Chapter 9

Advertising Discourse and “New” Ideologies in Spain

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ABSTRACT

According to Pollay’s metaphor, advertising works like a distorted mirror showing to society a slanted image of the reality. This means that, in spite of this reflected image being predominantly conservative, the advertising should pay attention and incorporate the changes that appear in the sociocultural and political contexts in order to impact on the target audience. In Spain, for example, “new” ideologies like ecologism or feminism have found their echo in advertising, although in most of the occasions as a mere pretext to sell goods. Thus, the purpose of this article is to analyse the background of recent Spanish advertising in consonance with the so-called “new” ideologies to check how the messages represent the changes claimed by society.

INTRODUCTION

The persuasive nature of advertising means that, in order to construct its messages, it must constantly resort to the context in which it is inserted. At the same time, it must be capable of engaging and having an impact on a particular target audience, but without upsetting or offending the rest of the population. This makes its discourse eminently conservative, insofar as it merely reflects its own distorted (Pollay, 1986) and somewhat honeyed vision of reality. However, as society evolves, advertising should reflect its new concerns and demands. In other words, advertising discourse must—albeit in a restrained fashion—heed and incorporate the changes emerging in social, political and cultural contexts. After all, since the interpretation of the messages made by consumers responds to their context, this continuous and updated adaptation to the social reality becomes essential.

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the ideological background of recent Spanish advertising, especially in relation to ideologies that could be defined as “new”, like feminism or ecologism (Heywood, 2012). The purpose is not to enumerate their most recurring features or main ideological cores, but to focus on those cases in which advertising agencies and advertisers have tried to engage a sector of the
population that is now more committed to “new” ideologies, to active mobilisation and struggle and to the empowerment of traditionally oppressed sectors, and which, in short, demands social change to which advertising merely reproduces. According to Escalas (1998), ads tell stories because stories can involve, entertain, captivate, communicate and persuade consumers. In order to do this, the messages must be meaningful and the audience should see themselves reflected in ads. A degree of ingenuity and novelty are important, but one should not lose sight of the receivers’ “horizon of expectations” using Jauss’ terminology. In that regard, concerning the concept of aesthetic distance, Jauss (1970) pointed out that a text would achieve either artistic or entertaining value depending on its more or less distance from the expectations horizon. In this way, a high distancing could lead most people to reject the text as unintelligible. This, which can be beneficial for a novel or even a film, is not convenient in the field of advertising, unless it is a very exclusive product or service with a very restricted target. In short, as will be seen throughout the chapter, the ads stories, although innovative, must refer to the consumers’ beliefs and attitudes about their world to achieve their objectives.

BACKGROUND

In its attempt to engage and influence its target audience, advertising is obliged to adapt to the predominant symbols and cultural values in such a way that these ultimately reveal “the identity of the target audience, namely its shared ideology” (Douthwaite, 2008, p. 280). This is related to the consumers’ cognitive processing, since they will interpret the advertisements based on their subjective experience (Chang, 2013). In this respect, following McCracken, who determines that “Advertising is a conduit through which meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods” (1986, pp. 75-76), Hackley (2002) resorts to the panopticon metaphor to evince how advertising agencies should monitor consumer behaviour and tastes in order to accommodate their messages to the public at large.

As Marshall McLuhan stated, even if only a few ads were left on earth, it would still be possible to chart the history of the world perfectly. This amounts to saying that advertising can be understood as a mere mirror that reflects the cultural values of a specific social reality (Pollay, 1986; Clark, 1988); a claim that has served as an argument to counter criticism of its cultural role. However, the problem lies in the fact that advertising neither reflects nor treats the values of a particular culture equally, but enhances some to the detriment of others, appropriating and channelling existing motives and tendencies (Alba de Diego, 1976, p. 90). Thus, advertising—as Clark (1988) would say—even though it does not create a stereotypical vision of reality, it at least accentuates and perpetuates it.

Therefore, if advertising functioned as a mirror, it would be a distorted one (Pollay, 1986), returning a deformed image of reality. As with halls of mirrors at funfairs, in which the twisted images that they reflect are based on reality, advertising is grounded in the prevailing model of society of which it reflects an equally misleading image. In a nutshell, it is both the agent and victim of its time, portraying current society in its own way (Baudrillard, 1989; Eguizábal, 2009)—or at least those social values that it deems most adequate (Codeluppi, 2007)—through its messages, while never losing sight of its commercial intention and purpose; an objective that would ultimately serve to differentiate between propaganda and advertising. Thus, while advertising pursues a commercial end, propaganda has an ideological purpose at the service of the powers that be (Pineda Cachero, 2007, p. 114). In other words,
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