

Propaganda of the Turn of Centuries

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Abstract

The main thesis of this paper is that advertisement is this way of mediation, which can be compared with propaganda. To advertise does not merely mean to inform. In advertisement, trivial statements seem to turn into highly interesting and important ones. We may even be inclined to believe that the advertised objects, tendencies, actions, or convictions carry the value conditioning our quality of life. Their effective advertising may determine attitudes and habits, direct thinking on a given subject as well as introduce us into the arena of present events and indicate appropriate way of participating in them. Thus, advertisement functions in numerous elements of mass-media. In this way it acquires the importance of propaganda, which, in my opinion, is closest to its essence. Promotion exists wherever we find the need of presentation. It is quite possible that one can advertise everything.

The main idea of the paper includes two hypotheses, i.e., that advertisement is a way of mediation that can be compared to ideological propaganda, and that advertisement evokes mimetism called here mimetism of possession.

The above theses illustrate the subject-object approach to the subject of advertisement. They describe two faces of the problem: the essence of advertisement and the nature of the recipient of advertisement. This approach allows for recognition of the basic relation between advertisement and its recipient, and therefore for a description of the mechanism of the influence exerted by advertisement through indicating its essence and man's nature.

In the present paper we do not pay attention to the commonly emphasised aspect, i.e., advertisement's ability to increase the sales of a product. We are mostly interested in the abundance of elements of advertisement in all those domains where the decision of the recipient is important. Thus, advertisement is treated as one of the more important information channels of our time – to advertise means not only to inform but also to persuade, promote and propagate.

It seems that advertisement enjoys continually greater importance. This issues mostly from the fact that its basic feature is commonness. Television that reaches millions of recipients may be opposed to, e.g., hundreds of thousands of newspaper readers or tens of thousands of book readers. Thus, it may be so that advertisement dynamically shapes the recipient – the features characteristic for advertisement become common, and advertisement becomes a commonly understood language.

Advertisement (on television, radio, internet, newspapers, outdoors) influences imagination through symbols, emblems, simple allegories and its obvious, specific magnetism produced by the way of representation. It is also most probable that advertisement develops in its recipient a scheme of pictorial correspondents for, e.g., philosophical ideas, moral concepts, family life, objects, social rules, political tendencies and even for theological trends. The above motives seem to be a constant set used in production of advertisements, constituting a frame of reference for the advertised contents.

We may add that theoretical rules for advertisement are worked out. They issue, firstly, from the medial carrier, and secondly, from the choice, i.e., form, application of language, concepts and categories like community, commonness or truth, which are used to make the advertised contents familiar for the recipient.

Advertisement makes use of the components existing in the recipient's convictions, which usually come from his general knowledge. Authors of advertisements "put together" the selected components, i.e., fragments, iconographic motives, quotations and pseudo-quotations, and then record them in the form of various language and sign systems. Thus, production of advertisements is rather the job of marketing and promotion engineering and not the magic of a creative process.

1. Advertisement as propaganda (The essence of advertisement)

Our first claim is that advertisement performs the role of propaganda and in this sense we focus our attention on the essence of advertisement. Mass-media are the natural carrier of advertisement. The influence of the propagated contents reaches an enormous number of recipients, shaping their views. Here we do not mean the

advertisements in commercial blocks¹, but being present in media – a commercial block is a mere conventional limitation of a cosmetic character. Actually, advertisement is also performed, e.g., on television in the news, political and social programmes as well as in family ones, for instance:

1. Information programmes, which involve hierarchy of information as well as selection of events and comments.
2. Political programmes, which regard presentation of ideologies, views and arguments.
3. Community programmes, which discuss men's needs and conflicts.
4. Family programmes, which serve for presentation and display of men's misfortunes, and which make use of unfortunate persons who are unaware of the main idea of the presentation.
5. Entertainment programmes, which present human attitudes effective for survival and achieving a proper status in a group.

Having this in mind, we can say that advertisement is present in many places in mass-media. Therefore, it acquires the importance of propaganda, which presumably is the closest to its essence. The ability of speaking about things, their presentation and their further promotion is wherever there is a need for it – everything can be advertised. We can assume that this rule of action is present in all media. This issues from the factors like presentation time and presentation space. In fact, all types of activity in the media have the aspect of advertisement and promotion. Being unaware of this fact is a non-medial and unprofessional approach.

Thus, advertisement is defined as a propaganda statement formulated with the use of the simplest artistic rules.²

¹ Here we neglect the subject of advertising a product, assuming that advertising goods and persuading customers to purchase them is an obvious propaganda measure.

² "No matter whether the customer values art, almost always it does seduce him. In the aesthetics [of a product] there is some mesmerising charm, for on the one hand we are attracted by harmony, on the other hand – by the purposefully introduced contrasts. Compact systems of visual forms are always a temptation for our eyes." 9B. Schmitt, A. Simonson, *Aesthetics in Marketing*, „The Free Press, A Division o Simon & Schuster Inc.“, 1997.

In advertisement, trivial statements seem to become extremely interesting and important. We can have an impression that the advertised objects, tendencies, behaviours and convictions have the value determining the quality of life. Their effective advertising may determine attitudes and decisions, and influence thinking on a given subject. It may also introduce us in a specific manner into the domain of present events and suggest the way of our participating in them.³

Politics that is advertised in election campaigns is a specific kind of product. The views advertised then are frequently far from being possible to bring into life, because their aim is to win the electorate and not to introduce a systematic change. This is when advertisements referring to the strategic state policies, e.g., in the domain of economy or international politics are made and introduced into the recipient's perception range. Selling pre-election views is similar to selling any other advertised product, e.g., insect repellent. It is not understanding that is important, but the quality of presentation – here advertisement serves for making election decisions.

Advertisement of political views seems to be a complex process issuing from the principles of promotion, i.e., ability to select and promote selected ideas, marketing, i.e., preparing ideas for sale through adjusting them to the recipient's needs, and public relations, i.e., reliable presentation of actions and persons who issue comments on a given subject. We can say that the indicated elements may exert a stronger influence on the recipient than the actual state of reality. Participation in television and radio debates makes it possible to create a common image – the contents are merely a component of what can be achieved during such a debate in the sense of its effective impact on the recipient.⁴

A specific kind of advertisement is presentation of human attitudes, e.g., rebellious attitudes, pretences, successes or misfortunes, which shape medial opinions that start to function in everyday life. The advertised features influence the image of

³ B. Schmitt, A. Simonson, *Aesthetics in Marketing*, „The Free Press, A Division o Simon & Schuster Inc.“, 1997.

⁴ Some programmes like, e.g., mockery in a cabaret may lead to ridicule of all political ideas and actions, causing bluntness of chaos or ideologies and views. Another feature of advertisements, i.e., flattening, is revealed in this way.

reality or the recipient. This regards the external features like appearance, behaviour and understanding, and may be independent of the actual state of affairs and indirectly dependent on the actual intention of the primary broadcaster. By way of example we can mention the advertisement of political views discussed above, and the more and more widespread idea of reality show (e.g. *Big Brother*), where the rewarded attitudes and behaviours of the participants advertise such attitudes in reality. In one of such programmes the winner was the participant who – catching fish for the others – survived till the end and won the prize. Effectiveness of his actions consisted in gorging others with food. In other programmes of this kind the winners were persons who were able to effectively amuse others.

We claim that advertisement similar to propaganda, indirectly or directly, that is, through mass media or individually, purposefully and systematically persuades, shapes opinions, attitudes, views and behaviours in accord with the sponsors' intentions. Therefore, advertisement can be associated with intentional manipulation, communication and creation of images whose aim is to achieve definite goals.

Advertisement also strives to gain and maintain supporters of a definite group, and therefore to evoke in them certain tendencies or incline them to definite actions. Effectiveness of ideological proclamations and propaganda messages in advertisements is built with appropriately selected pieces of information, chosen arguments and means exerting influence on judgements, attitudes, feelings and actions. Their goal may be propagation of goods and services, but also hidden shaping, forming and creating the man and the world. A part of the advertisement propaganda is simply manipulation. It is often cynical and ruthless, tending towards argumentation that does not raise ethical objections. To achieve this, some of advertisement mechanisms are bimodal, that is, the first part of the advertisement refers of anxiety-evoking factors, triggering the recipient's fear, depressions or gloom. They deteriorate the recipient, making him more sensitive to influence. In the second part the advertisement shows him an alternative, liberation through a product or ideology. Advertisement, like ideology, makes appearances of objectivism and truth, making use of precisely chosen half-truths and one-sidedly selected pieces of information.

2. Mimetism of possession (the nature of advertisement reception)

Another thesis mentioned above is that advertisement evokes a kind of mimetism – in this sense we focus our attention at the advertisement recipient.

We assume that all people share a tendency to imitate. And the kind of mimetism that is reinforced by the desire to possess this, which is the object of presentation, we shall call the mimetism of appropriation. Thus, on the one hand, imitation called here mimetism of appropriation is a force integrating the subject through imitation of everyday behaviours. On the other hand, with the growth of the quantity of things, views and behaviours that become the object of competition and desire, it becomes a destructive force evoking conflicts or frustrations. The desire to possess is a feature that develops and assumes its final shape through observation of others. People learn to possess, they learn to desire things, views, behaviours possessed, manifested or desired by other people.

Let us add that advertisement probably possesses also a cathartic function, that is, through offering an alternative it enables us to fulfil our own world. The recipient gets free of the mimetic desire for other unattainable goals, because advertisement shows him what is “worth possessing”, and what is usually attainable for the recipient. Similarly, we can also suggest that advertisement saves us from situations perceived as “dead end”, i.e., makes us free of the mechanism of feeling guilty for hardships and misfortunes. In this sense, achieving this, which is advertised “guarantees” being happy. Thus, through its cathartic dimension, i.e., the function it performs, advertisement is probably closer to antique tragedy than to mass art. It may also serve the mechanism of acceptance of everyday reality through sublimation of the appropriate. The world is beautiful because I have achieved what has been commonly recognised as worth possessing or doing, or at least, I have fulfilled the obligation to make it happen.

Thus, if we can say at all that advertisement is art, it is art through its functions rather than through its other features like values or aesthetic and artistic qualities.

To make mimetic desire creative, full and inducing to make a decision, advertisement presents a rival. In advertisement, everything that evokes desire is called a rival. It may be, for instance, another person (which is most frequent), object, behaviour or view. Moreover, a rival in the sense indicated above may change throughout the advertisement – generally speaking, it may be a context of presentation. In connection with the evoked mimetic tension, the recipient must undertake an attempt to define the rival. The rival, e.g., a person as a hero of the advertisement, desires something, and the recipient of the advertisement is put in the situation in which he desires the same for himself. The hero of the advertisement, the rival, is a model for the recipient in the sense of the basic structure of mimetic imitation. As we can assume, desire issues not so much from the basic need, but from the sense of lack of something possessed by someone else. The desire is not concrete; it issues from the necessity of desiring imposed by the advertisement. The desire becomes the basis for acceptance of views or for acquiring something.

If the recipient believes that the presented content is able to give him complete satisfaction, it would be fundamental to efficiently indicate this content, which would be desirable to the highest extent. Since desiring issues from human nature and is of mimetic character, the recipient imitates his rival's strivings – the desiring imitator, that is the recipient of the advertisement wants to choose and strive for the same thing that his rival does.

Let us add that the recipient's desire may be hidden, that is, he might be ashamed of his desire and not want his needs, fascinations or shortcomings to be revealed to others. Thus, the recipient of advertisements may apparently express his disapproval of the advertised contents and declare that he is not an imitator, frequently hiding the mimetic nature. There occurs interdependence between the recipient of the advertisement and its hero, i.e., the rival. The recipient's mimetic nature is not inclined to admit that the advertisement hero is a rival. The recipient may think that he is unworthy of participating in those regions of bliss that are the rival's object of delight – in the world of new, brilliant, fascinating, sexy or enviable things.

Thus, in the sphere of desires there exists a mimetic tendency issuing from the essence of man. One of the elements in which it becomes manifest is advertisement.

Conclusion

In the general sense the value of advertisement consists in its ability to recognise the connections between the advertised contents and those motives, which are interesting or intriguing for the recipient. Thus, the function of advertisement as an element of product sales increase is merely one of the ways to understand it, and not the most important one. It seems to be a secondary factor as compared to the ability to associate the advertised contents with other, non-commercial messages. Therefore, the main goal of advertisement is its ability to shape consciousness – the former masses have been replaced by today's consumers, divided into definite groups (strata) mostly by the financial means they possess.

We can assume that influencing consumers, advertisement performs the following functions:

1. Critically-explicative function – it criticises some received state of things and then explains the way in which something imperfect and unworthy can be overcome, offering a new solution.
2. Prognostic function – it creates the postulated image of consumer reality, e.g., pre-election situation, where prognoses exert an influence on the decisions of the voters.
3. Practical function – it is able to influence the consumers and modify their behaviours, usually in accord with the intention of advertisement producers and broadcasters.
4. Sociological function – it shapes needs and tastes, becomes the object of competition and forms the style of living.

Through its similarity to political ideology and propaganda, advertisement creates a mythical space, that is, an expanded space that is apparently more perfect than the actually experienced reality, in which people, ideologies, behaviours and objects are idealised. To this aim, values are set and ordered so that in effect the recipient apparently receives this, which is unattainable in the direct experience of his

condition or social nature. Besides, what seems most important, advertisement helps work out the recipient's own mythical domain in the created space.

You can be free if you only buy, order or accept our offer.

Even if the recipient has the sense of manipulation and suspects that someone wants to cheat or delude him into something, he may treat it as something superficial or unimportant. The sense of advertisement artificiality itself is usually recognised, so the recipient can be prepared for this type of influence, though he submits to it, as it were, unresistingly.

Another, and probably more serious issue is the fact that in the recipient's consciousness advertisement becomes similar to art, that is, it can function on the level of the recipient's aesthetic sensitivity through application of artistic techniques and magnetism of transmission. On the one hand, the recipient ridicules the advertisement and feels that it is something inferior, imposing itself and deserving rejection, and in this way he has a sense of being resistant to it. On the other hand, the recipient may perceive an advertisement like an aesthetic phenomenon. And can one defend oneself against art?