

The “Communication Semiosis” of Advertising: An Innovative Strategy of Optimization

Abstract. Using innovation in advertising represents a strategic decision that brand owners and advertisers make in order to grow and even survive on a competing market. In advertising, innovation manifests through creativity, a concept we will develop in this paper, in order to understand the semiotic implications of using creativity. As it is presented in this paper, scholars consider that creativity/innovation has a positive impact on ad effectiveness, encouraging ad processing and creating the context of a semiotic interpretation. From the semiotic point of view, creativity may though imply risks of interpretation due to some identified factors.

Keywords: creativity, innovation, semiotics, communication, ad processing, misinterpretation

The present work discusses the semiotic implications of using creativity and innovation in advertising and outlines the implications of creativity in ads' effectiveness.

1. Conceptual introduction

An advertisement does not exist in isolation, it typically occurs in an environment (for example, TV), which contains its own programs and other types of content. Besides these factors, there are also the competition's messages interfering and affecting a brand's messages' efficacy. Kent (1993) concluded that the competition's messages affect more the effectiveness of advertising messages. People are able to process a limited amount of information, therefore, the numerous posts will decrease the likelihood that any given message is processed or recalled. Another important factor that may be responsible for the negative impact on ad effectiveness is that too many advertisements may cause irritation,

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which will negatively influence the perception of advertising messages (Nan and Faber 2004).

In this context, innovation in advertising appears to be the strategic move that professionals can make in order to facilitate the commercial communication between brands and their target. Provided that any process of communication comprises semiotic implications, discussions about the effects of using innovation in advertising become an important aspect to approach in order to develop a theoretical point of view on the implications innovation and creativity have in the situation of advertising communication.

Innovation, defined as "the introduction of something new; a new idea, method or device" (Webster's Dictionary), has become an imperative in the current economic and business climate, as it has become vital not only for growth, but also for survival (Westwood and Low 2003). In the advertising industry, innovation manifests through creativity. Innovation is the application of creative ideas, and an organization cannot innovate unless it has the ability to generate creative ideas (Westwood and Low 2003).

There are many conceptualizations of creativity, in 1961 the index counted no less than 40 definitions of creativity (Rhodes 1961). Of these, we will select the most relevant to this paper, in order to establish the state of knowledge. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the act of creation as "the ability to do or to be something new, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or a new device or a new form of art, or an object". Webster's dictionary states that *to create* means "to make or bring into existence something new, to invest something with a new form, to produce through imaginative skill". Eastern cultures believe that creative acts are repeated reconfigurations of reiterative and holistic pre-established realities, eastern researchers considering creativity not as a novelty, but as a rediscovery (Westwood and Low 2003). In contrast, Western cultures consider creativity as a break with tradition. Some specialists have defined *creativity* as the source of "imaginative new ideas" (Miller 1987) and others believe that it is not a perfect novel, but rather "endowed with imaginative recombination of elements into something new" (Ciardi 1956).

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) states that, in practice, professionals refer to the *creativity* both as *process* and the *result of the process*. This approach is criticized by the psychologist who believes that the use of

creative methodologies in a process does not provide any form of creative results / product. In this paper, we treat creativity as a result, in terms of creative advertising product.

2. Elements of innovation in advertising

The term *creativity* is a leitmotif in the advertising industry, as it is considered to be a determining factor for the effectiveness of advertising (Smith and Yang 2004). Advertising professionals, even semioticians often use this term in the specialized language (e.g., creative director, creative approach, creative strategy, creative platform).

Advertising is probably the only industry where staff consists of “creative” individuals who are responsible for developing creative concepts and executions through commercials, give life to creative ideas. Creatives are grouped in the creative department, creative directors coordinate teams of art directors and copywriters. This creative team examines and criticizes the ideas of advertisements in terms of strategy, originality and impact of creative concept in its various executions (Moriarty and Robbs 1999).

Creativity is defined as what is *new and different*, with emphasis on originality (Ries and Ries 2005) and “fundamental essence of creativity is the ability to see what others do not see – from another perspective” (Ravich 2003), involving a lateral thinking, branched, rather than a vertical one (Braunstein 1999). Advertising agencies always boast their “creative” copywriters and art directors who attract their customers with the “wow” effect of the ads they imagine and put into practice.

The effect of overcrowding, the abundance of all messages from everywhere are not favourable to the businesses trying to get notorious, nor to the advertising agencies working for them and, ultimately, not even to the consumers that find themselves overwhelmed and invaded, feeling effectively attacked by many distraction factors. According to statistics, an individual is exposed during a typical day up to 5000 messages (Ries and Ries 2005). As the number of ads has increased in recent years, the messages have become a kind of wallpaper. Ads surround us from early morning until late at night. Therefore, the tendency is to ignore individual advertisements. Only when an advertisement is unusual it gets little attention (Ries and Ries 2005). This is the reason why advertisers are competing in making “catchy” and creative commercials.

Smith and Yang developed the creativity issue in advertising, noting that this concept implies the existence of an imaginative, unique element, a divergent component that is also relevant to the solved problem (Smith and Yang 2004). The divergent nature of the advertising product can be identified as it follows:

- an empathic perspective – the ability to use an attitude or perspective that understands the thoughts and feelings of the target audience;
- a provocative question: the ability to use analysis and interrogations with the intention to incite, stimulate or evade an interesting answer;
- orientation to the future: the ability to speculate or provide opportunities or future events (Smith and Yang 2004).

With regard to the second characteristic, challenging questions, Smith and Yang (2004) consider the relevance of communication products for the consumer must have embodies two forms:

- ad's relevance to consumer – some of the ad's elements are relevant to the target, for example, background music or symbols;
- brand's relevance to consumer – advertising creates an important link between the consumer and the brand, for example, shared values.

Later, they added some practical observations, noting there would be a third form of relevance, namely that between the advertisement and the brand (Smith and Yang 2004).

Following the structure composed of the two factors “divergence” and “relevance”, Smith and Yang (2004) provide a summary of how these factors are expressed in creation. The divergence is being expressed through unusualness (Jackson and Messick 1965), originality (Sobel and Rothenberg 1980; Haberland and Dacin 1992; Thorson and Zhao 1997; Wells 1989), innovation (Amabile, 1983; Besemer and Treffinger, 1981; Besemer and O'Quinn 1986), divergence (Tellis 1998), imaginativeness (Duke 2000, Duke and Sutherland 2001). On the other hand, the relevance is manifested in the creative act by: (1) appropriateness (Jackson and Messick 1965 Amabile 1983; Besemer and Treffinger 1981; Besemer and O'Quinn 1986, Thorson and Zhao 1997; Wells 1989), (2) value (Sobel and Rothenberg 1980; Amabile 1983), (3) meaningfulness (Haberland and Dacin 1992; Thorson and Zhao 1997; Wells 1989), (4) resolution / functionality (Besemer and Treffinger 1981; Besemer and O'Quinn 1986), (5) condensation (Jackson and Messick 1965 Haberland and

Dacin 1992), (6) external and internal confluence (Duke 2000, Duke and Sutherland 2001).

An advertising campaign has a number of objectives, depending on the needs of the beneficiary. These objectives usually refer to cognitive, attitudinal or behavioural changes of the target audience (MacInnis and Jarwowski 1989): increasing the visibility of the brand / product / service on the market, attracting a positive attitude towards the promoted brand / product / service, sales growth by inducing purchase behaviour etc. As a result, some consider efficacy as a third term to define creativity in advertising (Smith and Yang 2004). Creativity implies effectiveness that is reaching the ad campaign objectives. The implications experts identified concern the change of attitude toward a brand (Haberland and Dacin 1992), the impact (the power to stop, the connection with advertising) (Thorson and Zhao 1997; Wells 1989), the productivity (Tellis 1998).

In summary, we conclude that what we call *creativity* in advertising has been defined by scholars in terms of three characteristics: *divergence, relevance and effectiveness*. *The notion of divergence is the fundamental characteristic of creativity and it involves innovation, differentiation, unusualness* (Smith and Yang 2004). The notion of relevance is defined by meaningfulness, appropriateness or value for the audience (Smith and Yang 2004). Finally, the notion of effectiveness requires that advertising be productive or able to achieve the communication and marketing objectives.

3. The situation of creative communication in advertising

Analyzing conceptualizations of creativity, we deduce that creativity is the result of a *semiotic situation* where the *transmitter* creates a *message* and sends it *encrypted* through a *channel* in a certain *context*, to a *recipient*. Therefore, following the model of the six elements of the semiotic communication situation defined by Roman Jakobson (1963) are also found in the act of advertising. Next, we present a *conceptual diagram* (Fig. 1) schematically illustrating creative advertising message transmission from the *Transmitter* to the *Receiver*.

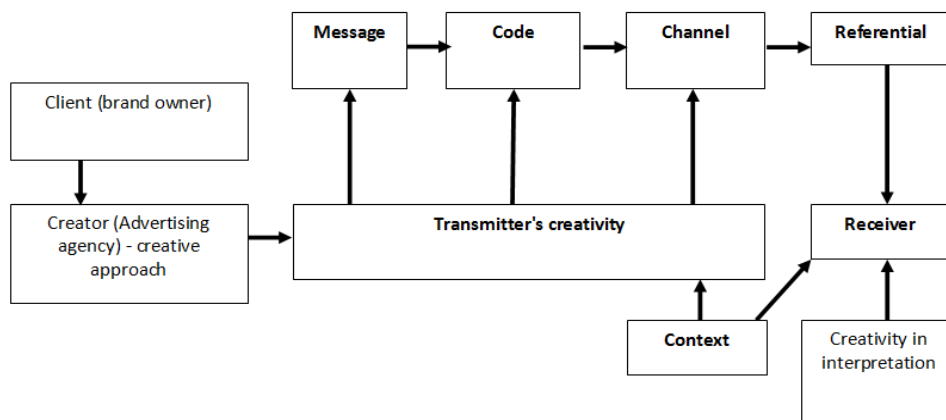


Fig. 1. Conceptual diagram of a creative advertising message transmission from transmitter to receiver

The transmitter. *The transmitter is the person that sends a message to the receiver. He is defined by means of personality factors, such as biological factors, psychological factors and social factors (Stănciulescu 2007). The transmitter of advertisements as it is identified in the conceptual diagram is the brand represented by the ad's author (the advertising agency), who provides creative contribution. In turn, the advertising agency is influenced by the client – the owner of the brand, who controls the development of a promotional advertising product.*

The message. *In advertising, the message is represented by the advertisement made by advertisers and distributed through various channels. This presents a meaningful content, whose degree of attractiveness is given partly by the level of creativity that can be found in the advertising product. Studies in psychology state that attention is a necessary condition of learning, attitudinal and behavioural change. Marketers say that, in an advertisement, what matters to efficiency is to draw attention.*

The code. *The code is a means of encoding used by an emitter of a message and it refers to the type of language utilized (Stănciulescu 2007). Advertisers encode messages in the form of audio, video, audiovisual ads or in the form of events below the line (BTL). The encoding is carried out through language, sounds, symbols, etc. The code is another element where advertisers can manifest creativity by staging ideas in unique ways.*

The channel. *The channel it refers to the nature of the message transmitted: oral, written, drawn etc. (Stănciulescu 2007) on a physical support. The ads are created by advertisers to broadcast on several*

channels, depending on the media plan prepared by them. These channels include: television, radio, outdoor banners, cinema, internet, posters, and some innovative solutions. In this regard, advertisers can demonstrate creativity by using less conventional channels, and surprising more (for example, some interventions by changing the environment to promote brands).

The referential. The referential is “the objective reality reflected through the communicational-creative act” (Stănciulescu 2007). In advertising, the referential of an ad may be a brand/trademark, a service, a product, a person.

The context. The context of a transmission of an advertisement is determined by several factors. Among the most important, they are: (1) psycho-socio-cultural characteristics of the public, and (2) the abundance of marketing messages. *Divergence and relevance* (main factors defining creativity) are determined by the context or the “social criteria recognizer” (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1975; MacKinnon 1962). This explains the fact that there are advertisements perceived as creative by a group but non-creative by another group. Mason (1988) and Sinclair (1971) consider how creativity is interpreted in different cultures is rooted in creation myths and religious precepts of culture. The creative acts are viewed differently from one culture to another.

The receiver. The receiver is the person/the group of persons to whom the message is addressed (Stănciulescu 2007). It is represented by the target audience of the advertisement. He has an active contribution to the interpretation of a creative advertising. In fact, recipients need a dose of creativity in order to be able to interpret creative commercials, as shown in the three expressions of creativity in advertising communication (Smith and Yang, 2004):

- personal creativity – should correspond to the team of agency copywriters; it refers to the divergence and relevance a creative talent requests;
- creative creativity – how creative the ad seems to the target;
- consumer creativity – target's creativity, how people receive and process an ad.

Novelty creates a new context of interpretation for the target audience. The semiotic situation will be new, and the way the message gets defined can influence, undoubtedly, the third term associated with creativity: efficacy.

To refer to the effectiveness of a creative message, we use a semiotic approach to the creative process model proposed by Greenwald

and Leavitt (1984) that Smith and Yang (2004) used in their study on divergence and relevance of creativity in advertising.

In the advertising research, Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) identified four levels of involvement of the audience in receiving an advertisement. They start with the preattention level (lowest level of involvement) to the stage of elaboration (the highest level of involvement). The progression from preattention through elaboration is assumed to be accompanied by the allocation of increasing capacity, which is required for increasingly abstract analyses of incoming information (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984). At the *preattention level*, an advertisement succeeds in attracting attention usually through repetition, so that to become a familiar stimulus (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984). The second level, *the focal attention*, is based on distinguishing features (colour, motion, novelty, emotional stimuli, etc.) (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984) and uses a reduced capacity to decipher the message's sensory content into categorical codes. The next level is *comprehension*, where the speech is being analyzed and its propositional representation gets created. The highest level of involvement, the *elaboration*, implies the adaptation of the message's content to the conceptual understanding of the recipient (Greenwald and Leavitt 1984).

With regard to these steps, Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) provide a series of connections, as it follows:

- the preattention stage is associated with sensory buffering and the feature analysis;
- the focal attention is associated with channel selection and perceptual and semantic processing;
- the comprehension involves syntactic analysis;
- the elaboration includes the conceptual analysis.

It is worth to notice that the levels associated with the processes correspond to the concepts discussed in the *semiotic philosophy* by Charles Morris, who believes that “any text / speech can be assumed as a syntactic – the relationship between its signs, semantics – the relation between signs and referentially, pragmatics – the relationship between human subjects of communication” (Stănciulescu 2004). The meaning generating trajectory of the Semio-linguistic research group in Paris led by Greimas (Floch 1988; Semprini 1992; Danesi and Beasley 2002) argued that a brand gets a meaning by passing through different levels or structures, i.e. the deep structure, the semio-narrative and the discursive structures. Similarly, we may state that the *semiosis related to an ad interpretation is a semiosis in semiosis*, ultimately included in a semiosis

of a higher level that creates what experts in branding like to call “a brand”, *id est* “an organization a product or service with personality” (Wally Olins 2006) or “what a product or service represents in people’s minds” (Adamson 2009). In other words, *the receiver of advertisements*, before moving on to the actual analysis of it (*syntactic, semantic, pragmatic analysis*), it takes an item to ensure a creative prevalence comparing to other messages competing for the target’s attention. This differentiating item is *innovation* expressed through *creativity*.

Smith and Yang (2004) identified a series of levels to follow the preattention level that designed to lead the receiver to interpret the message. The next level the two researchers featured is represented by the receiver's motivation to process information (MacInnis and Jarkowski 1989), thus attracting attention so that to finally reach the depth of the message (Bertrand, 2000). The deep processing of the message can go from a simple acknowledgment of the content until a connection between the message's meaning and the receiver. As Smith and Yang argued (2004), depth of processing has played a central role in determining the *type of encoding* and ability to remember (Craik and Lockhart 1972). In this model, Level I codes are superficial (analog) codes that can be remembered via rehearsal. Level II codes are more organized representations and take advantage of categorical structures to enhance recall (Ornstein and Trabasso 1974). Level III codes are creative or elaborate encodings (e.g. personal connections) that attach the new information to existing knowledge structures, thus maximizing recall (Krugman 1965).

Considering these results, Smith and Yang (2004) added that scientists had concluded that what we call *innovation or creativity in advertising has a positive impact in terms of effectiveness and efficiency in advertising*. This is revealed by the fact that between the two expressions of creativity – *divergence and relevance*, particularly the *divergence is that which facilitates storing and recalling advertisements and information about a particular brand*, showing that divergent ads increase the level of attention and the processing depth. These two variables are associated with a better codification, a transfer of information to long-term memory and a greater accessibility of information (Smith and Yang 2004).

On the other hand, the *relevance proved positive effects regarding the processing levels*: preattention, motivation and deep processing of information (Smith and Yang 2004; Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; MacInnis and Jaworski 1989).

5. Semiotic risks associated to creativity in advertising

The previous chapter showed us the advantages of using creativity/innovation in advertising. Next, we shall discuss a series of *semiotic risks* one should take into consideration when adopting new ideas or perspectives. *The creativity*, as scholars stated (Smith and Yang 2004), is *associated both to the emitter, and to the receiver of an ad*. We conclude that there is a need for creativity from both sides. The main risks that we may identify considering this situation are the following: (1) the risk regarding the message and (2) the risk regarding the context.

(1) The risk regarding the message. Greimas (1966) stated that there is a possibility, in communication, that unpredicted decoding takes place so that the receiver will only partially "consume" the message's content. He called *isotopies* these parallel and autonomous meaning levels. In practice, people may give a meaning to ads without fully understanding them, as Greimas argued it may happen in a generic situation of communication. Umberto Eco (...) featured the graphic of this partial/misinterpretation process, as follows: *the receiver* finds himself between a *message-expression* (the source of information) and a *message-content* (interpreted text). The input (the message-expression) and the output (the message-content) are influenced by a series of factors, such as: transmitter's personal codes and ideological points of view, *expression's ambiguity and content's ambiguity* on the one side, and receiver's personal codes and ideological points of view, *aleatory connotations and errors of interpretation* on the other side. Although the risks of misinterpretation and "isotopies" happen in any communicational context, we consider that for a message defined by "novelty", "originality", "unusualness", "imaginative" is even harder to provide an appropriate correspondence between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 1907).

(2) The risk regarding the context. Creativity has a positive impact on communication, but it should be adapted and controlled so that to correspond to the client's needs, the ad campaign main message (unity), and not the least, creativity should depend on audience and context. *Culture* has an impact on how creative and innovative processes are perceived and interpreted. This is visible especially in the field of advertising, where *expansive creativity can be more or less accepted* by the public. On this topic, there is the term of *risk 6*: "An orientation towards a degree of risk is seen as necessary if people are to *explore new*

and potentially challenging ideas required in acts of creativity" (Westwood and Low 2003). We believe that risk can be particularly attached to the relevance of the created advertising product, namely how to attach meaning to the creative message sent.

6. A short conclusion

What surfaces from the above mentioned is that the creative process is a game, a maze from A (brand) to B (target). Creativity is to find the shortest, the safer and more enjoyable path to get to the destination. Creativity means on the one hand effectiveness, and efficient means strategy. Advertising messages must mean something their target, the consumer must receive an understandable message, his nearest way. An advertising message must know what to design, how to sew, where to promote and when.

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