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PICTURE OF EVOLVING SOCIETY CAPTURED IN BRITISH COMMERCIALS

This paper explores the issue of cultural changes in the Media in relation to the state of contemporary society. The aim is to show commercials as closely connected with the state of society at a given moment in time, which is done by examining selected advertising campaigns in Great Britain. As a result the picture that emerges is not only a reflection of what Jean François Lyotard labelled as the world with a so called postmodern condition, but it is also a challenge to the seemingly well-established conceptions about the society in question. Finally, people are offered a broader and more complete picture of their particular place in society, which enables them to better understand its structure and negotiate its shape and form through both: direct and indirect participation. In that sense advertising can be used as a critical tool to study the growing complexities of social relations that are always in flux and undergo a metamorphosis.

Keywords: society, media, commercial, change, culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Evolution is the ongoing process that is present in all areas of life. When it comes to a society it is a process of bringing matters up-to-date with technological advancements, beliefs and human desires. In no other field can it be more noticeable than in the world of advertising. Respectively, over the last century the advertising industry has come a long way that parallels social development. Simple and straightforward commercials introducing new products to the public by enumerating their features have been replaced with elaborate works of artistic concepts, playing on human desires and dreams. More profound than just influencing consumption behaviour, advertising now has the ability to shape human aspirations. Furthermore, in order to overcome growing competition, companies have been resorting to an array of different strategies to win over potential customers. To be relevant, these strategies must accommodate the aforementioned constant changes taking place in any evolving society.

Companies shift from merely delivering monologues, to engaging in a conversation, transforming the relationship that exists between brand and buyer. This new dynamic has made brands appear more human in the process, as they centre on creating discourses around shared values. Therefore, by using elements important to a given nation in a particular time, advertisements reflect cultural evolution. Since society is a constantly evolving entity, also the norms and rules governing it evolve with it. The advertising industry often draws on this fact by portraying these changes in order to promote a product or a service.

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As stated above, advertising has become an elaborate and sophisticated platform and a tool of addressing humans' needs and aspirations. In terms of its research value, when discussing cultural aspects, commercials evolve with a society always reflecting new trends, beliefs and fads in order to fulfil their primary objective, i.e. to sell a product. Since the human desire is defined in terms of 'to be' rather than 'to have' companies use this fact to advertise an idea or a concept more than the product itself, and in that way they both mirror and create an image of today's society.

In order for commercials to be relevant and notable they must be able to capture the mood within the society in such a way that individuals can connect with the values and beliefs presented in the commercial. As a result, a picture of evolving society emerges. Since the primary function of advertising has always been about selling the product, as society grows more refined, sophisticated and advanced so do the commercials. In today's world simply presenting an object and stating its credentials is not enough to keep the audience interested. Likewise, employing the notion of 'to have' while presenting new products is perceived as somewhat outdated and basic for a 21st century customer. On the other hand, presenting a product by using the concept of 'to be' draws on one's desires and dreams as it offers an idea, or a strong belief that 'to be' is one's purpose in life.

2. MEDIA AND SOCIETY

The mass media, undoubtedly, play a vital role in a way we perceive the world. Human desires fuel technological advancements, leading consequently to the broadening of views and changes in a society's belief system. Therefore, the media are tools such as: channels, strategies and platforms, which people use to obtain, produce and finally share knowledge about the world through communication and interaction (Lindgren 2017). Lindgren states that "throughout history, different media, such as cave paintings, television, or the internet and mobile phones, have all played a specific role in how we relate to the world, and how we understand how society has transformed, and is continuously transforming" (2017). According to Deana A. Rohlinger in *New Media and Society,* traditional media outlets, i.e. radio, television, newspapers and books, as well as the new media platforms, such as internet and blogs in particular, even though profit-oriented, they are also social institutions as they teach us the behaviour and norms of our society. "Mass media help give meaning to the world around us and provide guidance on how we should behave in it" (Rohlnger, 2019). Furthermore, the author adds that these institutions are critical since they incorporate every area of social life while fulfilling essential functions: perpetuating society and preserving order. Rohlinger acknowledges the media's profit-making orientation and the way companies "craft the stories they tell us, the products they offer, and, consequently, the messages we receive about the world and how it works" (2019).

The development of interactive technologies has extended the role that the culture industry plays in everyday life (Carah, Louw, 2015). According to the authors, the 20th century culture industry was criticized for limiting the range of cultural resources to which audiences had access, and containing the extent to which the population participated in the creation and circulation of meaning. In recent years the culture industry[2] has become more permissive and participatory; it is also more responsive and deeply rooted into everyday life (Carah, Louw, 2015). Likewise, Arthur Asa Berger in *Media and Society: A Critical Per-*

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[2] I use the expression 'culture industry' in the same sense as Theodor Adorno did in his seminal essay.

spective, claims "The media entertain us, socialize us, inform us, educate us, sell things to us (and sell us, as audiences, to advertisers), and indoctrinate us- among other things. The media help shape our identities, our attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities, and our attitudes about sexuality" (2007). Furthermore, Berger, drawing on the works of Durkheim, Sausseure and Freud, who reversed the perspective from being motivated by individual behaviour to deriving from collective social systems states that mass media are in society and society is in the mass media (2007).

3. SOCIETY AND CULTURE

According to Raymond Williams, the term society is quite broad and refers to the entire social world in which we exist, i.e. "the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live" (1985). At the core of a society are such elements as patterns of wealth power and inequality, but also social institutions: government and law apparatus, education system, religious organisations, commercial corporations and smaller organisational units – families. These institutions together with firmly established hierarchies of wealth, control and power, form a set of structures through which social relations are lived out (Hodkinson, 2017). Therefore, the question arises of whether people are shaped by elements such as the gender, social class or ethnic category into which they are born, or indeed by the education system, family structure or religious institutions which play a vital role in shaping human lives and opinions.

The term culture refers firstly to the worlds of creative expressions, and secondly to the whole way of life of a society, including traditions, norms of behaviour, values, meanings and ways of understanding the world (Williams, 1985). Although the two concepts are different, the corresponding senses are closely related. Williams points out that the term culture refers to creative practices as much as broader ways of life in a more general way employing a range of cultural features and practices across a broader reach of people.

> "The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence. It is especially interesting that in archaeology and in cultural anthropology the reference to culture or a culture is primarily to material production, while in history and cultural studies the reference is primarily to signifying or symbolic systems" (Williams, 1983).

Even though society and culture are two different terms, there are major overlaps and ambiguities between them. It would be difficult to research cultural rituals, understandings or creative practices without any reference to the society in which they take place. At the same time it would be impossible to examine social relations or structure and agency while omitting the cultural ways of life (Hodkinson, 2017).

4. MEDIA AS A SHAPER OR MEDIA AS A MIRROR

Hodkinson mentions two contrasting approaches present while discussing the relationship between society (culture in a broad sense of all areas of life) and mass media content. The author states that approach of media as a shaper regards the media as constructors because the content they circulate has the power to influence people and therefore affect the future of society. As an example Hodkinson uses stereotypical portrayals of ethnic minority

groups which can easily lead to the marginalisation of such groups; and political favouritism which may lead to a predominance of particular opinions among audiences. The quality of media content affects how informed, engaged and creative a population really is (2017). Therefore, approach that sees media as a shaper portrays the media as an influencing tool.

In contrast, the approach of media as a mirror focuses on how media content reflects (mirrors) society. In this approach the media follows rather than leads the way. Therefore, if the dominating element in the media is, for example, violence and sex this is because these elements are present and regarded as important in the society. However, the author argues that media producers are quite selective as to what they include, and they also control the way it is done. Hodkinson adds that instead of offering the viewers a 'mirror' they present a selective, manufactured set of representations of our world (2017). "Representation is a very different notion to reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping" (Hall, 1997). Following this thought, it can be said that the viewer is still influenced by the media. Therefore, both approaches mentioned by Hodkinson really affect the way we perceive the world and the way we create our opinions.

5. MEDIA FOR PROFIT: ADVERTISING

Advertising is considered a key source of revenues for the media. In fact, when it comes to broadcasting, advertising may be the only source of revenue, therefore quite often "TV commercials seem more clever and interesting than the programs they surround" (Croteau, Hoynes, 2003). After all, as is stated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to advertise is to draw attention to a service or a product in a public medium in order to promote sales (Advertisement, Oxford English Dictionary, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/advertise). Therefore, in the words of Kumari: "Advertisement is directly related to the need of man to communicate his message and attract to each other" (2014). Veerkumar and Jaiswal also acknowledge the pivotal role advertising plays in forming an image in the mind, the image that manufacturers indirectly communicate in order to provide information. Therefore, an advertisement focuses on the audience that may be persuaded by it or simply watch and pay attention to this medium (2015). According to Potter, advertising can be compared to well-established institutions, such as the Church or schools, when it comes to the magnitude of its social influence (Chapman, 1992). Furthermore, since it dominates the media, advertising has the power to shape popular standards by portraying consumer culture.

Even though, on occasion, an advertisement has been referred to as a play for a client, poetry for sale, or a game of words or dreams for sale, the images it employs "are neither false not true reflections of social reality because they are in fact part of social reality" (Jhally, 1990). Therefore, Rutledge Shields states that advertising needs to be studied as a main part of our social reality, and not as a reflection of it (2002). According to Jhally "the critique of advertising has to start by giving people permission to recognise the strength of the images of advertising, of where the power rests. From that we can start to unfold the exact role that advertising plays in our culture from a critical perspective" (1990).

6. THE PICTURE OF EVOLVING SOCIETY CAPTURED IN COMMERCIALS SHOWN IN GREAT BRITAIN

A lot has changed since the 1965 *Marlboro Cigarettes Commercial*, where a man is fixing his car while smoking a cigarette. Looking unemotional and distant, yet in full control

of the situation he calmly states that he is the kind of man who likes to work on his car, and when he works on it he forgets about everything, but he *never* forgets to smoke. "I always smoke when I work", he says and adds, "they go together", and only then does he state why he chose Marlboro by enumerating the brand's qualities (YouTube, *Marlboro Cigarettes Commercial*, 1965, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wibHcZ4FNbU).

These days, with the medical knowledge most people possess, there are no commercials advertising cigarettes or promoting smoking in general. On the contrary, nowadays anti-smoking campaigns are featured in the media, stating the danger of smoking not only to one's health but also to bystanders due to passive smoking (YouTube, *Anti-smoking advert*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIyqcST29wQ). Looking at these two commercials it is noticeable how far society has come; it is common knowledge today that smoking is harmful; furthermore, judging by the share volume of sports-related commercials encouraging exercise one can concur that we are living in a very health-oriented society.

Another major company evolving its image with the times is Gillette. The 1960's Gillette Razor Blades commercial – Gillette Slim Adjustable – portrays first of all, two men fishing, and then camping in the forest, while talking about a new product on the market, namely a Gillette razor and its qualities (You Tube, Gillette Razor Blades commercial - 1960's – *Gillette Slim Adjustable*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCGZp9nmhkw). The commercial is short and straight to the point, the scenarios in which the two men are portrayed are simple, yet they draw on the fact that fishing or camping was always considered a manly thing. However the motto of the company *The best a man can get* over the years has changed together with the message that the company is trying to convey in its commercials to *The best a man can be*, reflecting the new trend within a society, namely from 'to have' toward 'to be'. Yet, quite often the 'to be' requires the 'to have' in the first place. According to Jean Baudrillard in *The Consumer society: Myths and Structures* "the consumption of goods (…) does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution" (2017). The whole idea behind the advertisement phenomenon is, after all, to present a product or a service in such a way that will be desirable by many people. This new image is exploited by most of today's companies. The 2018 Gillette commercial *For the best men* presents its product in a new way (YouTube*, The Best Gillette Razors for the Best Men | Gillette UK*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xpLSsoJNrA). Instead of introducing the product and its qualities, the advertisement suggests for who the product is, i.e. for the best men, but then the narrative goes on to present the qualities of the best men of today. With messages like the best men aren't afraid to show their feelings, they don't just look good on the outside, they take a good look inside, they are not afraid of a challenge or a commitment, the commercial shows men's sensitive side, which is more of a portrayal of the beliefs of today's society. However, Gillette's new advertising campaign in 2019, *We believe: the best men can be* it chooses a different strategy. This time the company draws on the notions of bullying, sexual harassment, toxic masculinity, which, as it is suggested, have been in existence for far too long, and it is time to change it; therefore, after a lengthy presentation of some of the negative elements of society, the Gillette's company states "we believe in the best in men…to say the right thing, to act in the right way…as the boys of today will be the men of tomorrow" (YouTube, *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0). With the final motto: *It's only by challenging ourselves to do more that we can get closer to our best*, the commercial ends without actually presenting any particular product.

Boots is yet another company through whose commercials we can notice changes in society. This company's commercials are different to Gillette's in the way that they present a range of products in a very colourful and loud way. There are no hidden messages and deep thoughts. With the simple message: "it is not just how it makes you look" the Boots advertising strategy is to present its products to as many potential customers as possible (YouTube, Boots TV advert *It's not just how it makes you look*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL7SJ4p9ZSs). Nevertheless, the 30-second ad showing a range of skincare goods, still draws on the new concept that 'to be' is more than 'to have': "it is not how it makes you look but how it makes you feel" is the final statement of the commercial. This statement appears just after a small group of women, who have previously appeared in short video clips, walk in onto a stage and stop to pose together for a picture. This final portrait shows to whom Boots addresses the commercial: there we have an elderly white lady, a young white female, people of mixed race and black women, a black transgender woman and a white disabled female. A different company, namely Superdrug, advertises its goods in the same way; a short, cheerful ad showing a range of beauty products, no commentary, only a final statement and again the same final shot of the people taking part in the commercial, representing potential markets to which the commercial is addressed (YouTube, *Superdrug Christmas Advert 2018*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rxx3YynpN44). A couple of teenagers, a boy and a girl, an elderly mixed race female, a young black female, a young white female, a middle-aged black man, and a transgender woman, in other words a portrait of evolving British society captured in a photo frame.

Since the purpose of a commercial is usually to present a new product or a service to the public, it must evolve with the times in order to be desirable. These final photo snaps in both of the abovementioned commercials, i.e. Boots' and Superdrug's, give us not only a look into British society per se, but also show us the changes in values and beliefs. Notions such as racism, ageism, genderism, are things of the past here. Britain has become known for its multiculturalism and remarkable tolerance, which was captured by yet another commercial, this one for Amazon. A 2016 Knee Pads commercial bridges the faiths, by showing an elderly priest and an elderly imam as the best of friends (YouTube, Amazon, *Knee pads*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8ku6bO0moo). In this Amazon ad an elderly imam is visiting his old friend for tea, they are portrayed laughing and joking while drinking their beverages, now and then the imam, probably due to his age, is touching his knees implying that he must be in pain. The next day, unknown to one another, they order each other knee pads from Amazon's online service. This short commercial with no commentary, but only with one short line, reading: "the next day", meaning that Amazon offers a next-day delivery service, is yet another example of the growing tolerance in British society.

Another retail giant, M&S, broke with tradition in its 2016 Christmas commercial, where Santa Claus is actually a woman (YouTube, M&S 2016 *Christmas Ad: Christmas with love from Mrs Claus*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5QPXhStb5I). The clever advert does not present any new products, it is more of a Christmas greetings message to its loyal customers. In the commercial Mr and Mrs Claus live at the North Pole, and while Mr Claus is getting ready to fly off in his sleigh to deliver some Christmas presents, Mrs Claus, unbeknownst to her husband, is doing the same but in a modern way. She is tall and slim, dressed in a trendy bright red dress-suit and high heels, and delivers the presents by means of a helicopter. In this commercial where tradition meets progress, M&S recognised the evolving nature of society. While Santa Clause is still portrayed as he has always been, being fat, with a long white beard and moustache, in a red suit, flying his open sleigh pulled

by reindeer to distribute the gifts, Mrs Claus looks more like a business woman, and not just in the sense of her looks, but the way she is running the whole 'North Pole' operation centre, using modern technology, gadgets, computers, snow quads and helicopters, all of which are facets of the modern world, and in her free time she is reading *Fifty Shades of Red*. The 'old' meets the 'new', and just as the commercial demonstrates, both of these properties can coexist in harmony.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Insomuch as commercials reflect the changes within a society, they also influence social perceptions and attitudes. Since the primary objective is to sell the product, the producer needs to take into account the current mood in the society, its beliefs and values. As a result, the more sophisticated and less straightforward messages in today's ads are parallel to the growing social awareness as well as they mirror social complexities. Inadvertently, the commercials also transform the being-having relation that is paramount to the capitalist system. Namely, if 'to have' really determines 'to be' in capitalism, as it was observed by Marx in *The German Ideology* (Torrance, 1995), then by reversing that pattern, i.e. putting being ahead of having, commercial advertisers of today show that we have already entered the new phase of what can be called a post-capitalist reasoning. Finally, when they conceptualise their message to such an extent that an idea or a concept become more exposed than the product itself, they change the character of market economy, an indication that a symbol of value has been turned into value alone. This, in turn, is a proof that the connection between a signifier and a signified is lost and, as observed by Baudrillard, we live in the world of free-floating signifiers (Elliott, 2014).

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