencing its decisions that have as a final target the act of buying, of adherence or of support.

We are thus aiming at identifying the main roles that act simultaneously in the creation of the iconotextual advertising message from print ads. The dynamic advertising message combines, besides the codes reminded above, the sound code, which, however, falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

### The Advertising Message as a Space of Pluricodification

The communication process is a very complex act that develops simultaneously on several levels and uses instruments that belong to different spheres of expressions. Words and images combine harmoniously and strategically to configure utopian, fantastic and creative worlds and perspectives able to extend and expand the receiver's *imaginary* indefinitely. Advertising communication is a multi-layered set of elements that are brightly combined to create significations that sell. The deep knowledge of the consumers' needs and wishes represents a fundamental condition of the creator of advertising messages. The detailed study of the psycho-sociologic and cultural behaviour of the public's behaviour allows specialists in advertising to create messages that contain values and the principles of the consumers and respond to their needs in daily life.

Any act of communication can be analysed, regardless of the perspective one may adopt, in relation with the context in which it takes place. The factors, the mechanisms and the relations that can be established between all the elements that compose the advertising communication always depend on the psycho-socio-cultural context to which the involved actants belong, namely the transmitter and the receiver. The specificity of the context will contribute to the direction of the signification, anchoring the latter in a predefined, known space, whose identification mechanisms are already constituted.

Referring to an ideal situation of communication, the semiotician J.-M. Klinkenberg claims that the communication partners "should dispose of the same code" (2004: 42), as it happens with cars, for example. The author argues for the replacement of the singular *code* with the plural *codes* and observes that, in reality, "there is never a perfect superposition of the codes, at the disposition of the transmitter's, on the one hand, and on the other, of the receiver's, at least when we speak of living beings" (*idem*, 43). In conclusion, the author admits the futility of communication through the perfect superposition of the codes, as the role of communication is "to share with somebody a knowledge that the other does not have, a feeling that the other does not experience, to inspire new reasons of action in a certain way etc., to modify the data assembly that the partner disposed of and, thus, the organizing of the signs in his/her code" (*ibidem*). This perspective, in which the partners start all the time from distinct codes allows the manifestation of the rhetorical and pragma-semantic codes in a space of negotiation between the two actants. The quoted author asserts that Jakobson's scheme of communication does not include the variety and the multitude of the codes that appear in the process of communication (*idem*, 51).

In advertising, the message is a space of intentional pluri-codification that serves a pre-established purpose and pursues active positive reactions from the receiver. The advertising iconotextual construct is a complex mixture of heterogeneous factors that converge towards homogeneity through syntax and codification. The created resultant will catch the receiver's attention through factual, descriptive, psycho-affective or humorous means.

By the message transmitted to the public, the ad's creator envisages to surprise and to create attraction towards its promoted product or service. The authors J.-M. Adam and M. Bonhomme (2005: 56) consider that the most important parameters of advertising argumentation are the *channel*, the *referent* and the addressee and the advertising communication is dependent of the context in which it appears. The advertising message is sustained in a substantial way by these factors, in order to create significations and to persuade the potential consumers. As we shall see in what follows, these elements are not the only ones that essentially contribute to the creation of the message. In J.-N. Kapferer's opinion (2002: 66-67), a message can engender two types of interdependent reactions: a) the adaptation reactions (that presuppose the adjusting or the non-adjusting to the receiver's

behaviour/attitude) and b) the emotional reactions (that result from the psycho-affective answers of the consumers after the message's receipt).

### One Message, Several Codes

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg suggests that the message would be prejudiced by the role and its importance if it were approached only as a factor among the others, asserting that we can relate to the message as to a product of the other factors as "the message is, eventually, a portion of the referent transformed by a code and in which it is established the interaction between the communication partners, which makes it transmittable through a channel" (Klinkenberg: 2004: 45).

Alongside the channel, the referent and the addressee, the code contributes substantially to the construction of the message. As we shall see in what follows, the advertising iconotext is the space where several distinct codes merge and succeed in shaping a common etiquette. In this case, we can speak of a multistratification of codes that is found in the same advertising message. The codes have specific roles, have a different behaviour and sustain themselves mutually, acting simultaneously to create signification. Any deviance or vulnerability of one of them will alter and overtake the wanted meaning by the ad's creator. The relations between the codes are dynamic, complementary, of sustenance and stake on a variety as large as possible of the specific means of expression.

The codes are not rigid, after J.-M. Klinkenberg (2004: 44), but can be *imprecise* and *weak* (the variation is imposed by the spatial-temporal code), *fragmentary* (when they use significant units of a vastly divisible content), *temporary* (ephemeral or substitutable) and *contradictory* (due to the lack of reciprocity between the referent and the stimulus).

The code can be defined as "the association between two different systems: a signifier system and a signified system" (*idem*, 123), the system being seen as the totality of the differences that oppose unities of identical nature and status. The association of the systems engenders the code, which is active and is constructed, delimiting the referents and thus, building a world. On the paradigmatic axis there are more or less systematic codes (the opposition of the units being stronger vs. weaker), and on the syntagmatic axis the variety of the syntaxes is higher: syntaxes with explicit, implicit, free markers etc. At the level of the advertising iconotext, the most obvious syntagmatic opposition is the one between the chrono-syntax (the linear sequentiality) and the topo-syntax (the tabular sequentiality). The code determines an apparently stable unity capable of generating different syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations (*idem*, 135).

Referring to the semiotic codes, Klinkenberg sustains that they are variable, in relation to the transmitting channel of the message, of its nature and structure, arguing that through the fact that a verbal message (the spoken language) or paraverbal (the music) is tributary to a linear syntax, in comparison to a visual message that favours the tabular syntax and that allows much more refined distinctions (*idem*, 41-42). This observation should be taken in consideration when defining codes. A physical stimulus is perceived due to one or more sensorial systems and is then processed and interpreted by the central nervous system through complex neuronal operations named *programmes*. The code represents the totality of these programmes and functions as "an interface between the stimulus, thus lacking sense, and the referent, [being] a structure in which a relation between the portion of the sensitive experience and of the cognoscible world is established, a relation that we call *signification* (my italics, my translation). The code turns, thus, the portion of sensitive experience into (a) sign, and the portion of world into (a) referent" (*idem*, 42).

*The iconic codes* sum up the variety of forms and of the dimensional relations of the images and of the graphic representations present in the individual and collective imaginary. The receiver will decipher easily a delicate feminine face, a semi-profile picture, with the hair swept-back and the face towards the bottle of perfume, and will deduce the direction of the product and the message of that commercial. J.-M. Adam and Marc Bonhomme argue that the advertising image can be *transitive*, having a mimetic and a referential function, and *intransitive*, possessing a great capacity of persuasion (2004: 92). They admit that the iconic signifier "is based on a tight proximity and on a continuum with its referent" (*idem*, 91), which differentiates it from the linguistic signified.

*The linguistic codes* include linguistic signs present in advertisements: the title, the slogan, the informative text, the paratext. The delimitations between these are made through the conceptual

specific descriptions of each mentioned element. The social and cultural space of the actants makes possible the codification and decodification of the transmitted message by the advertisement's text. From the simple and explicit expression to the ludic and poetic-stylistic expressions, the creators of advertisements use all the creative resources to surprise and to direct the receiver's attention towards the message. The linguistic sign distances itself from its referent, stepping into an "arbitrary, symbolic, conventional and linear frame" (Adam & Bonhomme, 2004: 93).

*The typographic codes* underline clearly and distinctively the textual elements of the ad. For instance, the title and the slogan will have bigger letter fonts than the informative text or the paratext and will be written in bold or italics. If the informative text and the paratext are present, these will appear micro-dimensioned, because their role is not to attract the receiver's attention, as the title and slogan intends, but to complete the iconotextual information and to strengthen the persuasive function of the message, through supplementary data and iconotextual landmarks. Another aspect that deserves mentioning is the one of the printing quality or the digital exposure. The ads that are generous with the typographic aspect, that is they use paper of superior quality and an extended space or a higher resolution (in the case of ads on web pages), will create the feeling of opulence and will unconsciously ensure the receiver that everything is made for his/her well-being and comfort.

*The chromatic codes* are designed to direct the receiver on captivating psycho-mental paths, premeditated by the ad's creators. The colours are well chosen starting from their unique significations, also depending on the chromatic relations that they realize through juxtapositions. If red is perceived as powerful and passionate, then it will be used to suggest passion, while green, which has a calming effect, will be used in an ad to induce the idea and sensation of tranquillity. Also, blue will suggest the idea of clarity, cleanness and truth, yellow will designate the light and orange – joy and communion. Specialists in advertising know that each colour is related to a given wavelength, meaning that it has a specific vibrational frequency and this aspect is exploited in order to persuade people. Even though the receiver is not conscious of the influence of colours over his/her subconscious, these frequencies influence his/her choices and decisions, being deeply correlated with his/her psycho-emotional mood from the moment of the reception.

*The socio-cultural codes* define the imaginary of the actants. The iconotextual inventory of life and the transmitter's and receiver's reality determine the signification of the transmitted message. The creation of the messages is tributary to the necessity of the specialists to address the receivers in a readable and intelligible language, at first. The iconotextual inventory of life and of the transmitter's and receiver's reality determines the signification of the transmitted message. Beyond it, the symbolic connotations can take sublime forms that invite the consumer into more and more impressive realities. The cultural codes manifest multidimensional and differ depending on the context (the group, the society) that they relate to.

Mentality, as a sum of ethnic, racial, religious, cultural etc. prejudices, is also coded in the advertising message. We can easily recognize, in interwar commercials, for instance, the simple style, explicit and innocent of the first print ad messages, that we can compare to the modern commercials that exploit all the graphic, technological and chromatic tools that we have today (see Apetri, 2014). In this situation, we observe the clear difference between the sincere and clear intention of persuading and the artistic aspirations of the present advertising iconotext.

*The psycho-affective codes.* Eric Berne claims that people constantly play roles (e.g. of persecutor or executioner, of victim or persecuted and saviour in his/her family, of communitarian, professional, political life etc.) and the defective transactions between them initiates and entertains the drama (De Lassus, 2000: 51-52). In the advertising space, these roles are present and exploited to the full through the strategies and tactics that target the determination of the receiver to buy the product or to manifest his/her adhesion or sustenance to/of a product/service.

The victim, the executioner and the saviour are three characters that act in a common play, whose roles are mutually and constantly conditioned and whose functionality nourishes the drama that becomes a sordid trap for any of the three actants. Through these messages, the advertising creators initiate a game of manipulation by which they force the receiver to identify the victim that they studied the reactions of and can, therefore, propose solutions of salvation. They create and maintain the dramatic tension, and the advertising messages are presented as miracle-solutions to the unfulfilled needs of the consumers. When advertising exploits only their creative side, in the authentic tendency of presenting the product, it distances the manipulative intentions so often criticized by the specialists

that see it as a *constant fabrication of pseudo-needs* (Debord, 1996), as an inventive, rich and free spectacle (Cathelat, 1987) or as “an instrument whose action of alienation and brain-washing, put in the service of the permanent raise of profits” (Troger, 2010: 228).

In many commercials, the consumer is lured into a world of shortcomings and needs, in which he/she is induced the awaiting of a miracle that would accomplish his/her need of evasion from that constraining space. By using this strategy, the advertising creators set a trap, placing the receiver in the position of a victim waiting for its saviour. The advertising message takes the status of the persecutor/executor that suggests the receiver that he/she lacks something and therefore he/she is unhappy. Towards the end, the advertising message takes the saviour status, through the reward that it offers. Gratification removes the tension of the waiting and the need is accomplished. The receiver gets the rewards and the game restarts with another commercial, for a different product.

This strategic basis of the commercial leads to advertising using all the poetic, stylistic and persuasive-rhetorical means that can seduce and persuade the individual. The message acquires the status of persecutor when advertising searches to impose itself in an aggressive way, trespassing on the public's opinions and agreement. Such messages are of a coercive, normative-caring and didactic-moralising nature, a situation in which the receiver is attracted in the game and he/she can only manifest the status of victim.

## Conclusions

The multitude of heterogeneous codes that operates in print advertising creates a unitary message, anchored in the psycho-socio-cultural context of the actants. This is why advertising communication is a broad space in which all the tools of persuasion are developed in a creative way, with the support of technology that allows for the expansion of the surrealism borders, conquering the public through spectacularity and uniqueness. Although they are different and can be analysed separately, all these codes act simultaneously in the process of creation of the signification. Even though the prevalence of a code can be observed (chromatically, for instance, through the filling of an ample space in the commercial of a certain colour), all the codes contribute to the creation and anchoring of the message. Thus, the title, the slogan and the informative text will direct the receiver towards the global decryption of the advertising message.

In time, things can acquire a negative connotation, when the message exacerbates the qualities of the product/service, and does not meet the standards of the features the commercial presents. Advertising will continue to exist and to refine itself, and consumers will always search for the seductive iconotextual forms to satisfy their need of (extra)ordinary things.

The capacity of consciously choosing the products and services necessitates a meticulous exploration of all the aspects that present and describe the product. The scenario of the commercial presupposes the most powerful persuasion of the receiver to whom a feeling of lack, of limitation and unhappiness is induced, to be invited afterwards in „the land of all possibilities” that becomes real and satisfactory after the acquisition of the product or the adherence to a certain service. It is more reachable to take from the shelves the product from the commercial that we saw in a magazine or on a webpage, than making the effort to decipher several informative texts that are placed on the product with very little, unreadable font, most of the times. More than that, the constant exploitation of the macro-dimensioned colours and forms, as well as the ludic-poetic presentation, draws the receiver into a psycho-social game that includes the inherent wish of getting a reward.

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