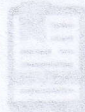


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MEDIACIONES COMUNICATIVAS



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Capítulo 14

Deconstructing Persuasive Communication in Perfume Advertising

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I. INTRODUCTION

Processes of persuasive communication in perfume advertising are very subtle and efficient. They rely on a range of semiotic codes: audiovisual codes, music, daydreaming scenarios, etc. The verbal code, language, is just one of them. Very often we also have translanguaging, that is, the switch to another language. All these semiotic codes and strategies contribute to covert and unveiled processes of communication in this type of adverts, addressed at a target segment of the population to produce branding. Branding is the emotional connection of this target segment with the brand name (Kovalenco, 2021). This emotional branding requires inferential processes of interpretation, based on emotions, feelings, sensations and on evoking a sense of identity, of liminal and idealized identities. In this paper, these processes of persuasive communication will be pointed out in order to deconstruct the way persuasion functions in this subgenre of publicity, perfume adverts, our scope of analysis.

II. AIM

The goal of this paper is to deconstruct persuasive processes of communication in advertising, focusing on perfume adverts because this subtype of adverts can be claimed to be more subtle in their persuasive construction. To this aim, taking as a starting point the fact that advertising messages are not fully encoded (in language), even less perfume adverts, an analytical framework relying on an inferential model of communication

from the field of Pragmatics will be used. Also, from the field of Anthropology the concept of liminality will be applied. This paper will show the great analytical potential of the chosen conceptual frameworks for the purpose of deconstructing persuasion in perfume adverts.

III. METHODOLOGY

The first conceptual framework chosen to deconstruct and analyse perfume adverts are key concepts from the linguistic field of Pragmatics, in particular from Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004)¹. Concepts such as covert communication as well as the interaction between explicatures and implicatures will be powerful analytical tools. These concepts will be presented in detail in the following section.

In addition, it is my claim that the anthropological concept of liminality will provide a complementary and interesting perspective to interpret processes of persuasion in perfume adverts. Liminality (see Bigger, 2009) is characterized by openness, by the experience of a beyond. In a liminal space, one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, to the point that our rational selves may disappear. In these realms, ordinary parameters of cognition may be subverted, and the emotional self can take over and be led into other worlds. In these fictional worlds (the adverts), our unconscious may start a process of identification with the visual identities displayed in those oniric perfume adverts. In my analysis, I postulate that perfume adverts can be analysed and deconstructed as liminal spaces, invoking glamour, youth, beauty and idealized identities.

A small corpus of perfume adverts has been chosen just to illustrate this type of analysis in this subtype of publicity.

IV. RESULTS

In this section, I will present the analysis conducted using the conceptual frameworks mentioned above, the aim being to deconstruct perfume adverts in their persuasion process. Our starting point is the acknowledgement that inference rather than decoding words is the key to comprehension, as the field of Pragmatics has revealed. That is why our hypothesis is that Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), a pragmatic inferential model of communication, will be useful for deconstructing perfume adverts. This theory states that the goal

1. See Zhaohui Xu (2013) for an application of Relevance theory to advertising in general.

of communication is changing the cognitive environment of a hearer. And if we focus on publicity and more specifically on the publicity of products like perfumes, borderline between material and immaterial goods, communication can also be considered as the art of changing the emotional makeup of potential consumers. According to this theory, in our process of inference of meaning, we follow the cognitive Principle of Relevance, that is, the principle of balancing processing effort and cognitive effects in order to retrieve the final interpretation. For humans, images and sounds are easier to process than language and publicists are well aware of this. We even get a kind of pleasure out of processing these stimuli. Publicists use them first to catch out attention, even to reward us for paying attention, as Cook pointed out (1992). And in this way publicists introduce us to what I claim are liminal spaces so that persuasion and emotional branding are easier to trigger. I will analyse these two goals publicists attempt to achieve, in this order.

4.1. CATCHING OUT ATTENTION, THE FIRST AIM OF ANY ADVERT

A well-known and much discussed singularity of the genre of publicity is the fact that advertisements often exist on the periphery of receiver attention (Cook, 1992). Consequently, a lack of cooperation between communicator and addressee can be expected. Strategies are used to catch the attention of the target segment to which the advert is addressed, such as an alluring style, enticing resources which create rapport, surprise, wonder, and above all, a sense of membership or of identification, a whole gamut of strategies whose underlying idea is to lead prospective consumers into the final aim: branding, or the emotional connection with the product and its brand name.

4.2. BRANDING, OR THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE PRODUCT AND ITS BRAND NAME

I have chosen to focus on the advertising of perfumes because in my view this special subgenre is creating a parallel dimension in our culture, which I will analyse using the anthropological concept of liminality, in connection with the identities visually and semiotically evoked. We can imagine perfume publicists storming their minds to draw their audience's attention away from the feeling of being manipulated. Publicists lead addressees to evocative interpretative paths, which will become associated with the perfume advertised. They are also careful balancing the processing effort invested to retrieve the final meaning and this fact has

long been noticed by analysts (Tanaka, 1994). This paper highlights that the nature of these interpretative paths is subtle, beyond rational cognition. It is emotional. Advertisers hope that the feelings activated will be transferred to the product which is advertised, to the brand name, and in this way succeed in triggering emotional branding (involving loyalty and processes of identification) in the target segment to which the advert is addressed. This type of communication is called “covert communication” in Relevance theory.

I claim that this theory is very useful in the attempt to deconstruct persuasion in publicity precisely because it reveals that there are two types of communication: overt and covert communication. In overt communication, communicators intend their message to be clear, the aim being to transmit some piece of information (*vid* Caldevilla-Domínguez *et al.*, 2020; Barrientos-Báez *et al.*, 2019). Overt communication is very tricky in publicity. As all publicists know, “the speaker does not publicize his informative intention when he believes that revealing it would have an adverse effect on its fulfillment” (Tanaka, 1994 p. 43). Covert communication is a more powerful concept to deconstruct publicity. In contrast to overt communication, in covert communication, there are several layers of meaning, and the real intended meaning is hidden. Publicity typically uses an engaging style on the surface, in the microcosms or liminal spaces publicists create in adverts, as we will see in the corpus of chosen adverts, but these strategies are in fact masquerading another level of meaning: the hidden intention on the part of publicists of succeeding in their goal: to prompt their target audience to emotionally connect with the brand name. Branding is this emotional connection, and is being achieved through instinctive or emotional mechanisms, almost below the realm of critical consciousness. In perfume adverts, communication is not overt, as is in our daily life, but covert, since the real intention of publicists is hidden, wrapped in what I claim are liminal spaces of glamour and beauty where it is easier for publicists to evoke in the target consumers emotional processes of identity construction or membership, using a range of semiotic codes.

In regard to the semiotic codes used, Relevance theory will also help us understand that the explicit part of communication, the so called explicatures, are just the first premise in any communicative event. In the case of publicity, the explicatures are the semiotic codes and the narrative thread used to construct the advert, which can be considered a meaningful microcosm. Communication is a process, an interaction between the explicit part, the explicatures, and all the implicit presuppositions or implicatures that we retrieve in our minds in order to make sense and find meaning. The combination and on-going interaction of explicatures and implicatures lead us

to the final interpretation. Implicatures or presuppositional meaning relate to all types of meanings stored in our brains, but we activate only what we need in order to obtain the meaning that we perceive is relevant to us. According to this cognitive theory of communication, our human cognition functions in this dynamic, selective and ongoing way. This is the cognitive principle of Relevance. And among all the possible meanings available to us, our human cognitive system is more attuned to some cognitive phenomena, those related to survival mechanisms or to identity construction, or to a sense of membership. My claim is that in perfume adverts, we are allured out of our ordinary lives to liminalities, to liminal states, where idealized identities and idealized realities seem within our reach.

Covert communication can also be used to appeal to a slightly less “basic” instinct in human beings, snobbery (Tanaka, 1994; Pearson & Turner, 1966). Advertisements for perfumes are a particularly good example of this because perfumes are a luxury good. They have been traditionally associated with wealth and status, and from my anthropological analysis, I will add with idealized liminal identities of being young, beautiful and glamorous in an exclusive environment.

The following adverts will be used as a small corpus for the sake of illustration:

- *La vie est belle-Lancôme*² (Aveillan, 2016). Here Julia Roberts leads guests from conventional and dull luxury to enjoying freedom while still being in a privileged place of glamour, elegance and richness. With her “halo” effect (Yan, 2017; Birckett, 2021), she leads them through glamour to openness to the beyond, to a liminal state of mind of freedom, to be associated with the perfume advertised.
- *Invictus Paco Rabanne*³. In this advert, the young and athletic hero wins over his competitors, he is “Invictus”, on a heroic journey to a heavenly group of beautiful young women waiting for him. The kind of victorious identity many males would like to have. This is possible in this mythological liminal space, offered to the prospective target audience.
- *Olympia Paco Rabanne*⁴. A similar advert creating a liminal paradise addressed to victorious women, with the beautiful heroine of Greek mythology⁵, Olympia, leading them to an oniric liminal world.

2. <https://youtu.be/oE4H16NRNCE>.

3. <https://youtu.be/VNOZTsK0gRs>.

4. <https://youtu.be/WxLgkmA-deA>.

5. See Freire (2014) for the use of mythological characters in publicity.

Even the use of French or English captions (in Spanish media) contribute to the effect of glamour and above all, of liminality. These captions are not perceived as obstacles to communication. Their function is not conventional linguistic communication but a kind of language crossing or "identity crossing" following Rampton's sociolinguistic ideas (1995). This identity crossing contributes to the sense of inhabiting a liminal space and time, where persuasion is easy to convey through the means analysed above.

Illustration:

- *Gucci Bloom*⁶. In this oniric watery world, at the end, a voice says in English: "Gucci Bloom, a new fragrance for her". This is an example of language crossing, which is associated to identity crossing, the identity of elegant young women, who have English as their youth code.

V. DISCUSSION

It is my claim that persuasion in perfume adverts is created through the construction of transient liminal identities, idealized identities, highly valuable in our secular culture, where the experience of the sacred is not channelled any more through institutionalized religions but in the appropriation of youth and beauty.

So, I suggest this type of publicity can be analysed from this angle. These visual identities are evoked in a liminal space that perfume adverts create with their covert style of communication, opening up and unveiling for us feminine or masculine idealized identities and thus igniting our journey to an almost oniric site where wishes are fulfilled, and an ideal version of oneself can be associated with those visual identities which are targeted at the prospective audience, at their inner emotional liminality between consciousness and unconsciousness.

In this realm of imagination and daydreaming, rational selves may disappear. Ordinary parameters of cognition may be subverted, and the emotional self can take over. In a world of rationality, perfume adverts launch receptive addressees into another dimension: a liminal space, where identities are not fixed by conventional, realistic parameters, but liminal, with the full potential to be transformed or associated with the identities displayed in the oniric worlds created by publicists.

6. <https://youtu.be/wafe6kDBb6c>.

By means of covert communication, the targeted audience is led into other realms where reality can be subverted, and new idealized identities can be appropriated. Once engaged in this unconscious process of liminal identification, the emotional branding with the brand name is easier to be achieved.

VI. CONCLUSION

Applying the anthropological concept of liminality, I postulate that in the liminal spaces created in perfume adverts, advertisers take advantage of our human needs and wishes, and relying on them, lead their target audience to the interpretative paths that will make them connect those sensations with the brand name. This process is called branding and remains almost below the level of conscious awareness. Triggering our human cognitive and emotional systems and matching them with the brand and the advertised product is a clear strategy of covert communication, a useful concept from Relevance theory to deconstruct publicity. The connection is not rational, it has no logic in it, but our mind is rational or logical. Perfumes are not advertised following a line of rational thinking. Higher order thinking is avoided in the microcosm of the advert. Critical thinking will be an obstacle to the persuasion process. Therefore, it is not brought to the fore. And the scenes portrayed can be treated as liminalities, liminal spaces between reality and unconsciously desired identities, where idealized identities of youth and beauty can be transferred to the target audience, thanks to the oniric appeal of the emotions, the narrative thread and the visual images presented.

To conclude, the results of my analysis points to the anthropological concept of liminality and the pragmatic concept of covert communication as very powerful analytical tools to deconstruct persuasive strategies in perfume adverts.

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