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ADVERTISING DISCOURSE AND THE PERTAINING ETHNOGRAPHY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY CONDUCTED IN MONTENEGRO

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse advertising discourse, as a form of social and linguistic phenomenon, from the theoretical point of view and then use this information to answer the question of why some advertisements in Montenegro are better at getting their message across and consequently attracting new/retaining old customers, while other advertisements seem to struggle with the precisely same task. To be able to answer this question, we designed and conducted ethnographic research in Montenegro in 2021. The question shall be answered from the perspective of customers and companies.

Keywords: advertising discourse, social targeting, ethnographic research, communication modes, genre

RICERCA ETNOGRAFICA DEL DISCORSO PUBBLICITARIO: UN CASO DI STUDIO ETNOGRAFICO CONDOTTO IN MONTENEGRO

SINTESI

Questo lavoro si propone come obiettivo l'analisi del discorso pubblicitario come forma di fenomeno sociale e linguistico. L'analisi è stata eseguita prima dal punto di vista teorico, dopo di che le informazioni teoriche raccolte sono state utilizzate al fine di rispondere alla domanda sul motivo per cui alcune campagne pubblicitarie in Montenegro hanno più successo a trasmettere i loro messaggi e ad attirare nuovi utenti oppure a mantenere quelli esistenti, mentre altre non riescono ad ottenere un successo simile. Per rispondere a questa domanda, nel 2021 abbiamo progettato e condotto una ricerca etnografica in Montenegro. Risponderemo a questa domanda dal punto di vista degli utenti dei servizi e delle aziende.

Parole chiave: discorso pubblicitario, targeting sociale, ricerca etnografica, modalità di comunicazione, generi

ADVERTISING AS A MULTIATTRIBUTE CONSTRUCT AND ITS BUILDING BLOCKS

Before we delve into our ethnographic study and try to answer why some advertisements are more conducive to success than other, let us define some key concepts related to advertising and elaborate on the theories pertaining to this phenomenon. These theories will help us in our quest to properly define advertising. Many of these theories are “borrowed” from older and more established scientific fields such as psychology, sociology, sociolinguistics, etc. Nevertheless, they enabled us to deepen our understanding of advertising, its setting and key concepts. According to the Embodied Motivated Cognition (EMC), the three key concepts in advertisements are: receiver, message, and channel. A receiver is typically an individual who is actively engaged in message processing. We must not forget that there are a lot of accidental receivers who may be able to subconsciously process the message to a degree, but for the purposes of our paper, a receiver is an individual who actively mentally interacts with an advertising message delivered through a channel. A message is psychologically meaningful information of some varied motivational significance that activates cognitive processes within the mind of a receiver. A platform that is used to deliver such psychologically meaningful advertising message of the potential motivational significance is called a channel. Such platform is usually commercial in its nature, which brings us to a very important distinction found in our definition of advertising. Typically, advertising is a subcategory of marketing and commercial socio-linguistic construct mediated through mass media and aimed at inciting reactions from the target audience. This definition leans on the definition offered by Richards & Curran (2002) and it should be understood as a broad definition of the phenomenon which is not easy to define because it has many intended and unintended effects on different domains of our lives.

Apart from the EMC, another theory that is used in the analysis of advertisements is the Multiattribute theory where Ajzen & Fishbein (1972) posited that the attitude “ A_{it} ” towards an advertisement is established by multiattribute summation which can be represented as $A_{it} = \sum b_{ad} a_{ad}$, where “ a_{ad} ” is the attribute and “ b_{ad} ” is the belief that such attribute can be linked with such advertisement. Thus, any attribute will be given more/less priority (multiplied as a function of the abovementioned formula) depending on the relative strength of the corresponding belief. Other attributes can be added to this formula such as social norms, scientific facts, availability of opportunities, source credibility/likeability, awareness, knowledge level, etc. which may exert more or less influence on our attitudes towards different advertisements. For instance, we may see an ad and may have a very positive opinion about using a pesticide, because it can serve the purpose of eliminating the

pests that can cause trouble for our harvest. Thus, our intention to buy a pesticide after seeing the ad should be clear and should lead to the purchase. However, we may be dissuaded by the fact that pesticides are detrimental to our environment, which means that even though we liked the ad and generally agree with its message, the result is not the purchase of the said pesticide. This is the example where one subjectively dominant attribute may prevail over several other attributes. This is the case of advertising involvement (Krugman, 1972) where there is a positive correlation between the receiver and the advertising message, with no or low psychological reactance, but a negative outcome in terms of the advertisement intention to sell a product and customer’s wish to purchase the product. This means that advertisements need to clad themselves with as many positive attributes as possible to entice customers to perform an action and associate them with positive notions. According to the Associative Learning Theory, for customers to be able to associate two notions when they appear together it is necessary to initially repeat them as frequently as possible (ad wear-in). Repetition is necessary because it facilitates, through conscious recollection, retrieval of previously encoded information within consumers’ explicit memory. However, too much repetition is detrimental because it may cause an “ad wear-out”, which is usually presented as an inverted “U” shaped curve (Nordhielm, 2002), which will turn an ad into a consumer distracter that will be devalued. Repetition of an advertisement usually yields two results if we take into consideration only the customers who want to be actively engaged. Once the message is actively perceived, individuals with high need for cognition (NFC) will mentally elaborate and process the message which will be the stepping stone for their attitude formation. Individuals with low NFC will only take into consideration the number of message elements. This has several interesting repercussions important for the advertising industry. Attitude decay in high NFC receivers will be less prominent when compared to low NFC receivers. High NFC receivers will be most affected by the substantive (information) appeal of an ad rather than the cosmetic (affective) appeal of an ad. This is not to say that affective appeal is less important since, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model designed by Petty & Cacioppo (1981), emotions are important for all persuasive messages such as advertisements and serve as a mediator leading to the formation of brand attitude and positive/negative brand perception.

ADVERTISING AS A GENRE

To properly identify advertisements and find their place in our society we must define them from the perspective of genre. Genres are sometimes notoriously difficult to define since they do not like to be constrained and they prefer to defy exact definition. The reason why



Image 1: Tymes Square, New York (Photo: Joshua Earle, joshua-earle-X_roZ7toBJY-unsplash).

advertisements are a particularly slippery case is due to their nature. Almost inevitably, advertisements exemplify several genres at once. This is not contradictory, since there is nothing mutually exclusive in the fact that an advertisement can be a piece of discourse, which contains a story, provocation, joke, cartoon, etc. Furthermore, we must not forget that proper genre identification involves non-verbal elements of communication. That is why some advertisements are completely without language, or language is of secondary importance. Therefore, advertisements as a genre need to be described in terms of their texts and contexts. Advertisements must also be perceived through the prism of society. This means that advertisements will change together with the society to which they relate and are an integral part of. Therefore, certain advertisements seem inappropriate today or even offensive and/or racist at the time they were made, but the change in our perception made certain advertisements utterly inappropriate. Another example of how advertisements change is exemplified through an anecdote which tells us that numerous tourists from capitalist countries, 30-40 years ago, were struck by the absence of advertisements advertising goods in Montenegro. They would flip through different newspapers

and sometimes would not find a single advertisement. However, as Eastern European societies changed, advertisement genres equalised and turned us into a global ad village. Today we have a situation where, while abroad, we can see an advertisement that is identical to the advertisement in our home country, just partially adapted or translated into the local language. In this context, we can speak about globalisation and the homogenisation of advertisements, markets and even whole communities and societies which would otherwise have less mental overlap.

According to the Collins Concise Dictionary, advertising is “the promotion of goods and services through impersonal media” or “the activity or profession of producing advertisements for commercial products or services”, according to the Oxford Dictionary. The character of advertising was dramatically changed with the advent of radio and then television advertising, since these two means of communication made advertisements more accessible and varied than the two definitions above. Advertisements now range from a simple pop-up screen promoting “quality” goods and services to a multi-million Super Bowl commercial. With so much variety, it is very difficult to pinpoint the defining feature of modern advertisement

as a genre. One of the main features, which separates advertisements from similar genres, is their function, which is usually to convince people to perform a certain activity, usually to purchase a particular product. However, there are numerous examples of different advertisements, which do not sell anything, but, for instance, plead us to eat more healthily to avoid health issues. Additionally, apart from being there to persuade us to buy something, advertisements may also be used to inform, warn, or amuse us (Lenderman, 2009; Lerman & Shefrin, 2015).

To make things linguistically “worse”, in terms of finding that crucial feature that distinguishes advertisements from related genres, other genres, such as poems, may become advertisements if they are used in a particular way. Advertisements which can be sung are not something unheard of. Another issue, which further complicates the definition of advertising, is the fact that the term “function” can be understood from the perspective of the sender, which may not be the same as the perspective of the receiver. Additionally, there are usually numerous senders and countless receivers each with their own perspective of what the function of that particular advertisement may be. It can be argued that, regardless of its form, all functions of advertisements are typically in the service of one main function, and that is to sell goods and services. One way, or at least the first step, out of this definitional conundrum would be to define advertisements as a genre which shares numerous features and draw upon different other genres. Thus, we will conclude that the further a given instance of a genre moves away from this prototypical standard, the less likely it is to be classified as an advertisement. If we accept this line of reasoning, we must be ready to tolerate fuzzy, dubious, and borderline cases between different concepts, because the prototypical ads will vary from one individual to another, and different cultures and periods will differ in their interpretation of a typical instance. This yardstick interpretation will be used to define categories of advertisements.

Apart from being linguistically volatile, advertisements exhibit social volatility as well. An advertisement or a message may be exceptionally successful in one market, only to miserably fail in another one. For instance, if sign conventions exhibit significant differences, because of different cultural norms, accepted patterns of behaviour, experiences, or expectations, this may lead to the intended advertising message being misunderstood. Generally speaking, this is why advertisers cannot fully control the perception of their messages. They can only hope they understand that market to a sufficient level so as to be able to predict the verdict of the audience. This occurs because the public reworks commercial messages promulgated by the advertisers to their own liking. Thus, we may conclude society also influences both the advertisements and the advertisers. The opposite is valid as

well. Advertising is a powerful tool which affects our identity and tries to appeal to it by creating a more intimate connexion between the message it promulgates and the recipient communities. The use of the plural here is deliberate because advertisers have more and more consumer pools that are used to tailor their advertisements to different social/consumer/age groups. This is particularly important in this day and age when advertisers at their disposal have huge quantities of digital data which enable them to personalise their advertisements and categorise their target audiences. This targeted advertising enables its message to focus on particular expectations, experiences and aspirations of different social groups making its affective appeal salient to individual customer identity.

ADVERTISING CATEGORIES

To properly define advertisements, we also must define their categories. This categorisation can be done along the line of the “hard sell” and “soft sell” advertisements. Hard sell advertisements are those which are created to make a direct appeal to potential receivers. Prototypically, these advertisements have been represented through a man in a suit shouting directly to the camera how this product is something never seen before, something which should inevitably be part of your life. On the other side, soft-selling advertisements rely on the implicative value of the atmosphere they want to create. In this category of advertisements, the sender usually does not resort to direct advertising, but s/he is trying to create a positive aura around their products. Usually, in this type of advertisement, we can see young, fit, and perfectly happy people, since their lives are much better with the product. In this type of advertisement, you will almost always encounter, for instance, young people basking happily on a tropical beach. Even though direct sunlight can give people headaches and skin burns, this will never be the implicative value of this type of advertisement.

According to Bernstein (Bernstein, 1974), another type of classification is between “reason” and “tickle”. Reason ads give people different incentives for purchase. This category of advertisements tries to persuade you that product A is much better than other products. On the other hand, tickle advertisements try to strike a chord with the numerous receivers in terms of humour and mood. This distinction between reason and tickle advertisements is very important for cigarette ads. Since cigarette manufacturers cannot give any good or healthy reason why somebody would consume cigarettes, they must turn to tickle advertisements to avoid questions pertaining to health and to emphasise other elements. These can be social elements, for example, showing a group of people smoking together and laughing. Luckily, this category of advertisements is forbidden in many European countries.

Advertisements can also be categorised according to medium i.e., according to different means of mass communication such as the internet, radio, television, and different kinds of printed materials. What is interesting about this type of advertisement categorisation is that a medium is at the same time an enabler and a limiter. A medium enables advertisements to be transmitted to numerous customers which would otherwise be unreachable. At the same time, this medium may limit the availability of an advertisement since different people use different means of mass communication. Many ads are affected by the medium in which an ad appears (Myers, 1999). That is why we have the difference between an advertisement on trains and a roadside advertisement. Advertisements on trains can be more detailed and contain more text because it is expected that commuters will have more time to analyse and read this category of advertisements. On the other side, roadside advertisements, almost inevitably, must be concise because the potential receiver will be able to see them for several fleeting seconds only. Along the same lines, newspaper advertisements cannot rely on music and moving pictures, but for television ads, these two elements are of essential importance. To partially remove these limitations, sometimes advertisements refer their receivers to seek more information on the product on an internet site.

When it comes to the “quantity” of an advertisement we can also make a distinction between “short copy” and “long copy”. Short copy advertisements usually employ the technique of sudden burst, meaning the advertiser does not want to give you sufficient time to think about some product. They want you to buy their product right here, right now. On the other side, a long copy of an ad wants you to have more time because the purchase of, for example, more expensive items merits longer consideration. Similarly, long copy and slow drip campaigns want to invoke an aura of respectability and give you an ample amount of time.

All these categories aside, probably the most important category for advertisers is the categorisation of ads by consumer (Myers, 1999). The advertising industry spares no effort on attempts to categorise people and then target them effectively. This categorisation can be done through traditional surveys, focus groups and internet cookies which, more or less secretly, inform advertisers about our online behaviour, habits and visited sites. Sometimes advertisers categorise people depending on their personality, city, country, neighbourhood or parish, lifestyle, socioeconomic class, or gender. This all makes sense since some products are more likely to be considered and bought by women than by men and vice versa.

ADVERTISING AS DISCOURSE

To properly understand the internal mechanisms of language and certain acts of communication, we must view text, context, and language holistically, through the perspective of discourse and social analysis. In this paper, text is used to denote different linguistic forms, which we usually artificially and temporarily separate from context to analyse it. Any study of language must take context into account because there are no acts of communication without participants, intertexts, paralanguage and substance. Context has several constituents such as participants with their feelings, opinions, and beliefs. Each participant is a part of the context and, at the same time, both the creator and the observer of it. Furthermore, they are usually described as senders and receivers, which is not always the same as addressers and addressees. The sender of a message may be an advertising agency, but the addresser may be the person who relays the message. On a related note, the receiver may be anyone who “unintentionally” sees the advertisement, whereas the addressee is the person for whom such advertisement is intended. Another constituent would be intertext, a text that the abovementioned participants perceive as related to other discourse, but that affects their interpretation of the text under consideration. The third constituent is paralanguage expressed (in speech) as facial expressions, gestures and (in writing) choice of fonts. The fourth constituent, which is of linguistic relevance for this paper is the substance or the media, which relays music, pictures, and text. In terms of substance, oral communication is transmitted by sound waves and a written language is carried by different symbols and signs which contain a propositional content that, depending on the context, may yield different meanings. Symbols and signs are primary substances of language, which are related and may be relayed by secondary substances such as DVDs, radio waves, coaxial cables, or digital input/output systems. For example, a news broadcast is first written, then spoken and then broadcast by satellite. Although it may seem trivial, the choice of substance is sometimes of vital importance. Thus, advertisers who want to reach the younger population almost inevitably must choose the internet as the primary substance of ads (Cowden, 2014). This is true because the younger population seldom uses print media to collect new information (Taylor, 2013). Additionally, advertisers must consider the state of literacy, usually computer literacy, of their potential receivers. What is interesting about substance is the fact that ancient civilisations invested a lot of effort to transition from oral to written culture. Now we have a slightly different tendency to prefer oral com-

munication and even the typical representatives of written communication, for instance, books, yield ground to audiobooks. Similarly, with the advent of sound recording, we have a new transition which is sometimes called a “secondary orality” (Ong, 1982). Advertisements are disseminated across space and time, and they usually come to us as sound and pictures. Therefore, we can say that secondary orality gave birth to advertising in its modern sense. This is visible because even printed advertisements have the style of spoken communication. Advertisers want to communicate their ideas in a fast and effective manner, with a lot of omissions and implications just like a speaker would do in his or her regular communication with somebody else.

As we can see from the previous text, advertising is an intricate area to navigate, affected by a diverse assortment of things. Thus, to have successful advertising nothing must be left to chance. Even seemingly trivial things can be very important. This can be illustrated in terms of the physical position of an ad in a newspaper because newspaper advertising placement can affect each ad’s visibility, and if you go through advertisements in the newspapers in Montenegro and the region, you can see that certain companies prefer to place their advertisements closer to the top of the page or the bottom of the page or even right next to the list of obituaries. This is the case where advertising occurs within other discourse, meaning it is embedded in that other discourse to which they make no direct reference. In this case, we can talk about accompanying discourse and in this situation, advertisers try to create new meanings through manipulation or by chance. One of the best examples of the creation of new meanings through manipulation is the case of different cigarette ads. In Montenegro, it is prohibited to advertise tobacco products directly and openly. That is why different distributors of tobacco products “accidentally” place their ads on different prominent places such as money trays, where you leave your money when you want to pay for some product in a shop. Since these props are not paid for, they are not considered advertisements within our legal framework, rather they are viewed as “physical job aids”. However, you are bound to see this type of advertisements because you want to see where you are placing your money.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND PERTAINING ETHNOGRAPHY

Having defined or at least explained all the aforementioned linguistic and social features of advertising, we can turn our attention to the qualitative research we conducted in November and December 2021. The rationale behind this research was as follows. If advertising is such a slippery case in terms of its definition, if the same advertisement may be successful in one market,

but fail miserably in another one, what makes some advertisements in Montenegro more successful in terms of their outreach to the customers?

Our research is based on a modified Arnould et al. (2006) methodological approach. We opted for this approach because it best suited our needs and particular circumstances and it also, most importantly, allowed for a scientifically relevant and valid consumer ethnography. This methodology best suited our needs because, as opposed to the macro and micro-level ethnographic approaches that try to “enter consumers’ minds” and “analyse consumers’ feelings” respectively, we decided to go for a middle or meso-level approach that places emphasis on tacit knowledge intertwined with cultural context co-constructed by consumers behaving as intentional actors. This is very important for our paper since advertising as a linguistic and social phenomenon should also be construed as a culturally situated practice exercised by consumers. Let us elaborate more on our methodological approach.

First, we needed to identify the research question that we seek to answer. Since we are interested in advertising, within the commercial sector, we wanted to see why some advertisements are more successful than other. According to consumers, what are the best advertisements and why?

Second step: we needed to determine locations to conduct the participatory research. The ethnographic interview is an exceptionally useful tool if we want to investigate the relevance of an ad or a set of ads in a market over time. For our ethnographic research, we set the target of interviewing between 550 and 750 consumers from different parts of Montenegro. The rationale behind this range is linked to our previous research (Ivanović, 2020), where we noticed that both qualitative and quantitative data, after taking into consideration at least 300-400 data points/observations/interviews, seem to level out at an acceptable rate which allows for scientifically valid conclusions to be drawn. We opted for a maximum variation sample involving a population that will be as varied as possible in order to extract information from different age groups, communities, people of different employment/marital/social status, ethnicity, religion, etc. This sampling technique allowed us to detect recurrent patterns which cut across variations. We managed to interview and observe 662 people (357 females and 305 males) from three different cities in Montenegro and of different age (the youngest was 16, the oldest 71). Our interviews were performed in three major Montenegrin cities: Podgorica (capital city + central part of Montenegro), Bijelo Polje (the biggest city in the north of Montenegro) and Bar (the biggest city in the south of Montenegro). The interviews were recorded so as to create a reliable database which could be transcribed and (re)analysed later. These elements were implemented in order not to skew the results of our research.

The third step could be titled “Adopting a participant-centred approach”. In terms of the third step, the in-situ interview, we opted for a slightly different approach when compared to some other ethnographic interviews. Rather than impose questions and maybe subliminally direct interviewees regarding their responses, we opted for an interview where we would listen to consumers express their opinions and beliefs. We would start our semi-structured in-depth interviews with an open-ended question like “Which type of advertisement do you prefer?” that would serve as a non-directive prompt and a conversation starter, and all interviewers were instructed to “remove” themselves as much as possible and let the consumers talk. We wanted to simulate a natural flow of communication, outside of a controlled research environment, to encourage our interviewees to be as honest as possible. Moreover, interviewers were instructed to repeat certain key phrases uttered by the interviewees to elicit additional information without seeming too inquisitive or willing to steer the conversation in one direction or another. Furthermore, they were asked to listen for key phrases and observe and note reactions, emotions, and the overall affective states of their respondents. It was of particular importance that our interviews seemed honest, unintrusive and produced at least some level of emotional response in interviewees because it is assumed that such conversations are more honest and bring about “affective subjectivity” (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). All interviewers were our second-year students of the master’s studies at the Faculty of Philology, University of Montenegro. They were from the three above-mentioned cities and were familiar with the cultural milieu, which gave them a nuanced understanding of the context. They were instructed to randomly choose their respondents bearing in mind that on average there should be an equal number of female and male respondents, roughly equally distributed across different age ranges. If the interviewer was given consent, along with the interviews, we were collecting (recording) data, and this was followed by data analysis during which we were seeking for patterns, identifying outliers, and paying particular attention to reflection statements produced by the interviewees. All interviewees consented to being recorded and their data analysed under the condition of respecting confidentiality, maintaining anonymity, and observing the Montenegrin Personal Data Protection Law. Finally, interviewers were asked to write dated and descriptive analytic memos, observer notes, logs, diaries, etc. as an extension to the research briefly describing the interviewers’ process of thinking, customers’ affective state, key moments, interesting observations, and line of reasoning (Miles et al., 2019).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data aggregation was followed by their thematic analysis. The analysis was facilitated by the use of Provalis Research’s QDA Miner. The main aim of our analysis was to make sense of the aggregated textual data to make some assertions (Bailey, 2018). Our data analysis was split into two interlinked stages: data organisation and analysis proper. The connective tissue that binds these two stages is iterative-inductive coding as a way of labelling and categorising phenomena (O’Reilly, 2012). Iterative refers to the repetitive nature of our analysis while inductive refers to our aim of drawing a certain conclusion based on the data we collected. The iterative-inductive coding enabled us to identify emerging patterns within respondents’ answers (Madden, 2017). After reading and rereading our transcripts, and by using the constant comparative method, we believed our transcripts had reached theoretical saturation where no new information seemed to emerge from the coding cycle. Our interview-related coding scheme consisted of six core categories:

- Code IN (initial thoughts/notions/ideas) – the initial stage of the interview
- Code HE (hesitation, hedging) – overcoming the face-threatening aspect of the interview
- Code TH (thoughts on a particular advertisement) – the expressive stage of the interview
- Code AR (affective response) – the affective stage of the interview
- Code AS (advertising situatedness) – the contextual stage of the interview
- Code LI (linking situatedness to personal, familial, and cultural experiences) – the final stage of the interview.

After organising our data according to the applied codes, we were ready to see what the most important patterns or key topics are. We would classify something as a pattern if it fulfilled two criteria. First, it needed to frequently emerge in our data and, maybe, more importantly, to have a high degree of observed and annotated emotional response (based on the analytic memos).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND THE INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESS; CUSTOMERS’ SIDE OF THE STORY

Based on the analysis and our research, in this section, we will try to describe what ingredients went into the making of the five top advertisements our respondents selected as a perfect blend of advertising, affective, linguistic and/or social elements. This section will talk about what ingredients go into successful advertising from the standpoint of consumers and companies.

Very early in the analysis, it became clear that one of the recurring themes is that our respondents never view advertisements in isolation. It is always within a context. What the context will be, depends on numerous personal and external factors, but advertising is always viewed through a prism of other elements, financial, social, political, situational, etc. A vast majority of respondents were able to recollect their favourite advertisements more readily if an emotional element was present during the first encounter with such advertisements. What is additionally interesting and noteworthy is that those respondents seemed like they were re-experiencing emotions while talking about their favourite advertisements.

Another salient pattern that emerged quickly was that the more the advertised message corresponded to consumers' concept of self-identity, the more it was readily accepted by such consumers. Self-identity as a collection of most prominent beliefs in terms of self-referent cognition enabled advertisements to be internalised and become a part of consumers' mental microcosm. This means that if an ad becomes a metonym for consumers' values, beliefs, opinions, honesty, etc. it stands a better chance of being accepted by them and become their "window to the world" (Aniskina & Ukhova, 2015). Advertisements, by being accepted by a community, remove interpersonal boundaries and are generally better suited for the market. In our concrete case, customers repeatedly emphasised the value of advertisements that promoted familial bonds, happiness and bring about richer customer meaning-making. Another important element pointed out by our interviewees is that more successful advertisements are better at overcoming psychological reactance, i.e., consumer scepticism which is usually at its highest level if advertisements show overt persuasive intent and are perceived as excessively self-serving.

This is linked to another very important variable that emerged from our interviews when discussing advertising, emotion. While analysing our results, we used the emotional response model made by Mehrabian & Russell (1977) which revolves around the three dimensions of emotions: pleasure, arousal, and dominance (PAD). The pleasure dimension ranges from exceptionally positive to exceptionally negative feelings. The arousal dimension refers to the state of excitation and dominance varies from weak to powerful. The analysis of our interviews shows that emotions are significant factor in terms of brand learning and advertising. Our respondents naturally preferred advertisements which elicited positive emotions combined with the state of moderate excitement.

To reach these two states, advertisements needed to be properly encoded and mentally processed. In our case, proper processing of advertisements depends on synchronous activation of nondeclarative emotional memory and conscious explicit memory. This means that our respondents were able to better recollect an advertisement that produced an emotional response coupled with high involvement conditions such as "healthy" scepticism and a higher level of persuasion knowledge. This emotional response caused the customer to mentally encode such advertisement and form either a positive or negative attitude. Thus, emotional responses and associations serve as a mental framework within which the message is processed, and an attitude formed.

When it comes to the advertisements our interviewees rated as the most favourable, one important variable that emerged from our research was the interplay of different ad modes. This is because different modes of advertising seem to be more conducive to getting our attention (Zulkifly & Firdaus, 2014). Getting our attention is one of the most difficult tasks the advertisers need to overcome. How to get our attention and involvement in the sea of other stimuli vying for the same attention span? Our data showed that many consumers paid more attention to those advertisements where different ad modes were singing in unison to better express the intended message. The modes of advertisements can be expressed as the choice between the following means of communication: language, music, and pictures. Each of them can be subdivided into sub-modes. For example, pictures may be in the form of a photograph, still or cartoon. In many ads, music and pictures are the essence of communication. Picture and music give new meanings and connections to ads and together with language create a powerful combination aimed at persuading and making claims. There is an ongoing debate about whether language is the dominant mode of communication and music, and pictures serve, at best, as the secondary mode of communication, supporting the dominant one. In this paper, we will support the opinion that, for some types of ads, we cannot talk about primary and secondary modes of communication. All modes are equally important. That is why it is very important to see the structure of the ad because some ads are simply generated in such a manner that it would be futile to assign more significance to any mode of communication (Danesi, 2006). This can be best illustrated by an example of what our respondents thought was the best ad of 2021. In order not to infringe on any copyrights, our example will be sufficiently general, but not too general because we want to keep the essence of the advertisement in question.

Context: A telephone company unveils its latest offer, it offers an unprecedented number of text messages, completely free of charge, if you subscribe to a new data plan. The advertisement initially shows only one sentence "Pazi da se ne zakucaš". The literal translation in English would be meaningless, but the translation of the context of the sentence is "Watch out, don't hit a road sign". An additional explanation is required here. In the Montenegrin language, the verb "zakucati" means to knock (on the door) or to hit something due to not paying attention or not being able to avoid it. But it can also be interpreted as "to text too much", so the wordplay should now be clearer, thus the extended translation in English would be "watch out, don't hit a road sign/don't text too much", because you can text anybody for free. This is the language part of the advertisement. After 15 seconds the main protagonists (a family) of the advertisement hit the sign and hopefully learn their lesson. The advertisement finishes by reiterating the initial premise "texting free of charge".

Music: It is accompanied by music, which is initially slow-paced, but the rhythm explodes when the pedestrians (the family) hit the road sign.

Video: The video shows this family walking down the street paying no attention to anybody or anything, just texting their respective numerous friends saying how awesome it was to have an unlimited number of text messages, completely free of charge.

In this short example, you can clearly see the interplay between language, music, and pictures. It would be almost impossible to have the same short and effective advertisement if the advertisement did not have all three means of communication. This relation between the three means of communication reinforces the pun allowing the ad to be humorous in its nature. Here, it is possible to see how the effect of the advertisement is not about any of the three major modes alone, but about their interplay. In this advertisement, the message is boosted by music and pictures. The highest-rated advertisements (based on our research) use music to better convey the subtleties of their messages. In addition, music can vary its pace which can allow an advertisement to become a fast burst or slow drip type. Unlike language, and since music has no typical semantics, music can be interpreted in numerous ways which means that numerous receivers can interpret an ad in their own manner and still get the original message. For an individual, a piece of music may evoke a certain emotion, and create a sense of "happiness" or "an impending doom", but these reactions will vary between different social groups and different individuals. Therefore, advertisers must be very careful in terms of the selection of music for their advertisements. That is why advertisers favour any mode of communication which is predictable in the sense it can be clearly predicted it will evoke a positive mood. Since music is a mode of communication which is indeterminate, advertisers sometimes prepare different scores with the different combinations of instruments, rhythm, and harmony for different markets. An additional benefit of the music in advertisements is that actors can remain silent, and the music is sometimes much better at formulating the impression than the words. All these elements put together seemed to be the winning formula for advertisers.

COMPANIES' SIDE OF THE STORY

In this section, we will try to explain what theoretical and practical considerations went into the creation of, based on our research, the highest-rated advertisements. Thanks to these "customer distant" data, we managed to learn (thanks to the willingness of the three companies owning the intellectual rights to these top five advertisements to share their customer-distant data with us) about the background of these five advertisements and what happened to them before they became socially engaged and publicly visible. So, how does it all function? Before an advertisement can be seen by the public, it must go through numerous revisions as an "internal" advertisement. It is an interesting process where the initial form of an advertisement sometimes drastically changes in terms of wording, images, and overall tone. Some advertisements are toned down, i.e., their messages are attenuated if the management deems them to be too expressive or at high risk of being misinterpreted by (potential) customers. The whole process of message attenuation is based on politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987) which is based on the concept of "face" created by sociologist Ervin Goffman (1955). Within politeness theory marketing departments focus on how to choose different politeness strategies based on their rational assessment of a social situation to be able to successfully navigate different social or market(ing) situations. Politeness theory has chiefly been scrutinised through the perspective of face-to-face communication, but in our paper, we will use it within the context of advertising as mediated communication. Since this paper deals with advertisements as a form of mediated communication, one important distinction arises as opposed to face-to-face communication. Marketing departments



Photo 2: “Watch out, don’t hit a road sign” (Foto: Azat Satlykov, azat-satlykov-XgHZzKdgVKc-unsplash).

can plan their communication and politeness strategies and generally have more control over message production in pursuit of relational goals. However, once the customers see the advertisement, marketing departments must tread very lightly because most of the communication (nonverbal) cues are filtered out and because they are unable to see customers’ facial expressions and body language in general, which puts them in danger of misinterpreting (especially face-threatening) certain situations. Therefore, in these advertisements, companies try to present themselves as a model (legal) person who seeks to achieve its goal(s) through making rational choices and avoiding face-threatening acts. In general, a face-threatening act is any act which may be (subjectively or objectively) interpreted by a customer as negative to his/her face. This means marketing departments must be aware that under certain circumstances some activities will be perceived as face-threatening, while under some other

they will not. According to Goffman (Goffman 1967), face is maintained when a person’s presentation and self-management are internally consistent. For the purpose of our paper, we would add that marketing departments need to be externally consistent as well, i.e., this consistency has to be shown towards the customers, otherwise “a company’s face” will not be successful in terms of its social production. Additionally, face helps in the formation of company-customer integration which serves as a social bond preventing communication spinoffs/detours which could direct such delayed communication into an unpredictable or undesirable direction (Ivanović, 2020). This is not to say that unexpected communication twists and turns do not exist in the company-customer communication or that they are utterly undesirable. Companies just want to be in control as much as possible, even though complete control is unattainable. Even though Goffman considers mediated communication as “merely



Photo 3: Brainstorming (Foto: Marvin Meyer, *marvin-meyer-SYTO3xs06fU-unsplash*).

situated" (1967) or "situation-like" (1979), this makes mediated communication even more interesting to analyse because of additional challenges imposed by the lack of traditional mutual monitoring present in face-to-face communication. However, mediated communication in advertising is not completely devoid of mutual monitoring since different aspects of advertisement visual identity: colours, font style and size, images, etc. can serve as mutual monitoring which enables interactants to identify, structure and maintain concerted social interactions, share a mediated copresence and shape their social experience.

Which ad-related politeness strategy a company will use depends on the weightiness which can be defined as an evaluation of a social situation in terms of the seriousness or "the weight" of a face-threatening act. The social situation will be evaluated in terms of social presence which measures the degree of contextual involvement in a communication exchange

between the speaker and the hearer. Another element which will be evaluated is the degree of imposition which represents the level of one's interference with somebody's free will. The third evaluated element is related to the concept of social power which measures the extent of rights which enable the speaker to impose his or her will and alter the communication plans of the hearer. Companies will, almost invariably, try to assess all these elements as soon as the advertisement development/production starts and the more successful this initial assessment is, the more advantageous the outcome in terms of customer interest, satisfaction, retention, etc. should be. When talking about strategies, tentativeness strategy is very important for the companies, and therefore, during the new ad creation process, particular emphasis is placed on two elements: how to promote/sell a service or a device and how to be pragmatically competent. This means marketing departments need to be ready to convey a message with

all its nuances to customers of different socio-cultural backgrounds. This is where, for instance, tentativeness and hedging are convenient mitigating devices which can be used to attenuate the full illocutionary force and the full semantic value of a particular word, phrase or structure (Strauss & Parastou, 2014; Paul, 2017). Hedging in the top-rated advertisements from our research is mostly represented through modal verbs and verbs with modal meanings which are the dominant force for carrying a more or less hedged meaning since “even when modal forms convey speaker-external meanings, these are often given interpersonal significance by the particular context in which they appear, usually as part of a tentativeness strategy” (Preisler, 1986).

Whether a company will opt for a targeted or general advertising depends on numerous factors, but, for the highest-rated advertisements of our research, the most important market considerations are:

- purchasing power: companies will more readily target higher purchasing power groups since this means a higher chance of a return on investment,
- long term profitability: companies are also eager to tap the trove of long-term profitability by targeting, for instance, whole families, which may not be financially rewarding in the short term but is perfectly sustainable in the long term,
- target availability: companies are more willing to target easily reachable and/or wider audience, since more people, in theory, means more visibility/potential customers,
- ad “packaging” and branding expenses: companies need to find a way to present both old and new services/technologies as brand new regardless of the fact whether that service/technology is indeed the most recent one, coupled with the three most pertinent intercultural dimensions:
- threat avoidance, face preservation and power distance: the degree to which an ad may be perceived as socially threatening, awkward, acceptable, equal, or desirable,
- individual vs. group: whether a company should target individuals with certain tastes, traits, characteristics, personalities, etc. or it should be an “umbrella” advertisement,
- neutrality, masculinity, or femininity: the degree to which a company should emphasise/tone down male or female elements.

It is worth mentioning that the seven points are just a rough guide to how the three companies mentioned in the text above generally define their priorities and not something which is an immutable law. If these points are obviously (to a marketing department) not relevant or feasible, companies will usually invest their time and money into general or generalised advertising. However, if they are feasi-

ble, companies will almost invariably move to the next step which is product/advertisement categorisation because categorisation helps in predicting future customers’ behaviour and this predictability is what companies will try to achieve and anticipate. Similar is with people, social categorisation or self-categorisation usually entails gradual adoption of different norms and values postulated by that social group. Norms and values, as parts of social consciousness, are structured hierarchically, pursuant to their importance, into a value system. Our yearning to belong to a group usually leads to us being more susceptible to accepting that group’s rules. Thus, if an ad is properly categorised to suit the needs and expectations of a particular social category, it is more likely to succeed in achieving its purpose. It is worth mentioning that such categorisations are a dynamic process and companies are aware of the transient nature of different categories. Due to this transient nature, these three companies will always make several batches of advertisements which are suitable for different groups of society. If that is not possible or desirable, advertisements will be, for instance, toned down and expensive items and services will be shown without prices, coupled with images of ordinary people who may or may not be able to afford that product. These three companies also try to keep a low distance, especially with ads targeting teenagers, where the companies want to present themselves as “friends”, the ones that support familial and positive social bonds.

CONCLUSION

Our data analysis showed that the reasons some advertisements resonate better with customers are as follows: advertisements must not be socially passive, but an active social player that will energise their relationship with customers and make it more interactive; advertisements need to be meaningful to customers in order to instil significance into the brand-customer relationship; advertisement-customer relationship needs to facilitate social/experiential exchanges via multiple touch points, since customers usually base their purchases on extended evaluation and advertisement-customer relationship needs to be groomed over time, which presents a challenge because all the components of that relationship dynamically change over time. Advertisements that fulfil all the above-mentioned conditions or come close to fulfilling them are far more likely to be successful with customers and produce the desired outcome (contract/subscription extension, purchase of a device, etc.). To be noticed and overcome the filter posed by the subjective perception, advertisements need to be able to inspire a receiver to make a bridging association that will serve as a link between

the ad message and his/her personal interests/life/hobbies, etc. Once the ad is seen as relevant, and becomes the part of the receiver's mental domain, it is more likely to lead to the formation of customer commitment. Commitment is the resistance and resilience of the customer's belief system regarding a brand. Commitment building is one way of how advertisers fight against consumer scepticism which mostly emanates from the consumers' increased knowledge and awareness related to advertisers' tactics and motives.

From the commercial perspective, almost all companies agree that the most obvious element of an advertisement is its visual identity. Pictures, colours, and other non-lexicalised visual cues are the best attention-grabbing tools, thus, they may be of paramount importance in terms of the success of an advertisement (Lee & Ahn, 2012). Similarly, language relies more and more on the meaning it extracts from interaction with pictures. The relative power of pictures has increased, and most advertisements try not to be too narrative. Fundamentally, advertisements are more and more nonverbal because people simply do not have time or do not want to have time to read anything longer than a short paragraph. In the world of advertising, time is literally money, because every second counts and every additional second can cost an advertiser millions. Pictures enable compressed storytelling and can convey a message in an amount of time which is usually shorter than it would take us to read through a text. This pictorial perspective is used to convey the most common advertising theme: our products bring people together and make their lives better. However, despite all the invested effort advertisers will probably never be able to fully control the meaning of their advertisements because advertisements by their nature are polysemic and the audience is free to construe the message in various ways. This is one of the "beauties" of advertising because identical messages can be perceived in a drastically different manner in different communities, societies, or countries. This means advertisers need to be on their



Photo 4: Advertising – social media (Foto: Sara Kurfess, sara-kurfess-6lcT2kRPvnl-unsplash).

toes all the time and try to anticipate all possible outcomes and steer their message towards the most favourable one. Based on our research, probably the most frequent path towards a favourable outcome is the following one: ad saliency overcomes scepticism and inattention caused by the sheer quantity of stimuli our brains are exposed to. In turn, if the

great filter of inattention is overcome, this may lead to an increase in brand awareness and visibility. Ideally, these elements lead to an increase in brand knowledge and loyalty. Brand knowledge and loyalty usually manifest themselves as willingness to purchase. This is, more or less, along the lines of reasoning of the AIDA hierarchy model.

In terms of our ethnographic research, it showed that advertising is the field that lends itself well to ethnography. This is because advertising should not be viewed in isolation, without the people who are its receivers, moderators, and mental consumers. However, as with any research, our research had certain limitations, with the following two being

the most salient: time frame and sample size. Even though we spent almost half a year performing different steps of the study (three months for the design and preparation; two months for the implementation and field work and one month for the analysis), as with any study interested in repeated observations of the same variable, the observed period could have been longer. In terms of the sample size, larger sample size, coupled with a longer observation period, would provide more conclusive and generalisable data. However, this was the best research format and duration given the resources we were able to muster under the circumstances.

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POVZETEK

Oglasi so sestavni del našega življenja, a so nekateri oglasi na eni strani izjemno uspešni, drugi pa ne dosežejo svojega cilja. Namen prispevka je bil zato razumeti, kateri so elementi diskurza, ki ločijo uspešne oglase od tistih, ki to niso. Da bi našli odgovor na to vprašanje, je bila opravljena etnografska raziskava v treh črnogorskih mestih. Anketiranci so bili ljudje različnih starosti, porekla in stopenj izobrazbe, zato da bi zagotovili reprezentativni vzorec, ki bi nam omogočal znanstveno utemeljene posplošitve. Po opravljenih intervjujih z več sto intervjuvanci in obdelavi pridobljenih podatkov prispevek ponuja več ugotovitev. Prvič, veliko število anketirancev ocenjuje kakovost oglasa glede na njegovo konotacijo in denotacijo. Drugič, uspešen oglas pri opazovalcu nujno povzroči pozitiven čustveni odziv, tj. prejemniku sporočila. Tretjič, oglasi, ki ustvarijo uspešno sintezo besedila, slik in glasbe, veliko bolje pritegnejo pozornost današnjega občinstva. Konec koncev so med najuspešnejšimi oglasi tisti, ki prebudijo našo prirojeno željo po pripadnosti skupini in občutku, da jih drugi razumejo.

Ključne besede: oglaševalski diskurz, socialno ciljanje, etnografsko raziskovanje, načini komuniciranja, žanri

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