

ADVERTISING IN A MODERN FORMAT: EXIGENCIES AND EXCESSES

Ludmila RUSNAC¹

¹Assist. Prof. PhD, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova
Corresponding author: Ludmila Rusnac; e-mail: rusnac.contacte@gmail.com

Abstract

The advertising activity has become an indispensable factor for the efficient performance of the process of communicative-cultural interaction in the contemporary society. The essential function of the advertising content is to promote a certain product by informing about its qualities. At the same time, this information activity is oriented towards belief, for this purpose being applied a series of strategies, meant to trigger the buying process: gender stereotypes, sexuality elements, elements of violence, shock technique, humour technique etc. Of course, such advertising structures incite and draw attention to them, because they give the public an original, exciting and surprising status. However, the excessive juggling with such techniques represents rather an index of the advertisers' unprofessionalism, with arrears in the field of advertising ethics.

Keywords: *advertising, function, strategies, gender stereotypes, sexuality elements, violence, humour.*

Advertising messages present a history of eight decades. However, the first content of this sort was published at the beginning of the 1940s. The subsequent decades with their continuous developing technologies, standards and practices left their mark on the concept of "advertising strategy". Therefore, the advertising activity became an indispensable factor for the efficient achievement of the communicative-cultural interaction process in contemporary society. In our view, advertising contents do not only promote a particular product, but also the type of relationships existing in the society, as well as the cultural real that it possesses. Therefore, to a certain extent, advertising builds the symbolic social, moral, familiar, cultural and behavioural value systems that the public purchases together with the product. In other words, advertising teaches the buyer what he should want, how to behave in certain typical situations taken from an invented life, in which everything is perfect: the feelings, sensations, physical appearance,

habits, desires and attitudes. As a result, people do not buy products, but what these products offer them: self-esteem, comfort, health, social status, lifestyle and the other peoples' attitudes towards them. Bernard Cathelat views advertising as "a persuasive and complex activity which influences different categories of public to purchase the products" (CATHELAT, 1992). Therefore, the essential function of the advertising content is to promote a certain product by informing about its qualities. In order for this information process to be efficient, advertising specialists have to know the methods through which they can exert psychological and emotional influences on the conscience of individuals. It is necessary for them to possess knowledge from the field of psychology and to know how to emotionally influence the structure of the content, text and image. At the same time, this information activity is oriented towards persuading and therefore a long range of strategies is used, in order to trigger the purchase process: gender stereotypes, elements of sexuality, elements of violence, the shock technique, the humour technique etc. In this respect, the connotative performance of iconic, linguistic and plastic signs is practically inexhaustible. Of course, such advertising structures incite and draw attention towards them because they confer advertising an original, exciting and surprising status. Gender differentiation is familiar to the public and therefore it is not very annoying, violence dramatizes and intensifies the emotivity of the content and the placement of products in humorous contexts amuses and helps consumers to remember the message for a long period of time. Well-designed advertising contents are valuable from an aesthetic and artistic point of

view as they become images – symbols that influence the emotional and spiritual world of the content consumer, also acting on the formation of convictions, value systems and aesthetic preferences. There are two reasons why people purchase products: either because the product helps them solve a problem or because it ensures psychological satisfaction. In the first situation, in structuring the message, emphasis is placed on the verbal envelope, the text and the suggestiveness of the constituent elements, whereas in the second situation emphasis is placed on colour, dynamism, sound, effects, therefore on the non-verbal elements.

A strategy often put to good use in advertising messages refers to the sexual reasons and gender stereotypes used in the advertising contents of goods and services (food, clothes, shoes, mobile phone services, cosmetic products etc.). The sex topic is highly significant for people, it is in close relationship with the libido and it is even considered an element of prestige, being situated in the same semantic field with physical strength and symbolic power. When we speak about gender stereotypes, we mainly refer to the delimitative characteristics of the image of the woman and the image of the man and in this case, there are different types of differentiation: according to physical aspect, the particularities of the character, professional skills, rights and obligations and social purpose. We cannot deny the fact that the advertising space presents a thinking pattern about how a woman should look like (nice, sensual, gentle, tolerant, respectful, slim, with long hair), while the representative of the opposite sex is brawny, strong, sensual, aggressive, independent and winner when it comes to tackling different problems (thirst, hunger, fever, dandruff, bad smell etc.). When speaking about the images of sexuality in advertising, sociologist Anthony Giddens, in his book entitled “The transformation of intimacy”, states the following: “Erotism, the elements of sexuality and female nudes are very much used in advertising, even in those contents that have nothing to do with actual sex” (GIDDENS, 1992). This happens because gender image is part of a topic set which determinates consumers’ interest. Gender strategy in advertising highlights an erotic character, presenting the woman as an

object of masculine desire or the advertising production is mainly created by emphasizing the strengths of the female body. In the contents in which the woman is presented as a sexual object, the stake of the creators accesses the archetype of Aphrodite – as a symbiosis between attraction and purity, on the one side, and sin and taboo, on the other side. In other words, products and services are presented in advertising in the context of a symbolic load which speaks about social behaviours, culture and nature of the relationships between men and women. Relationships in which a woman’s success depends on her ability of adapting her behaviour to the desires and expectations of men. Therefore, an exciting female body sees absolutely everything: cosmetics, alcoholic beverages, jewellery, drugs, cloth and shoes, chemicals and household appliances. However, in order to sell, the female body has to be ideal in proportions and “youth is added as an advantage and even as obligation” (BATAILLE, 1986).

Another advertising strategy that we shall now analyse refers to highlighting the sources of humour, by the usual access to the “cool” type of humour, without neglecting the grotesque comic and even the technique of black humour. It is worth noticing the fact that humour presents immediate pragmatic effects. Some time ago, researcher Maria Constantin argued the use of humour in TV commercials by the fact that “it attracts the attention of the public, it relaxes him and it makes him remember and even like that particular commercial” (CONSTANTIN, n.d.). The use of humour is now a common practice in autochthonous advertising but ten years ago this practice was completely avoided. It was considered that such a promotion activity cannot be successful because jokes give a touch of frivolity that extends to the promoted product and to the brand in general. Critics considered that “the use of humour in advertising aims to entertain the public and not to persuade him” (SUTHERLAND, 1982), in other words, the public focused mainly on understanding the message and not on what it suggested. On the other hand, the messages which contain humour sources are memorable, they seduce and create positive emotions. A humorous spot makes the audience want to review it, but not every funny

advertising content represents a successful advertising message. Therefore, both the concept of the message is important as well as its humour concentration. It is not necessary to use numerous humour elements, but they should be used in certain conditions, aiming a well-delimited audience, and only in relationship to a certain set of products that are to be promoted (refreshments, chocolate, biscuits, mobile phone services etc). However, product placement in contexts in which the excess of ludic aestheticism modifies the meaning of the message and outlines a grotesque, even anaesthetic, humour. A mechanism which is rarely used in scripting the imagistic discourse refers to black humour, a risky technique because it can provoke different reactions on behalf of the public. Despite all this, regardless of the effects, the procedure is efficient in itself as it facilitates the memorization of the content. We offer as example an advertising spot which promoted the "Yellow pages" book, in which the ludic of the situation was represented by the wife's violent language and the husband's efforts to calm her down. As a result of the gradual increase of the wife's violent language, numerous elements of the book are presented: flowers, travel agencies, lawyer firms and finally weapons and ammunition. The end of the imagistic discourse presents the sound of a gun-shot, an element which suggests that the argument has a tragic ending. The slogan is also suggestive: "Yellow pages. Whenever you need a helping hand". Advertisers often use situational humour, represented by unexpected, exaggerated or unjustified behaviour. These techniques transform advertising contents into small show which ensure the memorability of the message. In this context, it is worth mentioning the fact that the value of commercials does not strictly refer to the informational aspect, but rather to the artistic prominent one, which refers to fictional entertainment. Researcher Viorica Zafiu also certifies, in the humour of the situation, the relevance of contrasting, surprising and inconsistent scenarios that aim to provoke laughter (ZAFIU, 2000). Some time ago, the script of a commercial for a mobile phone service provider, Moldcell, presented the following: a nice young lady visits a specialised shop in order to purchase a product and a handsome young man presents the benefits of a subscription to her in a similar

manner to a marriage proposal. Therefore, the young lady teleports herself into another dimension, guided by the man's soft voice and finally she says "yes". She then goes back to the real world and realises that she had approved to purchase the product. Obviously, in drafting the imagistic-verbal discourse, the authors pay significant attention to the exploitation of stylistic procedures, responsible for expressiveness and "the gradual addition of aesthetic and emotional elements that increased the chances of the advertisement to be received and retained" (CHELCEA, 2006), although humour should not be directly connected to the product because otherwise it would only distract and amuse, and not increase sales. At the same time, bad humour should be avoided as it ignores the cultural values of the target audience. Such contents stir up negative emotions which are automatically directed towards the promoted product and this may lead to negative brand associations.

Another aspect regarding the building of advertising structures that we address next refers to the presence of violent elements in commercials. Many sources consider that the concept of "violent advertising" is synonymous with the concept of "aggressive advertising", due to the fact that both terms refer to the same idea. In our view, the existence of some moments of interference does not allow us to overlap the two terms. Therefore, aggressive advertising refers to the commercials' promotion methods whereas violent advertising refers to the form and content of commercials, meaning script, image, text and sound. In commercials that promote goods and services, the elements of violence fulfil the following functions:

- to highlight the seriousness of the matter;
- to dramatize they daily unpleasant situations that people are confronted with;
- to symbolize the violent actions undertaken by the hero-characters;
- to intensify emotivity.

We shall now focus on the analysis of the discursive and imagistic strategies used by advertisers. Speaking about advertising for goods and services, the most popular products placed in the context of violence are: intimate hygiene products, energy drinks, drugs and chemicals. Therefore, the negative heroes against

whom the acts of violence are usually directed to are the following: pain, sweat, dandruff, dirt, bacteria etc. However, the elements of violence may also appear in commercials which promote services. A suggestive example is the commercial for the mobile phone service provider "Tele -2", broadcasted on one of the TV channels in the Republic of Moldova. The elements of violence are present both at the level of the visual message and at the level of linguistic message. The subject is similar to that of action movies related to mafia clans, presenting the adventures of two highbinders and of Tony, a scared individual working for one of them. The script presents Tony subjected to tortures because he tried to subscribe to another mobile phone operator. The images present Tony with his hands tied, with his mouth glued with adhesive tape and in a suspended position upside down. The connotative aspect presents the images of one boss with a pair of scissors in his hand, in close proximity to Tony's fingers, suggesting that his finger was cut off, but later it becomes clear that the tip of a Cuban cigar was actually cut.

The actions of the heroes are frequently placed in contexts of heroization and sensational exaltation. For example, in a TV commercial for "Nesscafe" (Ren-TV), characters become very aggressive because of the consumption of a certain type of coffee. They start to destroy and set fire to all nearby objects because they were disappointed by the taste of the coffee: "This is not Nesscafe!" A similar scripting procedure was used in a commercial that promoted the "Aridon" card. In its content, a fierce and huge monster appears and he chases the heroine, trying to steal her "Aridon" card. The pursuit is accompanied by destruction of property and buildings, explosions and traffic accidents. The actions are placed in a fantastic context, the hero walking on the roof of cars and buildings. In the given context, the scripting structure refers to the strategies of sensationalism and fiction, which assign the message with constituents adjacent to the fairy tale.

The following advertising script construction technique refers to the use of shock elements, generally used in social advertising in order to attract attention to some social phenomena that need to be counteracted. The exploited thematic spectre in these advertising contents is quite vast:

death, drugs, war, miscarriage, suicide, slavery, violence towards animals, racial discrimination etc. Therefore, researcher Jim Aitchison was right when he stated, 15 years ago, that violent advertising will soon become "an outdated procedure, the place of violence being taken by the element of shock" (AITCHISON, 2004). This type of advertising never arouses positive emotions, but feelings of fear, unsafety, frustration or even repulsion. Mostly similar to the components of the script, the elements of shock are consciously used to trigger certain emotions and therefore the shock reaction is a planned one. In other cases, the shock reaction of those who interact with these contents represents an unexpected effect, as a result of the dissonance from the perception system of the surrounding world. As example, we may refer to Beneton commercials, a company which often uses shock to promote its products. Some time ago, in an advertising content, a picture with three human hearts was presented and it represented three human races. The idea suggested here is that on the inside all people are the same. The elements of shock appear as a result of the development of a conflict between the deeply rooted cultural norms and values and the new ones, a confrontation between "acceptable" and "inacceptable", at the level of individual conscience. In this order of ideas, it is worth mentioning the fact that in shock advertising there is a violation of the viable cultural taboos at the societal level. Through the semantic loading that they possess, these topics are highly traumatizing from a psychological point of view, without the use of certain discursive techniques, in order to emphasize the emotional loading that it bears. Therefore, the use of shock elements represents quite a risky strategy that might not always fulfil expectations. This is why the shock strategy should not always be used in promoting products. It is acceptable in the launching phase in order to quickly draw attention towards the product and the company, but after that advertisers should use proper emotional contents, according to the value system of the potential customers. Otherwise, there is a risk of not being accepted. Researcher L. Morozova presents the items which determine the efficiency of shock advertising: "the characteristics of the target-audience, the geographical area in which

the advertising message is broadcasted and the semantic loading". The author specifies the fact that in underdeveloped countries, in which political, social, economic and cultural crisis appear on a regular basis, "such advertising does no longer exalt, but it represents an additional source of stress". Taking into account the above-mentioned aspects, we conclude by saying that the presence of shock elements has to be augmented and it has to possess an easily-understandable meaning to the consumer.

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