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## **THE SEMIOSPHERE OF ADVERTISING AND CULTURE**

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**Abstract:** *Should we take for granted that semiosis stands for any form of activity, conduct and process that involves signs and the meaning they produce, then it comes right to say that semiosis is to be identified with any form of publicity and advertising. Moreover, advertising is as ubiquitous as the individuals themselves and as technological progress outputs. In this context, Lotman’s concepts of semiosphere (2005) encompass the meaning and the effect, the signs and audience, along with Bandura’s triadic view on the continuum between the human, his existence, his behaviour and the context in which he reacts. In the light of all the above stated, the present paper comes to explore whether advertising the same product or service in various cultures needs to be tackled differently or whether slight background differences change the meaning due to cultural variations. Can the same advertisement be advanced interculturally? This is an endeavour in finding out whether Krylov’s fable (1946) about the pearl “What they don’t understand they regard as trivial” still stands in terms of intercultural advertising or whether the promotion goes ahead unspoilt due to the intrinsic features of the product. Are the psychological mechanisms beyond the advertising product solely responsible for the decoding of meaning or is it Bandura’s triad at stake? These and other aspects are to be explained in the current paper.*

**Key words:** *advertising, publicity, culture, social learning, semiosphere, semiotics*

### **1. Introduction**

Advertisement and publicity are so related to one another yet they are so apart from each other. To advertise is to promote finite products fully encoded, media products that aim at changing people’s behavior for financial purposes, to turn them into targets, part of a sell-buy process based on a well-planned financial strategy. Publicity, on the other hand is the intention-free presentation and advancement of an image, an idea or a person with no planned financial aim at stake. Therefore, since both publicity and advertising rely upon signs to promote meaning, be it for financial purposes or not, we will look at how these two trigger a process of decoding meaning for people all over the world, sometimes relating to the same products or services. In this very case, the question that comes is will the message be decoded similarly for different cultural context? Will the “environment” influence the decoding process or the individual differently? Is it necessary to adapt the promoted product in order for the psychological process to happen and trigger the change in the targeted individuals? Following this paper we are trying to answer these questions.

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## **2. Language- a social and cultural signpost**

If we consider advertising a form of discourse, then we can bring into discussion the frequently used quote in the US journalism, "where you stand greatly depends on where you sit". In other words, your position in the world is very much dependent on the discourse that you often have in various social contexts. By discourse of course we can understand any form of expression, from lexis to dress code or living standards.

Likewise, messages used in advertising make use of different forms of expressions, rendering different positions to the interlocutor, in our case- the targeted public. These positions are, however, influenced by the environment and tailored to the receiver. Wittgenstein's language games are thus subdued to specific rules: rules on culture, rules on national identity, rules based on social and cognitive learning. These rules enhance meaning, which is thus different for each nation, each culture, appealing to particular stereotypes and country specific references. Individuals engaged in this process are placed at "nodal points of specific common circuits" as Lyotard puts it, all playing the role of receiver and sender, taking turns. We are all players that fulfill our roles for the communication to exist, let alone advertising, where words and proper decoding are necessarily accompanied by attitude, otherwise there is a flaw in the communication process, a flaw in the choice of words advertising makes traffic with. A Romanian philosopher, Plesu A ( 1994) spoke about the power that words have over the receiver and said that "to speak is to nourish or poison people" since words are two-folded and chameleonic, based on the rules they go by.

Searle (1975) on the other hand, looked at a speech act from more perspectives, highlighting that any message must be looked at in a complex light to thus decode its complex meaning, since it is multi-faceted: what the message means, what the sender intends to say, what the receiver decodes and, last but not least, what the rules governing the language are. Therefore, once again we understand that context, the environment per se, is very important to a proper decoding of the message, since placing and replacing the same message in various environments trigger data change, from the influenced reception to other cultural, social and personal factors that come to mean different things to different people.

In current times yet, where postmodern approaches have broken boundaries and have opened all types of gates, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility" ( Lyotard,1984) Information is polyphonic, texts are multifaceted and, implicitly, advertising is an open door to multiple meanings, for places where cultures mix and match, where they coexist but also where they keep their specificities in what culturally rooted individuals understand, since people structure their identity around texts ( Barton D et al, 2013) Moreover, while the media texts seem to be closed (Eco, 1979), advertising seems to be open to a certain extent, to convey a wide array of meanings to be able to tailor themselves to each individual in the targeted publics. This is possible because there is an implicit relation between language and the social world. Language determines attitude by encoding meaning, where the "old and the habitual is spoken as if it were new and unusual" as Tomashevsky stated in one of his volumes on narratology.

Meanings carried by the advertisements nurture opinions which are expressed in the public sphere. Hence, a portion of the public sphere is created each time a conversation unfolds and makes reference to an advertisement made public. The semiosphere (1982, Lotman) is thus getting contour all the time an advertisement is launched to its targeted individuals, while we

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ask ourselves whether the “semiotics of culture”(Lotman, 2001) functions in case of advertising to explain whether signs function with the same values in different cultures. This questions come because, according Lotman, cultures are self-referential, they allow meanings to be generated only in connection to the sender, the medium and the socially constructed objects.

Metaphors that are called upon in order to embed message in a cultural product when we speak of advertisements, serve as mediators between two minds- the mind of the one who sends the message, who encodes symbols, and the mind of the one who is the targeted individual. As Lotman states (1990), if the cultures (of origin and of the target) are not the same, there is never a “precise translation”, but “approximate equivalences determined by the cultural- psychological and semiotic context common to both systems” The real meaning can thus be lost, the intended message can suffer from distortion and either communicate something else or – the worst case- not communicate at all.

On the other hand, while cultures are embedded in three dimensional products ( goods, pieces of clothing, personal objects, surrounding housing and daily living objects) therefore advertising is calling for culture and cultural values, whenever products are advanced in society via advertisements, whereas decoding advertising is semiosphere, it is decoding messages under the influence of culturally embedded symbols. All the “values, attitudes, beliefs and artifacts or any other symbol belonging to lifestyle” do nothing but help people “interpret, assess and communicate as members of the same society.” (Hoffmeyer,1996)

It is culture thus that determines the tastes of consumers, dictating for the products and services in demand. In this respect, advertisements are simply tools to sell products that were asked for and shaped by the cultural trends in the first place. One can state, at this point, that advertisements are the mirror of culture, and decoding them, reacting to them is nothing but contributing to the semiosphere, to that abstract space where meanings meet, unveil and act upon the intended subject by a mere play with manufactured goods or services. Advertisements become thus a body of messages about the culture that produced them.

To understand the variations in the cultural complexity of semiosphere is to appeal to Bandura’s view( 2004) . He focuses on social learning that is acknowledging information or behavior and the consequences they trigger by observation and imitation. Once a behavioural pattern is taken as one’s own, the newly acquired set of inner rules are displayed, maintained and used as patented. Based on Bandura’s work, the social behavior is not innate; it is learned through adequate examples until later on it becomes intrinsic. His theory states that any change of behavior involves a cognitive change. Once we change something in our life through observation or imitation, then our whole behavior will change. This is a very good explanation to the fact that advertising acts upon people because they react to one another in the same culture. They see products and observe the consumers’ attitude towards the promoted products, they identify with the ones using the goods or services advertising for a gratification they need in Maslow’s pyramid and therefore they change behavior in identifying themselves with the product by wanting it, purchasing it. This would be, shortly, the chain of reaction and the reason why and how people in a culture act or are acted upon by advertisements. This is what explains the limitation of the cultural semiosphere.

Moreover, cultures come from the past and act upon present, to influence the future, people’s way of living and reacting to life, because culture is the “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic

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forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973d:89). Culture is also not a force or causal agent in the world, but a context in which people live out their lives (Geertz 1973f:14).

It takes a good knowledge on peculiarities in thinking, attitude, mentalities and cultural specificities of a certain community. A mere translation of the advertisement in another language can affect the problem of raising awareness in a certain focus group. Needless to say that each nation can be distinguished through its cultural specificities, culture being the factor that ensures diversity when compared to other cultures. However, all societies accept general values like sensibility to beauty, humanity, family spirit, positive attitude, etc.

Minds work to decode and grasp meanings, in a way that determined Hofstede (2010) to speak about the “Software of the mind” when trying to showcase how people react differently based on the culture they come from. Thus, he brought into light five cultural dimensions, five universal values that he placed at the center of all cultures, values that even though the same, they are so different from one culture to another:

- a) power distance is the attitude people have towards everything that means power, that means higher echelon. When this indicator is small- everyone is equal; when the values are high, there are disparities among individuals
- b) uncertainty avoidance is the factor that shows to what extent people from a culture would react to something that new, that is unknown and thus gives rise to uncertainty. If the indicator is big, it means that nation doesn't like uncertainty, they are emotional; if the figure is small, it means the people are more flexible, they are more tolerant.
- c) individualism versus collectivism shows to what extent one is responsible for himself versus to what extent the group is responsible for him, for what he or she does.
- d) masculinity versus femininity in figures show a high value for male society and a low value for a female society
- e) long versus short term orientation if the value highlights the “short” indicator, it means that society manifests tolerance and respect, whereas if the “long” one is relevant it means people are all circumstantial and adaptable.

If we extract some values from the table presenting situations of various countries then we have enough arguments to support the idea according to which advertisements will be decoded differently based on the cultural reactions the subjects are embedded in. Thus, commercials imported as such from other countries, designed for other cultures, will not have full 100 % response in the targeted audience since our national or country specific embedded reactions are different. The situation is even stronger with the rural areas where no western or other cultural influence penetrated in their subjects value systems due to poorer information channels or due to a lower chance to update information and thus get ”infected” with other cultural values that allow for a better reaction when faced with foreign stimulus ( foreign in terms of culture).

Therefore, since advertisement is greatly dependent on culture, advertising makes use of humour, puns, and metaphors for common words, some behavioural patterns which ease the reception for the targeted publics. Speaking the public's language, the advertiser will accomplish his target easier, in order to start the process of promoting the new and intended product. This is because the rules of a culture include the linguistic system as well. Language is one of the most powerful tools for defending the cultural identity. In order to understand the message in an

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advertising material, the subject needs certain knowledge on the textual systems in the culture of origin. The best example is translating an ad from a language into another one. It is known that the essence in a commercial text is not just accurate translation from a language to another but finding these significances specific to the targeted culture that make the people resonate. For example the producers of Rolls Royce had to find another solution (another name for that model) for the model Silver Mist simply because mist in German means excrements. Another example for adapting the text to fit the culture of its targeted group spectacular failures is the following: the Vauxhall Nova intended to be promoted for the Spanish audience: 'no va' in Spanish means 'won't go', therefore the producers were either unable to sell the product to its Spanish customers due to what the model meant in the targeted language, thing which brought the opposite of confidence in a new product, or they had to change the name of the newly designed model "Nova". Moreover, the example with the new model Toyota's MR2 had a similar story, since if uttered aloud by French speakers, the new model name sounds very similar to "merde", which is the French for 'rubbish. Finally, another example similarly concludent is the KIA which failed to appeal to the US soldiers since as a Military acronym KIA stands for "killed in action".

What we understand from all this is that the process of stereotyping advertisements targets particular groups of people; therefore, getting audience recognize who an advert might be aimed at is to make use of language connected to a group. We need to change some meaningful parts in cases we want to use the same advertisement in different cultures or different countries.

For instance, the mobile phone operator, Orange, is about to develop its product in Northern Ireland, so the slogan with unintentionally political meaning when applied to that area has to be changed "Your future is Orange" because "In 1996, Orange faced difficulties when expanding into the [Northern Ireland](#) region of the United Kingdom. At the time, Orange's slogan was "The future's bright... The future's Orange" but to mention "orange" in such a context could be seen to refer to the [Orange Order](#), a controversial Protestant Loyalist organisation active in the region. This could be offensive to the Irish Catholic population due to the [ongoing sectarian violence](#) between the two groups, but only if they chose to take a slogan in such a way" (The Independent, retrieved at .....<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/the-futures-not-so-bright-as-orange-gets-the-red-light-in-ulster-1328424.html>)



Fig 1- the advertisement for Orange

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Should we look at other examples, we can bring up the example of two different commercials tailored for the specificities of the countries they were distributed in, even though they were actually advancing the same product- the 3G in mobile telephony for Vodafone. If the one meant for Romania is making use of “The Danube Delta to highlight the specificities of a country where family closeness is a very important quality and cultural value, using thus the 3G to connect family even more, in the British society the storyboard is set in a bus, a more individualistic setting, yet which connects people together, but the story is not of a family or of some people sharing; the story for the UK 3G is the story of a single girl crying out loud, a girl that gets calm again by watching some cartoons on 3G; the watching is done by oneself, and this is because the UK has an individualist culture, opposed to Romania which is a collectivist one. It is not hard to conclude why the same product- 3G in Vodafone was advanced differently- there were different countries with different culture and different values, so the product could reach its targeted people only by resonating with the same sides one meets in his culture on common grounds.



Fig 2-the same event, same goal - different countries ( Romania and UK)

Likewise, talking about the same event, two different commercials were used to promote the culture of sharing for Christmas- Sainsbury had a commercial with the cat that produced a disaster in order to reach the conclusion that “ sharing is caring” all leading to Sainsbury( a UK supermarket chain) as a shopping need for Christmas, and this happened in the UK, whereas for Germany they had a colder commercial with a lonesome grandfather, who made his family share a little bit of time with him, ready for Christmas as well, with the help of EDEKA ( another national supermarket chain, a German one this time). Why they used different stories for promoting supermarket chains for the same religious event, is no wonder- different cultures made the targeted individuals perceive things differently.

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## **3. Conclusion**

Even though the approach we have taken is based on Bandura's and Hofstede's work, even though the recent research has many more analytical tools for culture, its products and the relationship between these, the individuals and the way they relate to one another, our endeavor has tried to highlight the fact that advertising should always consider national culture to a large extent, due to the extended influence which national cultural dimensions have on consumers' behavior. Therefore, we cannot use a universally well made advertisement to influence consumers' behavior in all cultures, irrespective of the peculiarities, since each nation decodes the information embedded in the commercial based on a specific code of symbols and meanings, deeply printed in the national identity. A commercial that is not tailored to make people resonate due to specific national traits will never reach the consumers' heart, will never influence his behavior and will never determine changes of attitudes that end up in purchasing the intended product or service. The key to success in a well developed marketing campaign is a specific advertisement even if the promoted merchandise or service is internationally equally known and forwarded simultaneously.

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